

# **Beyond Duality: The Paradox of the Eco-Influencer**

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# Abstract

New, more resistant conceptions of 'influencer' have appeared in the field in recent years. Beyond influence that promotes excessive materialism, 'eco-influencers' encourage their followers to adopt eco-friendly waste practices, shop sustainably and resist consumption altogether. These influencers adopt many of the normative procedures of the field such as partaking in paid partnerships with brands and documenting 'unboxing' rituals, albeit with a green flair. This conception reveals a paradoxical, ideological tension as eco-influencers are both, at once, attempting to resist the marketplace whilst receiving a stake within it.

This thesis is concerned with the paradoxical and 'technocultural' aspects of the eco-influencer's practices. Eco-influence is situated within highly performative, algorithmic environments where surveillance is becoming increasingly 'liquid' and ubiquitous. In spite of constraints, eco-influencers harness technological tools to seek marketplace change and attempt to change the marketplace for environmental reasons.

Recent research has brought attention to eco-influence, yet this thesis is the first to address this context qualitatively and anchored into a Consumer Culture Theory perspective. To address this knowledge gap, this research addresses the following questions: *How do eco-influencers build and maintain legitimacy in paradoxical fields?* And *How does an eco-influencer's use of digital technology affect marketplace logics?* This thesis develops answers to these questions making use of institutional theory and its relevant concepts including: institutional legitimacy, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship. To collect data, I conducted a netnographic study which included 17 semi-structured interviews with eco-influencers. The findings reveal that eco-influencers maintain and balance their legitimacy by leveraging plural, paradoxical logics in ways which are complimentary and counterbalancing. To demonstrate this dialectic relationship, the Taoist perspective of Yin-Yang and its relevant notions of duality are used to establish a novel way to understand paradox. Further, the finding of 'The Surveillance Paradox' and my subsequent theorising of 'The Digital Discipline Model' demonstrate how algorithmic and surveillance logics can pressurise eco-influencers into becoming their idealised self.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	7
1.3 Contributions.....	11
1.3.1 Key Finding: Leveraging Paradoxical Logics .....	11
1.3.2 Key Finding: The Surveillance Paradox .....	12
1.3.3 Methodological Contribution: ‘Chronological Contemplation’.....	12
1.4 Thesis Structure .....	12
Chapter Two: Theoretical Literature Review: Marketplace Change and An Institutional Perspective .....	15
2.1 Introduction.....	15
2.1 Consumer Culture Theory.....	15
2.2 The Politics of Consumption .....	17
2.3 Structure versus Agency .....	20
2.4 Marketplace Solutions?.....	24
2.5 Marketplace Resistance .....	31
2.6 An Institutional Perspective .....	33
2.61 Institutional Pillars and Definitions .....	36
2.62 Legitimacy .....	38
2.63 Institutional Logics .....	40
2.64 Institutional Entrepreneurship.....	43
2.7 Institutional approaches in CCT .....	45
2.7.1 Plural Logics .....	48
2.7.2 A Contribution with an Institutional Lens.....	49
2.8 Conclusion .....	50
Chapter Three: Influencer and Field .....	52
3.1 Introduction.....	52
3.2 The Evolution of Influencer Culture.....	52
3.2.1 Influential Fields .....	53
3.2.2 Celebrity Endorsement.....	55
3.2.3 Influencer Culture as We Know It .....	58
3.3 Technology and Consumer Culture.....	60
3.3.1 Instagram.....	62
3.3.2 Algorithms .....	63
3.3.3 Surveillance.....	64
3.4 Digital Activism .....	66



3.4.1 Identifying with Green.....	69
3.5 The Eco-Influencer .....	71
3.6 Conclusion .....	72
Chapter Four: Methodology.....	73
4.1 Introduction.....	73
4.2 Ontological, Axiological and Epistemological Assumptions.....	74
4.2.1 Ontology .....	74
4.2.2 Axiology.....	76
4.2.3 Epistemology .....	77
4.3 Reflexivity.....	78
4.4 Data Collection Process .....	79
4.5 Netnography.....	80
4.6 Netnographic Movements: Movement 1: Initiation.....	82
4.6.1 Ethical Considerations .....	83
4.7 Movement 2: Investigation .....	84
4.7.1 Scouting the virtual community.....	84
4.8 Movement 3: Immersion.....	85
4.9 Movement 4: Interaction.....	86
4.9.1 Interviews.....	88
4.9.2 The Post-Structuralist Interview .....	89
4.9.3 Sampling and Recruitment.....	90
4.10 Movement 5: Integration.....	93
4.10.1 Collating.....	93
4.10.2 Coding.....	94
4.10.3 Combining .....	94
4.10.4 Counting.....	94
4.10.5 Charting.....	95
4.10.6 Hermeneutic Analysis .....	95
4.11 Movement 6: Incarnation .....	95
4.12 Ethical Procedures and Considerations.....	96
4.13 Conclusion .....	96
Chapter Five: Findings 1: The Eco-Influencer: Initiation, Definition and Contradiction .....	98
5.1 Introduction.....	98
5.2 Initiation.....	98
5.2.1 Private to Public.....	99

5.2.2 Counteracting Difficult Emotions .....	102
5.2.3 Recreation and Labour .....	105
5.3 Definition: Influencer.....	107
5.3.1 Brand Connections.....	113
5.3.2 Money vs. Morality.....	115
5.4 Individualist Platform for Collective Goals.....	118
5.5 Conclusion .....	121
Chapter Six: Findings 2: Green and Spiritual logics, The Eco-Influencer Self-Journey and Extent of Activism .....	122
6.1 Introduction.....	122
6.2 Nature as a Catalyst for Green Logics .....	122
6.3 Transcending the Self via spiritual logics .....	125
6.4 Public Purification and Sacrifice .....	129
6.5 Passive Activism: A Middle Ground.....	134
6.5.1 Mobilising.....	137
6.5.2 Echo chambers .....	140
6.6 Conclusion .....	142
Chapter 7: Findings 3: Performance and Surveillance .....	143
7.1 Introduction.....	143
7.2 ‘Performing your greenness’ .....	143
7.2.1 Dissonance: ‘The aspirational self’ .....	149
7.3 Hyper awareness: who is watching?.....	154
7.4 Conclusion .....	157
Bibliography .....	185
Appendix.....	211

## List of Figures

**Figure 1:** Screenshot of *Stay Wild Swimwear* brand created by eco-influencers (p.28)

**Figure 2:** The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel (p. 61)

**Figure 3:** Screenshot of Madeline Olivia's paid partnership with *Bower Collective* (p.98)

**Figure 4:** Screenshot of Zanna Van Dijk's paid partnership with *Wild Refill* (p.99)

**Figure 5:** Screenshot of Less Waste Laura's paid partnership with *Suri* (p.118)

**Figure 6:** Screenshot of Grace Beverley's story about travel and sustainability (p.120)

**Figure 7:** Screenshot of Lauren Singer talking about composting (p.121)

**Figure 8:** The Yin Yang of Paradoxical Logics (p.148)

**Figure 9:** The Digital Discipline Model (p.160)

### APPENDIX

**Figure 1.** Screenshot of research Instagram Account (p.192)

**Figure 2:** Example of Interview Protocol (p.193)

## List of Tables

**Table 1:** Consumer Responsibilisation as a Governmental Process (p.26)

**Table 2.** Three Pillars of Institutions (p.33)

**Table 3.** Institutional pillars and carriers (p.34)

**Table 4:** Meaning Transfer Model (p.38)

**Table 5:** The six procedural movements of netnography (p.74)

**Table 6:** Interview participant profiles (p.83)

**Table 7 :** Collation (p.84)

# Chapter One: Introduction

They are ruptures, perhaps small,  
but the small can become big,  
and small movements multiply when shared

(Kozinets and Jenkins, 2021, p. 280)

Cyberspace does not lie within your borders.  
Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project.  
You cannot. It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions.

John Perry Barlow (cited in Greenberg, 2016)

## 1.1 Research Background

Who do we think of when we think of an ‘influencer’? The word typically conjures a glamorous image, the promotion of materialism (Dinh and Lee, 2021; Lee et al. 2022), or perhaps ‘young, rich women doing vain things online’ as one academic summarises (Abidin, 2016). The term ‘influencer culture’ is defined by UK parliament in their committee report on influencers, titled ‘Influencer Culture: Lights, Camera, Inaction?’ as being: ‘the social phenomenon of individual internet users developing an online community over which they exert commercial and non-commercial influence’ (UK Parliament, 2022). This vibrant phenomenon has gained much attention in the past decade, often using the visual platform Instagram to host their endorsements which can include fashion, food, and travel destinations. Brands have seized the opportunity to profit from influencers' fame and power, and in 2023, influencer marketing is expected to generate revenue of over \$32.5 billion (Nasrin 2022). Research from the UK government shows that the speedy expansion of this industry has outgrown the capabilities for regulation both in terms of its scale, and how fast technology is advancing (UK Parliament, 2022). Alongside this acceleration of technology, the ‘technocultural’ context is also shifting, being moulded and co-created every day (Kozinets, 2020), as technology is having an ever-greater impact on so many facets of our life that it essentially appears to be a dominant force in our societies, civilisations, and planet (Kozinets,

2019). The ‘technocultural’ can be defined as ‘identities, practices, values, rituals, hierarchies and structures of meaning’ which are expressed through the consumption of technology (Kozinets, 2019, p. 621).

Perhaps as a response to consumers feeling ‘influencer fatigue’ (Mayer, 2023), with the over saturation of this marketing tool; new, more resistant conceptions of influence have appeared in the field in recent years. This includes cases of ‘deinfluencing’ which involves influencers discouraging the consumption of products they deem too expensive or ineffective (Fares, 2023), and eco-influencing (or sustainable influencing) which is the encouragement to buy sustainably or resist consumption altogether (Hadden, 2022; Wightman-Stone, 2023). Research by Unilever and the Behavioural Insights Team suggests social media influencers can have a positive impact on sustainability (Unilever, 2023). Out of 6,000 consumers, their results find 83% of consumers find that TikTok and Instagram are useful sites when it comes to eco education, and 78% say they find social media to be more informing than documentaries, news articles, and government campaigns. Recent research has quantitatively addressed the role of trust (Pittman and Abell, 2021) and authentic message appeals of ‘greenfluencers’ (Kapoor et al. 2022), yet up to now no study has explored this phenomenon qualitatively or interpreted this case from a consumer culture theory (CCT) perspective which considers sociocultural, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

The term ‘eco-influencer’ (Buttolph, 2019) is used to describe the influencers in this study as I explore the paradoxical combining of two fields as within its etymology, it reveals a curious, paradoxical conception: to oppose the marketplace, whilst receiving a stake within it. One eco-influencer tells *Elle Magazine*, ‘I describe what I do now as a kind of activism [...]and then I encourage people to be their own activists’ (Feller, 2020). How then, do these two fields of activist and influencer meet? To investigate this phenomenon, I use institutional theory to develop an understanding of the eco-influencer which is contextually orientated (Askegard and Linnet, 2011) and considers the ways in which eco-influencers take action whilst orientated and constrained by larger social fields (Scott, 2001). This thesis utilises institutional legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), institutional logics (Friedland and

Alford, 1991) and institutional entrepreneurship to describe the conditions of the influencers in this study (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The next section more closely describes the aims and objectives of the thesis and anchors them to the research questions.

## **1.2 Research Aim, Objectives, Questions and Design**

In this study I am guided by the overarching aim to understand more closely how influencers can regulate their legitimacy as both an environmental activist and influencer, at the same time. The paradoxical nature of the conception guided the research aim. This objective is also supported by literature reviewed in chapter two which investigates how coexisting, contradictory logics can advance and innovate the marketplace rather than merely pose constraints (Cherrier et al. 2018; Kjeldgaard et al. 2017; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). The effect of the technocultural was also of peak concern to the topic area (Kozinets, 2020) and literature from relative areas such as surveillance and algorithms is addressed as scholars question discrepancies between our digital and physical realities (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Das and Kramer, 2013; Marder et al. 2016). To address gaps in the research and contribute to understanding eco-influencers, this study aims to address the following research questions:

*RQ1. How do influencers build and maintain legitimacy in paradoxical fields?*

*RQ2. How does an eco-influencer's use of digital technology affect marketplace logics?*

To purposively address these research questions, I conducted a netnographic study in accordance to Kozinets's (2019) six procedural movements of netnography which included investigative, immersive, interactive and integrative procedures which led the study from its initiation to its incarnation. During my immersion in the field, I observed eco-influence on Instagram which ultimately allowed me to scout the community and become acquainted to language, routines, power structures and particularities of the field (Fischer et al. 2014). Subsequent interactions were then conducted via post-structuralist interview which was used for its utility in 'grasping the social construction of reality' (p.9). My sample was recruited via purposeful sampling and snowball techniques (Patton, 2002), and consisted of 17 eco-influencers with Instagram followings of 1k to 55k. To take part, individuals required a following of over 1k; and second, individuals must have had experience in receiving

monetary or gifted compensation from an advertising partnership with a brand selling eco-products or services. Analysis consisted of a five-step process which included: collating, coding, combining, counting and charting and utilising the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Paterson and Higgs, 2005).

### **1.3 Contributions**

In this section, I state the theoretical and methodological contributions made by this study. I describe how eco-influencers leverage paradoxical logics to build and maintain legitimacy, and further describe the contribution which reveals how the pressures of surveillance create the means for eco-influencers to become their ‘idealised self’. I further introduce a data collection technique which I call ‘chronological contemplation’ which develops the photo-elicitation method to be used in social media research.

#### **1.3.1 Key Finding: Leveraging Paradoxical Logics**

To demonstrate the dialectic relationship between green logics and influencer logics, the Taoist perspective of Yin-Yang and its relevant notions of duality are used to establish a novel way to understand paradox. This study contributes to limited research that adopts Yin-Yang by using it alongside an institutional approach to show the complexity of dual logics at play in the case of the eco-influencer. Consumer research and marketing theory has up to now only briefly touched upon the Yin-Yang principle to look into interdependence between cooperation and competition within SMEs (Mattson and Tidstrom, 2015). The theoretical development of this thesis uses a Yin-Yang perspective to explore how influencers gain and maintain legitimacy in the following paradoxical fields: consumerism/activism, individualism/collectivism, the spiritual/mechanical and nature/technology. The findings show that paradoxical fields and their corresponding dualistic logics are interdependent and leveraged in a complimentary way depending on excesses and deficiencies. Whilst previous studies recognise the coexistence of paradoxical logics, their research does not explore the dynamism of the logics themselves and how dualisms interact in a way which can trigger field-level change (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2012; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019; Cherrier et al. 2018; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). In the discussion, I

introduce *The Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics* to assist in the visualisation of how paradoxical dualisms can be viewed as unifying and counterbalancing.

### **1.3.2 Key Finding: The Surveillance Paradox**

Previous literature has highlighted the ways in which actors ‘self-censor’ and constrain their digital personas to suit expectations of an imagined audience (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Das and Kramer, 2013). Theorisations of this effect have further investigated the ways in which people’s offline behaviour is also altered as a result of the threat that their offline behaviour becomes exposed online, communicating the avoidance of displeasing imagined audiences (Marder et al. 2016). This thesis expands on literature in this area to reveal how surveillance can assist in actualising the goals of eco-influencers. In doing this, it answers the call for further research from Marder et al. (2016) which has been ignored to date, to explore a case where surveillance interacts with the ‘could’ self – ‘the person that we would ideally like to be’ (p. 589). To illustrate this, I develop *The Digital Discipline Model* to theorise the ways in which technocultural logics enable the eco-influencer to actualise their eco-goals.

### **1.3.3 Methodological Contribution: ‘Chronological Contemplation’**

This technique builds on the photo-elicitation method where researchers gain insight from participants using photographs (Richard and Lahman, 2014). ‘Chronological contemplation’ involves the participant sharing with me, the interviewer, three Instagram posts which will assist them in narrating their Instagram journey so far: their start, middle and end. The technique allowed novel insight to occur as some participants were taken back to a time that now feels illegitimate to them as it also prompted them to tell me about other posts which they have deleted or archived. This method can be of great utility to researchers investigating social media contexts as this technique crossed the boundaries of time and added validity and reliability to the eco-influencer’s recalling of their past Instagram posts.

## **1.4 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is made up of eight chapters. Following on from this chapter, chapter two, titled ‘Marketplace Change and An Institutional Approach’ functions as a theoretical literature



review. It begins by introducing the CCT research domain and introducing the track to which this research project contributes. The chapter considers the structure versus agency conundrum in the social sciences and how 'institutional thought styles' go beyond this dualism. Sections on 'marketplace solutions' and 'marketplace resistance' review some of the ways consumers choose to express their dismay with aspects of the marketplace. The chapter then introduces institutional theory as the lens through which to explore this phenomenon. Core pillars are outlined, alongside key aspects of the theory including legitimacy, institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship. The chapter finishes by reviewing how consumer research scholars use institutional theory and where this study can contribute and add to the discussion.

Chapter three, titled 'Influencer and Field' offers insight into the context of this study and also considers the 'context of the context'. I give an overview of the evolution of the influencer field from 1700s to influencer culture as we know it today. I then introduce technology and 'technoculture' as a cultural field of significance and introduce Instagram as the social media platform most associated with influencer culture. I further outline some of the key attributes of the platform including its communication features and algorithms. I consider Zuboff's (2019) lens of surveillance capitalism as a constraining force which is not always realised by users of social media. As the influencers in question are eco-conscious, the final sections detail digital activism, and the green identity before presenting the eco-influencer as the actors in question.

Chapter four, titled 'Methodology', discusses the ontological, axiological and epistemological assumptions which underpin this thesis. A justification is offered as to where this research stands in regards to these philosophical considerations. The netnographic and interview methods are outlined and its usefulness in CCT research discussed. The participant sample and analysis procedures are also presented, before considering the ethical procedures and considerations of the study.

Chapters five, six and seven, present the analysis where I showcase the findings of this research. I present the experiences of my participants, highlighting some of the paradoxical

ways they define themselves and relate with the online world. Chapter five pays attention the eco-influencer's 'initiation, definition and contradiction'. Chapter six analyses the eco-influencer's self-journey and extent of activism and, chapter seven the relationship between performance and surveillance.

Chapter eight, the discussion chapter, reveals two key contributions in relation to the research questions. *The Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics* and *The Digital Discipline Model* are offered as emerging frameworks which contribute to the discussion of institutional complexity and multiple logics. I also highlight methodological contribution and further propose directions for future research in this field, before concluding on the implications and limitations of my contribution.

# **Chapter Two: Theoretical Literature Review: Marketplace Change and An Institutional Perspective**

## **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to outline the theoretical lens of this study. I introduce this chapter with a synthesis of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and its subsequent research stream, *The Politics of Consumption*, as the broader theoretical domain to which this research contributes to. I then reflect on the structure versus agency conundrum and how CCT scholars have found consolation in institutional thought styles as a way of navigating the structure-agency dualism (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Askegaard, 2015). Before institutional theory is introduced as the theory which supports this thesis, sections *Marketplace Solutions* and *Marketplace Resistance* deliberate some of the ways in which consumers have approached marketplace change within the perimeters of CCT and how this relates to the agency of relative actors (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014).

The chapter then presents the institutional perspective as the adopted lens for this research project. I overview the defining pillars of the theory before focusing on legitimacy, institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship which all assist in understanding the dynamism of fields within the marketplace. Finally, CCT studies which use an institutional approach are reviewed. Before concluding, this section clearly outlines which works this thesis is in dialogue with (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Cherrier et al. 2018; Hartman and Coslor, 2019), and how I make a contribution to the literature on plural, contradictory logics.

## **2.1 Consumer Culture Theory**

Synthesised by Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson in 2005, this field of enquiry addresses the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. CCT is not, in itself, a unified theory but rather a grouping of theoretical perspectives that draw substance from an interdisciplinary network. Described as ‘a heteroglossic interpretive community’ by Askegaard and Scott (2013); CCT offers a plethora of interpretations that are rooted in social theory, used to better understand the lived world of consumers. CCT is interested in the dynamism that exists between the consumer and the cultural, contextual and ideological

forces that exist within the social world (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In providing clarification of this evidently coherent stream of consumer research, Arnould and Thompson (2005) outline the four research programs in CCT as: (1) *consumer identity projects*, (2) *marketplace cultures*, (3) *the sociohistoric patterning of consumption*, and (4) *mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer's interpretative strategies*.

*Consumer identity projects* examine how the self is constructed through the symbolism of marketplace commodities and experiences. Research in this first domain seeks an understanding of extra-ordinary narratives that consumers are seen to construct and also includes the efforts made by individuals to 'resist, abandon and avoid particular consumption artefacts, patterns and meanings' (Larson and Patterson, 2018). The second domain, that of *marketplace cultures*, concerns questions regarding the 'pockets' of consumption that individuals create and assign themselves to. Mutual interests, identities or ideological positions drive consumers to congregate into various categories such as subcultures (Portwood-Stacer, 2012) and brand (or anti-brand) communities (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010; Wiejo et al., 2018). The third research program seeks an understanding of institutional and social structures which influence consumer behaviour. This can include: class structures (Weinberger et al., 2017), ethnicity (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018) and gender (Davidenko, 2019). These structures are legitimate points of analysis as research in this area reveals how hierarchies or marginalisation within these structures can shape consumption choices and behaviour. The final domain is that of *marketplace ideologies and consumer's interpretative strategies*. Research within this domain looks at how ideological factors influence consumption practices and studies typically include examples of consumers who hold grounded views towards the dominant narrative that corporate capitalism and marketing promote (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). At the nucleus of this domain is the consideration of consumers as 'active agents' who actively pursue commodities or resist them entirely with the goal of constructing an identity, culture or igniting change within the marketplace (Wiedenhof-Murphy, 2016).

Tensions exist within the CCT research community and critiques to CCT point out that the domain invites 'neoliberal co-optation' as a critique of late-capitalist ideology is often absent from the consumer projects that welcome corporate participation (Cova et al. 2013). Arnould and Thompson (2015) address such tensions as they explain that it is only by immersing

oneself into these consumer worlds that we can gain the understanding needed to reform or critique society. Critiquing marketing ‘from a distance’ is in this view: ‘less effectual and less nuanced’ (p.4). The usefulness of certain aspects of CCT is also debated by Askegaard and Linnet (2011) who criticise the individualistic tendencies that the ‘legacy’ of CCT carries. These tendencies usually reside within identity project studies which take a consumer agency-based view and which do not pay much attention to the underlying external and contextual ideological forces that co-create these consumption practices. As previously mentioned, agency can also be presumed in studies regarding the interpretive strategies that consumers use in their attempts to mould the marketplace (Shankar et al. 2006; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

Arnould and Thompson’s 10-year reverberation of their seminal CCT paper highlights new theoretical development in the area of *the politics of consumption* (Arnould and Thompson, 2015). Significantly, they notice how it is common for the other theoretical domains to intertwine with projects that have political and ideological matters at their nucleus and in particular relation to this research project, address institutionally framed CCT studies. The theoretical lens of institutional theory, which informs this project, allows ideology and identity to be examined whilst avoiding individualistic, agency-based tendencies existent within CCT that ignore social contextualisation (Askegaard, 2014).

## **2.2 The Politics of Consumption**

This research project is concerned with politics of consumption related to sustainability. The *politics of consumption* is categorised by a variety of social actors, all of whom mobilise in one way or another to challenge, transform or simply reform the structures of the marketplace (Arnould and Thompson, 2015). This pool of social actors consists of more than just consumers, it is constituted by assemblages of stakeholders, among which: activists, entrepreneurs, government officials, journalists and technologies. Mobilisation occurs as a reaction to concern; individuals today find themselves uncomfortable with the effects of globalisation and the critical environmental and sociocultural problems it has brought about (Roux & Izberk-Bilgin, 2018). Environmental concern, is to many, the realisation that the earth’s resources are not infinite; that single use materials are causing waste problems; and that the world as we know it is on the brink of dramatic change. Shock realisations come

from frightening predictions: for example, the approximation that our earth is predicted to have a mere sixty years of harvest left (IPCC, 2022). For some, it is also the realisation that governments are slow to respond to these changes and change is increasingly pressed onto the individual with ideas that leadership could and can ‘bubble up’ from below (Klein, 2014, p.465).

To resolve such tensions, individuals find themselves involved in politically charged consumption activity which can range from altering their consumption or altogether resisting consumption. Thus, there is a broad range of studies which fit under the *politics of consumption* category and a neat way to think of this category is to imagine how the individual views the marketplace: as a solution or a hinderance. Neoliberal tendencies are often only visible to a limited number of: activists, critical scholars, reporters and researchers, and thus, consumers themselves are not often so reflective in the domineering force behind their actions (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018). Neoliberalism, the dominant political-economical system in modern society, can be defined as the encouragement of ‘free-market competition, deregulation, privatisation, and individual responsibility’ (Veresui & Giesler, 2018). Studies which focus on this political aspect of consumption activity must take into consideration the wider ideological forces at play when consumers act and this is why there are calls for consumer research to go beyond the consumer subject and look at the role that external forces play in shaping consumer action (Giesler and Veresui, 2014; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Karababa and Ger, 2011).

Perspectives which consider the external environment often draw substance from tenets of neoliberalism which directs and even controls the consumer (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018). Since its beginnings in the 1970s as ‘market liberalism’, an ideology which supports the upmost protection of the free market, neoliberalism has grown as a logic with its own rules which depending on one’s world view, constrains or empowers the individual. Neoliberalism ideologically alters consumption habits in various ways, one way is by pressuring the individual to become self-governing and entrepreneurial as a means of putting an end to some of the ills of society (Veresui & Giesker, 2018).

Ideals which are at the nucleus of neoliberalism are entrepreneurialism and individual freedom (Scharff, 2015). Scharff (2015) discusses the difference of neoliberalism to market

liberalism in saying that the ideology does not automatically assume entrepreneurial spirit but instead develops and emphasises institutional practices such as ‘...ambition, calculation, accountability and personal responsibility’ (p.3) which are all prominent characteristics in the consumer agents of this research. Thinkers such as Michael Foucault view individual mobilisation as something with potential and something which has overridden traditional political uprising; this is something Zamora, & Ackerman (2019) condense as ‘ethics [taking] the place of politics’. The replacement of political structure with individual ethics is something which Foucault outlines as being the ‘technologies of the self’: a type of self-governance whereby an individual’s practice reflects their own personal ethics, rather than an alignment with hierarchal, top-down structures (Foucault, 1978-79/2008). This theory of self-governance is one example which informs CCT studies and links consumer activity to wider sociological, macro considerations (Ashman et. al, 2018; Giesler and Veresui, 2014). Foucauldian perspective on governmentality has, for example, informed and revealed a rather downbeat reality in the realm of YouTubers. Ashman et al. (2018) found that entrepreneurial capitalism both encouraged ruthless competitiveness and evidently altered the self-esteem of their participants.

In essence, all consumption activity is politically charged, even if only by a small margin as dominating societal structures like neoliberalism and its ideals mould individual understandings of identity and selfhood. Thus, they also considerably mould how individual’s view and practice resistance, and how much agency and power they believe they have in doing this. Sections 2.4 *marketplace solutions* and 2.5 *marketplace resistance*, explore these claims to agency and review some of the seminal works which shape the politics of consumption. These two streams of literature are typically kept separate but cases like the eco-influencer indicate a case where their behaviour cannot be easily compartmentalised into dual categories. This is due to the nature of the eco-influencer’s output which is varied and shifts between a stance with an anti-consumerist rhetoric to a stance which promotes and profits off eco-friendly purchases; a similar point alluded to by Kozinets (2002) suggests that marketplace escapism is at best temporary and that high-involvement practices are short lived.

The following literature review chapter will shortly introduce institutional theory which, when applied to the case of the eco-influencer, poses questions as to how their legitimacy is

built and maintained when they leverage strategy in two seemingly dualistic fields. A careful balance is needed for eco-influencers to remain simultaneously legitimate as both an influencer and environmental activist. On the one hand, activists may view these entrepreneurs as illegitimate if their motive seems primarily profit-driven, whereas if their output seems overly anti-consumerist, then this may drive away marketers and brands seeking an endorsee. Both marketplace solutions and marketplace resistance will shortly be reviewed following the next section which critically considers consumers as agentic subjects.

### **2.3 Structure versus Agency**

How many people rise and say  
“My brain’s so awfully glad to be here  
For yet another mindless day”?  
Now I’ve got all morning to obsessively accrue  
A small nation of meaningful objects  
And they’ve got to represent me too.  
- Father John Misty (‘Bored in the USA’)

Although the above quotation may seem obscure in a section which reviews a core theoretical conundrum in the social sciences, the above quotation taken from a folk-rock song by Father John Misty raises some interesting questions: do we view consumers as ‘mindless’ and controlled by the marketplace? Or do they purposely accrue commodities that represent them and which hold personal meaning? Can we consider consumers to be agents of their own representation? As this study is seeking an understanding of consumers pushing for change, of whom perhaps ‘obsessively accrue’ objects to represent them in the digital world and who are looking to influence consumption practices in some way; agency is a critical consideration as these are consumers who believe in their own power to alter marketplace structures.

A theoretical ‘problem’ that arises in CCT projects, as it does in; sociological, anthropological, and political theory, is the ‘structure versus agency’ problem. This dualism is



embedded in sociological research with structuralists believing that social structures have the most important influence on human behaviour; whereas consumer agency on the other hand, is associated with an interactionist perspective which acknowledges that human behaviour and meaning is co-created through the communication of symbols (Elder-Vass, 2010). Structuralism takes a macro-perspective of the phenomena, often borrowing from critical theory to harness an understanding. Agency-based perspectives are often used in micro-sociology and psychology as they reduce the phenomena's reasoning down to individual sense-making (Ratner, 2000). Structural arguments of culture suggest that the choice which is offered to us is commodified and that the freedom which we express is confined by larger ideological structures. These ideas are rooted and linked to scholars within the Frankfurt School for Social Research: the school which the development of critical theory can be traced back to (Wiedenhof-Murphy, 2017). Critical theory's primary belief is that ideology constrains the individual. Contrary to this, sidings with an individual agency-based view can be traced back to The Birmingham School: where scholars in cultural studies took the view that commodities can be used to display aspects of personality, lifestyle and class. Consumption studies which align with this school have been known to go by the assumption that consumers use marketplace resources to construct a sense of self and have the power to do so at their free will. Scholars from the Birmingham school take the view that hegemonic meanings assigned to objects can be challenged by individual agents: individuals can, for example, express resistance by appropriating symbols and overtime override the original, dominant meanings assigned to such objects (Hebdige, 1979). The dichotomised treatment of both structure and agency is a problem for social theorists. This contrasting nature is illustrated by Hays (1994) when he says that: 'structure is systematic and patterned, while agency is contingent and random; that structure is constraint, while agency is freedom; that structure is static, while agency is active; that structure is collective, while agency is individual' (p.57). The latter is especially a fundamental concern for scholars of politicised consumption as individual political acts are often questioned for their effectiveness and thought to be a neoliberal 'myth' (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014).

The relationship between meaning and consumer behaviour is central to the study of consumption as CCT scholars recognise the act of consuming as a cultural practice which is

embedded with both symbolic and ideological meaning (Thompson et. al. 2018). The consumer's conscious awareness of this meaning is at the nucleus of this debate. In a CCT context, structure is the rigid social arrangements which influences or provides limitations to consumer behaviour, whereas agency can be understood as 'the flex' a consumer has in the marketplace (Thompson et al. 2018). Agentic actors, or in this case consumers, are posited by Giddens (1976) as actors who could have acted otherwise. Thus, in taking an agency-based view, the research under this umbrella represents a neoliberal institutional logic whereby the consumer is primarily recognised as an empowered and autonomous choice-maker (Askegaard, 2014). Thus, the encouragement that consumers become active and responsible agents for changing elements of the marketplace that they detest is deeply embedded within neoliberal reasoning. To take a fully structural perspective, however, is to take the entirely critical view that views the consumer as a 'victim of capitalist interests and mindlessly trapped in a consuming spiral' (Roux & Bilgin, 2018, p. 296).

There is known pressure within the CCT scholarly community for research to steer away from an agency-based view, an assessment which is argued by some to have taken primacy in CCT studies:

Central to CCT research has been the representation of the consumer subject as a reflexive and empowered identity seeker, navigating its way through the plethora of opportunities provided by the marketplace, and reflecting often both consciously and critically over the market mediated messages that embrace him or her (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011 p.383).

This agency-dominant view presents a narrow version of existence as it automatically assigns power to the consumer's subjectivity of their condition. As highlighted, the individualistic, agency-dominant tendencies of CCT are often subject to critique and CCT researchers can find epistemic problems in consumer identity projects or those on marketplace collectives which take micro and meso perspectives (Moisander et al., 2009; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). This thesis steers away from this perspective, however, neither is a wholly critical perspective assigned to this thesis that consumers are, in their entirety, 'passive dupes' (Paterson, 2005).

To find a medium which considers a perspective beyond duality and which considers the dynamism between these two standpoints is one which is arguably, most applicable.

Culture itself is commonly associated with agency and contrasted with social structure (Berger, 1991: Kane, 1991). This is something which Hays (1994) discusses to be another unnecessary dichotomy as culture and agency are implied to be subjective and wholly more epiphenomenal than structure. Hays (1994) makes the argument that culture is a structure:

Culture is a social, durable, layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems that are at once material and ideal, objective and subjective, embodied in artefacts and embedded in behaviour, passed about in interaction, internalised in personalities, and externalised in institutions. Culture is both the product of human interaction and the producer of certain forms of interaction. Culture is both constraining and enabling. (p.65)

What this passage conveys is that culture embodies elements of both structure and agency and that structures, like culture, are themselves subject to agentic characteristics. An embodiment of these ideas can be found by using an institutional perspective as the lens in which to view culture. Askeegard & Linnet (2011) put forth the consideration of the inclusion of what they coin 'institutional thought styles' in CCT projects. Based upon functionalist thought, an institutional thought style emphasises the awareness, or rather unawareness, that the actor has as an individual within a collective. This thought style asserts that the actor is unconscious to the thought style which dictates their actions and that social forces are constantly and compulsively forcing responses from the consumer which they themselves are not directly aware of (Askeegard, 2015). This institutional perspective is at the same time enabling and constraining to the consumer agent and considers the forces at play which go beyond the lived experience of the consumer. It allows the 'simultaneously antagonistic and mutually dependent relationship' of structure and agency to be expressed (Hays, 1994 p.65), and provides a medium to view marketplace transformation as it accepts that actors do try to ignite change but cannot manoeuvre outside of the institutional logics that they are cognitively bound to and which they act upon in a 'taken for granted' manner (Askeegard, 2015).

In a similar vein, the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has been crucial in understanding consumer culture in a reflexive way and his frameworks have been hailed as being a ‘useful way to think about the structure-agency conundrum’ (Thompson, MacInnis & Arnould, 2018). Marketplace resources are no longer simply viewed as symbolic objects which the individual willingly buys into, but ‘key sources of performative-ideological value’ as resources are assigned cultural and symbolic capital which is a product of a consumer’s socialisation (Thompson et al. 2018). These useful, reflexive perspectives, which do not dichotomise structure from agency, will be reviewed later on in this chapter as they act as the theoretical backbones to this research project. The following sections will now consider *marketplace solutions* and *marketplace resistance* as consumer practices.

## **2.4 Marketplace Solutions?**

The idea that consumption itself can push forward market boundaries and ignite social and marketplace change is a widespread belief for many concerned individuals. For example, consumers look within the realm of the marketplace to solve a variety of issues which can include: frustrations towards the lack of marketplace inclusion (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), lacking product ranges (Kjeldgaard et al., 2016), destigmatising styles (Sandikci and Ger, 2010) and in relation to this research: reactions to environmental concern (Carrington et al., 2016) synonymised with ethical consumption, alternative consumption or green consumption.

The example of Scaraboto and Fischer’s (2013) study shows the extraordinary circumstance whereby marginalised consumers campaigned for a more established place within the marketplace. The marginalised, self-proclaimed ‘fatshionistas’ (plus sized consumers) used personal blogs to express their anger as a means of raising awareness at their frustrations towards the lack of plus sized options and lack of exposure in an industry which predominately supports slimmer body types. Thus, there is no option for these consumers outside the dominant capitalist metanarrative and their pursued collective agenda is shown to marginally change marketplace offerings over time as they gain institutional legitimacy. As will later be further discussed later in this chapter, the work of Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) has been seminal in the construction of this research project as it provides an opening into the conversation on institutional logics, entrepreneurship and legitimacy. The below table presents the variation in market change dynamics.

**TABLE 2**  
SOURCES AND TYPES OF VARIATION IN MARKET CHANGE DYNAMICS

What consumers want	How consumers are perceived in mainstream market	
	Consumers have less legitimacy in mainstream market	Consumers have greater legitimacy in mainstream market
To be better served by mainstream marketers	<p>Consumers are <i>Stigmatized Seekers</i>  <i>Example:</i> Fashionistas who want to buy clothes from mainstream manufacturers and retailers  <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> If consumers are persistent in pursuing their change agenda, a few mainstream marketers will expand their offerings over time</p>	<p>Consumers are <i>Comfortable Collaborators</i>  <i>Example:</i> Members of brand communities who collaborate with one another and with marketers to refine existing market offerings or design new ones  <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> Incremental changes to market offerings will be continuous as marketers collaborate with customers in an effort to keep them loyal</p>
Fundamental changes to market practices	<p>Consumers are <i>Resistant Rebels</i>  <i>Example:</i> American protestors against genetically engineered food  <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> Marginal changes if any to institutionalized practices</p>	<p>Consumers are <i>Mainstream Malcontents</i>  <i>Example:</i> Music consumers who want to download songs for free  <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> If changes threaten marketers' profitability, marketers will resist but find a compromise</p>

Figure 1. Sources and Types of Variation in Market Change Dynamics (Sourced in Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013).

Although this classification shows the variations of market change dynamics, it could further consider how consumers can fluctuate between being both resistant and comfortable as they attempt to maintain legitimacy in two paradoxical fields. I argue this with the case of the eco-influencer, as their partaking in paid partnerships sees their collaboration with marketers, whilst at other times their discourse is more resistant and anti-consumerist. Their intermittent rejection resembles a fluidity of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) or rather of anti-consumption, as one must sell and protest in sync.

The change dynamics in studies such as Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), where the consumers seek more marketplace choice, are not as contentious as studies where consumers seek environmental change within the marketplace. The argument by scholars is that simply engaging in resistance-lite practices such as ethical and green consumption and adhering to green brands only preserves the ideological functioning of consumerist capitalism – the very system that is at the crux of environmental degradation (Carrington et al., 2016). Gabriel and Lang (2006) suggest that contemporary movements have been ‘drowned out by consumerism’ as instead of protesting the harms of the marketplace, activists are now motivated by their stake within it. This is a key consideration of this research as the balancing

act of protest and consumerist activity is questioned. The conception and continuation of the eco-influencer is dependent on their legitimacy in two seemingly incompatible fields.

Identified themes in the eco-conscious influencers output, for example, include 'buying better', 'conscious living' or 'shopping small' which are central to scholarly consumption concepts such as political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003), ethical consumerism (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007), 'shopping for change' (Nader, 2017) and citizen-consumption (Cohen, 2004). By definition, political consumerism is 'actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices' (Micheletti, 2003: p.2). The idea of buying a better world and consuming with a conscious are ideas embedded within market-forward ideologies such as neoliberalism, as individualised consumption acts and practices are thought to be valuable solutions to political problems (Micheletti, 2010). 'Myths' present within the neoliberal paradigm '[redefine] the solution of the social problem at hand as a matter of developing a more ethical individual conduct rather than a collective protection and redistribution' (Giesler and Veresiu, 2004 p.843). Any 'change' which does occur as a result of incremental consumption alteration occurs within the boundaries of market logic - the encouragement is still there to go out and purchase and consuming green arguably just 'substitutes one power source for another' (Klein, 2015, p.90). Thus, the consumers we witness in studies within this topic fall for this misconception and their solution seeking, through no fault of their own, may prove to be more effective on their wellbeing and personal sense of ethics rather than effective in tackling complex environmental problems. Although illogical as a meaningful action, it is important to recognise these consumers as virtuous – although their virtue allows them to become susceptible to neoliberal ideals of ethical individual conduct. Afterall, 'good responsibility-taking requires the use of virtues' (Micheletti, 2010, p.149). Of course, there can be some interim 'symptom relief' (Einstein, 2017) of the problems which consumers recognise but the ideological model which political purchasing is based upon is largely a contradictory one. It is important to note that there is much grey area as to what is meaningful action and what is not as change can not be pinned down to single events.

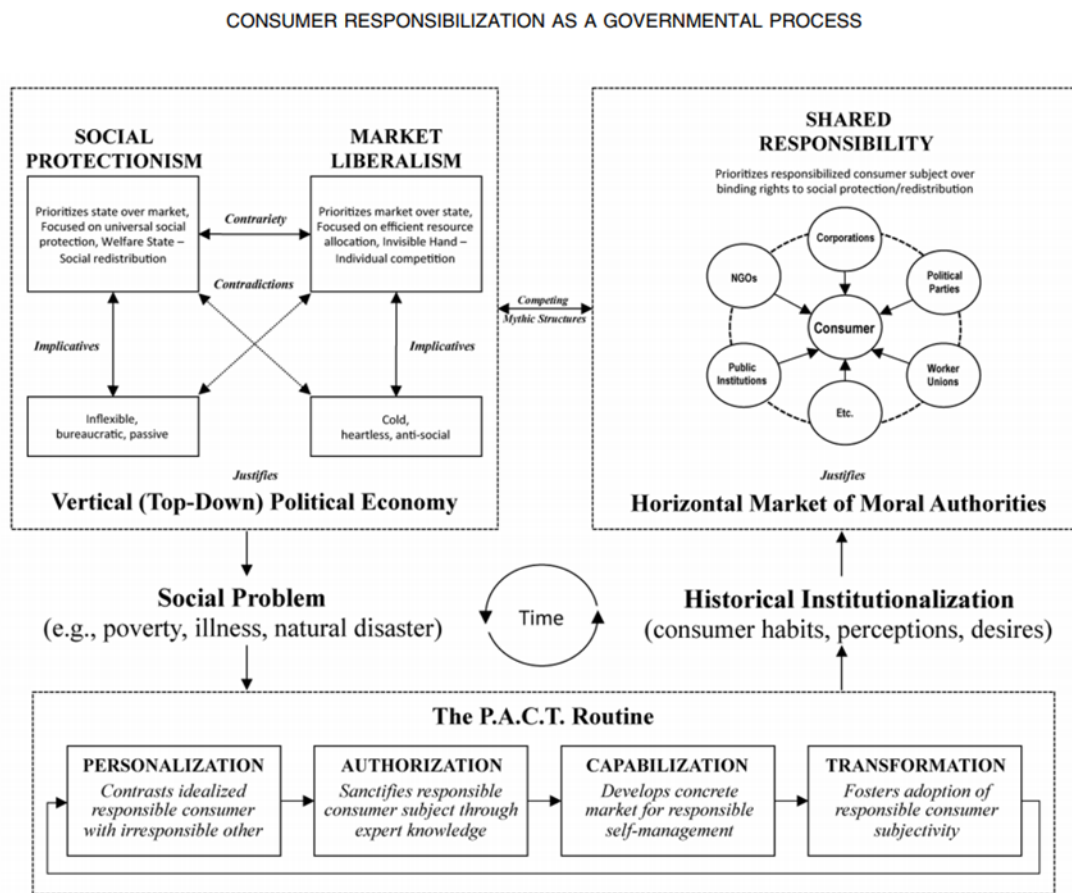
Studies like that of D'Antone & Spencer (2015) attempt to address the complexity of consumption by using the notion of 'agencement' which depicts 'the assemblage of human and non-human, material and abstract knowledge, devices and entities related to the

dissipation of resources/value in the market' (p.57). Their study on the sustainable palm oil movement moves away from an agency-based view and rather considers the supply chain in its entirety to highlight consumption as a wider macro-market issue and not just the issue of consumers or suppliers alone.

There are numerous consumer behaviour studies which empirically investigate the discrepancy between green purchase intentions and behaviour. Studies which focus on 'the green gap' provide a plethora of reasons for this gap: cost (Gleim and Lawson, 2014; Moser, 2015), lack of choice (Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008), overwhelming choice (Cherrier, 2007) and green stigma (Johnstone and Tan, 2015). However, these behavioural perspectives in themselves automatically assume and focus on the consumer as a sovereign, agentic and independent choice maker and do not consider macro considerations and institutional thought styles which navigate the consumer into believing their green consumption can be a politically charged driver of change. Theorising about the consumption gap, is in itself, problematic as it ignores issues of consumer responsabilisation (Giesler and Veresui, 2014) and the idea that closing the gap would solve any social problems can be thought of as being an espoused myth that is transferred to us from the heart of consumer capitalism (Gunderson, 2014; Carrington et al. 2016). Further, Carrington et al. (2016) dote on the work of Žižek (2009) in their suggestion that work on the ethical consumption gap is fetishistic, meaning that it offers merely a fantasy which cancels out the harshness of reality and avoids the confrontation of 'the blatant irrationalism of global capitalism predicated on excess, exploitation, and destruction' (p.37). A CCT perspective would allow for a closer consideration of both the institutional context and the field logics themselves. CCT can go beyond theorisations about micro-phenomena such as the consumption gap, and offer an exploration into the complex cognitive and normative systems which both enable and constrain consumer behaviour (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). This study assumes that minimal institutional market-level change takes place, if any, and in asking how legitimacy is balanced in a paradoxical case, rather focuses on how the eco-influencer moulds their output continuously to be an ideological fit.

Giesler and Veresui (2014) introduce the 'P.A.C.T routine' which is a process model of 'consumer responsabilisation' to theorise how a responsible consumer is formed. Their stages

*personalisation, authorisation, capabilisation and transformation* show how the consumer is socialised into ‘an ethos of responsible consumption with heightened moral significance’ (p.853) (See Table 1). Their work draws upon Foucauldian concepts of governmentality (1978–79/2008) which theorises the shift from top-down government structure to market-based structures which place responsibility on the consumer agent, encouraging sovereignty and self-reliance.



**Table 1:** Consumer Responsibilisation as a Governmental Process (Sourced in Giesler and Veresiu, 2014).

This model reveals a routine which shows the journey and creation of responsibility as an ideological system. Giesler and Veresiu’s research considers the ‘context of the context’ and heavily reflects upon neoliberal mythology and how the ideal of individual responsibility, forces the belief that consumers should and can be the principle problem-solving agents of complex social problems. This research requests that future CCT studies explore ways in

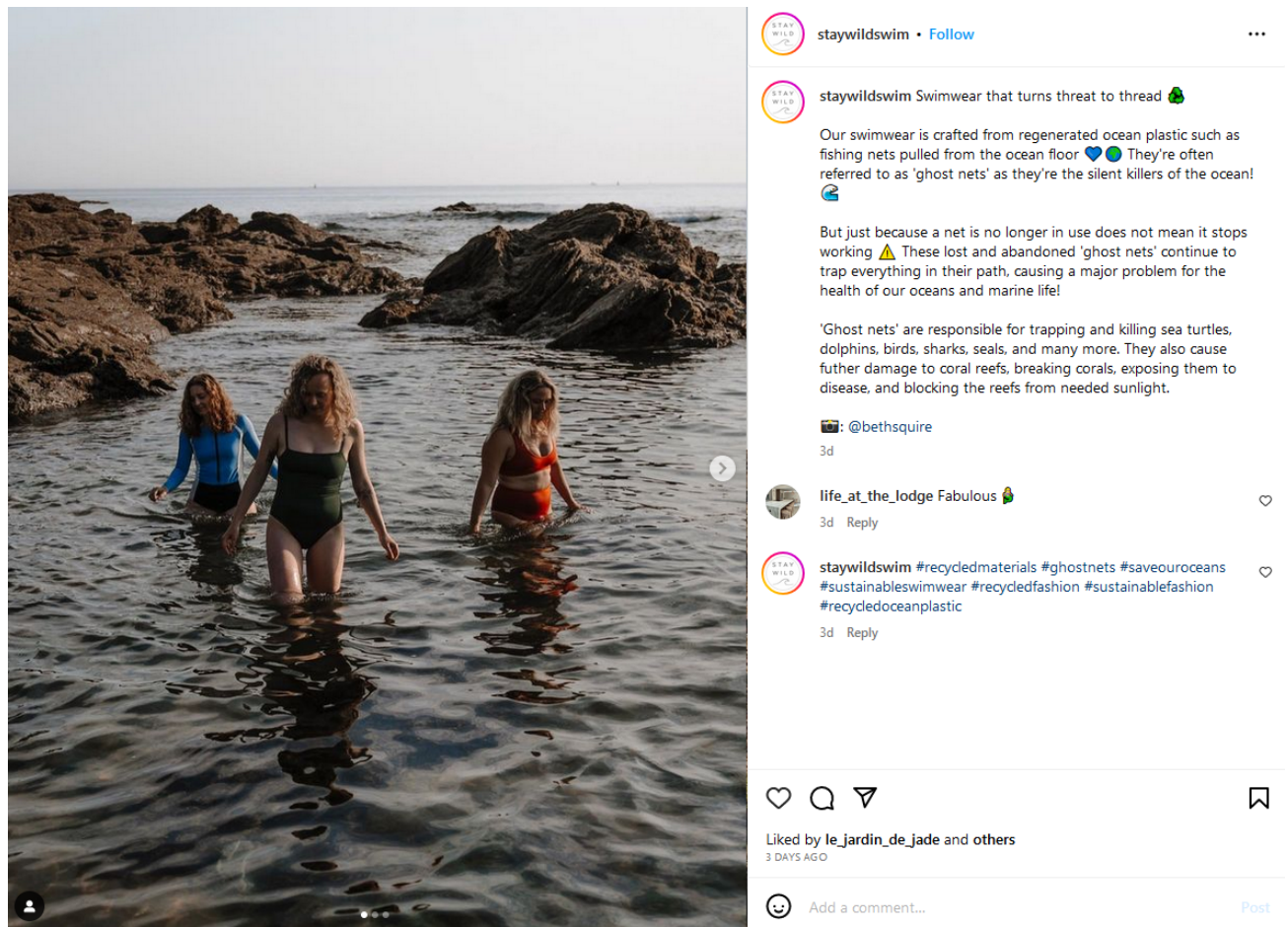


which activism has been ‘rearticulated as [a] market and consumption system’ (p. 855). This thesis answers this call as it considers how environmental activism operates within an influencer context, a field typically associated with hyper-consumerism and marketing ploys with infiltrate private spheres (Arsel et al. 2021).

Theoretical standpoints like co-optation theory present a conceptualisation that views *all* change as residing within the marketplace. Co-optation theory’s key premise is that: ‘the capitalist marketplace transforms the symbols and practices of countercultural opposition into a constellation of trendy commodities and depoliticised fashion styles that are readily assimilated into the societal mainstream’ (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007 p.138). Thus, even dramatic forms of resistance are somehow attenuated by corporate agents. Co-optation brings into question what constitutes true resistance by consumers as symbols of resistance usually find their way channelled back into mass society as a palatable commodity. Perhaps we have already witnessed this happen with the case of the eco-influencer. For example, department store Selfridges have introduced the Hurr Collective: a sustainability and sharing-economy focused clothes-rental service (*BBC*, 2020). Clothes sharing, clothes swaps and campaigns against Fast Fashion are hugely popular amongst eco-influencers with many influencers themselves creating their own niche ideas of ways to recycle and reuse fashion.

Figure 1. shows the example of the Stay Wild swimwear brand created by Natalie Glaze and Zanna Van Dijk, which is another brand featured in Selfridges stores.

**Figure 1:** Screenshot of Stay Wild swimwear brand created by eco-influencers



**Source:** *StayWild Swimwear (2023)*

The brand features swimwear made from 100% recycled ocean plastic and although it could be viewed as positive that such brands are finding a mainstream, department store audience – it also shows the process of co-optation in practice as innovative, entrepreneurial ideas that avoid using single-use materials find their way of being profited upon by a luxury capitalist store like Selfridges.

Thompson & Coskuner-Balli (2007) integrate co-optation theory with the context of the organic food movement and find that corporate co-optation can actually create countervailing market structures. The community led markets projects, are in this study, motivated by co-optation and seek to reclaim their Community Sourced Agriculture (CSA). CSA presents itself in Thompson & Coskuner-Balli's (2007) study as a 'sacrosanct social institution' and one whose communal aspects cannot be easily replicated by market threats as it provides an intimate, artisan marketplace experience. Practices that the eco-influencer documents, such as

composting and recycling, may too involve community aspects which cannot be easily replicated to support corporate capitalism and which are somewhat protected from easy market co-optation. Thus, examples like Stay Wild swimwear may seem more appealing before being 'bought out' by department stores and brands like such provide an example of how eco-influencers must carefully balance their legitimacy as both entrepreneur and as environmentalist.

## **2.5 Marketplace Resistance**

To want to change tenets of the marketplace, individuals or collectives are expressing their dismay with the way it operates or the attitudes or practices of the consumers within it. Of course, such beliefs often remain stagnant and the consumer will rarely take action to seek any change at all (Henry, 2010). Penalzoza and Price (1993) define resistance as 'the way individuals and groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination' (p.123). This definition says a lot as it tells us that strategies can be both individual and collective and that action must occur for resistance to happen, it cannot merely be a belief or intention. It also suggests an awareness of ideological structures and thus consumers who practice resistance may behold an awareness of their lack of agency within institutional fields such as the marketplace.

Resistance can take various forms. It has been known to occur through osmosis as small practices of resistance and choices can mobilise market transformation to take place with gradual emergence (Sandikci and Ger, 2010). Purposeful consumer resistance can often be recognised as a collective force. Resistance to marketplace structures and the mobilisation of unified consumer movement can be viewed as a sub category of a New Social Movement (NSM). NSMs are defined as 'resolute and persistent efforts by organised groups of ordinary citizens that strive for societal change outside conventional institutions and means' (Weijo et al. 2018). NSM theories seek to explain the rise of movements with looser structures which can be based upon lifestyle, counterculture and identity work and can be recognised as being apolitical (Touraine, 1977). The seminal work of Kozinets and Handelman (2004) investigates the efforts of consumer activists within anti-Nike, anti-genetically engineered food and anti-advertising movements. Their study extends new social movement theory, in particular Touraine's typology of a movement to be consisting of a movement's identity,

adversary and totality. Their findings indicate that religious and spiritual identity is interwoven with the work of activists in the study as they conceptualise their activist participants to present themselves as ‘a modern-day puritan who seeks changes in consumption culture through seeking to reform the wrongs of the unenlightened consumer’ (p.701). Thus, their adversary has extended from being capitalist corporations to also including the ‘selfish, greedy consumer consciousness’ of the unenlightened consumer and in totality, the goal of change is not particularly tangible.

Consumers can find creative and unconventional ways to practice their concern outside of typical marketplace perimeters. Gollhofer et al. (2019) present the case of the retail food sector in Germany and how individuals within a consumer movement create new alternative object pathways for food waste avoidance by practicing ‘dumpster diving’. Examples like this show how consumers within ideological CCT research can act as ‘interpretive agents’ and use direct intervention to divert commodities and create alternative pathways for food waste. The study’s participants often use anti-capitalist rhetoric to justify their practice and therefore dumpster diving can be viewed as an ideologically fuelled act which directly criticises the global economic circuit. Further resistant responses are found in Weijo et al (2018)’s study of the ‘Restaurant Day’ movement. Restaurant Day stands in protest against ‘nanny state’ Finnish food regulation and embodies a consumer movement trajectory as aggrieved consumers come together to rebel against institutional structures.

Resistance can also rise up through subcultural interests and can sometimes be a result of identificatory and social motivations such as affiliation with anarchist and anti-consumer identities (Portwood-Stacer, 2015). Although resistant practices like anti-consumption are viewed as a more integral part of pushing forth an environmental agenda (Black and Cherrier, 2010), they are still subject to critique. Varul (2013) detects a ‘sneering attitude’ and further critiques the sentiment of anti-consumption as being strangely bourgeois and aristocratic despite its anti-bourgeois stance, describing it as: ‘a vanguard movement of an enlightened few trying to wean the intoxicated masses from their addiction to consumption’ (p.297). Pure marketplace resistance is questionable and some scholars would suggest that the anti-consumer is altogether a non-existent concept (Eckhardt et al., 2010; Black and Cherrier, 2010). Resistance is further explored in chapter 3 as the dynamics of online networks for organising resistance and protest is considered (Oudou et al. 2017).

## 2.6 An Institutional Perspective

As highlighted by Arnould and Thompson, (2015), an institutional lens has been of assistance to CCT scholars who have contributed within the theoretical area surrounding the politics of consumption. Institutional theory allows us to reimagine the marketplace as a set of institutions which each has their own established practices. It has been a seminal perspective in the social sciences in the last few decades and provides a powerful tool for analysing phenomena at the macro-level (Chaney and Slimane, 2019). Although scholars of social theory will suggest that there is no universally accepted law of what defines an institution (Scott, 1995), it is roughly recognised as a social structure with its own cultural norms, symbols, beliefs and rituals (Suchman, 1995). Garud, Hardy and Maguire (2007) define institutions as ‘taken-for-granted, culturally embedded understandings, they specify and justify social arrangements and behaviours, both formal and informal’ (p.959). Further, they compare institutions to ‘performance scripts’ – indicating that individuals act out according to pre-written designs. To go ‘off script’ then would indicate some sort of resistance to the design. Institutions provide a structure to social order and draw clearly defined boundaries between categories; thus, this logic can even be applied to humans in the sense that the institutional context that the individual is situated within will alter their categorisation as an individual (Suddaby, 2010). In more objectively thinking about what an institution actually is, it can be thought of as a humanly devised mental construction which consists of both formal rules and informal constraints (Neale, 1987; North, 1990).

Institutional logic has featured in several of the reviewed articles (Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019) from the prior sections and the adoption of institutional theory allows theorising to go beyond a focus on individual consumer meaning and experiences, and develop an understanding of embedded consumption behaviour that is contextually orientated (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Scott (2001) discusses this idea of embedded behaviour, when he confers that:

[...] the thrust of institutional theory is to account for continuity and constraint in social structure, but that need not preclude attention to the ways in which individual actors take action to create, maintain, and transform institutions (p.75).

As the previous section has illuminated, the meaning that individuals apply to practice within their field can be studied but should be in sync with the realisation that individuals are not always aware of the subordinating nature that the institution has on their behaviour (Suddaby, 2010). Typically, institutional theory has stressed that the conditioning of norms and conventions has legitimised particular organisations and fields (Scott, 1995), yet consumer research brings with it a different focus which considers agentic behaviour, all whilst respecting structure (Coskuner-Balli, 2013). CCT research, rather than dwelling too much on the dichotomy of structure and agency, allows for an exploration of consumption activity which attempts to pose a challenge to foundational structures; it considers and investigates some of the far out and ‘wacky’ creative possibilities that individuals create as to pose a threat to a societal problem (Coskuner-Balli, 2013).

The phenomenon being explored in this thesis provides an example of a network of individuals using digital spaces to share and influence consumption practices. It can be considered that these consumers are ‘institutional entrepreneurs’, which can be defined as: ‘actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones (Maguire et al. 2004, p.657). Thus, the combining of institutional work with entrepreneurship allows for the study of individuals who harness creativity and thrust themselves into existence; these individuals do this by opposing established practices and attempting to legitimise their own alternative cause (Battilana, 2006). A fundamental challenge within institutional theory is to investigate and reveal some of the ways social actors are motivated to change the embedded structures that they themselves are moulded by and the strategies they come up with to do this (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). Fields such as influencer marketing have typically been isomorphic in the sense that dominant logics have provided a way of doing things: their narration and visual content follows similar themes e.g. careful artefact placement, candid photographs, emotive and lengthy captions, and their output has typically been associated with consumerist forward rhetoric (Haenlein et al. 2020).

It can be said that: ‘existing institutions do not just post constraints; they “are also enabling to the extent that they provide a repertoire of already existing institutional principles (e.g.,

models, analogies, conventions, concepts) that actors use to create new solutions in ways that lead to evolutionary change” (Campbell, 1997:22, cited in Scott, 1995). Thus, the very constraints which consumers wish to resist may leak into their strategies of resistance: subconsciously moulding them and crafting their resistance in line with the dominant institutional logics. To operate outside of patterned and reproduced behaviour is relatively impossible (Scott, 1995), and thus it becomes an interesting topic of study to consider consumer resistance which is taking place in a field which typically operates in tune with a marketplace logic. If we consider, for example, market co-optation which was mentioned in the prior section on *marketplace solutions*, this shows how difficult it is for resistance to escape appropriation by corporate agents and thus even showcasing resistance – under the impression that it can be co-opted – shows how individuals operate according to existing principles (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2008; Campbell, 1997).

This study contributes to neoinstitutional theory which is the discipline which emphasises culture as a critical dimension of institutions (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Further neoinstitutional theory allows for the study of logics and diversity within cultural fields. Culture can be viewed as a system of meaning and of practices and logics themselves are both material and symbolic (Thornton et al. 2012). This study not only engages with micro-level analysis of consumers and how they perceive and experience the institutional field, but also meso-level actors who can be considered to be institutional entrepreneurs. Both institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurs will be reviewed in the following sections.

## 2.61 Institutional Pillars and Definitions

As will be reinforced in the following section on institutional legitimacy, the ‘vital ingredients’ or rather the ‘three pillars’ of institutions are its regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive systems (Scott, 1995). These pillars can be viewed in Table 2.

	<i>Regulative</i>	<i>Normative</i>	<i>Cultural-Cognitive</i>
<i>Basis of compliance</i>	Expedience	Social obligation	Taken-for-grantedness Shared understanding
<i>Basis of order</i>	Regulative rules	Binding expectations	Constitutive schema
<i>Mechanisms</i>	Coercive	Normative	Mimetic
<i>Logic</i>	Instrumentality	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
<i>Indicators</i>	Rules Laws Sanctions	Certification Accreditation	Common beliefs Shared logics of action Isomorphism
<i>Affect</i>	Fear Guilt/Innocence	Shame/Honour	Confusion/Certainty
<i>Basis of legitimacy</i>	Legally sanctioned	Morally governed	Comprehensible Recognizable Culturally supported

**Table 2.** Three Pillars of Institutions (Sourced in Scott, 1995)

The focus of this research is mostly on both normative and cultural-cognitive rules and systems as this refers to ‘the congruence between the social values associated with or implied by actors and the norms of acceptable behaviour in the larger social system’ (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013, p. 1236). Normative systems refer to the ‘moral roots’ of an institution and thus the behaviours they impose enable social action as they effectively promote social welfare and altruistic behaviours (Scott, 1995; Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) warns that definitions should not be interpreted to exclude self-serving motivations and raises the point that fields can and do behold normative legitimacy even though their output is based upon ‘hollow’ claims and token gestures. For example, it can be interpreted that an influencer’s paid partnerships with brands who are known for greenwashing could translate into an instance where token gestures may be present, although their perceived legitimacy remains



intact. It is important to highlight, in regards to this, that the doubts of mere individuals do not affect the overall normative legitimacy one has, although an influencer may reconfigure their strategy if audience's reception is overwhelmingly critical in an attempt to repair and maintain their dual legitimacy as a concerned environmentalist (Suchman, 1995). The cultural-cognitive pillar is mostly associated with neo-institutionalism which binds institutional arguments with the study of organisations. This approach is a concoction of frameworks and ideas which are rooted in cultural studies, psychology and phenomenology (Scott, 1995).

Institutions are theorised to have 'carriers', that is systems, routines and artefacts that carry and reinforce the institution as they are practiced (Scott, 1995). These carriers can be imagined as being the travel routes of institutional ideas and principles, of which there are four classes which can be viewed in the table below.

Carriers	Pillars		
	Regulative	Normative	Cultural-cognitive
Symbolic systems	Rules, laws	Values, expectations, standards	Categories, typifications, schema
Relational systems	Governance systems, power systems	Regimes, authority systems	Structural isomorphism, identities
Routines	Protocols, standard operating procedures	Jobs, roles, obedience to duty	Scripts
Artifacts	Objects complying with mandated specifications	Objects meeting conventions, standards	Objects possessing symbolic value

**Table 3.** Institutional pillars and carriers (Sourced in Scott, 2001)

Institutional theory, of course, has its limitations as a tool and Suddaby (2010) argues that the theory has perhaps been stretched beyond its own parameters of application. His argument stems from his observation that theorists have overlooked the central point of institutional enquiry in attending to questions which focus on outcomes or products. What Suddaby (2010) claims is missing from institutional research is the 'institutional story': the motivation for adoption of practice; the meaning systems, symbols, myths by which field actors interpret

their institutional environments; how the individual interprets their institutional surroundings and how we as researchers can try to understand what actors do not themselves understand.

## **2.62 Legitimacy**

A central tenet of institutional theory, which has been used to better understand the marketplace, is the notion of legitimacy. Legitimacy can be thought of as being 'sociopolitical endorsement' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This concept acts as an 'anchor point' within the institutional approach as it explains how social actors use marketplace symbols to gain, maintain and repair legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). There are two recognised examinations of legitimacy: organisational legitimacy and social psychological legitimacy. The legitimacy that often guides projects within CCT is rooted in organisational scholarship and scholars who take an organisational institutional perspective define legitimacy as 'the degree of cultural support for an organisation' (Meyer & Scott, 1983 p. 201; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Fundamental to the understanding of this perspective, and which ties it with the epistemic positioning of CCT, is the process of legitimation which sees the acceptance of novel practices and ideologies being based upon the broader cultural frameworks they reside in. Further, this study acknowledges the differences in legitimacy amongst individual actors within a cultural field and aligns with studies which adopt institutional legitimacy in this way (Maguire et al. 2004; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013).

Before the legitimation process is reviewed, it is worthwhile to examine some of the foundational definitions and classifications of legitimacy. Original descriptions of legitimacy stem from social theorist Max Weber's essays on social order and authority. For an order – a system of specified maxims and rules – to be considered legitimate, it must be formed on the basis of tradition, by virtue of affectual attitudes and rational belief, or its established legal manner (Weber, 1964). These four orientations uphold the legitimate order and all rely on the basic tenet that legitimate orders are followed when actors feel 'a sense of duty, obligation, or 'oughtness' towards rules, principles or commands' (Spencer, 1970 p. 126). Deductions to the early definitions include Dornbusch & Scott's (1975) separation of Weber's classification. Their deduction simplifies the classification into validity and propriety which neatly

introduces legitimacy as something which is either an obligation or desire of the actor to accept.

Drawing on Weber's classification, Spencer (1970) seeks understanding of the relationship between a social order and authority, as this synthesis is absent from Weber's work. The example of a prophet is drawn upon as such a charismatic leader is assumed to break through normative structures and override existing norms with new ones. Weber too perceived prophets to play an important role in traditional authority systems and in moulding effectual attitudes of society. Other early social theorists such as Parsons (1968) make the argument that the crux of legitimacy can be assigned to the role of charisma. Although absent from some of the institutional definitions of legitimacy, which will guide this project, the compelling nature of charismatic actors is a worthy consideration when theorising about influencer culture as eco-influencers are seen as institutional entrepreneurs who are questioning norms and reconfiguring the field. It is important to acknowledge that these factors – charisma, authority and legitimacy itself – are not based upon a singular actor's impressions of phenomena but the presumption that others recognise and accept these factors in the social order or actor (Johnson, Dowd & Ridgeway, 2006).

Organisational theorists define legitimacy as: 'the degree of cultural support for an organisation (Meyer & Scott, 1983, p.201). Organisational definitions pay attention to the collective nature of legitimacy and emphasise how single observations and behaviours which contradict the legitimacy of an organisation do not affect its overall legitimacy. A definition of an organisational field is: 'those organisations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Organisational legitimacy, alike the wider theoretical base it belongs to, can fall under three pillars which it can be categorised into - cognitive, normative and regulative. Cognitive legitimacy refers to the integration of an institution with pre-existing 'schemas' which are the cognitive mental structures that inform and guide human behaviour. Normative legitimacy (or moral) is how socially acceptable an institution is and how it abides to dominant norms and values, and regulatory legitimacy is how the organisation conforms to the social rules and regulations as set out by higher institutions such as governments. It is important to mention that these

defining pillars of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive and can interrelate in the social world (Suchman, 1995).

Johnson, Dowd & Ridgeway (2006) in their examination of the legitimation process bring attention to the organisational variant of literature on cultural capital, in particular the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's work has been centrepiece in many CCT projects due to its usage as a: 'means to analyse how social class conditioning shapes consumer choices and preferences or creates distinctive consumer groupings and taste segments (Arnould & Thompson, 2015 p. 10). Arnould & Thompson (2015) highlight how both the usage of Bourdieu's sociological framework and institutional perspectives have contributed to two separate theoretical shifts within the CCT dimension of the politics of consumption. For example, Scaraboto & Fischer (2013) whilst primarily applying an institutional lens, also use Bourdieu's field theory to complement their analysis of the study's context on the field of fashion. A lens such as Bourdieu's (1984) theory provides an interesting supplement in an institutional study which focuses on legitimation as this theory considers how superiority through symbols of cultural capital can equate to the gaining and maintenance of legitimacy in a field of cultural production. The next section introduces institutional logics as a concept which assists in understanding how socially constructed patterns shapes the behaviour of marketplace actors.

### **2.63 Institutional Logics**

The institutional logics perspective was conceived by Friedland and Alford (1991) as a tenet of neoinstitutional theory which considers the cultural and symbolic alongside the material structures within institutions. Thornton et al. (2012) introduce an institutional logics perspective as an analytical framework highlighting how both 'vocabulary to motivate action' and 'their sense of self and identity' are representative frames of reference which allow actors to make sense of their choices (p.2). If legitimacy is the authority, support or acceptance an organisation or actor within a field has, then institutional logics carry the content which makes this legitimacy manifest. Institutional logics can be defined as being the 'socially constructed and historically patterned assumptions, values, and beliefs by which people in particular contexts provide meaning both to daily activities and to their life projects and

experiences' (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015, p.1449). The connection between institutional logics and legitimacy, according to Bitekine & Song (2022), is lacking in the literature which highlights the importance of this study as this crucial link is investigated.

As noted previously, Bourdieu paid large attention to the ways in which logics operate in fields such as fashion, identifying both the logic of art and the logic of commerce as domineering (Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975). In Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) analysis, alongside the logic of art and commerce, logics which exist in adjacent fields are leveraged such as logics of human rights, which assist the Fat Acceptance activists in their study. Other studies, such as the work of Sandicki and Ger (2010), draw upon the logics of modesty and virtue to investigate choices within the boundaries of Islamic faith. Field logics are significant because they influence what actors focus on when interacting in a field, whereas societal level logics such as a market logic, are underlying yet dominant and can also shape and reinforce themselves through the field-level logics (Thornton et al. 2012). Actors are often embedded in a variety of fields, and this can result in sense-making and behaviour that does not strictly follow the dominant logics in a particular field (Thornton et al. 2012). Dynamism of logics is expected at the field level and Thornton et al. (2012) in table 4 below outline how logics are introduced and how fields evolve. Transformational change processes depict more radical changes to the logics in a field, whereas developmental change processes are when many prevailing logics in the field still remain.

Forms of Change	Definition	Sample Study
<i>Transformational Change</i>		
Replacement	One institutional logic replaces another	Rao, Monin, and Durand (2003)
Blending	Combining dimensions of diverse logics	Glynn and Lounsbury (2005)
Segregation	Separation of logics from a common origin	Purdy and Gray (2009)
<i>Developmental Change</i>		
Assimilation	Incorporation of external dimensions	Murray (2010)
Elaboration	Endogenous reinforcement	Shipilov, Greve, and Rowley (2010)
Expansion	Shift from one field to another	Nigam and Ocasio (2010)
Contraction	Decrease in logic's scope	Reay and Hinings (2009)

**Table 4.** Typology of Change in Field-Level Institutional Logics (Sourced in Thornton et al. 2012)

As is outlined, logics can be replaced or they can blend with existing logics in a field. Similarly to blending, assimilation can occur where logics blend but the core elements of the original logic prevail (Thornton et al. 2012). Even with more transformational processes such as replacement, original logics can still prevail but just with less dominance (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). More transformational, revolutionary examples include research such as Sine and David's (2003) analysis shows 'environmental jolts' within the US electric power industry which erode established logics and catalyse new opportunities. Other more confrontational replacements of logics can be viewed in the work of Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) who see new logics enter and replace old logics within accounting firms. Research which shows how logics can be affirmed in a more developmental and evolutionary ways includes Wright and Zammuto's (2013) study which shows this dynamism in English county cricket, and Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) study which shows how a human rights logic evolves the field of fashion to be more inclusive of plus-sized consumers, and how the consumers in their study also reproduce the dominant market logics of the field.

To date, little has been researched on paradoxical or contradictory logics. Contradictions within institutional fields are inevitable and Thornton et al. (2012) stresses that logics which enter the field externally are critical to changes within the field. Zanette & Scaraboto (2019)

explore the contradictory logics of ‘constricted femininity’ and ‘flexible feminism’ in their study on consumers of women’s ‘Spanx’ shapewear. Their study, along with others (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017) investigates how contradictory logics prompts identity conflicts in individuals as they question whether or not they can sustain multiple identities as when logics contradict each other, the identity of the social actor is threatened (Thornton et al. 2012). Although these studies consider logics that pose a contradiction and how they link to identity maintenance, they do not show a case where a consumer’s identity project results in marketplace resistance or entrepreneurial work. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature for a study which investigates some of the ideological tensions that are posed when an individual operates in two paradoxical fields and to which can give indications of marketplace change. Wright et al. (2012) do consider contradictory identities of business organisations responding to climate change but their focus is more on corporate identity and how discourses around climate change have come to influence managerial decisions. This study, which considers the eco-influencer as a self-managed organisational actor, observes and analyses a case whereby consumers interacting in the field wish to change facets of the marketplace and at the same time, allow for the marketplace’s continuation by reproducing dominant logics of the field. As the previous introductory chapter outlined, this study is one which investigates paradox over contradiction as the eco-influencer as a concept is contradictory but presents itself as neither side of the dualism of true or untrue. The next section offers understanding of institutional entrepreneurship as an aspect of institutional theory which assists in theorisations around marketplace change.

## **2.64 Institutional Entrepreneurship**

Institutional entrepreneurship is used to describe the conditions of the influencers in this study. Although the participants in the Scaraboto and Fischer’s (2013) study are also bloggers, the institutional entrepreneurs identified in their study are ‘fat activist celebrities’ who consumers can identify with and draw inspiration from. Institutional entrepreneurs can also be recognised as individuals seeking change for societal reasons and not for personal gain, for example individuals in Maguire et al. (2004) leverage resources to alter the way in

which AIDS societies and initiatives function. The participants of this study are considered to be institutional entrepreneurs as they challenge aspects of the marketplace they find unsatisfactory and encourage their followers to do so too. However, it is noted that institutional entrepreneurship is not always strategic, as an institutional entrepreneur might not consider themselves as such or regard themselves as having much of an effect on marketplace change (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). They also highlight that institutional entrepreneurs are not always inspiring and will not always trigger consumers to change.

The literature on this concept defines this as a strategic endeavour whereby organisations or actors play an active part in shaping the institutional environment (Maguire et al. 2004). The merging of institutional thought and entrepreneurialism into a singular concept allows for investigation into how actors within a field can act strategically and mobilise resources to establish new practices and change existing ones and become established over time (Guard et al., 2007; Weik, 2011). Guard et al. (2007) recognise this as ‘a concept that reintroduces agency, interests and power into institutional analyses’ (p.957). Thus, this use of institutional theory appeals to the institutional thought styles as indicated by Askegaard and Linnet (2011) who seek balance of agency with contextual orientation. The notion of institutional entrepreneurship gives researchers the opportunity to explore power and politics within institutional fields, and of course CCT researchers the opportunity to theorise within the politics of consumption. As Garud et al. (2007) elaborate: ‘to qualify as institutional entrepreneurs, individuals must break with existing rules and practices associated within the dominant institutional logic(s) and institutionalise the alternative rules, practices or logics they are championing (p.962).

A feature of institutional entrepreneurship is ‘the paradox of embedded agency’ which relates to the structure-agency debate in social theory which has been reviewed in section 2.3 of this chapter. Agency is considered to be ‘embedded’ in institutional theory and subordinate to prevailing norms within a field as the actor is not separate from the field but acting from within it (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The paradox is as follows: how can actors be embedded in the institutional field and bound to the processes and logics within it, and at the same time, bring new logics to the field which inevitably shapes the field and lead to change? (DiMaggio



and Powell, 1991; Friedland and Alford, 1991). Answers are offered to this puzzle, offering explanations which conceptualise that structure does not wholly constrain agency but rather it offers a platform for actors to be reflexive of the field and these reflexive actions reconstruct the field accordingly. Weik (2011) finds the paradox 'peculiar' as it is naïve and presumptuous to expect definite answers from a paradox. That a paradox needs resolving is questionable as paradoxes can never be finally solved. As will be introduced in the discussion and conclusion of this thesis as an emerging concept is the Taoist perspective, which embraces paradox as the fundamental nature of reality.

## **2.7 Institutional approaches in CCT**

The density of this chapter, which outlines the foundational pillars of the theoretical perspective, perhaps juxtaposes with the 'wild and wacky world of consumer oddballs' which CCT is known to offer (Bode and Østergaard, 2013). However, now this is sufficiently reviewed, we can now turn to conclude this chapter on how institutional theory has been weaved into the CCT and consumer research field, and where this leaves opportunity for this study to join and expand on current research conversations. It is worth noting that rich interpretative and symbolic research which studies institutional processes do not always explicitly categorise their studies as fitting within institutional theory (Suddaby, 2011). For example, Gollnhofer et al. (2019)'s study states that it theorises in the area of value regimes but upon reading their contextual sections they discuss how institutions shape the values and object pathways of consumers and their food items. This study encompasses the elements of an institutional perspective and the concluding remarks also highlight how these tactical practices resulted in increased legitimacy for the practice of dumpster diving (the process of retrieving food waste from supermarket waste bins) as a consumer movement. The consumers in this study show resistance to the dominant market place logic which accepts food waste as an institutional practice.

Handelman and Arnold (1999) use an institutional approach to investigate the role of social marketing for firms. Legitimation can be used to measure and warn firms on their performance as legitimation provides an assessment of the longevity of a firm and their right

to exist. Further their study shows that 'support' from consumers is a variable not just measured economically, but a variable measured in reaction to a firm's social behaviour. Norms carried from separate social institutions inform a consumer's decision to support or withdraw support from a firm. These implications, seminal at the time, are arguably taken for granted norms and institutional approaches have been extended, in recent years, to concern how entrepreneurial actors harness these strategies for legitimation (Scaraboto and Fisher, 2013). In Kates (2004) study uses on gay consumers, they find that 'brands consumption served as a symbolic arena in which the struggle between oppression and human rights were fought and legitimate meanings ritually confirmed' (p.462). Legitimate meanings in this study are relative to 'gay-friendly' brands and brands who insert their brand into their collective memory i.e. through partnerships at gay pride events or AIDS walk for life. Thus, their findings confirm what Handelman and Arnold (1999) found in that brand citizenship is linked to brand legitimacy.

Research where consumers are contented and share enthusiasm about their consumption such as the fashion bloggers in Dolbec & Fischer's (2015) study, show how incremental improvements made by consumers can, overtime, lead to significant changes at the market level. For example, activity which goes on inside 'the action arena' of fashion blogging page *lookbook.nu* leads to reconfiguration of institutional work whilst it is being performed. The *lookbook.nu* bloggers in their study match and mirror the professionalism of industry level actors who can be considered 'insiders' in the fashion industry, and their opportunities for online interaction suggest markets can be changed without intention. Similarly, Ghaffari et al. (2019) research a subtler change towards change. In their study of the Iranian female fashion market, various actors such as consumers, retailers and activists participate in institutional work despite limited resources. Their study shows that more subtle, everyday acts of resistance can overtime lead to unintentional change in market dynamics. Their findings show a case where actors do not wish to overturn dynamics yet their 'small wins' help negotiate symbolic and material structures within the field to allow for relaxations in the dress code of the state.

Further examinations of legitimacy include the work of Humphreys and Latour (2013) who use experiments and content analysis to investigate online gambling and how media framing affects perceptions of legitimacy. Their research design allowed them to investigate differences in normative and cognitive legitimacy and how media frames play an effective role in bridging these two types. Prior work by Humphreys (2010) on legitimation as a historical process examines casino gambling and how institutional actors such as journalists shape public discourse and semantics around casinos which accompanies the regulatory approval of gambling. Cultural legitimacy is achieved by gambling amounting to being 'cool' and regulative legitimacy highlights business and tax cycling to stakeholders and consumers.

Market shaping is often concluded to be a process undertaken both unconsciously and consciously by a variety of social actors at both micro and macro level. Baker et al.'s (2019) work explores the decline of traditional circuses and on the contrary, the emergence of new circuses such as *Cirque du Soleil* and finds that market shaping is 'shared, iterative, and recursive, that is co-created, and undertaken by market actors both formal and informal' (p. 301). Similar shared interactions are found in the context of French gastronomy (Rao et al. 2003) and gender stereotypes in advertising (Middleton and Turnball, 2021). The shift in logics which accompany the abandonment of classical cuisine for nouvelle cuisine in Rao et al.'s (2003) study is through the actions of varying actors, including activists who work to dismantle old logics and identities. They identify nouvelle cuisine as an identity movement which arose 'in opposition to the dominant cultural codes, consist of a "we-feeling" sustained through interactions among movement participants, and are expressed through cultural materials such as names, narratives, symbols, and rituals' (p.796). In the case of the emergence of gender progressive logics in advertising and marketing, Middleton and Turball's (2021) data reveals the complex social interplays between various market actors to which the emergent progressive logics depend upon. Their study identifies how institutional change, in this case the decline in gender stereotypes, is intricately linked to the market system, and how shifts in moral conscience and public discourse support market transformation. Fluctuations in markets are shown to depend on a variety of actors within the ecosystem and are 'open to manipulation by those actors who collectively generate their form' (Baker et al. 2019, p.305).

### **2.7.1 Plural Logics**

Research with focuses on the interweaving of plural logics is of seminal value to this contribution as differing, dual logics are shown to be blended in ways which are complimentary and lead to field innovation (Kjeldgaard et al. 2017; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). Actors can evolve the field by looking for inspiration in adjacent fields as is shown to be the case in the Danish beer market (Kjeldgaard et al. 2017) and plus sized fashion (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). For this process to occur, cultural practices have to be made congruent with existing norms, values and institutions of the society it is situated in (Kjeldgaard et al. 2017). Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015) analyse the coexistence of logics within the US yoga market which withholds the coexistence of spirituality, medical, fitness and commercial logics. Their findings illustrate that field level logics evolve over time depending on the cultural capital of market actors and legitimisation of logics. A key strand to their research which links it with this study is their investigation of the management of plural logics and how this creates competition and collaboration within the field. They theorise that markets are also subject to cultural hybridisation as hybrid services which embody both Indian and Western logics thrive in the context of yoga Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2016).

Cherrier et al. (2018) deal with institutional complexity which is defined as the confrontation of ‘incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics’ (p. 245). Notably, they explore the opportunities for entrepreneurship within markets where contradictory logics exist in the case of an Indian venture promoting sustainable menstrual hygiene. Their findings indicate that coexistence and contradiction within the institutional field can be creative, innovative and enabling rather than merely constraining. The integration of multiple logics allows for solutions to large scale problems to be conjured despite institutional complexity. This research answers their call for studies which consider the ‘productive tensions’ which exist within institutional fields and how institutional entrepreneurs can take advantage of contradictory logics. Hartman and Coslor (2019) research the novel context of commercial egg donation to examine the multiple institutional logics being navigated. They note tension between logics such as the logic of commodification and money, and a logic which extends to the sensitivity of human life. They cite the growing work on institutional complexity as a lens with great utility, and their findings indicate the intermingling of contradictory logics:

the framing of egg donation as a 'job' allows for the coexistence of logics which support commodification and altruism simultaneously.

### **2.7.2 A Contribution with an Institutional Lens**

As has been reiterated several times in this chapter, the work of Scaraboto and Fischer has been important in establishing an opening into the conversation of marketplace change. In addition to theorising surrounding the core concept of legitimacy, their study harnesses both logics and institutional entrepreneurship. Consequently, their strategies for change include appealing to logics in a countervailing field and harnessing support from more powerful actors in the fashion field. Therefore, in sum, these marginalised 'fatshionista' bloggers use support from established market actors to help them be served by the very field that excludes them. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) make the following suggestion that future research in the topic area of marketplace change could benefit from examining:

‘[...] a context where consumers gain symbolic capital (whether by blogging or some means), and want to change some institutionalised aspect of the market (and therefore can be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs), but where they are not members of a stigmatised group’ (p.1251).

This request speaks to the context of eco-influence on social media. First and foremost, the influencers in question use their platforms to gain capital in both symbolic and physical forms. Further, these influencers seek to change the market in favour of environmental outcomes yet are not themselves stigmatised by their ecological concerns. To reach an understanding of the phenomena at hand, institutional theory is harnessed to investigate how these influencers build and maintain legitimacy in their respective field. Understandably when using this lens, there is the consideration that the merging of environmentalism with influencer culture will yield contradictory, plural, coexisting logics (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2016; Cherrier et al., 2018; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). This study answers further calls for wider social media contexts to adapt an institutional lens as there is little understanding as to how actors acquire legitimacy in constantly fluctuating digital spaces where brand legitimacy is 'contested and reconsidered everyday' (Hakala et al. 2017, p. 538).

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the theoretical context which allows me to better understand how institutional entrepreneurs can seek change within the marketplace. I began by addressing CCT as the field of enquiry and revealing how this thesis appeals to the theoretical research program of *the politics of consumption* (Arnould and Thompson, 2015). This program considers the politically charged consumption activity that consumers partake in to relieve tensions in witnessing the effects of sociocultural problems (Roux and Izberk-Bilgin, 2018) and how their self-governed, entrepreneurial solutions to these problems are rooted in neoliberal ideology (Veresui & Giesler, 2018). This leads onto the questioning of consumer agency and the structure versus agency conundrum (Elder-Vass, 2010) and I conclude this section by highlighting the usefulness of ‘institutional thought styles’ (Askeegard and Linnet, 2011) which allows the ‘simultaneously antagonistic and mutually dependent relationship’ of structure and agency to be expressed (Hays, 1994, p.65). The next two sections, *marketplace solutions* and *marketplace resistance*, outline key CCT research which studies the ways in which consumers approach marketplace change (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). Drawing away from studies which merely study ‘the green gap’ (Carrington et al. 2016), the section *marketplace solutions* offers understanding of ‘consumer responsabilisation’ (Giesler and Verse, 2014) and market ‘co-optation’ (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007) which both question what constitutes as true resistance by consumers. *Marketplace resistance* considers some of the ways consumers attempt to practice resistance outside marketplace perimeters (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Weijo et al. 2018; Gollnhofer et al. 2019).

The chapter then introduced institutional theory as the supporting framework of this thesis. The appropriateness of this lens is argued as its adoption has previously allowed CCT studies to develop an understanding of embedded consumption behaviour that is contextually orientated (Askeegard and Linnet, 2011). A fundamental challenge within institutional theory is to investigate and reveal some of the ways actors are motivated to change embedded structures, yet are constrained by the paradox of their ‘embedded agency’ (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). After outlining the core pillars and definitions of institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell; Scott, 1995), the neoinstitutional concepts of legitimacy, institutional

entrepreneurship and logics are outlined for their usefulness in this thesis. Bourdieu's (1984) field theory is also defined as a usefulness supplement to institutional analyses (Arnould and Thompson, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). The chapter concludes by specifying some of the ways institutional analyses have featured in CCT and how this thesis responds to further research proposed by Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), and how this study's paradoxical context will contribute to research which investigates plural, coexisting logics (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2016; Cherrier et al. 2018; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). In the next chapter, titled *Influencer and Field*, I introduce the context of this thesis.

## Chapter Three: Influencer and Field

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter offers insight into the context of this study and also considers the systemic and structural influences governing the field (Askeegard and Linnet, 2011). This chapter is in three parts, the first part discusses the evolution of influencer culture. Here, I discuss its roots with the creativity of one entrepreneur in the 1700s and further influential figures who legitimised certain norms within the field of fashion, arguably *the* field for influence. I further consider celebrity endorsement and then introduce influencer culture as we know it today. The next part of this chapter is concerned with the technological context and ‘technoculture’ as a cultural field of significance (Mick and Fournier, 1998; Kozinets, 2019). Instagram is presented as the social media platform most associated with influencer culture (Glenister, 2021) and the enabling and constraining nature of its key attributes, communication features and algorithms are reviewed (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022; Eurbanks, 2018). Surveillance literature is then introduced as it is considered that influencing is a type of ubiquitous, ‘always on’ marketing (Manovich, 2018; Darmondy and Zwick, 2020). As the influencers in question are eco-conscious, the final sections detail digital activism, and green identity. The culmination of these sections are then drawn together to provide a more comprehensive definition of the eco-influencer and some of the ways that they are influencing consumption and participating in mass culture. Before concluding, the eco-influencer section draws attention to gaps in the research and states how this thesis makes a contribution.

### 3.2 The Evolution of Influencer Culture

‘If he had the patronage of the great, he would have the custom of the world’

McKendrick (1960, p.417)

The evolution of influencer marketing arguably begins with ‘her Majesty’s potter’ Josiah Wedgwood (12 July 1730 – 3 January 1795), who can be thought of as being the ‘inventor of modern marketing’ (Pirie, 2019). Wedgwood is credited to have proposed novel sales



offerings which are now taken for granted norms, such as: the money back guarantee, mail order, catalogues and “buy one get one free” (*Pioneering Minds*, 2020). The Wedgwood legacy is one which views him as a ‘pioneer’ as his exquisite products consist of fine china and porcelain pottery which have stood the test of time from 18<sup>th</sup> century to present day. The craftsman would go to great efforts to avoid waste – his craft was mindful of this, and although his accessories were often imitated by competitors, they failed to match the thoughtful production of Wedgwood’s pottery.

The recognisable neoclassical style of this pottery still reaches astronomical values at modern day auctions and proves that mastering the craft of production, sales and distribution can pervade the customs of a field for a remarkable amount of time. McKendrick (1960) explains how characteristics such as uniqueness and quality were soon rivalled by other potters and that his true success in meeting global demand was sought by conquering the field of fashion through sponsors which would ‘reinforce that appeal’ (p.417). As the opening quote to this section describes and is something which can still be upheld in modern day consumer culture; custom will always follow when the masses wish to imitate the ‘great’. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this consisted of the monarchy and other aristocratic figures. As McKendrick (1960) aptly puts it: ‘these patrons, these lines, channels, connections are of vital importance. They led the fashion. They encouraged imitation’ (p.418). Rojek (2004) identifies the origins of influence and celebrity culture within royal patronage but explains how the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the ‘shifting balance of power’ between aristocracy and society and a decline in the influence of the court. Therefore, patronage was ‘supplanted by the new taste cultures emerging in the coffee-houses, reading societies, debating clubs, assembly rooms, galleries and concert halls’ (p.111). This point explains a fin de siècle moment in the evolution of influencer culture where taste and popular cultures replaced the societal norm of imitating royalty.

### **3.2.1 Influential Fields**

Influence occurs as a result of cultural fields producing power in the forms of symbolic capital and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1993). Influence in this context is relative to fashion, as fashion is a field which directly feeds into culture and allows it to replicate itself. Blumer (1969) explains that fashion is a serious concern to sociology and that it ‘influences vitally

the central content of any field in which it operates' (p.276). In other words, if you can convince an audience that something is fashionable then imitation will follow. Rocamora and Smelik (2015) elaborate on Simmel's (1950) idea of fashion and its 'moulding' of individuals into identities which they believe are steady and fixed. They talk of a 'convincing' which both fashion and the actors within its field partake in, one which satisfies followers into believing that fashion will grant them 'their unique individuality, [when] they are, in fact, highly conformist to the capitalist demands of a fashion system that sells and even brands authenticity (p.168). Pierre Bourdieu was greatly interested in the field of fashion and used the 'general laws of the field' to build upon his theories of cultural fields of production. These fields, as explained by Cattani et al. (2014) have 'the ability to impose judgments of symbolic legitimacy, or the power to consecrate, in cultural fields allows participants to reproduce their positions—thus influencing the choice of (and return to) different aesthetic strategies' (p. 258). In short, these conceptual fields are dialectic arenas for power plays and popularity to take place. Culture is thus fathomed out of the push and pull activities in these fields. Norms are rewritten, abided by, and rewritten again.

For example, one of the next milestones in the evolution of influencer culture can be thought to be Coco Chanel who is widely attributed to being one of the most influential figures in fashion history and whose designs revolutionised fashion in the 1920s. What makes a 'milestone' moment in influence? There were surely many notable moments between the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup>, before the time that Chanel transformed the field. The 18<sup>th</sup> century is particularly noted as the century in which fashion became 'a more prominent marker of cultural capital' (Rojek, 2001, p.107). Innovation and entrepreneurship are at the heart of the success of these early figures – both Wedgwood and Chanel can be accredited for their holistic view of creation. For Wedgwood this was his awareness that aristocratic sponsorship, not just merit of the masses, would cement his creations as superior. For Chanel, it was her recognition that female liberation and empowerment would stir up the norms of society, for example, the shock of a contemporary audience when Chanel featured underwear in a haute couture collection (Rocamora and Smelik, 2015). Chanel is not just historically significant for her recognisable basic and chic designs, but because she modelled a socially daring attitude to women which corresponded to an alteration in the roles of women. In relation to

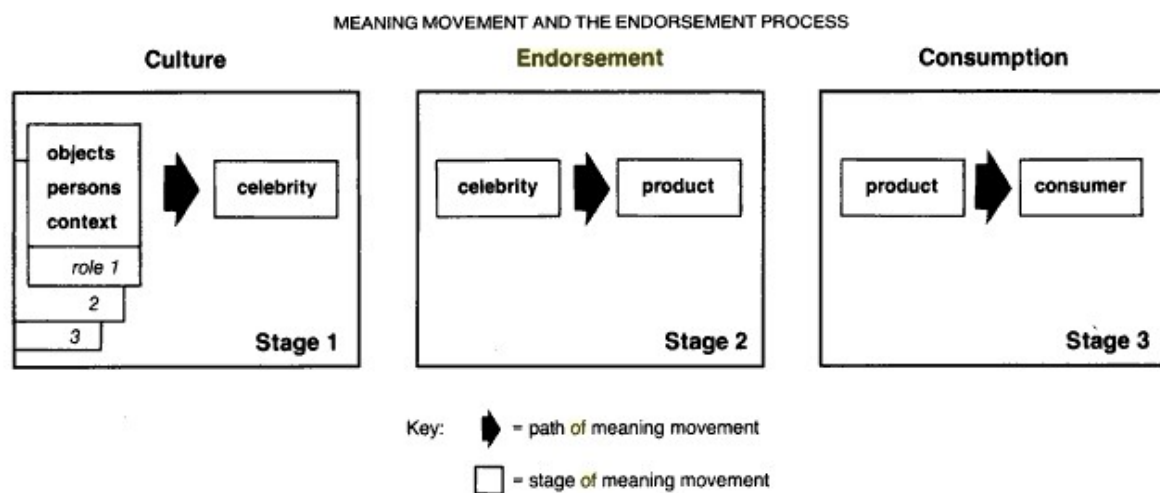
the prior theoretical standpoint, this shows an example of an actor leveraging logics from the adjacent field of women's rights and subsequently altering the institutional field. Chanel once said: "I set fashions precisely because I went out, because I was the first woman to live fully the life of her times" (Mackrell, 1992, p.9). What this tells us is that narratives of powerful actors have always, and still do, set the precedent. Wedgwood allowed the monarchy to live out the narrative of his style, whereas Chanel did this herself.

In curating a clothes line which spoke to an emergent lifestyle, a 'more active and less socially constrained [one] than the early years of the century (Crane, 1999, P.65), Chanel presented aspects of the political in her lived experience to which the masses desired to replicate. Her designs also echoed the changing dynamics surrounding gender roles of the era: women could be business owners, successful and financially independent (Crane, 1999). This is comparable to the almost 'hyper' narratives that social media allow us to follow today - yet the narrative is no longer merely perceivable in face to face interaction or by reportage of the media, but is readily available to us at all times through our electronic devices (Wagener, 2020).

### **3.2.2 Celebrity Endorsement**

If fashion is the 'central mechanism in forming social order' (Blumer, 1969, p.290), then the next milestone in influencer culture is the imitation of the famous. Celebrity endorsement, where brands pay large sums of money to individual celebrities for their placement in an advertisement or their public, performative usage of their products and services, has unprecedented power in influencing mass society. The celebrity can be thought of as 'protagonists who live in a land of make-believe, a media-constructed landscape of story and myth' (Mills et al. 2015, p.27). Rojek (2015) defines celebrity as 'the accumulation of attention capital' (p.1). He further explains how society's fascination with the celebrity is not merely a fascination with the individual achievements of the famous. Rather it is a fascination with narrative: 'personality types, social habits, adventurist impulses, hectic passions, moral and immoral desires, behavioural mutations, psychological urges and defences from which society is composed in all their prolific variety' (p.120). Musicians for example are leaders in fashion, and overt endorsements from musicians have been around since the birth of

commercial radio stations with artists such as David Bowie and Tina Turner featuring in jingles for notable soft drink advertisements (Klein, 2010). Thus, consumers who feel influenced by such advertisements and who feel the pull of the celebrity’s endorsement are not identifying with their achievements as a singer but arguably their characteristics and lifestyles. For example, these artists embody the attributes of a “rock and roll” lifestyle and thus these characteristics are temporarily borrowed to the soft drink brand and passed from brand to consumer. The primary objective of endorsement is for desirable associations to flow from the celebrity to the brand (Erdogan, 1999). McCracken’s (1989) seminal meaning transfer model depicts this process of celebrity endorsement, this is depicted in the below figure.



**Table 4:** Meaning Transfer Model Source: McCracken (1989)

McCracken (1989) elaborates that ‘distinctions of status, class, gender, and age, as well as personality and lifestyle types, are represented in the pool of available celebrities, putting an extraordinarily various and subtle pallet of meanings at the disposal of the marketing system’ (P. 312). This seminal framework offers an early cultural understanding of meanings that are made available to use by celebrity culture. It is certain that this work could not anticipate the complex way in which digital platforms allow meanings to transfer today. There are so many varying ‘micro-celebrities’ who advertise brands today, which means that meanings are diluted and there is no particular congruence sometimes with the brand and the person advertising it (Lynch & Schuler, 1994; Marick and Boyd, 2011).

Indeed, there are many instances where the transferable meanings onto the brand have not been particularly desirable. Notorious examples include drug use and sexual assault scandals of supermodels and Hollywood stars, although scandal in some cases can be desirable (Grant, 2006). No pool of celebrities have spotlighted this more than reality tv stars which appropriately tie in with the birth of influencer culture as we know it, the culture which resides on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. The beginnings of this pocket of culture was not one that is often considered 'tasteful'. The reality TV contestant is recognised as a person lacking 'intellect, taste, knowledge, skill or anything worthy of merit' despite some of them earning millions of dollars (Cashmore, 2006, p.3). The appeal is not something which is typically challenged, as Cashmore (2006) elaborates:

We become progressively preoccupied with famous persons whom we endowed with great meaning without really reflecting on why [...]. The pleasure in being in celebrity culture is that the consumer observes, secure in the knowledge that he or she is actually not just an observer, but a player too. (p. 3/5)

This depiction reveals the voyeuristic tendencies of the consumer, which accommodate the continuation of celebrity culture. It is not only the 'ethos of excess' which draws our commodity-hungry attention to these individuals (Cashmore, 2006). Celebrities often do a good job at presenting the complicated narratives of the political world to the masses, communicating difficult issues in a way which is palatable and understandable, albeit often heavily opinionated (Kogen, 2014). Giles (2002) emphasises that the 'ultimate' celebrity in contemporary times is the one whose fame stems solely from coverage from the media. Two decades later and individuals can harness this power with their own personal social media pages. 'Coverage' has now become normalised in our social interactions and we live in an age where a witty tweet or seductive selfie can catapult an individual to fame (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

Alongside the very overt brand endorsements featuring celebrities was the infiltration of brands into popular media such as music videos during the 1990s. McAllister (1996) discusses the infiltration of advertising and how the sponsorship of events and visual media,

be it a sporting event, music video or concert, become subordinate to the sponsorship. He writes: ‘every time the commercial intrudes on the cultural, the integrity of the public sphere is weakened because of the obvious encroachment of corporate promotion’ (p.221). These past discussions raise questions as to how these ideas can be applied to influencer culture today, when ‘events’ are the lifestyles of ordinary actors.

### **3.2.3 Influencer Culture as We Know It**

Influencer marketing was valued at US\$16.4 billion in 2022 and statistics show that 93% of marketers have used influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) have proven to be their own goldmines for advertising, yet it was really the power of the visual medium which allowed ‘influencers’ to become residents of their own pocket of culture on Instagram (Glenister, 2021). Entrepreneurs in this realm can be recognised as digital influencers (Abidin, 2016; Patterson and Ashman, 2020), microcelebrities (Smith, 2017), bloggers (van Esch et al. 2018), creative workers (Scolere et al. 2018) or ‘autpreneurs’ (Ashman et al. 2018). The latter concept is one conceived to bind the terms ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘autobiographical’ as popularity in this realm is dependent on the personal, the confessional and the intimate (Ashman et al. 2018). Influencers are more valuable to marketers than traditional celebrities from film, music and TV (YouGov, 2022), which suggests that the new possessors of legitimacy are those that the consumer can identify with on a more personal level; those who encourage us to live our lives as if they are a story. Scott (2015) discusses the commodification of private space and how influencer culture presents a ‘mock naivety’ in their storytelling. This can be described as the way in which the digital narrator now anticipates an audience with their every action, yet pretend the content is authentically channeled and ‘candid’ (Chae, 2018).

In 2019, ‘influencer’ officially became more than its original meaning of ‘a person or thing that influences another’ and a definition was added to depict how it has come to mean ‘a person with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media’ (Oxford Languages, 2020). Harrigan et al (2021) classify influencers as being: a micro-influencer with followings of up to 10,000, a meso influencer if they have a following of up to one million, and a macro influencer if they have

more than one million followers. Just as social media can assist in mobilising ordinary users into activist causes (Kozinets, 2022), it can also promise fame and encourage the ambition of being a micro-celebrity. ‘Instafame’ can be achieved through sometimes simple acts of posting alluring ‘selfies’ and gaining a large number of followers (Marwick, 2015). Abidin (2016) find that ‘selfies’ have been re-appropriated by influencers in providing them a way for ‘self-branding, financial gains, and self-actualisation pursuits’ (p. 1). Digitalisation has provided innovative arenas for individuals to creatively construct what can be thought of as a ‘self-branded’ persona and formulate this into a profit-making activity. Marwick (2013) identifies 3 factors which contribute to the ‘authenticity’ and ultimately, the amount of legitimacy an influencer has (his case refers to fashion ‘bloggers’): a palpable sense of truthful self-expression’, ‘a connection with and responsiveness to the audience’, and an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands’ (p.2). Marwick (2013) concludes that authenticity is not mutually exclusive from participation in commercial culture and the two can co-exist.

Influencer marketing has been of increasing interest in academia in the past decade, yet there is still the impression that it is overlooked (Abidin, 2016). Studies have looked at how fashion influencers acquire cultural capital through public displays of taste (McQuarrie et al. 2012), the effectiveness of sponsored posts (Hughes et al. 2019), and ‘selfies’ as tactic labour (Abidin, 2016). Like-minded influencers frequently develop helpful communities that give people a sense of belonging, identity, and empowerment. These communities can be especially important for groups who would otherwise be marginalised as shown in studies on ‘fatshionistas’ (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), LGBTQ influencers (Bond and Miller, 2021; Jenkins et al. 2019) and black female YouTubers (Sobande 2017). Empowerment is also a theme of those influencers disrupting normative beauty practices and standards, including studies on black bodies (Duthely 2022) and fashion influencers over age 50 (McFarlane and Samsioe, 2020; Veresiu and Parmentier, 2021). The next section leads onto a review of technology and consumer culture as a lens in which to view phenomena within the technological landscape.

### 3.3 Technology and Consumer Culture

Examining technology as a context is no easy task given the speed of advancement. In its simplest form, technology is known to be ‘complex engineered contraptions’ - our laptops, mobile phones and tablets (Kozinets, 2019, p.621). Through its weaving into everyday life, technology offers new avenues for self-extension (Belk, 2013), it offers both a utopian and dystopian vision of the future (Kozinets, 2008). Cultural scholars, including those of CCT, view technology beyond the lens of its function and investigate its interaction with humanity: as such, CCT investigates the ‘technocultural’ (Mick and Fournier, 1998). Technoculture can be defined as:

the various identities, practices, values, rituals, hierarchies, and other sources and structures of meanings that are influenced, created by, or expressed through technology consumption (Kozinets, 2019, p. 621).

Technocultural contexts are where both the consumption of technology and culture meet, we are inevitably co-creating and being influenced by the force of technoculture every day (Kozinets, 2020). As the previous chapter has outlined, consumer culture is both enabling and constraining; the product and producer; ‘internalised in personalities, and externalised in institutions’ (Hays, 1994, p.65). Even without the overwhelming influence of technology, consumer culture is messy, and digital communications and technology only enhance this complexity. This lens of technoculture, as indicated by Kozinets (2019) in his seminal paper, can assist in exploring the ways in which the technological landscape intertwines and is understood as a ‘liquid’ phenomenon (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). This liquidity can assist in explaining consumption activity in digital contexts as it draws attention to the ‘flexibility, adaptability, fluidity, lightness, detachment and speed’ of technocultural worlds (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017, p. 582).

Early musings on technology anticipate it as one which would unravel power hierarchies, empower consumers and fragment social and cultural spaces (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Other anticipations of technology in the 1990s include Mick and Fournier (1998) who discuss technology from the lens of paradox and postmodernity. Their research details some of the



paradoxes that technology arouses including dialectical tensions between freedom/enslavement, control/chaos and engaging/disengaging. They detail ‘coping strategies’ consumers use in managing these tensions which can be compared to coping strategies today. For example, ‘abandonment’ where a consumer declines or discontinues the use of a technological possession is comparative to consumer ‘deceleration’ where consumers engage in slower technological consumption for an escape from ‘the cult of speed’ (Honore, 2005; Husemann, 2019). Further arguments towards the paradoxical nature of technologies claims that although technology is designed for particular ‘rational’ aims, its performance can be ironic and result in contrasting conditions (Arnold, 2003). This is displayed in recent research which finds paradoxical implications in smartphone use: they are a help and hindrance to wellbeing, freeing and tethering its users in creating an extended or passive self (Thompson and Patterson, 2022).

The idea that the self can be transcended beyond its physical form is recognised by Belk (2013) in his seminal work on the extended self in the digital world. Belk (2013) updates his original formulation of ‘the extended self’ to include the ways in which consumers extend their narratives online through emergent technologies. Technology of course offers ‘enchanted’ properties which are utopian and ‘post-post modern’ (Belk et al. 2020), it can allow us to transcend the self and be part of ‘something bigger than us alone’ (Belk, 2013, p.488). Equally, it can be disenchanting to be networked to this larger sentient organism. As Kozinets (2017) elaborates:

it can be utterly terrifying to realize that our self, our precious “I,” is a desiring-machine wired into an unspeakably vast matrix of other desiring-machines, other “I”s, as well as computers, software systems, corporations, institutions, and so on. (p.672).

In relation to the overarching institutional lens of this thesis, technology and its fast paced, dematerial and ephemeral nature poses many challenges to institutional scholars (Currie, 2011). Digitisation accelerates institutional complexity, as an invasive logic itself, and a field for other logics to paradoxically coexist and forge new legitimate pockets of culture (Schildt, 2022).

### 3.3.1 Instagram

Instagram is the primary data collection site for this research. It is a social media platform which was founded in 2010 and which is now owned by Meta (formerly Facebook). It is the 4th most-used platform after Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp and is used daily by a staggering 1.4 billion users, being the most downloaded app in the world (Hootsuite, 2023) and it is estimated that there are 64 million influencer accounts on Instagram (Trend Hero, 2023). The selling points of the app are its visual features where users can share both image and video, 'reels' (multi-clip videos) and 'stories' (temporary images and videos) which are usually found alongside textual narration and search related tools such as hashtags (used to categorise). Interactive elements of the platform include feedback features such as 'likes', 'follows', 'saves', 'views' (on videos or stories) and 'comments'. Users can also privately message users. Instagram is described as the 'perfect' platform for influencer marketing as it has the highest influencer interaction rate amongst other platforms (Hootsuite, 2023).

The 'like' feature has been notably called 'our generation's crack cocaine', highlighting the addictiveness of receiving reward for what we post online (Zuboff, 2019, p. 458). What is often 'liked' on Instagram are 'selfies' which are photographic objects that oneself has taken (Oxford Dictionary, 2022). Further, selfies initiate relationships between viewer and viewed and which signify a sense of agency, despite being 'created, displayed, distributed, tracked, and monetised through an assemblage of nonhuman agents' (Senft and Baym, p. 1589). Scott (2015) talks of the 'mock naivety' of the digital world of selfies and how people today, and especially those of digital influence, are constantly anticipating their audience with their every action and behaviour and discusses how we are now encouraged to think of our lives as 'stories'. Spracklen (2015) says that social networks like Instagram act as 'Goffmanesque public spaces in which people perform acceptable social identities' (p.94). This is in reference to Goffman's (1959) work on impression management which has been seminal in the area of consumer culture and identity and his concepts of 'front stage' and 'back stage' performances make the distinction between what an audience sees of an individual's 'identity' and what is hidden (O'Leary and Murphy, 2019). As the next section reveals, successfully posting these

‘selfies’ amongst other performative content on Instagram can be amplified by following specific ‘rules of the game’ (Cotter, 2019).

### **3.3.2 Algorithms**

Algorithms analyse every piece of content posted to the Instagram platform (Hootsuite, 2023). They can be understood as being programming systems which follow step-by-step procedures to produce an inputted outcome (Gleick, 2011). They are ‘feedback loops’ which make predicted calculations, categorise and process data (Bishop, 2021; Kozinets, 2022). We likely interact with algorithms every day, whether it be via Instagram follow recommendations based upon user activity on the platform; or suggested Google Map directions (Willson, 2017). Algorithms make decisions on the user’s behalf, or at least offer solutions as classifications are formulated about individual consumers which present back information and products to advertise to the user (Gillespie, 2014; Cotter, 2017) Rather than ‘fetishise’ algorithms for their objectivity and usefulness (Willson, 2017), algorithms are critiqued for being “embedded in old systems of power and privilege” (Eurbanks, 2018. p. 178). Algorithms are not free from bias, just as the coding engineers who work closely with these designs are not immune from social, cultural, economic and political influence (Just and Latzer, 2017). Critical scholars in this area have pointed out the ‘perils’ of algorithmic procedures and how their sorting and filtering can lead to ‘opinion echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’ which in extreme cases can lead to radicalisation (Parsier, 2011; Just and Latzer, 2017; Etter and Albu, 2021). On social media, echo chambers are when an individual only encounters ‘beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). Similarly, a ‘filter bubble’ is when algorithmic bias limits the channel of information and thus intellectually isolates individuals (Parsier, 2011).

Airoidi and Rokka (2022) conceptualise algorithms as being opaque and thus ‘immune from scrutiny’ (Pasquale, 2015, p.5); authoritative and selective, thus reducing consumer agency; non-neutral and thus, biased; and, recursive, and thus providing responsive feedback loops. If algorithms make suggestions based upon our already held beliefs, then they are amplifiers of existing trends rather than creators of new ones (Parsier, 2011). Kozinets (2022) reminds us that the core function of algorithms is not to assist individuals to become more conscious

consumers but to serve to profit businesses. Instagram's design features shifted in 2016 from allowing the chronological structuring of content to moving towards an algorithm-driven feed (Cotter, 2019). This is something which Cotter (2019) calls 'playing the visibility game' as influencers can learn the 'rules of the game' and consciously interact with algorithms to undermine their power and increase their own visibility on the platform. For example, in 2023, the Instagram algorithm favours reels (multi-clip videos) over image posts and statistic websites offer users ways in which they can work strategically with other rules (Hootsuite, 2023). Strategic interaction with algorithms has also been used by social movements members as an attempt of 'algorithm activism' whereby activists push back against such biased tools and use their knowledge of the machine's mechanisms to boost interaction with protest posts. Social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) whose aim is to address and highlight systemic racial injustice, have partaken in this type of activism to boost the likeliness of their content 'going viral' on social media (Mitchell, 2020). Activities include using already viral content and 'duetting' (posting a reaction side-by-side video) on platforms such as TikTok. As Thompson and Patterson (2022) elaborate, the paradoxical nature of smartphone use and its subsequent interaction with technoculture is both, at the same time able to, oppose inequalities and also exacerbate them. If algorithms are the tool, then the next chapter on surveillance, outlines the logic which relies on the tool.

### **3.3.3 Surveillance**

Early arguments by Foucault (1997) include how surveillance (or disciplinary power) encourages individuals to self-monitor themselves. 'Discipline' is thought of as being a function of power which makes individuals responsible for their own behaviour (Bucher, 2012). Foucault (1997) uses the metaphor of the panopticon, an eighteenth-century observational prison design where prisoners could not know if they were being observed, to support his argument of how individuals partake in the logic of self-surveillance. Arguably in present day, this is amplified by the use of devices that capture and record our data (Andrejevic, 2015; Darmondy and Zwick, 2020), or social media which we willingly use to observe others whilst willingly putting ourselves within pantopic cyber space ourselves (Bucher, 2012). As a result of living in times of constant flux resonant with 'liquid society' (Bauman, 1966; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), it is now said that we are living in times

of ‘liquid surveillance’ where the nature of surveillance has become diffuse and free flowing in our everyday life (Bauman and Lyon, 2012). In light of the previous chapter, algorithms themselves can be thought of as everyday ‘disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe desirable forms of participation on social media’ (Cotter, 2019, p.896).

The transition from non-digital marketing to digital marketing has entailed that surveillance has become intertwined with new, innovative modes of communication such as co-creation and presumption where consumers become the marketers themselves (Cova and Dalli, 2009). Scholars such as Darmondy and Zwick (2020) ponder whether marketing has been replaced by something different to marketing altogether. Marketers are aware that emerging, ubiquitous consumer decision-control and ‘always on marketing’ surveillant tools significantly increase the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing practices (Manovich, 2018; Darmondy and Zwick, 2020). Whilst some scholars claim contemporary marketing is empowering to consumers (Pires et al. 2006), others proclaim emerging technologies and their effects on marketing only lead to privacy violations and concerns about consumer agency (Shankar et al. 2006; Mittelstadt et al. 2016; Darmondy and Zwick, 2020). This is depicted in studies where observed actors change the way they behave in order to please imaginary audiences. Marwick and Boyd (2011) introduce ‘the chilling effect’ of surveillance, where individuals alter, constrain or ‘self censor’ their online personas to suit the expectations of their imagined audience (Das and Kramer, 2013). More recent theorisations of ‘an extended chilling effect’ conclude that people’s offline behaviour is also altered: ‘that information about our offline activities may be communicated online, and that the thought of displeasing ‘imagined audiences’ alters our ‘real-life’ behaviour’ (Marder et al. 2016, p. 549). Their work calls for further research on how surveillance interacts with the ‘could’ self which is ‘the person that we would ideally like to be’ (p.589).

A critical lens of technological advances and their effect on society is that of ‘surveillance capitalism’. This term was formulated by Zuboff (2019) and can be defined as being ‘a parasitic economic logic’ and one that creates, collects, manipulates and valorises information (Damondy and Zwick, 2020). In exploring the ‘context of the context’ it is important to include this lens on capitalism’s new frontier, as the autonomy of consumers is challenged amidst their entanglement with its logic. The four features of this surveillance capitalism

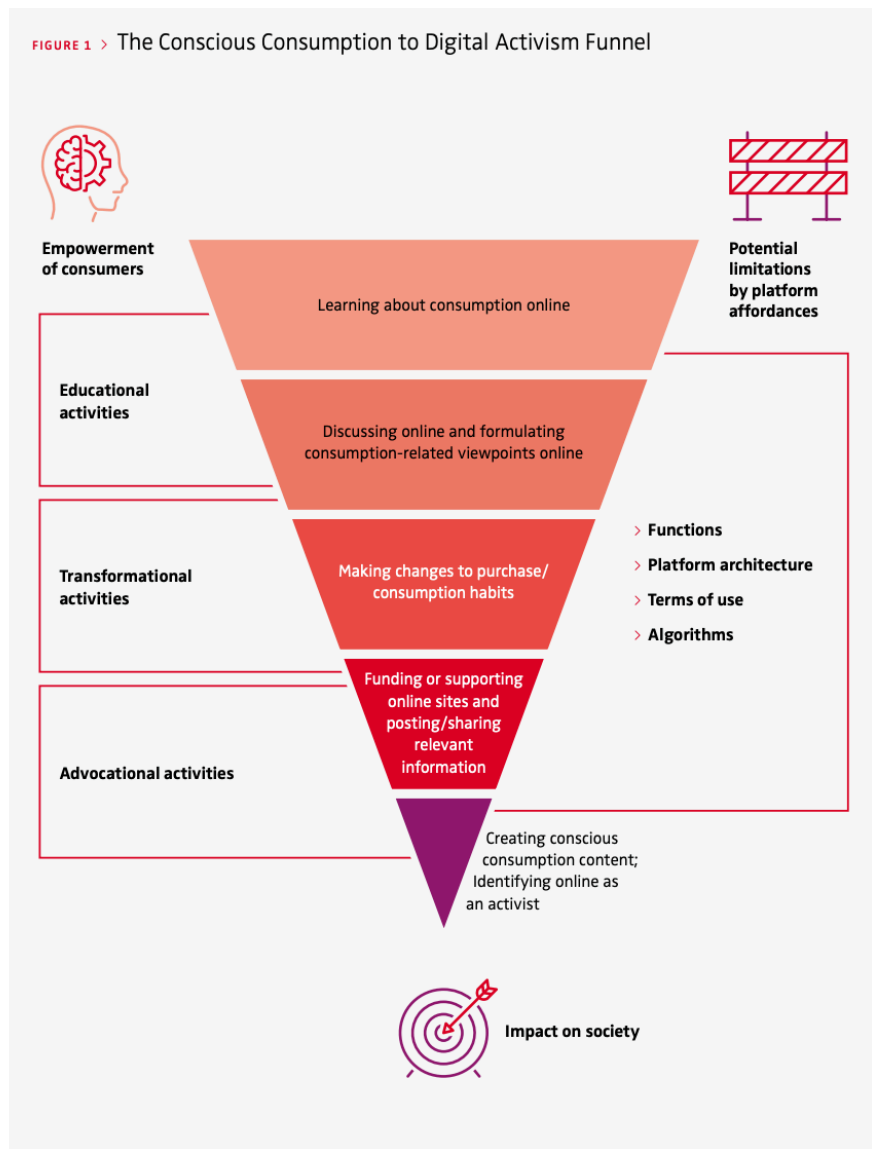
logic are: 1) data extraction and analysis, 2) new contractual forms (using monitoring and automation), 3) personalisation of services (or advertisements), and 3) using technology to carry out covert experiments on consumers (Danaher, 2015; Zuboff, 2019). Covert experiments can lead to scandals such as Cambridge Analytica whereby personal data was extracted from millions of Facebook users. Cases like this later revealed to us how our very own data was morphed into a weapon to be used against us in advertising campaigns (McCallum, 2022). Despite some of the constraining aspects of surveillance outlined in this section, the next section reveals how technoculture enables digital activism to take place.

### **3.4 Digital Activism**

A powerful tool for so many things, social media can also be a powerful tool for mobilisation and protest. Consumers may use digital activism in more subtle ways. As sections on marketplace change and marketplace resistance have highlighted in chapter two, there are multiple ways in which consumers respond to their discontent with the marketplace (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Gollnhofer et al. 2019). This contextual section overviews digital activism as a technocultural context and pays attention to the tools, the process and the consensus of its usefulness.

There has been an ever-growing body of research on the changing dynamics of activism in ‘the neoliberal area’ as a response to the ‘explosion of a niche of consumer goods, activist and charitable campaigns, and marketing aimed at an “ethical” consumer’ (Page, 2017, p.2) in which we are seeing ‘a flowering of activism’ (Kozinets and Jenkins, 2021, p.279). As previous sections have highlighted some of paradoxical dualisms that technology poses (Mick and Fournier, 1998; Thompson and Patterson, 2022), we can view digital activism through the lens of paradox also in that it too can be enabling and constraining, or rather that consumers in partaking with digital activism dance with the paradox of capitalism/protest (Matich et al. 2019). Digital activism has birthed many successful movements, for example, the Arab Spring uprisings, the Occupy, and the Indignados movements all prove that social media can successfully disseminate information, organise and mobilise (Etter and Albu, 2020). Participants are perhaps younger and are using the same technological tools they use

to partake in culture e.g. filming videos, in recording protest or capturing systemic injustice (Carissimo, 2016). In this way, social media is viewed as a 'training ground' for individuals to progress into activism (Kozinets, and Jenkins, 2021). Hashtags are also an enabling tool which allows individuals to show their support for a movement and connect to other movement members, with hashtags #Metoo, #TimesUp and #BlackLivesMatter becoming iconic and instantly recognised slogans for grassroots movements (Ghobadi, 2018). Hashtag activism is a pithy way for movements to gain momentum and widespread media attention which applies pressure to offending corporations or governments (Goswami, 2018). Consumers can use social media in this way to open dialogues directly with institutions, and connect to wider networks. These seemingly small social media actions which take place in public problem-solving arenas have the potential to reshape field level structures (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015).



**Figure 2:** The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel (Kozinets, 2022)

Kozinets (2022) presents the journey between conscious consumption to digital activism in figure 2, showing how educational activities such as learning about consumption online can lead to advocational activities where individuals create content and identify as an activist. This funnel is important as it illustrates how observing and learning can lead to advocacy and action. As Matich et al. (2019) identify in their study of feminist movement #freethenipple, protest activities online not only allow individuals to garner symbolic capital and monetise themselves as self-brands, but there is often a chain-like reaction where observers can mimic and perform their own opposing action. However, there is much debate as to whether advocational activities that take place online constitute as activism. Often re-titled ‘slacktivism’ (Glenn, 2015), ‘clicktivism’ (Kozinets, 2019) or ‘armchair activism’ (2022b),



these terms are often used to describe the discrepancy between awareness and action, as merely posting about or ‘liking’ activist content is framed as ‘a non-committal act, full of sound and fury, which ultimately achieves nothing’ (Kozinets, 2019, p. 80). Madison and Klang (2020) argue against criticisms of slacktivism, arguing that it ‘is used as a method for delegitimising nascent political participation by attacking the intentions and actions of those involved’ (p.29). In defending these derogatory criticisms, Madison and Klang (2020) suggest digital activism be investigated as a separate phenomenon to physical activism, to be better understood. The next section reflects on the green identity before the final section introduces brief literature on the eco-influencer.

### **3.4.1 Identifying with Green**

Conceptualising ‘identity’ is a nebulous task, as chapter two outlined, institutional logics are theorised to be the ‘carriers’ of identity (Thornton et al. 2012). In CCT, identity is thought of as a concept with an intersubjective nature: how a typical consumer ‘thinks’ of themselves and how the consumer ‘thinks’ they are perceived (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). A CCT perspective requires that how the consumer conceptualises themselves is not the focus of studies, but rather how this ‘self’ interacts with collectives and society (Arnould and Thompson, 2007). This is how the ‘self’ is realised, through its interactions and validations from the external (Shankar et al. 2009). Larsen and Patterson (2018) discuss this dialectical tension which exists, explaining that ‘in the matter of identity, consumers operate under tremendous strain as they seek to negotiate both personalised and commodified experiences’ (p.204). The CCT framework for viewing identity thus interrogates a view whereby identity goes much further than the ‘stale polemic’ of structure and agency (as discussed in chapter two). Humphreys (2018) discusses some ways to approach the idea of identity: drawing upon micro-sociological perspectives such as the dramaturgical perspective which reveals how actors ‘perform’ identities as if they are actors on a stage and acting in accordance to their designated audience (Moody, 2003).

Consumer movements are an ideal setting for identity projects to take place, and environmentalism is rich with ‘symbolic resources’ for individuals to conspicuously use to pose resistance and consequently reap the benefits of affiliation with a movement or a

subculture to construct their own self narrative (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). New Social Movement theories, which view contemporary social movements as a weaving of ideology and identity, see that individuals who make up 'movements' are intertwining their resistance with identity, lifestyle and culture (Buechler, 2011). Horton (2003) conceptualises that there are certain identity markers which make environmental activists distinct from others and which contributes to their overall 'green capital'. This idea draws substance from Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital which sees that individuals use identity markers like intellect and education to distinguish themselves from others. For example, individuals with high green capital are noted to be educated to at least degree level and vegetarians, although since Horton's (2003) publication, veganism has become the ultimate way for environmentalists to position themselves (Piwonka, 2018). Fringe movements such as veganism are now mainstream megatrends and thus the cultural boundaries for a 'green identity' have and will continue to greatly alter as the external environment changes. This is highlighted by Ulusoy and Firat (2018) who argue that identities within subcultural movements are fluid and in constant flux and so subsequently, there will be a constant reshuffling in what constitutes as being green capital and the ultimate green discourse. This fluctuation can be understood as existing within what describes as 'liquid society' – the consumer endures a never-ending need to undergo reflexive self-critique and renew their sense of identity according to new and emerging social paradigms (Bauman, 1966; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Horton (2003) continues in aligning his conceptualisation of 'green performances' with institutional norms: a 'misperformance' can result in depletion of green capital and a decrease in symbolic power which is relatable to the theoretical element of legitimacy and how it is managed.

Ulusoy and Firat (2018) argue that reducing activism down to matters of identity and neoliberal individualism is an oversimplification as it overly emphasises individualist motives and suggests these movements to be lacking in the political, allowing identity politics to unnecessarily take centre stage. The neoliberal focus is further criticised by Cherrier (2007) who highlights the disconnect this perspective has in grasping an accurate version of protest. Nevertheless, Cherrier (2007) makes the point that green consumption practices do offer co-production of self-expression and identification with plural identities both personal and collective. Identity is proven to entice consumers in behaving

environmentally (Schwartz et al. 2020), and so matters of identity seemingly coexist with the political. The idea of ‘green commodity discourse’ is argued to be of assistance in bridging a more mindful relationship between capitalism and the environment (Connolly and Prothero, 2000). They argue that whilst maintaining their core goals and ideologies, green movements should acquire necessary marketing skills to ‘compete’ with the organisations which support hyper-consumption and are ignorant towards environmental decline. The next section which introduces the eco-influencer, presents an example of a case where the logic of consumerism coexists with the political.

### **3.5 The Eco-Influencer**

This contextual chapter and its valuable enquiry of the ‘context of the context’ leads to the introduction of the subject of this study: the eco-influencer (Askeegard and Linnet, 2011). The eco-influencer can be defined as an individual who uses their online platforms to encourage their followers to buy sustainability or resist consumption (Hadden, 2022; Wightman-Stone, 2023). In his article, ‘Clicking Our Way to Conscious Consumption’, Kozinets (2022) identifies environmentally conscious influencers as those pushing for consumer action in the platform age, highlighting how they use social media to share content and information related to climate change. The rise and effectiveness of the eco-influencer is highlighted in recent research by Unilever which ranks social media as one of the most influential sources of sustainability information for the consumer (Unilever, 2023). Pittman and Abell’s (2021) study find that ‘greenfluencers with low popularity counts are trusted more, while non-green influencers with high popularity counts are trusted more’ (p. 1). Kapoor et al.’s (2022) study on ‘greenfluencers’ similarly found that a ‘concrete message appeal’ (specific communication), is more effective in promoting sustainable consumption. Although quantitative studies exist on ‘greenfluencers’ (Pittman and Abell, 2021; Kapoor et al. 2022), this thesis is the first to address this context qualitatively and contribute to understanding it from a CCT perspective. Industry has significantly paid more attention to eco-influencers than academia (Buttolph, 2019; Feller, 2020; Hadden, 2022; Wightman-Stone, 2023), which further adds value to this thesis as it contributes and starts conversation on this topic within CCT.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed and reviewed the research context of eco-influence amongst the wider technocultural context it resides within. I detail the evolution of influencer culture and its lesser known origins and further discuss influential fields such as fashion as dialectic arenas for power plays and popularity to interact (Cattani et al. 2014). I discuss celebrity endorsement as the next milestone in influencer culture's evolution and then finally introduce influencer culture in contemporary society. I then explored, more in depth, the 'context of the context' (Askeegard and Linnet, 2001) and review 'technoculture' as a way to investigate technology consumption (Kozinets, 2019) before exploring Instagram and its utility as a platform. I delved deep into the literature surrounding algorithms and their constraints as tools which restrict consumer agency (Pasquale, 2015). Surveillance was then considered as a 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1997; Bucher, 2012), before the next section detailed how creating conscious consumption content online can be considered an advocational activity of digital activism (Kozinets, 2022). The following section dealt with matters of 'green' identity and finally, the eco-influencer section draws attention to the lack of research in this area. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology of this thesis.

# Chapter Four: Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

‘Methodology’ is the overarching inquiry in how one answers their research questions (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). In this chapter the two strands of methodological inquiry, both positivism and interpretivism, their philosophical underpinnings and their relative attempts at theory formation are discussed in relation to consumer research. . This methodology chapter intends to outline and clarify the assumptions of this research in regard to ontology, axiological and epistemology. This will provide a philosophical standpoint which will anchor the study and inform the chosen methods. These methods will also be explained at length and are subsequently linked to the answering of the research questions. As the research primarily concerns digital activity and behaviours, questions arose surrounding best practice of capturing this data. This discussion also connects to issues surrounding data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore, questions of accessibility are embedded within this chapter.

This section offers a justification of where this research stands in regards to ontological, axiological and epistemological assumptions. The following section of this chapter outlines the netnographic method – highlighting its usefulness in CCT research and how its adoption was especially useful during COVID-19 data collection restrictions. This then leads onto the outline of the interview method used and how open-ended interview questions benefited the discussion and harnessed fruitful revelations in the eco-influencer’s depiction of their work. From here, the chapter takes an introspective turn and discusses the research journey – including information regarding sampling, collection and netnographic immersion. The data analysis procedures are then discussed and followed by the conclusion which, in linear fashion, leads to the showcasing of the data itself.

## **4.2 Ontological, Axiological and Epistemological Assumptions**

### **4.2.1 Ontology**

The ontological question is one which is positioned to query the nature of reality and what we, as researchers, can know about it (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). All research makes ontological assumptions and the ontological position of this thesis is an interpretivist one: one which 'seeks to describe many perceived realities that cannot be known a priori because they are time-and-context specific' (Hudson and Ozanne, 1998, p. 513). This is opposed to a positivist ontological position which adheres strictly to scientific protocol, often using hypotheses, to find "accurate answers" and "a true reality" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1998, p. 513). The positivist approach is one that offers an air of absolute conviction in its claims to the truth and eradicates the outlook that sees facts as a matter of perception: positive science proceeds by a study of a priori logical assemblies and is a total rejection of the idea that sensory experiences craft scientific knowledge. (Baert, 2006). Positivism entails quantitative, predetermined methods such as surveys, questionnaires and experiments which perceives human behaviour as predictable and rational (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Such methods would be insufficient in exploring a new and ongoing phenomenon such as eco-influence as the lived experience, perceptions and historical narratives of eco-influencers cannot be tapped into by quantification.

Saatcioglu & Corus (2019) highlight the sensitivity and adaptability needed when applying methods in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research as it 'reflects multi-layered cultural analyses that draw from complex cultural systems, social structures and power relations' (p.20). Since the CCT approach weaves 'anthropology, design, history, literary criticism, semiotics, sociological and, social psychology' into its investigation, it is plausible to adopt qualitative methods such as the ethnographic (and in this case netnographic) methods to be used to capture an understanding of consumption activity and cultural meanings (Arnould and Thompson, 2018, p. 8). This more rigid and dominant approach to social sciences was upheld, and scholars such as Shankar and Patterson (2001) argue that interpretivist beliefs were suppressed in consumer research for quite some time, only to give

birth to the ‘interpretivist turn’. The interpretive turn is hooked on context, an aspect which is illustrated meticulously by Blaikie (2003) when they state:

Phenomena must be situated in the larger wholes from which they derive their meaning; parts acquire significance from the whole and the whole is given in its meaning by the parts. (p.31)

This allows for researchers to envision a complex network and ‘mind created world’ (Blake, 2003), where differing cultures, identities and conceptual structures govern the understanding of human beings. To understand the fine-grained details, it is important to consider these networks as a ‘web of relevancies’ (Bartunek et al. 2016).

Shankar and Patterson (2001) very aptly use the following quote to introduce their depiction of the ‘interpretive turn’ in consumer research: “truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions.” (Nietzsche,1873:1995). The ‘interpretive turn’ can be depicted as being a response to the excesses of positivism in the social sciences. An interpretivist view recognises the plethora of external realities which are independent from the reality of our own minds, thus we can never directly encounter that reality but we can acknowledge its existence, and construct our knowledge of the world in agreement that there will always be experience beyond our perceptions (Willis, 2007). As academics, the quest for “truth” is an ongoing one, which predicates that truths are: never absolute, are subject to being overridden and they provide us with temporary interpretations. In favour of interpretivist study in consumer research, Holbrook and Shaughnessy (1988) in their research which is now over 35 years old, looked forth towards the “emerging consensus” that interpretivism constructs meaningful understanding of consumers and that the scientific study of consumption can take comfort in this revelation. In recent times, the greater interpretivist application in marketing has largely been attributed to the increase in researchers carrying out qualitative studies, especially in Europe (Matich et al. 2019; Khanijou and Pirani, 2021; Alonso et al. 2022) and also due to the fact more market research studies are using focus groups, interviews and ethnographic methods (Arnould et al. 2019). Additionally, exploratory

qualitative studies are useful for tracking processual changes whereas quantitative studies tend to favour variance over process (Flick, 2014).

Since CCT is inspired by fields such as anthropology, sociology and social psychology, its overall goal is to unpick multiple forms of existent reality that can co-exist independently of each other. Interpretivism allows for a deep exploration of a given context and is therefore the dominant paradigm in these fields of enquiry (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Past interpretations influence current interpretations, and current interpretations will influence future interpretations. Thus, understanding is never finished or complete. Interpretivism therefore offers a fluid conceptualisation of human life as behaviour and interaction is ever-flowing and thus, social life is always in the process of being created by individuals and groups in any given context (Hudson and Ozanne, 1998). This research holds faith in the interpretivist paradigm to provide a meaningful array of interpretations based on how social actors construct their sense of reality in the context of eco-influence.

#### **4.2.2 Axiology**

Within the interpretivist paradigms lies axiological assumptions, these are the assumed goals or axiologies. Unlike a positivist position which seeks explanation of universal law, the interpretivist position is one which seeks out understanding (Rubenstein, 1981) and as an axiological distinction, the data is context embedded and there is no objectivity meaning that generalisations are refused in favour of confirmability and transferability. The nature of understanding the word “understanding” necessitates an interpretivist approach, as interpretivists view understanding as being a never-ending process, perhaps a journey more than a destination. This process can be understood as being part of the ‘hermeneutic circle’:

“[...] what was interpreted enters into current interpretations, just as the current interpretations will influence future interpretations. Therefore, interpretations are always incomplete. One never achieves *the* understanding; one achieves *an* understanding (Hudson and Ozanne, 1998, p. 510).



The hermeneutical approach which embodies epistemological stances such as interpretivism can be characterised by some of the following tendencies: (1) interpretation, (2) anti-scientism, (3) value-freedom, (4) humanism, (5) linguistic constructivism and (6) intersubjectivity (Delanty, 2005). The latter is a tendency that is particularly stressed in the approach of the given research topic as it is believed that cultural construction can lead to a self-understanding of human action. It is the role of the interpretivist researcher then, to understand what cultural aspects truly *mean* to their participants who are experiencing them, whilst also realising that the interpretation of the researcher will still inevitably be their interpretation (Tholen, 2017). Geertz (1973) postulates that this deep understanding needs interpretive researchers to engage in ‘thick description’: what is often the result of in-depth interviews and textual analysis. The distinction between the general and the particular is essentially what distinguishes positivism from interpretivism (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

### **4.2.3 Epistemology**

The epistemic stance refers to the “relationship between the knower or would-be-knower and what can be known” (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). In interpretivist research, the researcher and the participant, or field of investigation, are linked in a transaction and thus, understanding or findings are created in this moment in time – as the investigation takes place. Interpretivism therefore has a subjective epistemic stance as knowledge is created in a very specific context (Tholen, 2017). This produces understanding which is bound to context rather than being generalisable. Askegaard and Linnet (2011) argue for CCT research to go beyond the lived experience of actors and expand contextualisation to include systemic influences of market systems which consumers themselves are not aware of. Hence, the chosen theoretical framework- institutional theory, assists in connecting the constraints of structure with the phenomenological experience of marketplace actors. As has been already indicated in the theoretical literature chapter, an institutional lens assists in going beyond individually focused research to an epistemology which is more socially embedded (Askegaard and Linnet: 2011; Arnould and Thompson, 2015). Although it accounts for structural constraint, it also considers ways that actors can create, maintain and transform institutions (Scott, 2001).

### 4.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity describes the relationship between the researcher and their study. It is widely claimed that reflexivity is of utmost importance when carrying out interpretive research (Holloway, 1997; Charmaz, 2006). Takhar and Chitakunye (2012) define self-reflexivity as being: “concerned with engaging in the reflexive process of questioning the basis of our thinking and questioning ourselves” (p. 914). Although scholars such as Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argue that there is a lack of accountability in this area in qualitative research, I have made examining my presumptions an on-going task. Epistemological reflexivity activities have consisted of examining how interpretations were reached and how the personal beliefs and biases of the researcher reached certain conclusions (Palaganas et al. 2017). It is also allowing me to reflect on how methodological changes could have yielded different results (Gray, 2018).

Both reflexivity and self-reflexivity has been practiced throughout the process of collecting data - this has been supported by keeping a field diary, as well as field notes. The keeping of a research diary allows for the process of personal reflexivity and is increasingly used as a reflective technique in the social sciences (Radcliffe, 2018). This consists of my thoughts and feelings and will contribute to part of the analysis and write up of the study. Field diaries can be thought of as a useful place for complex emotions, that arise from the research process, to be reflected upon, whereas field notes are more simple observations. Field diaries are used as “a tool to enhance the process of reflexivity, positionality and the place of emotions in fieldwork” (Punch, 2010, p. 87). Below is an extract taken from my own field diary:

My participant is talking about the lack of reach in academia and I sort of agree? I so badly feel the need for my research to have purpose and not just fill a gap in the literature which will gather dust and be forgotten about. I really want to change mindsets somehow - need to keep thinking about this. Environmentalism needs spiritualism and connection to be sustainable. I think spiritual dimensions scare people, to go beyond the material and to keep asking why? This is rising in academia, maybe not fast enough. There needs to be a very huge mindset shift in awareness, for

people to realise that they are conscious beings and not an identity built on egoic thoughts, patterns, memories.

(Research Diary, January 5<sup>th</sup> 2021).

This particular entry shows reflexivity as I ponder the “reach” of my own research whilst carrying it out. It also shows the co-create process of hermeneutics at play as the conversations which took place in interviews with my participants, evidently changed the perspective I have on my research’s ‘purpose’: their interpretation challenged and moulded my own interpretation of a particular subject (Day and Thatcher, 2009).

#### **4.4 Data Collection Process**

It was imperative to collect both secondary and primary data to fulfil the aims and objectives of this thesis. The following table describes the processes to date of attaining knowledge in both secondary and primary forms, and depicts some of the in-between details which provide a more in-depth view of the process and how I experienced it.

##### October 2018 – May 2019

###### *Research Methods Training*

This period mostly involved the compulsory completion of research modules from the MRes qualification. This included modules on: research philosophy, both a quantitative and qualitative module, and a mixed methods module.

##### June 2019 – January 2020

###### *Reviewing the Literature*

This time frame was spent reviewing the literature at hand in consumer research, consumer culture theory and sociology with the aim of finding a theoretical focus. I attended the *Academy of Marketing* doctoral colloquium during this period where I presented my work. The critiques offered by reputable CCT scholars in the field changed the direction of the project and methodological advice was also given concerning netnography.

February 2020 – August 2020

*Secondary data collection*

Another difficult period, at times without guidance due to unforeseen circumstances with my supervisory team and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondary data collection took place during this time frame. Some secondary data collection had already taken place in the previous time frame but with a more solid understanding of the theoretical lens, it became easier to collect appropriate netnographic data and gain a deeper understanding of the context. Netnography is fully reviewed as a method in section 4.5

September 2020 – September 2021

*Primary data collection*

Following ethical approval, netnographic immersion could take place. This involved creating a research account on Instagram where I could post and act as an overt observer in the field and, upon sufficient informed consent, converse with individuals in public forum. I could here keep up with the field of enquiry by keeping track of certain hashtags (e.g. #sustainableselfie and #ecoinfluencer). This kept me up to date with trends and themes in the field and introduced me to accounts to follow. It started to become clear that a deeper understanding of some of these trends was needed – I needed to know what was motivating these accounts to post about these issues and collaborate with certain brands. I began recruiting participants by approaching them on Instagram or drawing them to my posts via hashtags. Once consent had been verified, I used Zoom to interview participants for approximately 1 hour. I approached each interview with specific questions which probed the cultural landscape. I was apprehensive that Zoom interviews would take away some of the “magic” of conversation, but I was pleasantly surprised at how much I felt that rapport was built with each participant and this led to rich data.

## **4.5 Netnography**

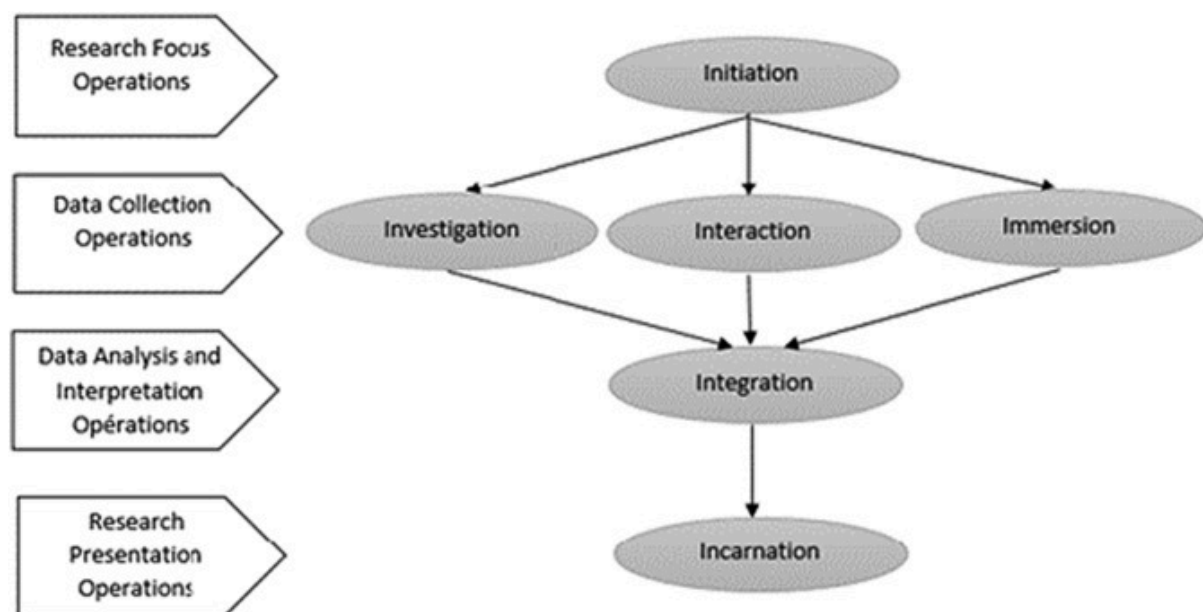
Netnography in its simplest form can be defined as ‘the ethnography of online network actors and interactions’ (Kozinets, 2020, p. 15), although it is argued that it is much more than this definition. Netnographic research can be applauded for its metamorphosis as a method: it adapts with the ever-changing digital environment – it establishes itself valuable in new and

novel fields of enquiry, for example, Netnography can be applied to TikTok without ever foreseeing this platform in its establishment as a method. This can be extended to include new, tangible technologies which come into existence. This aspect of netnography is well suited to the ever-changing cultures that we witness and immerse ourselves in as consumer researchers, therefore, it is commonly adopted in marketing and consumer research. This methodology section is primarily guided by *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research* by Kozinets (2019), as this is considered the anthology of the netnographic method and provides logical step-by-step guidance in integrating the method.

Internet research in the mid-1990s preoccupied itself with questions regarding the differences between virtual and “real” life. Researchers such as Markham (1998) contemplated the boundaries between these two worlds, pondering on questions of the body’s limitations and how these are extended in the virtual world. In present day, one might argue that these boundaries have dissolved even further and developments in social media and related technologies mean that these worlds have merged: an overwhelming majority of social life is lived out through virtual means of communication. It is fundamentally the mainstream way to communicate.

Recent statistics show that over half of the world’s population use social media (Smart Insights, 2023). The internet of today can be recognised as expansive, intangible space which has birthed some of the most popular ways of connecting, sharing and expressing. Internet users can choose to do this on an array of social networks, forums, blog sites, games and integrated chat functions. Social media has altered culture completely and will continue to alter culture in novel and unexpected ways. As Kozinets (2020) aptly puts it: “as online groupings shift and liquefy, and new configurations and networks constantly assemble and disperse, notions of community and sociality themselves are changed” (p.112). Netnography’s function in this thesis is to investigate the phenomenon of marketplace change from an eco-influencer perspective and to explore their attitudes and responses including changes in their behaviour towards living sustainably, and consuming less.

Netnographies, thanks to their ‘marketing-oriented point of difference’, have become a pivotal way for CCT researchers to execute studies (Kozinets et al. (2018). This powerful difference between digital ethnography and netnography is attributed to Robert Kozinets himself being a commendable consumer researcher, therefore the construction of the method – its steps and processes, are designed for consumer-based enquiry by default. The method has successfully been applied in work that is seminal to this thesis, for example, Scaraboto & Fischer’s (2013) investigation into market change dynamics in the plus-sized blogging community. The method has further enabled consumer researchers to investigate online phenomena such as online food image sharing (Kozinets et al. 2016), the vegan food industry (Ashman et al. 2021), the wine industry (Thanh & Kirova, 2018), and presidential candidacy (Villegas, 2017). Next, the six procedural movements of netnography are explained in more detail in the context of this thesis. These can be viewed in table 5.



**Table 5:** The six procedural movements of netnography (Kozinets, 2019)

#### **4.6 Netnographic Movements: Movement 1: Initiation**

This preliminary phase entailed moving from a broad idea to a narrower investigatory focus. Many different approaches were considered during the initiation and the honing in on this led to research questions, aims and objectives which have guided the study since. This phase also

included ethical considerations and using these to inform my ethical application. This initial phase was sparked by an interest in the paradoxical nature of eco-influencers, who present the narrative of an eco-friendly, 'minimalist' lifestyle whilst partaking in paid partnerships for social and physical capital on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

The guidelines given in Kozinet's (2020) recent anthology on the method states that 'good' netnographic research questions tend to focus on both 'cultural phenomena manifesting' online, and/or 'social media platforms and sites, and the way that they interact with other aspects of social existence'. Below are some of the focuses which are listed by Kozinets (2020, p. 157) and which have been carefully weaved into the research questions of this study which can be viewed in figure 2 in the appendix.

- 'social media rituals, postings, poses, and practices';
- 'shared stories, beliefs, passionate interests, and desires';
- 'group dynamics, power structures, and hierarchies';
- 'how people respond online to particular kinds of organisational or interpersonal communication directed to them';
- 'how particular themes or concepts are revealed through online discourse'
- 'how people use social media to communicate or educate one another about practices, ideologies, or information they might not gain elsewhere'

These focuses are what Geertz (1973, p.10) would depict as being the 'microscopic' details of the social and cultural aspects of human life. As previously mentioned, figure 2 in the appendix provides the interview protocol which gives an overview of potential prompts which were used in interview.

#### **4.6.1 Ethical Considerations**

The netnographic front is a conundrum for researchers when they are figuring out their approach. Questions posed include safety and how much we expose our real identities. A research-only account was created for the purpose of the study on Instagram as this seemed

the best way to avoid ethical and personal dilemmas during data collection (Urbanik & Roks, 2020). A screenshot of this account can be viewed in Figure 1 of the appendix. This account made it very clear, via its Instagram ‘handle’ that: “I’m a PhD student researching how digital content creators influence sustainable consumption/anti-consumption”. Any advertisements on the research account also featured the ethics application number.

The difference between public and private space was an aspect deeply considered during the ethical approval process, as the consensus that a space is public means that certain ethical procedures (i.e. taking informed consent) is no longer necessary. Roberts (2015) puts forth the ‘common’ argument that online spaces without password protection are public spaces. It was agreed that this research use publicly available social media posts and that any data from private accounts is not available for use.

Ethical considerations are further discussed holistically in its relevant section (section 8), so that the interview procedure can be discussed alongside netnographic enquiry.

#### **4.7 Movement 2: Investigation**

This phase coincided with both interaction and immersion. Investigation, however, took place before proper interaction and immersion as investigation of secondary data on social networking sites took place as ethical approval was being applied for. The investigation movement involves tracking the research themes via search engines and ‘following’ relevant accounts – any valuable information can then be print screened and saved. Search engines can reveal sites as well as individual conversations, topics and sub topics, tags such as hashtags, and visual images or other non-textual representations (Kozinets, 2020, p.140). It should be noted that secondary data was not part of the analysis but more used for these preliminary stages where I needed to immerse myself in the field and observe behaviours. This served the purpose of informing my interviews.

##### **4.7.1 Scouting the virtual community**

Community in this context is used to describe ‘the quality of holding something in common, as in a community of interests’ or ‘a common sense of identity’ (Kozinets, 2020, p.111). It is



said that consumers ‘forge feelings of social solidarity and create distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and sometimes transient cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests’ (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p.873). These worlds are ever-more visible when scouting social media platforms. A plethora of terms are commonly used to describe community, such as: consumer tribes or marketplace cultures (Cova et al. 2007), however, for the purpose of relatability with the netnographic guide, this section will use community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

A specific community, the eco-influencer community, was sought out by the researcher. This operation included searching relevant hashtags such as #ecoinfluencer and observing conversations taking place on influencer posts to see which profiles are taking part in this perceived community. If accounts were of relevance, they were followed and their location tracked. The majority of account profiles often included lengthy textual posts and offerings of personal experience. Kozinets (2021) believes this type of data is “rare”, but I found this community quite eager to share their experiences as they believed that sharing their experiences was for the greater good.

#### **4.8 Movement 3: Immersion**

This third movement can be attributed to the immersion in traditional ethnography, only the researcher is immersing themselves into the conceptual *digital* space. This included the conception of my research account on Instagram, which has been used as a means of entering, living, ‘scrolling’, ‘liking’, and posting as if I was myself an eco-influencer. Kozinets (2020) describes this movement as being a sort of interaction – ‘albeit one that is largely unobtrusive and non-invasive’ (p.141). Thus, immersion is interaction in the sense that I, the researcher, am interacting with the content – analysing it, writing field notes about it whilst observing it closely.

Fischer et al. (2014) discuss how ‘hanging out’ and immersing in the market context before commencing interaction provides: “a sense of localness from getting acquainted to local language, daily routines, power structures, taboos, and particularities of the field” (p. 71). This was certainly true for this research as discussions which took place in the interaction

phase often included community specific information such as debates which had took place on the platform between accounts, and community reactions to large scale events such as Black Friday. Participants often name dropped other popular and well-known accounts and assumed the researcher's knowledge of the field. Reflection was especially important during this phase as it was vital to report my own thoughts and feelings of being inside the focal topic, rather than outside of it. This process is spoke about in section 4 which discusses reflexivity. However, I share below a diary entry which expresses the process of immersing myself on Instagram:

Once critical of this type of thing, I now feel the pull of wanting to post. Even though I don't have much engagement on my account, there is a certain lure of being connected to the community and feeling as if you are doing good and showing it to the world. I usually keep my consumption habits to myself, being vegan and not buying new clothes etc. I guess I am still critical of it – wanting praise for resisting consumerist ideology doesn't really deserve a pat on the back, but MAYBE I will influence even one person to do better? But then that just assumes consumer agency when corporations are still wreaking havoc. A lot of conflicting emotions.

(Research Diary – October 2020)

#### **4.9 Movement 4: Interaction**

This movement involved a deeper enquiry into some of the research aims and objectives which still eluded the researcher and provided clarification on meanings and behaviours witnessed in the online space, in this case, 'confirmatory interviews' are useful to gain better understanding (Kozinets, 2020). Kozinets's (2020) outlines the five types of netnographic engagement (or interaction) which he states helps avoid criticisms of netnographic research such as 'passive' or 'purely observational' (Costello et al., 2017). These five engagement strategies are briefly listed below. I add examples of how these netnographic strategies were embedded into this research project:

- **Intellectual engagement:** The deliberate effort to constitute an understanding of information. An example of this is carefully considering what grasp of understanding

participants had about consumer capitalism and the extent to which they had agency in the marketplace. This is not something I explicitly asked, but rather gaged from their rhetoric and behaviours.

- **Cultural engagement:** This is where the researcher seeks deeper understanding of practices, rituals, symbols etc. For example, my own journey led me to becoming vegan, quitting fast fashion and buying some eco-alternatives around this time. This allowed me to genuinely post about my experiences with these practices on Instagram using relevant hashtags. This deepened my rapport with my participants.
- **Historical engagement:** The researcher will consider past ideas or narratives and where phenomena might be headed. I asked my participants to share a 'journey' of their online accounts, particularly focusing on what motivated them to begin sharing online. I also asked them if they had any strategies for the future and what they wanted to achieve.
- **Emotional engagement:** This involves the researcher being moved by the phenomenon, as well as participants. This is something that I felt throughout as the destruction of the earth's resources is something I find upsetting and engaging with constant 'triggering' content could sometimes be difficult. On the contrary, I also felt inspired by individuals and proud of some of their achievements.
- **Social engagement:** The most 'obvious' strategy. This simply means basic interaction with participants and the exchange of ideas. The interviews all used this type of engagement and the simple art of conversation changed my own perspective on many things.

All of these techniques go beyond the surface to reveal a much deeper reality, one that participants themselves might not be aware of. The application of these was crucial in conducting my interviews as they each unravel different tenets of the cultural and the social.

### **4.9.1 Interviews**

One popular way to qualitatively probe enquiry about consumers and marketplace cultures is through interviews in their many forms: “open-ended”, “semi-structured”, “online”, “informal” or “in-depth” (Belk et al. 2013). For the purpose of this research, I chose to conduct interviews which were online, in-depth and semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews were selected due to focusing on a post-structuralist interview strategy: a strategy which focuses on culture and community rather than individual lived experience (Firat and Dholakia, 2006). Semi-structured questions allow for the interviewer to avoid an overly-individualistic response from the respondent and instead, employ techniques which will stimulate cultural talk (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). These particular techniques are discussed in depth in the next chapter which delves deeper into the post-structuralist interview.

Interviews have an extensive history in the social sciences as being a primary data collection tool in qualitative research (Wolcott, 2001). This is because they are known for their ability to gain an unparalleled depth of understanding which gets ‘beneath the surface’ of responses (Willis, 2000). Further, they are incredibly dynamic and can be adapted impromptu depending on the response of the participant or social conditions i.e. COVID-19. Online interviews were especially beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic given limited face to face interaction, and, as outlined by the University of Liverpool’s ethical guidelines, were the only academic interviews allowed to take place during this time for matters of health and safety.

Semi-structured interviews have both the advantages and disadvantages of the interview techniques they integrate (as they have elements of both structured and unstructured methods). The responses still have depth and narrative, yet are guided by probes and clarifying questions (Brewerton & Millward, 2001). Prior to interviews, a set of interview questions were devised, however, most interviews flowed organically and this negated the need for interview prompts. The interview protocol can be viewed in Figure 2 of the appendix. The process was rather straightforward overall. Quality certainly depended on the questions asked and the nature of enquiry and probes were especially useful in receiving

thought-provoking explanations and would often lead the participant into a short narrative (Kozinets, 2020). Rapport was relatively easily to build. Spradley (1979) defines rapport as:

[...] a harmonious relationship between ethnographer and informant. It means that a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information (p.78).

At first apprehensive, all interviews certainly developed this “free flow” after a couple of questions and the participants, in general, perceived me as part of the community as the immersion phase of netnography had gifted me with intricate knowledge of the field. Spradley (1979) talks about the apprehensive feelings that often occur when recruiting participants – this was certainly true as interviewees sometimes expressed anxiety or suspicion when replying. I had an incident where a respondent asked for the interview questions ahead of schedule in a rather suspicious way, for example, where I had to reassure the respondent that all questions were in accordance with ethical guidelines. Every respondent who agreed to take part in the study was made to feel completely at ease and reminded of their anonymity.

#### **4.9.2 The Post-Structuralist Interview**

The post-structuralist interview paradigm has in recent years, provided CCT scholars with a tool for combating some of the criticisms faced regarding phenomenological research (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). Whereas interview styles such as phenomenology mostly make use of an open-ended interview style which requires little probing by the interviewer., post-structuralist interviews require more direction. Moisander et al. (2009) describes this paradigm as the following:

“Under the post-structuralist paradigm, qualitative interviews are reconceptualised as tools for grasping the social construction of reality by using individual interviewees as informants about the settings and cultures with which they are familiar” (p.9).

Post-structuralism considers the wider structures at play instead of assuming autonomous agency of the consumer or respondent. McCracken (1988) suggests using ‘grand tour’

questions for post-structuralist interviews. These are questions that have occurred as the researcher has undergone the investigation and immersion phases of the research project and includes important overarching cultural topic areas in which their discussion will enrich the researcher's understanding.

Fischer et al. (2014) make the following suggestion to consumer researchers considering an interview stance:

“When the goal of the research project is to understand why and how some aspect of contemporary culture shapes and is shaped by consumer behaviour or market dynamics, a post-structural interview is more likely to be the appropriate approach (p.71).”

As this project's primary objective is to understand both why and how consumers seek to change institutionalised aspects of the marketplace, a post-structuralist approach was undoubtedly the most suited way of conducting interviews as the interviewer needs to be aware of the logic of structural relations that underline the institutional fields in question. For example, an extract from my field notes made the following observation after an interview with a participant.

Participant admitted that she stays off apps to avoid content she doesn't want to see - how can she, in turn, influence people who don't want to see it if those influencing admit to not wanting to see disturbing content? Echo chamber?

(Research Diary – February 2020)

This extract reveals how interpretation considered the social construction of reality rather than merely the participants phenomenological account.

### **4.9.3 Sampling and Recruitment**

My sample was sought out using three main criteria. First, individuals must have a following of over 1k; second, individuals must have experience in receiving monetary or gifted compensation from an advertising partnership with a brand selling eco-products or services,

and third, they were willing to discuss their experiences. My sample was recruited via purposeful sampling, snowball techniques (Patton, 2002) and advertising on my research Instagram. Initially I used the Instagram hashtag search tool to locate potential participants, entering hashtags such as #ecoinfluencer #ethicalinfluencer and #sustainableselfie. Often this led to posts where the individual was involved in eco-influence and where a brand partnership was made evident in their post. I would then reach out to the individual and introduce myself and the research aims and objectives and inclusion criteria. If the individual was interested in the study, I would then share the information sheet and consent form from my university email address. Informed consent was required to take part in the interview and participants were made aware that their data was anonymised and they could withdraw at any stage. Snowballing recruitment yielded a small number of subsequent interviews but advertising and using certain hashtags on my own posts yielded no interest.

The final sample size of 17 was determined by the saturation point of which no new information was being uncovered in the interviews. 17 interviews provided an in-depth dive into the phenomena without being overwhelming when it came to the analysis of data. Although the sample ranged from 1k followers to 55k followers, all participants fit the criteria. The role 'aspiring eco-influencer' in table 6 is categorised as somebody who has only received gifted compensation but is actively seeking paid partnership. The sample consisted of 17 white cis-gender women aged between 18-55. The majority of participants were UK based, degree educated and middle class. Alongside their work as eco-influencers they held varying occupations in sectors such as teaching, PR consultancy and graphic design.

**Table 6: Interview participant profiles**

<b>Participant/ pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Follower Count on Instagram</b>
Adelaide	Aspiring eco- influencer	UK	2k
Joan	Eco- influencer	UK	2k
Darcy	Aspiring eco- influencer	UK	1.5k
Rio	Eco- influencer	UK	2.6k
Jane	Eco- influencer	UK	3.5k
Stella	Eco- influencer	UK	55.5k
Isla	Eco- influencer	UK	1.5k
Billie	Eco- influencer	UK	41.6k
Nadine	Eco- influencer	UK	20.4k
Etta	Eco- influencer	UK	8k
Sally	Eco- influencer	UK	8k
Miranda	Eco- influencer	UK	24k
Samantha	Eco- influencer	UK	1.5k
Tiffany	Eco- influencer	Australia	5k
Tegan	Eco- influencer	UK	8k
Lucy	Eco- influencer	Australia	3k
Sharon	Eco- influencer	UK	5.5k



## 4.10 Movement 5: Integration

Integration is arguably, or at least what I have thus so far found to be, the most important movement and it certainly is not a movement which takes place in linear fashion – it is an iterative process and is as present at the beginning as it is towards the final incarnation. At its core, it is analysis. Interpretation can be described as a ‘holistic link’ or a ‘search for essences’ (Miles, 2014, p.10).

Data analysis can be defined as “a process in which a particular phenomenon is broken down into component parts in order to study and understand it” (p.329). Analysis was carried out alongside data collection. This thesis adheres to the data analysis as set out by Kozinets (2021) which are: collating, coding, combining, counting, and charting. A summary of these processes is given below:

### 4.10.1 Collating

This process includes organising and gathering the data into a useful data set for analysis – it is the preparation for coding. Kozinets (2021) explains this process as “a form of data organisation, a systematising that encompasses removing downloaded data that is not going to be used in the analysis (p.333). Collation can be achieved by: filtering, formatting and filing the data. This occurred in the research process as follows:

**Table 7: Collation**

<i>Filtering</i>	This process entails deciding which data to include in the data set. I have only used interview data and minimal textual data taken from Instagram.
<i>Formatting</i>	Once filtered, the data needs formatting so that it is ready to be coded. This has been one of the most time consuming processes as it has included the transcription of audio-visual files and screenshots so that they are all in a textual format.

<i>Filing</i>	This is the process of organising files so that they are easy to read, search for, and code. Files were initially saved under the same folder, but as analysis progressed and coding of themes took place, new files were saved to a themed file. For example, “authenticity” was recognised a theme early and therefore, a screenshot of an influencer talking about authenticity was added to a specific folder for this theme.
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#### **4.10.2 Coding**

Collating is the preparation; coding is the analysis itself. Coding is the process in which the data is broken down into appropriate fractions – the data is deconstructed and its varying elements studied (Willis, 2007). Kozinets (2021) argues that coding is the most important stage in data analysis as it “spurs the researcher to deeper reflection on the meaning of the data, the study, and the guiding theoretical concepts (p.338).

#### **4.10.3 Combining**

This is the process of merging, fusing and blending concepts to form new elements - what Miles et al. (2014) calls ‘pattern code’. The codes become conceptual material that help the researcher discover new pathways in the data. This process involves going through codes and definitions and looking for possible connections – this is recognised as a challenging process (Kozinets, 2020).

#### **4.10.4 Counting**

Although qualitative, there is times when conceptual elements that have been coded require quantification. An example of this is using content analysis to describe and quantify phenomena, as well as to analyse documents and compartmentalise words into a smaller number of categories (Kozinets, 2020).

#### **4.10.5 Charting**

Charting is the process of analysing the data by using visualisation techniques: the process of displaying data can itself be an analytical tool as it reveals previously unrecognisable patterns. As Miles et al (2014) put it: “the creation and use of displays is not separate from analysis – it is *part* of analysis” (p.13).

#### **4.10. 6 Hermeneutic Analysis**

Hermeneutics is the knowledge branch which deals with interpretation and this theory and methodological practice is used to analyse the data. An aspect of hermeneutics which will be utilised throughout the analysing in the project is the processes involved in the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Paterson and Higgs, 2005). This process refers to the idea that understanding is developed by reaching a holistic view which consists of one’s understanding of the individual parts which make the whole (Paterson and Higgs, 2005). This type of analysis belongs to the interpretive paradigm which will be fully addressed in the following section. The circle, or sometimes ‘spiral’, is a way of metaphorically illustrating the process in which the researcher ‘abducts from the particular to the general’ (Kozinets, 2015, p. 205).

This continual abduction consists of reinterpreting our interpretations and breaking down our dataset into its smaller parts to reach a gradually altered conception of the larger whole (Bernstein, 1983). It should be outlined that there is no specific methodology which lends itself to this philosophy of analysis, however, there are consistent features. Arnould and Fischer (1994) determine some of these features which are utilised from a consumer research approach. This includes: (1) the nature and autonomy of the text, (2) semiotic-structural analysis, (3) (the already highlighted) hermeneutic circle, (4) fusions of horizons and (5) critical response. Some important maxims to take away from these features are how ‘a text assumes a life of its own’ (p. 61) and how ‘there is no single or correct interpretation’ (p.64).

#### **4.11 Movement 6: Incarnation**

This final form is the finished product, although Kozinets (2020) states that incarnation is only complete when the finished product is communicated. This communication consists of

this thesis itself and future journal articles/book chapters. The research findings can be found in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis.

#### **4.12 Ethical Procedures and Considerations**

Ethical research, as defined by Roberts (2015)' [...] balances potential benefits from research against potential harm (likelihood and severity of physical, social, psychological, economic, and legal harms) to research participants or others' (p.315). This potential for harm was fully understood and anticipated before embarking on the research journey – information which held risk in this area - such as probing sensitive questions during interview or collecting sensitive, or uncomfortable information from netnographic fieldwork sites was avoided completely.

During the first year of study and before any commencement of primary data collection, full ethical approval was applied for and granted by the University of Liverpool Ethics Committee. Ethical approval was granted in July 2020. The application process included the submission of research aims, and a research design which included details of the proposed methods and participant pool. The application also requested the uploading of advertisements for the study, a participant information sheet and a consent form. Signed consent forms, by the participant, have been used for all interviews. This ensured the participant was fully comfortable and confident with the study and that they understood their right to withdraw at any point they felt was necessary.

#### **4.13 Conclusion**

Although 'methodology' holds together this chapter holistically, on a more intricate level it refers to the nature of interaction between investigator and field of study – the instruments and techniques used for interpreting (Hudson and Ozanne, 1998). This chapter began by outlining the philosophical underpinnings of the study. It situated itself within the interpretivist paradigm and discussed the related axiological, epistemological and methodological assumptions which show how the study approaches the focal topic using *verstehen* and hermeneutics to gain a deep understanding, whilst realising the subjective

nature of this understanding itself. The interpretivist methodology is both hermeneutical and dialectical in nature.

This positioning then led to the study using inductive techniques, primarily a netnographic approach to fulfil its aims and objectives. This included immersion into the field by using a research Instagram account; and collecting images, video transcriptions and textual social media data. Online semi-structured interviews took place which adhered to post-structuralist philosophy, rather than phenomenology to delve deep into the cultural and social underpinnings of the participant's experience. Analysis consisted of a five-step process which included: collating, coding, combining, counting and charting and utilizing the 'hermeneutic circle' (Paterson and Higgs, 2005). The chapter concludes by respecting ethical considerations and procedures. The next three chapters detail the findings of this thesis.

# **Chapter Five: Findings 1: The Eco-Influencer: Initiation, Definition and Contradiction**

## **5.1 Introduction**

What makes an eco-influencer different to ordinary influencers? By taking a stand on social media and partaking in the promotion of alternative consumption and anti-consumption, eco-influencers are seeking change within the marketplace. Specifically, their shared goal is a more eco-conscious market. This chapter explicitly focuses on the influencer field and the ambiguity surrounding the eco-influencer's definition. This first section presents data which reveals the initiatory process of the eco-influencer; how Instagram thrusts the individual into public view. Other initiatory processes are motivated by guilt and anxiety, to which Instagram provides solace and enables recreational activity leading into labour. The chapter then explores the influencer's self-definition to better understand their association with the influencer field (associations with activism are explored in Chapter 6). The next two sections explore the collaborations influencers have with brands and finds that they leverage a logic of morality to help them resist capitalist marketplace temptation. Before concluding, tensions surrounding Instagram as a platform are revealed as individualist logics of the platform clash with collectivist goals.

## **5.2 Initiation**

The eco-influencer can be recognised as a 'consumer-agent' who in using and engaging with platforms and their emmeshed ideologies, is not always aware of the structural constraints which jeopardises, or in some cases expands, their marketplace goals (Askeegard, 2015). This section reveals some of the initiations that participants had into eco-influence and how legitimacy was attained. This includes crossing the threshold into public view; using Instagram as a counteracting force to difficult emotions; and, witnessing a hobby become labour. Despite some of the critical accounts of Instagram being constraining, the leveraging of structural logics bound to the platform harnesses the individual to a new, unforeseen reality.

### 5.2.1 Private to Public

Previous discussions of influencer culture have talked about the commodification of private space and how there is a ‘mock naivety’ present in which people share their information as if it were a candid endeavour (Scott, 2015; Briziarelli & Armano, 2017). Both Isla and Nadine in their interviews reveal how their accounts function as a diary, suggesting a candid, impromptu nature to how their accounts became manifest:

It sort of just grew organically out of that because I was doing it as a diary and people started following me specifically with an interest in that so I was like okay, I’ll share a bit more about that. People aren’t interested in “oh I went on a walk today and saw a cool tree” or “I went to a yoga class today” – people actually care about “oh I found this new sustainable shop today” or new cool thing or “I learnt this” or “I discovered someone who shared this thing.”

[Isla]

I share a lot of stuff, both sides, I find a comfort in that almost, a lot of things I put on are directed at me. I can put a caption explaining something but actually I’m just reaffirming it to myself – it’s like that diary or that journal but I’m sharing it, it’s weird.

[Nadine]

It is interesting that Isla began her account ‘organically’ as a diary in which she posted her daily activities. The free flowing, honest nature of a ‘diary’ is also something envisaged as inherently organic, yet through its mostly private nature, contrasts with the publicised aspect of an Instagram account. In her own words, Isla reveals that the account, once ‘organic’, soon turns strategic as she figured out which ‘performance scripts’ gained traction and which were met with disinterest through low engagement (Garud et al. 2007). The influencer field is typically isomorphic (Haenlein et al. 2020) and so it is interesting that organic origins soon grow in the direction of whatever is popular and palatable to a wider audience. Nadine too compares her sharing to a diary in which she speaks directly to herself to gain a sense of affirmation. The idea of affirmation indicates that the account is used to make Nadine feel better yet, Nadine chooses to do this publicly. In sharing, there seems to be a dialectic tension between what is private and what is public and admittingly to Nadine, this threshold of sharing is ‘weird’- a public diary of private thoughts is in itself, a paradoxical idea. Sharing candid thoughts is suggestive of authenticity, truthfulness and originality (Kim and Kim,

2021) which are all aspects which can be attributed to an actor's building of legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). It is also significant that Isla lists shopping as one of the activities people most care about, suggesting the attractiveness of marketplace logic.

Similarly, Sally also shares her views on the crossing from private to public, and also how the weaving of sustainability with lifestyle is 'cool' and 'aspirational':

I started out as a vegan account and I used to just do like travel and pictures and things, but it was never anything serious. Just a personal account that was closed, it wasn't public or anything and earlier this year I was just like, why not? Why not just start? I was studying as well and starting to have a lot of thoughts during my masters and I wanted to start sharing more stuff. So, I suppose it's gone from being well... I mean, it really has changed from being a vegan recipe account to being more of an eco-sustainability account now.

It seems that Instagram is a good platform because it's the aspirational life platform – it seems to be the right place to appeal to people's motivations...aspirations. Oh, maybe it could be quite aspirational or cool to be eco-friendly or whatever....

[Sally]

The private, diary-like use of social media to upload daily life or share recipes is something which Sally views as outside of 'serious' and the desire to share more than this and create eco-sustainability content is more of a consequential task: one which has over time led to her 8k following and paid and gifted advertised content with various eco brands. The transition to public sharing comes with the need to appeal to others. She describes the platform as being 'the aspirational life platform' stating how Instagram is a powerful tool to appeal to aspirations and an individual's identity work. These findings are very much in line with the work of Ulver (2019) who finds that markets are transformed by consumer identity projects and quests for 'cool', often creating new symbolic meanings and transforming the mundane into 'cool' and socially significant.

In her interview, Darcy like many other participants explain how watching aspirational content in the influencer world has become tiresome:

I built another Instagram so I can just keep it separate and not have to see everyone on my private platform. I was just...I get so sick of seeing all these people I know having



an amazing time in their private life and it just makes me feel like shit basically and it's nice to switch off from that.

[Darcy]

Although all influencers cross the threshold from private to public, Darcy here reveals how she also needs to rebalance this by reverting back to privacy and keeping a separate private account from the one she uses for eco-influence to 'switch off'. Her revelation is suggestive that people only share the positive aspects of their experience online and she finds this performative aspect difficult to navigate. There is a sense that individuals attempt to perform their private lives publicly, yet this publicity can have a detrimental effect on the true, private lives of social media users as they compare their lived experience to performance. The keeping of another account, one that is kept for matters of the private, is suggestive that the public account is not reflective of a true self but one which may be more socially conforming. This suggests that the maintenance of legitimacy may depend on strategic use of private and public accounts. Jane presents a conflicting idea of private/public, a view that is typical of the majority:

I wasn't going to tell anyone but I think because it's connected via email through my personal [account], I just started seeing everyone from my school start following it and I was just like oh no what's happening. This was the first week, I had a bit of a panic at first and I almost wanted to block people but then I was like why do I want to block people? I want to put this content out there so why would I not want them to see it?

[Jane]

There is a sense that the journey to eco-influence is not a typical one of simply wanting to do it, as Jane reveals, her initiation into sharing publicly meant talking herself into pushing through a level of panic and shame of what people would think. This conveys that the initial embarking onto Instagram is one where the individual feels illegitimate. Building oneself up to an established position in this field as entrepreneur can be a doubtful journey, yet over time this gradual sharing of the private can assist in the influencer journey as the commodification of everyday life is something which has become a normative pillar in the influencer field (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017).

Extending the view that public claims are in-genuine, Joan laments the following:

You can't live life in that selfish mind frame – we've got about 10 years to fucking save the planet. If I see one more person crying about a David Attenborough documentary and doing nothing about it in their private lives...

[Joan]

Joan gives the impression that individuals use public space on social media to cry about the content of eco-documentaries with little, if no action in their private lives. Although she has no way to prove this, her impression of the field reveals her scepticism and crying online is merely viewed as a non-committal, perhaps, 'slacktivist' act (Kozinets, 2019; Glenn, 2015). A journey to legitimation may include exaggerating or sharing token gestures to enhance engagement.

### **5.2.2 Counteracting Difficult Emotions**

Another reasoning behind the individual's initiation into eco-influence was to use Instagram as a soothing balm to some of the difficult emotions which arise when confronted with environmentalism: guilt, worry, anxiety, concern. Posting online about their own eco consumption and trying to influence others seemed an antidote and a way to navigate some of the uncomfortableness. For example, Joan whose guilt hinged on existential ideas of responsibility and Sally, who believes her account gives her a sense of control:

I was looking up to people, men and women, what they were doing for the world and thinking why aren't I doing that? Why am I letting myself down? Letting the world down? Who am I?

[Joan]

Trying to do stuff like Instagram, where I have direct control over my posts and what I'm putting out there to people...I don't know whether it counteracts my feelings. I suppose it makes me feel positive in some ways, and it makes me feel that I'm at least connecting with other likeminded people and that even if governments won't listen or aren't listening well enough that maybe somebody else out there is.

[Sally]

Sally reveals that what she craves is to feel listened to which conveys a sort of hopelessness of the situation that most people find themselves in when pondering the existential nature of environmentalism. Instagram is described as filling a void for individuals as the pleas of activists, scientists and consumers are ignored by corporations and governing bodies. In this way, Instagram fulfils a sense of belonging and acceptance. It provides a comfort blanket to the harsh ignorance of the reality of the problem. For Joan, the idea of ‘letting the world down’ depicts the heaviness that guilt brings with it and that a life without some sort of purpose or duty towards a collective goal equates to failure. The prevalence of guilt and shame used in marketing communications is high and these emotions both subsequently effect consumer decision making and behaviours (Han et. Al, 2014). Guilt is intricately tied to ethical decision making and Arli et al. (2016) find that consumers with high guilt-proneness are less agreeable with immoral behaviours. It is significant that social media, especially Instagram, is providing a buffer to these negative emotions by offering a space to be discovered, heard and seen ‘doing it for the world’. It is a platform where morality and virtue can be traded for social capital, and this social capital can thrust the individual into qualification as an institutional entrepreneur (Maguire et al. 2004; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013).

Other accounts emerged from a place of sympathy and concern for future generations. Etta elaborates on this point further:

It’s life changing when you become a mother and suddenly you start thinking about the future more, not just your future, but like her future. So you start thinking much further ahead in terms of like, you know, future generations.

I kind of force myself to take steps, for example, I did an IGTV (Instagram TV), I did an Instagram Live. I now do them like quite regularly and I don’t mind doing them... but the first one I was absolutely terrified. [Etta]

Etta describes how the initiation into motherhood altered her perception and resulted in her stepping out of her comfort zone. Her step into social media filled her with fear yet also seemingly counteracted some of the concerns she had for the state of the planet and her daughter’s future. She reveals how she forced herself to make live videos as if driven by her consideration of future generations. In some ways this suggests the impact of climate change

necessitates individuals to want to take action. As Etta notes, she considers the future quality of life of her daughter and perhaps the guilt that would be felt if she did nothing.

In a similar vein to Etta and several others, Isla's commitment to sustainability started by being moved by a graphic image online where she then felt the need to begin sharing her journey towards using less plastic:

I think I'd saw a picture of the turtles with the straws up their nose god love them, and I was like oh that will be a good new year's resolution, why don't I try and cut down on my plastic? I think it just spiralled off from there and you realise how easy it is, you think why don't I do this and this thing as well.

[Isla]

She notes that her journey was easy and her account spiralled into greater success with ease. That new year's resolutions led to the eco-influencer pathway shows the power of intention and how individuals can approach consumption with a sense of agency: their commitments to personal change can have unexpected outcomes. Likewise, this work seems to be a counter remedy to shame and guilt and a perfect new year's resolution which serves the collective good as much as it soothes negative emotions. It is surreal that a simple new year's resolution led another participant, Billie, to her 41k following on her account and her popularity stemmed from her wish to resist consumption:

So that's when I was like ok my new year's resolution is to try and live with less waste, let's try and cut it with plastic and live more environmentally friendly. I think it was on the 11th of January that's when I started my Instagram because people were really interested.

There's eco guilt that I feel a lot and I've definitely tried to detach myself from it – we can't be perfect all the time, that's fine – don't be so hard on yourself and I feel that's important for people to know in general.

[Billie]

Billie claims her popularity comes from her friendliness and timing, notably catapulting her into her role more deeply during UK lockdown. In her interview, she too talks about guilt and the perils of perfectionism. There is an irony that users may counteract their guilt with their accounts, yet find different sources of guilt online in comparison with the behaviour of other's online.

Darcy, as well as her account, has created her own platform to inform others what to do with their eco-anxiety. I describe eco-anxiety as being fear of environmental decline and worry for the future of the planet. Darcy admits she started the platform as a ‘selfish’ strategic career move but also sees the utility in it as a sanctuary for others to find coping mechanisms for their guilt and overwhelm:

Erm, but yeah it is kind of for selfish reasons but also because I would like to make a platform which is quite useful and somewhere where people can go when they think there is so much stuff going on and think “I don’t have time for this” and “I feel guilty all the time” and “I don’t know what to do with it”, and yeah just the chance to engage in action if you want to or like find local groups in your area.

[Darcy]

This instance shows an example where both selfishness and generosity can co-exist as Darcy’s career quest is mutually beneficial to her and her followers. Her offering would not exist if it were not for her need for success. This section highlights how a moral logic, which is motivated by uncomfortable feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety for others, is leveraged by the participants and gives indication of how this logic may be evolving the field. Whereas some studies show purely self-interested reasons for institutional work (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), the work of eco-influencers is made manifest by the discomfort they feel on environmental matters.

### **5.2.3 Recreation and Labour**

The idea of recreational activity turning into more impactful action is an interesting one. A hobby is suggestive of enjoyment and leisure and influencer culture allows for a place where recreational activity can often become people’s full-time careers. Jane discusses this:

My whole Instagram became a bit of a hobby to be honest. I think that’s how it started – I was always interested and at the weekend going charity shopping etc. but when I started making the page it sort of increased my interest in it all so that became a hobby like reading articles and everything.

[Jane]

Ironically, Jane later talks in her interview of her Instagram also feeling a bit like a job and talks of the tactical labour and mental exhaustion of creating content and showing up constantly to her following. Instagram offers a gateway into entrepreneurialism where the

individual can leverage the resources from the platform and in the case of influencer culture, institutionalise new rules, practices and logics (Garud et al. 2007).

Participant Stella, an eco-influencer with 55k followers, also speaks of her account starting her account for recreational use when asked if she ever expected her following would be so large:

Not really because at first it was just a hobby, a part time thing, and then during lockdown since I had more spare time I started to put more effort into it, more content and it just started growing. I guess because more people are interested in this topic – a few of my posts went viral and received more than 70k likes.

[Stella]

UK lockdown seemed to be a catalyst for hobbies to transform into something much larger as individuals were given the time to cultivate their creativity. Going ‘viral’ is something which hurls many individuals to popularity and even stardom online and the secret to success here is often unknown. There is also the consideration that the recreation is motivated by ‘visibility labour’ whereby an individual may wish to become noticed so partakes in free work (Abdin, 2016). Since the eco-influencer is also harnessing logics from the green movement, their passion to effect change becomes their reasoning for being noticed, not purely to become noticed by brands. Sally elaborates on this passion:

It's not just I feel passionate about it, like, I feel, oh I feel passionate about Shakespeare. It's not like that. Like, it's like it's a hobby or something...It's like actual real stuff, real multitude of real problems

[Sally]

Sally sees eco concern as more than a hobby. This may suggest why eco-influence has become manifest as an innovative branch of the influencer field: individuals are playing the influencer game yet are leveraging logics from the field of activism, logics which exude passion and moral concern. Samantha below, shares her feeling of her Instagram being a job:

I do daily posts and I have like the weekends off and stuff, but it's like it's constant. You're constantly being like, oh God I need to research this. I need to plan out these posts. I need to reply to these people who have messaged me and all that kind of stuff. It's become like a little bit like a job, but not in a good way.

[Samantha]

Samantha repeatedly states that she ‘needs’ to do these things and her extract reveals some of the unpaid, behind the scenes work which goes on behind influencing. The journey from recreation/passion to labour illustrates that the conception of eco-influence may have been manifested by individuals harnessing logics from the activist field. On the contrary, the framing of their work as a ‘job’ allows for the coexistence of logics which supports eco pursuits and money making simultaneously (Hartman and Coslor, 2019). The next section explores the influencer’s self-definition to better understand their association with the influencer field

### **5.3 Definition: Influencer**

Defining the participants and subjects of this phenomena is a difficult task as individuals who fit the criteria of either influencer or eco activist do not always identify with the label or culture surrounding it. This is due to negative connotations with both words ‘influencer’ and ‘activist’: one is associated with hyper-consumerism (Anwuri, 2023), and the other danger and disruption (*UN Environment Program*, 2020). The marketplace dynamics which are present in their outputs are often straddling two fields: a collaborator of marketplace dynamics, and often at the same time, a protestor against its harms. This project uses the term ‘eco-influencer’ to cover accounts which seek to influence marketplace change in favour of environmental outcomes. All participants interviewed had partnered with eco brands in some way, with some favouring this more than others.

The connotations of influencer are often that of a consumer, and somebody who promotes consumption whilst also being a consumer-product of some sort to their following as people invest their time and sometimes money into influencers by engaging with them. As is presented in Figure 3 with *Bower Collective*, and Figure 4 with *Wild Refill*, consumption is being subliminally promoted but with mundane household and sanitary products which are hardly excessive.

**Figure 3:** Madeline Olivia's paid partnership with Bower Collective



**Source:** Madeline Olivia (2022)



**Figure 4.** Zanna Van Dijk's paid partnership with Wild Refill



**Source:** Zanna Van Dijk (2022)

To Billie, the definition of an eco-influencer is one which reclaims the word from its negative connotations. Her definition is clearly well thought out:

Yeah definitely try and reclaim it because just what else would you call someone on a space? A digital content creator doesn't really make sense, an online educator sounds like I'm a teacher on zoom or something, like we all are influencers – we all have a sphere of influence. We influence people around us – some people just happen to have more followers online than others. We shouldn't make that as if you have to have a minimum following to be called that – we all have influence but there's people that are way more influential than me that don't even have social media.

[Billie]

Her definition celebrates the idea of simply influencing people to do better and to consume better, rather than just consume without intention. Billie's product collaborations include

*Lush Cosmetics* and *Boots UK* and some of her work has led to her working with the Scottish Government, *Visit Scotland* and *Sky News* which is typical for eco-influencers with large followings. Although the journey is somewhat unknown, collaborating with more powerful institutional actors enhances the credibility and visibility of the influencer. As with the bloggers in Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) study, collaborating with marketers or media outlets allows them to leverage resources to support the changes they seek. It seems that some of Billie's work is in support of marketplace solutions and some of her more activist work centres around protesting the harms of the marketplace and finding solutions outside of it. Billie is an example of how eco-influencers are attempting to straddle between two fields and balance their relevant logics.

When asked what she thought of the word influencer and whether she calls herself one, Jane responded with:

Only as a joke [laughs]. To my boyfriend to wind him up. No, I like to think yes – influencing people to make good decisions but I think the term influencer has such a bad connotation with it. If you take away Instagram – do I want to influence people – yes, but an Instagram influencer you just think...I mean I'm not the best example because today I did actually post an ad as my post.

[Jane]

Jane agrees that there is resonance in the word influencer and what she does, but also points out its negative connotations which has the potential to 'wind' up her partner. She attempts to detach from the label whilst also recognising logics she adheres to, for example, posting paid advertisements that day shows her appealing to the marketplace logics of the influencer field. It seems as though Jane is undecided about where she situates when it comes to influence, but at the same time, dismissing a marketplace logic entirely may lose her both physical and social capital. Below she shares that the reasoning behind her content is to raise awareness about the conditions of garment workers in the global south, Jane's account previously focused on finding bargains in charity shops, whereas now she identifies more with a green logic:

But recently I've realised the price isn't the reason I'm doing it anymore, it's because I really care about sustainable fashion. I care about the garment workers who are making clothes for fast fashion and I wouldn't want to impact that, erm, and that's the

driving point now and that's why I changed my name to [username about conscious shopping] because it's not really about finding a bargain anymore.

[Jane]

For Nadine, the word influencer is met with recoil and she associates the word with disappointment of what she sees being sold on the platform:

It makes me cringe and I don't know why. It just disappoints me when I see people with huge platforms and them not really adding much value or pushing messages that are...I just see a lot influencers who are using like fast fashion partnerships and all this stuff and it's not really adding value.

[Nadine]

For Nadine, who speaks a lot about 'alignment' and her output and goals being congruent, 'value' seems to mean taking a stand against larger societal issues and using the platform to send conscious messages. It becomes clear that this word is tainted and Nadine is an example of how some 'eco-influencers' dismiss the word 'influencer' rather than reclaim it, despite them meeting the criteria of influencing people, for example, Nadine has partaken in partnerships with *Lush UK* and *The Beeswax Wrap Co*. Partaking in influencer culture whilst dismissing its label or titles may indicate individuals tactically leverage certain logics and reject others as the influencer field has historically reflected hyper-consumerism (Anwuri, 2023). Stella notices a change in the field:

So yeah, influencer culture has kind of changed, not changed the movement but yeah, we need to have these eco-friendly stores and stuff but that's not the whole picture – we have to look beyond that as well.

[Stella]

Although Stella recognises positive change within the field, she recognises the limitations of influencer culture; how shopping changes are necessary but also that there must be further considerations. She speaks of 'we' indicating a sense of agency and sovereignty reflective of consumer responsabilisation (Giesler and Versiu, 2014). This idea of collective responsibility and is also echoed by Isla as she reflects on the community of 'hundreds of thousands' of voices:

You follow the Molly-Maes and all these big influencers and because I don't think there is a big standout million follower [eco] influencer like that, I just didn't realise they were out there. I just hadn't looked into it but now literally there are hundreds

upon thousands of us and we don't have the same follower count as Molly-Mae but together we all have one huge voice and I think that's important.

[Isla]

Jane explains her view that eco-influence has power as a collective. Rather than being one singular influencer with a large following (she uses the example of lifestyle influencer Molly-Mae with 8 Million followers) and no underlying message, she believes in the importance of influencing as part of a community and with a purpose. This gives example as to how eco-influencers believe they are positively effecting change in the marketplace by working as 'one huge voice' which draws similarities to Kozinets and Jenkins's (2021) thought that 'the small can become big, and small movements multiply when shared' (p280). Unlike previous conceptions of influencer which are rooted, often proudly, in individualism (O'Sullivan, 2022), the eco-influencer suggests an advancement of the influencer field whereby collectivist logics are leveraged from the green movement. Jane elaborates on this with the following:

I mean I'm all about rewearing my clothes and things like that but at the same time it's when you're trying to post nice pictures and you're going down the influencer route but it's sort of like an anti-influencer because you're trying to rewear your clothes – do you know what I'm trying to say?

Yeah, we're trying to be instagrammers without being instagrammers.

[Jane]

Jane here is attempting to define her craft which results in a paradoxical example of trying to be something, without being it. This sentiment suggests a level of institutional complexity as multiple, seemingly incompatible logics are coexisting and in tandem, innovating the field (Cherrier et al. 2018). Influencing or 'instagramming' is more sensical when it follows a more singular trajectory and her confusion indicates a tension, albeit a productive one, which is complex and contradictory.

Sally identifies with the word influencer but ensures that she applies her values and ethics when it comes to accepting gifts to promote – she is led by integrity rather than profit:

I've got about 7k and if at that I'm getting free things every week now – I can't imagine what it must be like for influencers at 15k and at 20k, it must – I wonder, does it become very seductive at that point? I'm still on a journey with it and it's

about trying to use that influence wisely and ethically – as ethically as possible to try and affect change in as many ways as possible.

[Sally]

Sally talks of a wise and ethical influence and one which she believes has the power to affect change. This is spoke of in tandem with the seductiveness of the certain paths on the journey. The impression is given that the eco-influencer cannot take up multiple, alluring offers from paid partnerships and still remain legitimate in their change making efforts. Further findings on this theme are found in section 4.3.1.

Stella, whose following is considerably higher at 55.5k, speaks of these challenges as she reveals she had to turn down some ‘pretty good opportunities’ in order to stay true to her values and to avoid losing followers:

I feel a lot of people are on the same page and agree that influencer culture is just quite bad to this movement which promotes like buying less, making things last. It is challenging because I did get some pretty good opportunities but I just feel like I would lose followers as well because I would change you know? Instead of promoting content, I would be promoting content to buy.

[Stella]

In this extract, Stella dismisses influencer culture and shows identification ‘with the movement’ which indicates that she positions herself as more of an activist. Despite her talking of rejecting offers to remain legitimate, she discusses partnerships she has happily accepted. She rejects influencer culture, calling it ‘bad’, yet borrows from its operating logics to support herself and further her cause.

### **5.3.1 Brand Connections**

To partake in this study, all participants had to have partaken in a brand collaboration where they either were gifted or compensated for their effort in advertising a product or service. Below, Jane talks of how this has been one of the positive takeaways from creating an account on Instagram and also for her changing how she brands herself as her account has evolved from a bargain hunting account to a conscious platform. She now collaborates with small business owners as the platform has enabled her to see the value of their offerings. Similarly, Nadine talks about her collaborations with *Lush UK* as inspiring as it allowed her

an insight into the ethics of the company, whilst Joan finds fulfilment in working with *Arbonne*:

Yeah and someone's put their hard work and time into making that for you. When you can see the person that's done it and see the hard work put into it – it's just yeah, that's really one thing that came out of doing this Instagram is I found all these small companies and that's another reason for the name change because I love all these companies.

[Jane]

So I think collaborating with brands like *Lush* has shown me what's a massive inspiration for me and I think it's amazing if you can track where everything comes from and you know the people who grow it and you know it's been done in an ethical way. It's really powerful.

[Nadine]

For the first time I'm helping someone [*Arbonne*] with purpose and I don't feel empty while I'm doing it.

[Joan]

Through visual media, the platform can harness a connection from supplier to consumer as processes that go on behind the scenes can be displayed. Both Nadine and Jane depict that they give brands a chance to be transparent and prove their worth to them, instead of vice-versa. Whereas influencers may usually wish to appeal to brands as the powerful actors which can leverage resources from (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), it seems that in reversal, the influencer's green seal of approval can also mutually boost a brand's legitimacy. For others however, the brand-influencer relationship feels one sided:

I've noticed that particularly like as I've gotten a little bit like more followers, like there's been some companies that have contacted me to try their product which I'm open to and happy to do. But then there's some that will contact you with an expectation about you sharing the product, which again, is fine, but there's very strict guidelines for that. So they'll say we're happy to send you this product to try but we expect three posts, two stories blah blah blah, and it becomes like, that's great...I'm glad to try your twenty dollars product, but then I'm, you know, exhibiting this many hours of my time like creating content for that when it may not even align with my values of what I'm trying to achieve.

[Lucy]

Lucy's extract reveals a tension between what is expected of her and her own values, revealing that paid offers can derail the alignment of her account. Alignment in this case,

being the union of goal and output. Lucy's account began in lockdown during the pandemic as a means to share eco-tips from family and friends. It is interesting that paid partnership is now altering her behaviour despite it never being something she set out to achieve. Incongruence is further discussed by Adelaide as she reflects on the behaviour of a well-known meso eco-influencer:

Her brand is an eco-environmental influencer but because she's an influencer she is influencing consumption in some way so whether you're consuming ethical goods, you're still consuming, so you're still using resources that otherwise would have not been consumed. And I would also say that I definitely remember her partnering with Nike or something who like...I'm not aware that they're a sustainable brand in any way. I don't think they market themselves to be that and I think there's a few collaborations she's done and I would say she has done more for her own gain as an individual rather than the broader social cause that she aligns herself with.

[Adelaide]

Adelaide clearly finds partnering with Nike problematic. This example is also suggestive of wider institutional complexity as some eco-influencers may be further involved with other fields such as fitness. Logics belonging to this field may pose further contradictions in their coexistence with eco-influence.

### **5.3.2 Money vs. Morality**

Again, brands and influencers can mutually benefit from each other. Brands seek the endorsement and desirable associations from eco-influencers (McCracken, 1989) and influencers can achieve capital in both physical and symbolic forms. Billie's connection with brands depends on specific questions she asks as a prerequisite to a partnership, including questions about worker's conditions:

So I think part of it is you just get approached by everyone and anyone and I think also I've got really high standards. Like I want to know this, this and this about your company before I sign my name to it and I think that's something that needs to happen more in the influencer world definitely but yeah loads of brands reach out and some of it is small brands, some of it is huge ones and it's a real variation.

[Billie]

I suppose it's just about weighing it up and how much you need the money and how strong your morals are I guess.

[Adelaide]

Although some brand collaborations are exciting, some are perceived to contaminate eco-influencer goals. For instance, Adelaide suggests that strong morals are needed to steer clear of the pull that marketers have on an eco-influencer's content. As has been highlighted in prior sections, eco-influence usually grows from a place of wanting to change the marketplace for the better: less consumption, reusing and recycling and if necessary, alternative eco-friendly purchases. In assessing whether a paid partnership is the correct path, the influencer leverages a moral logic which is more resonant with the field of activism. There is also the consideration that this moral logic 'looks good' and despite rejecting physical capital, the influencer is still harnessing symbolic, green capital with some influencers publicly displaying these rejections publicly to their followers.

Tiffany describes 'putting her foot down' as a way of setting boundaries with marketers on the platform and both her and Stella share their belief that monetary compensation is the appropriate exchange for the content they create on their account and that gifts are not sufficient:

I decided to put my foot down on paid advertisement on my Instagram. Before that, I was just like I'll just take the free product. If they can afford to pay someone I don't charge very high, but for Instagram I've only just started implementing like a rule where I'll only do paid promotion rather than just taking the free product.

[Tiffany]

Often these accounts just want a free promotion and I feel like often people with big followings like brands think that a gifted product is enough but like, I have a large following, I need some monetary compensation – a gifted item is not enough for me I guess. I guess it depends on if it's a reusable bottle or a handmade dress like more precious and stuff and more valuable.

[Stella]

A logic of workers' rights is harnessed here as both Stella and Tiffany discuss how their online labour is of high value to marketers and deserves a profitable return. Stella equates her large following to having something of value she possesses. Of course, perhaps only larger companies have the funds to cater for these demands which creates new tensions as larger companies may not be the most environmentally friendly. Echoing other participants, Nadine believes that money can sway people's behaviour in the community and it lessens the intention behind the content that eco-influencers put out on Instagram:

I think the money that these brands are offering, I think it can make a lot of people think I'll just do it for the money. There's not much conscious thought behind it, like



there's no intention like 'I'm just going to post pictures in these brands and I'm not really thinking where this stuff comes from or how this stuff is made or how are people treated'.

[Nadine]

Money is a contentious subject and often paradoxical. Individuals acknowledge their value and wish to be paid for the time, but at the same time recognise that money can become the core intention and they are at risk of seeming illegitimate. Both money and gifts can become excessive:

Yeah and I've been approached by some that I've actually rejected. So there was a water bottle company and they were saying about sending me one. I said that's really kind of you but I literally have multiple of these chilli bottles and I wouldn't need it – I would rather buy one when I needed one. I know I was going to be gifted something but then I would have more than I need and I don't think that would be a very conscious decision.

[Jane]

Jane highlights how receiving gifts from companies can conflict with the principles of eco-consumerism. This brings a new dimension to how we think about gift giving as companies are dependent on the influencer for their integrated advertisements which are highly profitable marketing channels. The influencer, in exchange, receives zero of the profit.

Much of this section has focused heavily on the morals of the individual which highlights the agency that eco-influencers believe they have. These incremental changes still occur within the boundaries of market logics, however: agency is 'embedded' with the institutional field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). The morality of companies is a more ambiguous topic. Stella and Isla discuss the topic of greenwashing below:

It's more that companies just don't really care – they just put it out, put information on their websites that isn't really true, like greenwashing happens a lot. Yeah, it's kind of hard but at the same time I really enjoy it and it's really rewarding seeing people be like "wow, I didn't know that" (about greenwashing) – helping them make the connection because we're so disconnected from what we buy. It's so bad.

[Stella]

I think it's really easy for things like greenwashing to crop up at the minute because a lot of accounts are like "oh it's trendy, so if we look like we are green then...". I think there's a fine line between eco-consumerism and actually promoting a genuine product. You have to make it clear you're not saying "everyone go buy this now" you're saying, for people who use a more wasteful version of this, here's a good alternative.

[Isla]

Participants seem aware that greenwashing is ongoing within the culture of paid partnerships on the platform and that marketers are channelling this sentiment through people like themselves. Stella shares a lot of information around greenwashing and helping her followers ‘make the connection’ themselves, for example she shares infographics on H&M’s efforts to offer sustainable clothing lines whilst still offering all their other product lines as usual. There is a noticeable ‘fine line’ between eco-influence and greenwashing, as Isla suggests. There is a noticeable tension here, perhaps because of the paradox of their agency being embedded within a marketplace field which they actively attempting to change (Friedland and Alford, 1991). The next section explores this paradox further.

#### **5.4 Individualist Platform for Collective Goals**

Below, Darcy highlights one of the largest yet discrete tensions of eco-influence on Instagram: that social media itself is another form of consumption which promotes individualist behaviours, whilst eco-influencers use this space to actively promote consumption-lite or anti-consumer behaviour:

Social media is just another form of consumption. You don’t even think of that because it’s virtual and it’s not a tangible thing but me liking someone’s pictures is me consuming someone’s content and it is another form of every day, mundane society.

[Darcy]

The time spent scrolling through Instagram is the price paid for the content of the eco-influencer. Time, attention and engagement are exchanged for the production of content, and of course, money is exchanged if the content persuades. That it is ‘another form of mundane society’ is seemingly a pointer to it operating as an institutional field with its own norms and values. For example, Rio below talks of an engagement exercise she and others carry out to boost their content:

In the beginning I was doing a lot of engagement with other people’s posts to get that engagement but as time has gone on I haven’t got a lot of time because work is a bit busy and things but you know, in the evening I’ll sit and comment and stuff and exchange. Quite a lot of people in the beginning were sharing my profile which was really nice.

[Rio]

Engaging with others content so that it is reciprocated allows users to rethink the numbers on the posts that are seen on a screen and question the value exchange of a like or comment and

whether or not these are genuine. Although an act of best intention, this exchange highlights how individuals engage in strategic game playing of some sort on social media platforms engaging just to receive engagement in return (Cotter, 2017). This is networking, after all, but it shows how the platform perpetuates competition and reinforces the importance of quantification (Greene and Brownstone, 2023). When asked what a truly established influencer looks like, Rio responded:

Probably be over like 10 or 20,000 followers I'd say. You never know truly because people buy followers. It's not something I would ever want to do for myself. It completely defeats the purpose for me. You can tell by if they've got like 20,000 followers and then maybe 30 likes.

[Rio]

Buying followers, although perhaps on the extreme end of this strategic game playing, is something which creates a fraudulent first impression to spectators, whether they be consumers of content or brands seeking potential influencers. It draws attention to the ingenuine aspects of the platform and how we can invent ourselves and then reinvent ourselves according to the requirements for legitimacy. Etta talks of further competitiveness:

I don't really have the time to sort of spend too long on it, so I probably don't have time to think about the pressure either. I think it can get really competitive though, people get really sort of obsessed with getting the right photograph.

[Etta]

Etta draws attention to the pressure that the platform can bring (pressure and perceived pressure are further explored in Chapter 7) and the obsession of self-presentation and competition. Being competitive whilst eco-influencing is almost ironic and it seems that matters of the self can take over collectivist goals. It certainly does not seem to be a matter of who can influence people's consumption habits the most, but more so who can look the best whilst doing it.

And yeah, at the beginning it was, yeah, at the beginning it was to the point where I was quite worried. I thought I don't know if I should be doing this. Actually, it's quite, you know, checking my phone all the time. What am I doing? And at first, because we were in lockdown, it didn't really occur to me that it was a problem because we were in lockdown and it was like, oh, it's just communication in a way. It was when we

started to go out and do things and meet people, I find myself wanting to check my phone. So this isn't that, oh god, this is not good.

[Sally]

Sally draws attention to the further pulls of Instagram. For many, the platform can become a problematic addiction and can easily take over and leak into everyday interactions, removing her from the social situations she was facing in the present moment. Despite Sally's infatuation with the platform, she claims that she does not wish to promote consumption 'at all':

Erm, you know, doing the activist stuff is one thing and learning about different aspects of the theory of sustainability has been another but actually learning how to do the practical things like composting or plastic free July [...]. Again, sometimes I want to talk about products and I'm always kind of conscious like ooh is that a good idea – am I just promoting consumption? I don't want to promote consumption at all, it's that balance and I'm trying to find that balance.

[Sally]

Sally's statement is confusing as she has partaken in partnership with brands, yet she admits she is still trying to find 'balance'. She explains her predicament as she resists speaking about topics she may be passionate about due to their underlying message. 'Balance' is seemingly important for the eco-influencer as their continuation and shared success between followers, community and marketers depends on a balancing act of plural, often paradoxical logics. There is sense of resisting certain behaviours to adhere to the normative expectations of the field. This balancing act is underscored further by Tiffany, who talks about being herself, and fitting in:

That's why I think online is so easy because I don't feel like I'm putting anybody out or impacting people in a negative way because it's my views and if they don't want to look at what I'm posting, they can just unfollow me. But I remember, especially in high school, I just wanted to fit in. I didn't want to be what like sort of looked outside of the norm, so I just went with the conventional. After high school I became myself more, I think...I fit in better here.

[Tiffany]

Interestingly, Tiffany talks about following conventions in school and how she now finds it easier to speak truthfully about her views online. There is a tension in being yourself and fitting in online, to which she said she does both. Perhaps her fitting in on the platform is

more to do with algorithmic echo chambers and her own views being mirrored back to her. This theme is explored further in Chapter six.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have introduced the eco-influencer, focusing on their initiation as an influencer; how they define themselves; and some of the paradoxes presented by their logical operation in two fields. The section which details initiatory processes shows how the journey from public to private can assist in the building of legitimacy as sharing diaries, feelings and truth are congruent with normative practices of the field that commodify private, everyday life (Scott, 2015; Briziarelli & Armano, 2017). It also reveals how *Instagram* is a soothing balm for emotions such as guilt, worry and eco-anxiety. Morality can be traded for social capital on the platform and moral logics can evolve the influencer field. The relationship between recreation and labour similarly shows how free work motivated by passion legitimates the influencer's cause. The following section reveals an ambiguous self-definition and level of institutional complexity at play as plural, paradoxical logics coexist. The difficult relationship with brands is explored as their power can be used for leveraging yet also can be dismissed for reasons of depleting green capital. The section 'money vs. reality' also further reveals dialectical tensions of trading value whilst remaining legitimate. The final section explores some of the individualistic pillars of Instagram and how it can negate collectivist goals. Throughout this chapter, various dualities become apparent through the workings of logics: private/public, hobbies/work, money/morality, and individualism/collectivism. In the next chapter, the activist identity of the eco-influencer and some of the carried logics of this side of the paradox are considered.

# **Chapter Six: Findings 2: Green and Spiritual logics, The Eco-Influencer Self-Journey and Extent of Activism**

## **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter introduced the eco-influencer and focused on their initiatory journey as an Instagram influencer. It presented findings which unpack the ‘influencer’ definition and highlighted some of the ways in which the eco-influencer appeals to marketplace logics by partaking in paid partnerships with brands. Various logical paradoxes become apparent throughout the chapter which indicates institutional complexity (Thornton et al. 2012). This chapter adds another layer to this entanglement by firstly exploring findings which reveal the eco-influencer’s self-journey and how green and spiritual logics are catalysed from transcendental experiences with nature. This chapter then delves deeper into their motivations of appealing to a green logic and reveals how public purification is a means of building and maintaining green capital. The final section considers the participant’s identification with the term ‘activist’ and considers the ways in which digital mobilisation is enabling and constraining.

## **6.2 Nature as a Catalyst for Green Logics**

As the previous chapter began by introducing some of the influencer’s initiations into the world of Instagram, this chapter spotlights journeys with beginnings and upbringings and how this can be linked to some of the symbolic and relational systems that assist in establishing oneself as an eco-influencer. An overwhelming majority of participants began narrating their journey with their home life and upbringing and how this linked to their present adherence to green logics. In considering how nature as an external force shapes consumer action, this analysis goes beyond the consumer subject and considers transcendental experience and how relevant green and spiritual logics are catalyst for action (Thornton et al. 2012). This section also highlights how a level of privilege is present in relation to nature as some eco-influencer’s acknowledge their ‘luck’ of growing up with access to rural areas. Although ontologically, nature is the all encapsulating force which we reside within, an individual’s identification with nature is an extension of self, though some individuals may feel ‘as one with nature’ (Kunchambo et al. 2017). Lucy’s experience with nature began through her voluntary work:

I also do lots of camping and I'm a girl guide so I did lots of outdoor camping in nature and yeah, lots of time spent back to basics and no technology and all of that stuff so I guess the desire for nature to be prosperous and good comes with that. You can see the true beauty of the native animals and stuff when you're in those areas and I imagine people who haven't been to those areas don't have an attachment to it so they're not as worried about it no longer being available or you know, like, climate change continues. They're not like "oh my god the forest has been cut down" - people who spend more time in nature have more heartbreak over something like that.

[Lucy]

Lucy understands the level of privilege that comes with direct access to nature and the 'heartbreak' she speaks of allows us to imagine the emotional attachment that comes with prolonged exposure to the outdoors. She describes how her experiences with nature had 'no technology' which echoes popular sentiment that the technological distracts us from the beauty of nature and is changing our relationship to it as technology advances (Matei, 2017). Lucy makes a distinction between people with an attachment to nature and those with minimal exposure to it: the former suffers at the hand of empathy in what they feel for the forest. The references made to 'back to basics' and 'no technology' also highlights a purity required to identify with nature and feel these emotions or 'see the true beauty', signalling that deceleration and identification with nature is only available to a privileged few (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). These attributes which oppose the fast paced, consumer world are depicted as a prerequisite to identifying with green logics and logics of preservation. Darcy also feels 'lucky' to have been raised in the countryside with prolonged exposure to nature:

I think you don't really realise when you grow up somewhere like this like how lucky you are to be connected to the countryside and what it's about and stuff. I think that probably is what it stems from and then I think it's just awareness, like through the years...my dad's a farmer so I think that has had quite a big impact. And being surrounded by countryside and animals growing up, and knowing where food came from. I think that was a big thing.

[Darcy]

Not only is Darcy connected to nature through her surroundings, but also connected to what she consumes from living on a farm. She describes this as being an enabling factor in her sharing eco-content and trying to influence the consumption of others. Similarly, Adelaide

also grew up on a farm and talks about how her university studies in sustainable development have led to her questioning her upbringing and early acquired roots:

I had to do an essay for a module about the impact of supermarket culture and I talked about how for supermarkets to work they have to transgress seasons and they just produce this stuff all year round, all around the world and they sort of effect the biodiversity of the places where they're growing this produce so that's when I started to become quite shocked and that's when I started to question my own upbringing on a farm.

[Adelaide]

Rather than feel lucky for her farm upbringing like Darcy, Adelaide's education brought about an identity crisis. There is an indication of cognitive dissonance as Adelaide dismisses her upbringing and like others revealed in the previous chapter, the practice of sharing online is seemingly motivated by shame or guilt. Exposure or natural immersion to sustainable topics can cause pivotal changes in perception which can be 'shocking' to the individual and both of these things are dependent on matters of privilege.

Participant Nadine found identification with nature in later life through a journey of self-connection. That her connection with nature correlated with enhanced connection to herself indicates a resonance with nature and an inclusiveness with it. When asked if her connection with nature has been lifelong, Nadine replied:

No, definitely not and I think that manifested as a disconnect to myself and as I started to connect with nature, I started to connect with myself more. So I think you can see the kind of macro relating to that as well because I wasn't connecting to nature, I wasn't connecting to myself. The more I am connected to nature, the more connected to myself I've become as well. It's like that inner/outer reflection.

[Nadine]

Nadine elaborates on connection by noticing a parallel with her inner and outer world, how the micro and the macro are connected. This aligns with the work of Kunchambo et al. (2017) whereby an intensified connection with nature leads to self-dilution and promotion of oneness in a spiritual sense. Their work also highlights how 'the self is seen as nature, [so] loss of nature becomes a loss of the self' (p.129). For Stella, it is indigenous wisdom that needs to be understood by modern day citizens: working in synergy with nature rather than overpowering it, to go beyond consumption and go beyond ourselves:



We kind of link sustainability with something that we can buy but it's not really – indigenous people: their connection to the land and their knowledge of the land – how much they value it is so important that we kind of need to go back to those principles and understand and learn from them.

[Stella]

Indigenous cultures are known for upholding their connection to nature as sacred, regarding nature with upmost respect (Kimmerer, 2013; Chakraborty & Sadachar, 2022). Connection, reciprocity and guardianship are well integrated in various indigenous cultures, for example, Māori cultures prioritise environmental well-being and decision making over community and family well-being and will tend to the environment as a matter of obligation Kennedy et al. (2020). Stella here invokes a spiritual logic to highlight the problematic practices of consumer society, revealing her disillusion with the culture she resides within as she refers to 'we', giving the impression that she longs to feel different solutions. While it is possible for eco-influencers to mobilise on Instagram without early identifications with nature and the benefit of a spiritual logic, it is apparent that these logics give eco-influencers justification of their mission. This emergent finding of a spiritual logic is seemingly both enabling for the eco-influencer in that it propels them into action, yet also constraining as it coexists amongst other competing marketplace logics and the technological. Consumer and technological based solutions are embedded with paradoxical constraints: those that in many ways can remove the consumer subject further away from the simplicity they witness within the natural world.

### **6.3 Transcending the Self via spiritual logics**

As the previous section has highlighted, most participants recalled a time when they were disconnected from nature or at least could empathise with what it feels like to feel disconnected from nature: this can be a disinterest in environmental issues or something which shows up as an ignorance to where food comes from and the effect consumption has on biodiversity. Overcoming this disconnection has also been portrayed as overcoming a disconnect to 'the self' or ones 'inner nature'. The purpose of this section is to further explore the emergent finding of a spiritual logic as a catalyst and justification for the eco-influencer's mission to influence consumption. Mindfulness and varying spiritual practices were often brought into conversation by participants as actions which greatly changed their self-impresions and supported their environmental endeavours:

As Adelaide explains:

Yeah because, like to my knowledge yoga practices are kind of linked with like Buddhism and that type of spirituality which is a cult or a religion which is more connected with the earth or the natural world. I might be completely wrong but to my...erm so it's kind of like a mindset that maybe isn't western, I guess? It's different to the western mindset which is very capitalist, consumption-based, erm it's more of like stripping everything back and just like being and not needing things – being more minimal and connection to the earth which I think in western society...I think we've become very disconnected to.

[Adelaide]

Upon discussing her deepened practice of yoga and meditation, Adelaide shares some of her impressions of how different philosophies view the natural world. Alike Stella in the previous section, she finds western society to be 'disconnected' and finds spiritual practice to be an antidote to her feelings towards this. She notably juxtaposes spirituality with capitalism and consumption which is reflective of the seemingly incompatible logics at play within the hybridisation of eco-influence. So far, nature and spirituality have been shown to be both enablers and soothers in protesting the harms of western, consumerist techno-cultural society. In this regard, eco-influencers attempt to leverage these dominant logics of the marketplace and technology to amplify their mission is significant and entrenched with paradox.

Stella further reveals how mindfulness practices are a buffer to the excesses of the modern world:

I'm trying meditation and that's kind of helping, especially during this period. Like owning a lot of stuff, like cluttered spaces make you feel less focused and feel kind of worse so yeah. I'd rather be more conscious with my purchases and think about "what is that going to add to my life?" and "do I really need it?" and so yeah, I try to do that – it's not easy because it's impossible to be perfect in this society.

[Stella]

In her interview, Stella elaborates further and talks of her past enjoyment of 'retail therapy' with friends and how this now feels 'so stupid'. This kind of 'therapy' contrasts with some of the mindful practices reflected in the above extract which she now feels are pivotal in helping her manage her account online. She questions her own consumption and poses questions to herself in a way that suggests an inner-monologue of a more actualised self which is grappling with the enticements of consumer society, perhaps a monologue of agency over

structural forces. Again, the logic of spirituality is depicted as a counteracting force, yet she also alludes to the standards of perfection which are held within the community indicating a tension between who she is and how she is viewed. Her legitimacy as an eco-influencer being intricately linked to the latter.

Nadine's extract reveals a spiritual logic at play as she describes a karmic idea of accountability: that her ignorance will only continue to follow her.

I think in a way it's a reflection of our inner state – once you become conscious of that, you become conscious of your impact and how much of an impact everything has – you can't deny that. You're either playing a part of it or you're staying ignorant to it but at the end of the day there is going to be a time when you're held accountable for it. That's what I think: the more conscious and connected you become, you can't push that away anymore because it finds a way to come into your reality.

[Nadine]

Nadine's passage is infused with spiritual rhetoric which is suggestive of a surrender to a higher universal law and that perhaps nature is this law in itself. Self-actualisation rhetoric and the logic of spirituality is a significant way for eco-influencers to demonstrate their social fit as a protector of nature. The reasoning behind the preservation of nature could be related to a mutually beneficial relationship between nature and the self. In other words, Nadine has inherited the belief that we are not entirely disconnected from nature but a part of it. Although eco-influencers are not marginalised like the bloggers in Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) study, passages like Nadine's allow us to see how eco-influencers may feel spiritually impacted by environmental issues.

Like many other participants, Joan finds that her eco influence would not have been possible if it had not been for her becoming 'spiritually aware':

If I didn't have this relationship with myself then there's no chance that I would have stuck to any of it because becoming spirituality aware...your ego starts dropping and when you start losing your ego, you become more compassionate and see the big picture and the big plan of what should be getting done.

I do want to influence people but want to inspire them to make better choices for themselves and the world. I don't want to be an influencer of ego, I don't want to influence you to take pictures with your new shoes on.

[Joan]

She feels as though a deeper level of compassion and a more holistic view of life gives her reason to invest in a cause outside of herself. Interestingly, she believes her 'ego' which is intrinsically tied to the mind's construct of selfhood has dropped and enabled more mindful behaviour. This in turn inspires Joan to be the influencer that she is and not an influencer 'of ego'. Spiritual practice encompasses a wide range of ego modifying practices which through extended meditation, contemplation and introspection provide the individual deeply moving personal experiences which can have an overall effect on impulsiveness and pro-social attitudes (Hodge, 2010). Isla adds to this conversation:

I think it takes a lot of mental fortitude to actually stop and take a look and think I need to make some changes and I think the type of person that does that is the type of person that is in tune with themselves and that comes a lot from doing things like yoga and meditation. I started those before this, I think that's where I got the skills to stop and take a look at what I'm doing.

[Isla]

Isla talks of mindful practices as 'skills' which enabled her to assess her consumption and make changes to her consumption. It is interesting to think of spiritual pursuits as a training ground for eco-influence which grant individuals the capacity to self-reflect and take action. Such practices seem to also grant the individual a sense of agency. If they have the 'mental fortitude' to self-actualise, they can then influence others to do the same. Billie echoes a similar sentiment. Whereas the majority of the eco-influencers approached mindfulness as a subject, Billie talks of how her Christian faith has hugely impacted her journey as an eco-influencer:

I could give you sermons on this stuff...but there's also aspects of being a Christian like "love your neighbour" is a big thing and trying to seek out the injustices in the world and realising that a lot of environmental issues: whether it's climate change, classic pollution or anything – it impacts people in an unjust way and often it impacts people who are least responsible the most and first and worst, so I guess there's a lot of caring for our neighbours and other people around the world. We need to start

thinking of environmental change, environmental care and environmental justice because actually there's like a call to be that responsibility to the world.

[Billie]

Billie talks of her connection to something larger than herself, through her Christian faith, as being the catalyst for taking accountability. There is a sense of selflessness in Billie's interview as she focuses on how environmental issues are affecting the people who she deems are responsible for climate injustice. Her faith is illustrated as invoking a sense of agency and self-responsibility 'to the world'. A mission which is noble, yet which comes with incredible pressure. All of the influencers collectively agreed with the notion that self-actualisation and self-transcending pursuits have both propelled them into eco-influence and assisted them in soothing some of the stresses and pressures of aggressive consumerism and social media. This indicated spiritual logic, which coexists with the dominant marketplace logic, is both catalytic and counteractive. It can reveal how individuals can both build and maintain their legitimacy as eco-influencers, as logics such as the spiritual can both catapult and preserve their efforts of navigating the technocultural world.

#### **6.4 Public Purification and Sacrifice**

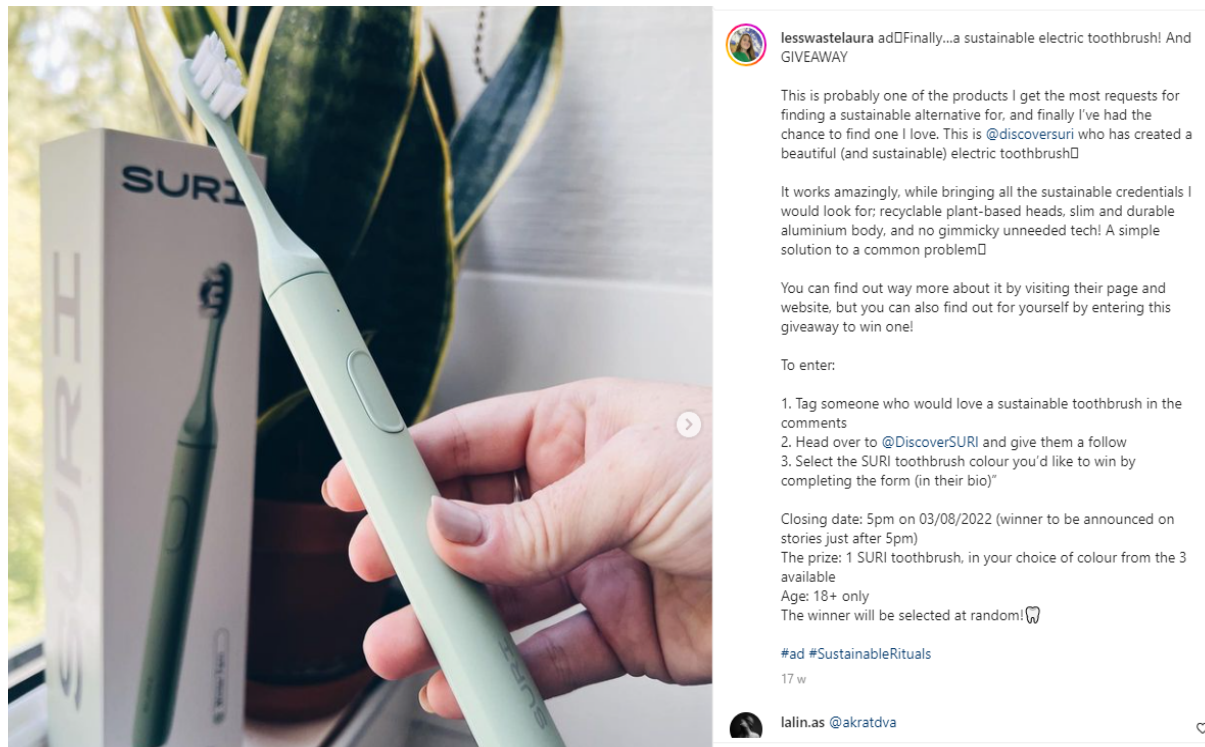
Eco-influencers publicly display their changing or resisting of consumption and quite often perform these sacrifices and eco-rituals on social media platforms. For influencers and Instagram users, the platform provides a means of showcasing this behaviour to an audience and allows them to share their commitments with others. Mundane sacrifices such as refraining from using plastic materials become important purification rituals. Eco-rituals can take place such as recycling or mending and reusing and opening an app, taking a picture or video and posting it to a shared network can elevate an individual's green capital (Horton, 2003). Darcy exemplifies the elevation of her own green capital in the following quote:

But yeah, I'm trying to go totally plastic free with all my bathroom stuff. That's the first step basically, I'm phasing everything out. I've got sustainable packaged toothpaste now and it's supposedly free of chemicals too like all-natural ingredients and little stuff like I used to use the cotton pads for my face but now I've got one you can put in the washing machine.

[Darcy]

Darcy, like several other eco-influencers, uses her social media account (as seen in the figure 5 below) to document this process which is unusual with the consideration that bathroom product consumption is a mundane and often a private topic.

**Figure 5:** Screenshot of Less Waste Laura’s Paid Partnership with Suri



**Source:** Less Waste Laura (2022)

There is considerable green capital to be gained in the field by sharing these processes, which in ways can be seen as a public purification. These mundane rituals are embedded behaviours within eco-influencer culture and publicly sharing them is both an identity building and ideologically charged action. Aesthetics are another consideration of how identity is built on these platforms also and can make the ordinary visually appealing and saturated with symbolic meaning (Leaver et al. 2020). Samantha below mocks some of the mundane rituals which take place on *Instagram*:

I’ve seen a lot of girls who sit round and drink their herbal teas and are like “I’ve just bought my bamboo toothbrush”. I mean...this is what I do.

[Samantha]

Perhaps mundane symbols have therefore become significant expressions of legitimacy in the field for eco-influencers. Extending the significance of seemingly mundane symbols, Billie posts many aesthetically pleasing photographs of herself holidaying in various parts of the UK in response to her making a pledge to never fly again. This also interlinks with her partnerships with *Visit Scotland*. Both her and Darcy talk about sacrificing travel:

I think within the sustainability community I think there's a split of people going "I love the world and that's why I do my activism so I am going to continue to travel and take 10 flights a year because that's how I renew my love for the world" and then you've got people who are like "I will never fly again" because it's a sacrifice. It's also a privilege thing, if you can take 10 flights a year like maybe check that and appreciate?

[Billie]

In agreement with Billie, Darcy notes the following:

So, a lot of people are going to be like "fuck it, I want to go on holiday" and then a lot of people are going to take time to actually think about stuff and have been outside way more, appreciated the simpler things and have realised you don't need as much. I think in that sense yeah, I feel optimistic but personally I don't know if change is going to happen quick enough. I think it will happen but there will be a lot of sacrifice.

[Darcy]

Billie highlights that having something to sacrifice in the first place, in this case: being able to fly internationally, is a privileged position to be in yet recognises that there are a variety of perspectives on why and how people do environmental activism. Her public declaration of this allows her to regain symbolic meaning in other ways, for example, by sharing stories of herself travelling in a campervan. Darcy also reflects on changes to travel will rely on 'a lot of sacrifice'. Travel seems to be a contentious topic between eco-influencers and is almost seen as the ultimate sacrifice. Figure 6 below is a screenshot of a story feature by Grace Beverley where she makes justification for her decision to travel.

**Figure 6:** Screenshot of Grace Beverley’s story about travel and sustainability



**Source:** Grace Beverley (2022)

The comment she has screenshotted is a response to criticism of her being both an eco-influencer and keen traveller. That Grace has defended herself and then posted the comment publicly shows how the legitimization of influencers is constantly in flux as backlash can occur and one must protect their identity by reminding their followers that they ‘make good decisions everyday’.



Most of the participants emphasised that it is the everyday, mundane sacrifices that make a difference. Below in figure 7 is influencer Lauren Singer who dwells on the ‘amazing positive impact’ of composting:

**Figure 7:** Screenshot of Lauren Singer talking about composting



Source: Trash is for Tossers (2020)

Like figure 7 above, these types of posts appeal to green logics as they document the influencer partaking in a mundane ritual. These rituals for many are done privately and conveniently, whereas eco-influencers flaunt these on their feeds, perhaps for symbolic and green capital. Isla further discusses mundane consumer items and how she unboxed them on her story:

I have been sent a few free things to try: there's a company called scrubber store and they sent me a deodorant to try and you know the tampon brand *Daye*? I was sent some of their stuff as well but to be fair they never even...there was no obligation for

anything. I sort of did an unboxing things on my story but these just said here's some stuff, message us and let us know what you think

[Isla]

'Unboxing' has become a social media phenomenon whereby individuals film their reactions to removing products from their packaging (Geysler, 2022). This ritual is popular amongst influencers and given that eco-influencers repeat this institutionalised practice with mundane items such as toiletries shows them adhering to dominant marketplace logics whilst also portraying alternative practice. Such behaviours seemingly appeal to the logics in both influencer and green activist field. The previous chapter revealed ambiguity surrounding the eco-influencer's self-definition and the word 'influencer'. This next section will again address this definition but focus more on the 'eco': does the eco-influencer view themselves as activist?

### **6.5 Passive Activism: A Middle Ground**

Stella describes how the identity of activist and influencer can both be accessed and how her output walks a tightrope of managing her identification with these identities. Excessive promotion of products would lead to her becoming an influencer, something which she does not consider herself:

I definitely consider myself a digital activist and erm, yeah I think it would be different if I started promoting things all the time and became an influencer but I don't really like the word.

That's honestly something I've struggled with as well because what you do online should be a supplement to what you do psychically – not something that replaces it. This is something I've struggled with because you sign a petition and like yeah it's great – I've signed this petition, but that's not all you should do yeah, it's just hard because I mean for me I don't have the time to dedicate to some organisations that I really admire so often online activism is called slacktivism because it's not really a lot of effort.

[Stella]

For Stella, what happens on social media should be an add-on to work done in the physical. She highlights that time prevents her from physical activism work and hints towards her sentiment that some of her online work is 'slacktivism' despite the effort she goes to, to create eco-content she makes accessible for a fee on her Patreon page (Glenn, 2015). Her

labelling of this could point towards her low self-esteem as an activist, perhaps effected by some of the paid partnerships she partakes in with eco-brands and identification with influencer culture despite her disagreement with it as a word. Stella's very careful treading of these two words reveals a hyper awareness of her fluctuating legitimacy in two worlds.

Isla here talks of the necessity of social media for any movement and that mobilisation requires social media:

I think it's necessary for everything now. I think if you need to find out something that's going on, you look on social media. If you want people to turn up to a campaign or turn up to a protest, you need to post about it. I don't think people consume their news in many other ways these days.

I think activist I would describe as actively doing something. So if you believe in something, I would call you an activist if you are actively doing something about it. If you're trying to continue to spread information, lobby for change or stop certain bad things happening. Influencer just means influencing – you're saying something, are people listening?

[Isla]

Isla further attempts to separate the two terms and labels influencing as simply speaking or spreading opinion, and activism with more targeted goals. That Isla and Stella can both have a similar output and disagree on their identification with activism shows a tension in definition despite both appealing to green logics. Samantha views both influencer and activist as not being mutually exclusive and sharing some similarities, whilst for Darcy, the boundaries for activism are quite low in that simply having awareness of environmental issues counts as action:

Yeah. I guess in a way you're trying to as an activist, you're trying to influence people, change something and I guess in the same way, that's kind of what an influencer is doing [...] How we like to categorise ourselves within that community is really interesting. Like, it almost feels like it doesn't matter what label you call yourself like, as long as you're doing something or making some kind of a difference like, that's fine.

[Samantha]

I think awareness in itself is action. I think awareness puts pressure on players who can change things but also you can spread the word.

[Darcy]

The findings detect that the eco-influencer presents both the perceived agency of an activist whilst their influencer pursuits reveal the ‘paradox of embedded agency’ as their agency is subordinate to the prevailing norms of the field of operation (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Both definitions are trying to change the marketplace, yet constrained by its logics of operation at the same time. Samantha further elaborates on influencer and activist as not being mutually exclusive terms:

There is that thing when I first started, I guess being...considering myself as an activist, whenever I tell people that all my friends are like, ‘whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Like, she's going off the rails. She's completely lost the plot’ [laughs]. You know, it's really interesting, I think people associate both influencer and activism as two different extremes because it almost feels like there can't be this kind of like middle ground. And like, I was talking to a lot of my friends about it who I would consider activist like, and they said I don't want to be considered an activist because that brings about kind of quite a lot violent connotations as well. I was just like, well what are you then if you're not an activist?

[Samantha]

Samantha finds difficulty in identifying with one of the two, activist or influencer, and feels that the two can coexist. Eco-influence is presented as a ‘middle ground’, almost an attempt to merge the two extremes despite incompatibilities of the two fields. Incompatible fields and their relevant logics have been shown to provide solutions and innovate fields (Cherrier et al. 2018; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). Therefore, this middle ground of eco-influence can act as a solution to ideological tensions as individuals can strategically leverage green logics and spiritual logics from the activist field whilst simultaneously appealing to marketplace logics with their pursuits as influencer. Samantha reveals some of the extreme connotations associated with the activist term. This is echoed in Miranda’s extract:

I don't necessarily want to be falling into the category, which is people like Extinction Rebellion and protest groups and I don't fall into their category because I'm an artist. So even though what I do spreads that message, I don't want to become...I suppose I'm a passive activist in a way because of what I do, but I do it for the education side of it more than I would want to be on some kind of protest, you know? Yeah, I am not extreme and I'm not going to go down that route, and I think you can be swayed by things in some ways. I think you've got to be quite...how do I say it, if I was to do that. People would take me out of context and I wouldn't be able to teach in schools then. Do you see what I mean?

[Miranda]

Miranda labels herself ‘a passive activist’ which suggests there is no immediacy in feeling that her views are heard. This approach also captures the idea of a middle ground as it reveals a gentler activism, much alike the term ‘eco-influencer’ which equally reveals a gentler approach to being an influencer. For Miranda, activism is an extreme way of expressing concern and something which is seen as unsafe to the legitimacy she maintains as her role as an educator. This could suggest that more passive forms of activism are favoured sometimes out of fear: fear of being taken ‘out of context’ and even losing opportunities. Tiffany continues this sentiment:

On the word activist, I do think of someone who's really full on and will go all out for a cause. For me, I take a very more passive approach to activism and I just slowly chip away with just like softer opinions rather than going hot out.

[Tiffany]

Tiffany similarly opts for a ‘passive approach’ to activism and sharing ‘softer’ opinions online. It is as if Tiffany acknowledges the gravity of the issue as she ‘chips away’ at it, but chooses a more nuanced option than drawing vigorous attention to herself. Both Miranda and Tiffany talk about activism as something dangerous and something which can negatively affect their legitimacy. There are evidently different understandings of activism emerging from the data as some proudly associate with the title whilst others leverage its power to a degree, opting for a more ‘passive activism’. Perhaps neither do very little to unsettle institutionalised practices as all participants do still identify with dominant marketplace logic through their accounts. However, there is also the consideration that the eco-influencer is made manifest as a ‘middle ground’ to the two seemingly incompatible fields. A ‘passive activist’ is as much a paradoxical contention as the eco-influencer.

### **6.5.1 Mobilising**

As this chapter has explored the environmental activist field and chartered green and spiritual logic journeys, this section outlines some of the ways the participants relate to other eco-influencers in the field. Community is the nucleus of movement activity and is required for collective identity formation and action coordination (Habermas, 1984). Isla talks of the importance of social media for her activism:

I think it's necessary for everything now. I think if you need to find out something that's going on, you look on social media. If you want people to turn up to a campaign or turn up to a protest, you need to post about it. I don't think people consume their news in many other ways these days.

[Isla]

Some of the activity listed here: campaigning and protesting, is far removed from the influencer activity of partaking in partnerships or creating content. The criteria for taking part in the study involved partaking in paid partnerships with eco-brands, yet Isla here talks of using social media to look up ways to protest which coexists with her influencer activity of marketing for eco brands online. Samantha discusses recruiting people into the community and accessibility:

So that's really the journey I'm going on, going from it's all about that one person, it's all about that one straw, it's all about that thing to looking much broader and being like, how do we bring people in to this community in a really helpful and accessible way instead of shunning them out.

[Samantha]

Samantha seeks way in which the movement is more accessible to those who are on the fringes and may be disengaged due to time or money constraints. Samantha's beliefs have changed over time and this is something she speaks about openly on her page. Her expression towards others has gone from one which perhaps judges outsiders for their consumption, to being 'intersectional' and realising that environmentalism is not accessible to all and depends on a range of socioeconomic factors.

The majority of influencers interviewed found solace with community on social media, including Rio, who finds validation through online interaction:

I enjoy the communication with my followers. There's a back and forth. They're a community to me. When I do something a bit quirky, I love it when people say it's cool because you think it's cool in your head. I mean I suppose that's validation but it's also a bit of fun and I need to tell myself that I do this for a bit of fun.

When someone has a success, always comment on it— show kindness. It's important to say "well done you" because they will be the first person to support you too.

[Rio]

There is a sentiment of reciprocity present in Rio's online interactions with her followers as she talks of kindness and support finding a way back to sender. The shared beliefs of what is cool are socially cohesive, in the sense that the recognition of shared norms and values allow people to like, comment on and follow each other. Although this reciprocity is 'kind', beneath this sentiment is a level of insincerity and almost a performance script of how to be noticed or 'liked' online. Social media can be an influential source of validation and engagement with posts is largely what builds up the legitimation of an influencer to prospective brands. Like Rio, Billie also values the reciprocity of the community and the mutual encouragement that can be found:

Yeah, it's been good like all these online people who you will probably never meet in your life, especially not in a pandemic – you know, it's great to have that little bubble to encourage you and encourage your work and equally do the same back. I spend lots of time with this community like engaging and learning so it's just a great little space. The friends you make are people who follow you and don't have a platform, just a personal account and also people who do, so it's great to have both of that and just community in the movement but also community to encourage one another, help one another navigate through that space so it's really great and even though it doesn't really exist anywhere – cyberspace – it's cool.

[Billie]

She finds educators and friends in both eco-influencers alike and people without a platform who are just interested and supportive of the content. She interestingly calls the community 'a bubble' and describes it as 'not really existing' which draws attention to how eco-influencers and others may interpret the institutional work that is carried out in 'cyberspace'. It is suggestive of the echo-chambers (further discussed in section 6.5.2) and could indicate a self-doubt to their legitimacy as somebody effecting true change and transforming the marketplace. Despite this, there are clear strong ties to others, something which Jane below is also in agreement with:

I think it does enhance connection I would say. I think it definitely, with like-minded people – yeah, I would say it definitely does.

Jane continues:

It just seems nice and everyone's being supportive and understanding, like if anybody said I bought this from a fast fashion website, I don't think anybody would jump

down their throats and say “why have you done that?” Because we understand these companies are still there and people may still need to use them.

[Jane]

Jane feels that there is an acceptance and understanding within the community of people who may still buy fast fashion or commit another eco faux pas, whereas Stella below feels that she is held accountable if she does something ‘wrong’:

I really like it because people have the same interests and stuff and similar accounts. I think...at first it was kind of difficult but now I really appreciate it. Especially since the BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement and what happened in the US and stuff – people are really calling out each other. If I make a mistake – if I do something wrong, I feel like that’s really good now but it’s just hard at first because I guess I wasn’t used to it. I thought of it as a personal critique in a way.

[Stella]

Stella finds that her behaviour is observed and corrected by others, something which highlights the way in which normative systems are being enforced by social actors on social media. She cites an activist cause as being the precedent she is held to which involves ‘calling each other out’. ‘Call out culture’ is defined as ‘a way of behaving in a society or group in which people are often criticised in public, for example on social media, for their words or actions, or asked to explain them’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). For Stella this is a positive exchange, whereas for Jane, understanding and giving leeway is a preferred outcome: ‘calling out’ can be mutually enabling and constraining. The next section considers the eco-influencer community as an echo chamber.

### **6.5.2 Echo chambers**

If actively seeking marketplace change, it is likely that individuals’ group and mobilise with other like-minded individuals and groups in order to feel validated and accepted (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Some of the eco-influencers interviewed expressed concern that their content was only being received by people who are already of these opinions, which negates their mission:

I think it’s hard because social media can almost become like a bubble where you’re only following people who are aligned with what you’re saying. It’s being fed back to you, your opinions a lot, so you almost become blinded by it and then when you step



out to the outside world you're like oh shit. It's like you can become closed off to that a bit and we've got a long way to go. I think we can see progress a lot more when it's the accounts we engage with, but when we step out and zoom out – it's just this one little section and there's a lot. It's definitely shifting but I think it's going to take a while for that to ripple out into the whole.

[Nadine]

Sometimes I wonder if it's an echo chamber or I wonder if it's more impactful than doing campaigning work with *Friends of The Earth* – I don't know the answer to that.

[Sally]

Nadine draws attention to how this pocket of culture may be an echo chamber for your own beliefs to be echoed back to you. She also points out that it will be a timely process for progress to become apparent and 'ripple out into the whole' – indicating that accessibility to this 'bubble' is hard to come by for people on the fringes. To suggest that eco-influencers become 'blinded' hints at a naivety within the community to how far their influence actually extends and the extent to which it is received by the people who need to hear it most. Stella echoes the frustration of feeling in an echo chamber:

Yeah, exactly and echo chambers that we're stuck in like obviously people who follow me agree with me and want to know more but I feel that like there's so many people that need to grasp this concept but they're not going to be following me.

[Stella]

This extract raises questions as to how individuals outside of eco-influence can be mobilised, as Stella feels it is wider society that needs to grasp this concept for the movement to be successful, otherwise it is just merely people on the same wavelength agreeing with each other. When asked what percentage of her engagement she feels are those not already on board with the movement, participant Jane reveals that she feels this could be approximately 10%:

I know a few people have said to me that I've inspired them to change their ways and stuff which is nice but I would say maybe 10% - I don't know if that's too much, I don't really know. I'd like to say more but realistically...

[Jane]

Jane's quote above suggests that her closest followers are indeed other eco-influencers or those who already resonate with an eco-lifestyle. It is however, fruitful that followers have thanked Jane for her content and been inspired to change their lifestyle.

## 6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, a counter-narrative to the previous chapter is presented in respect of a focus on the environmental intentions of the eco-influencer outside of appealing to dominant market logics. The first section revealed how growing up in nature and learning about nature was a catalyst for eco-influence. A green logic is adhered to as the participants reveal an emotional attachment to nature which increases their need to preserve and protect it. The next section revealed an adherence to a spiritual logic to which provided a similar catalyst and also acted as a counteracting force to disillusionment with modern society. The catalytic and counteractive nature of this logic both helped build and maintain legitimacy for my participants. The following section revealed how green and spiritual logics feature online as eco-influencers publicly display mundane rituals online as a way of publicly purifying themselves and elevating green capital. The section then navigates towards a consideration of the 'activist' definition, revealing an identification with a more 'passive activism'. I consider whether eco-influencers are seeking out a middle ground definition to reveal ideological tensions as 'passivist activist' is as much a paradox as 'eco-influencer'. I then continued in highlighting how the community can be enabling as it is 'supportive', 'kind', 'fun' and 'encouraging'. It is mutually explored as constraining as it can be 'bubble'-like and frustratingly, an echo chamber. The next chapter draws attention to some of the ways that digital technology effects the goals of the eco-influencer.

# Chapter 7: Findings 3: Performance and Surveillance

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter unravels the ways in which eco-influencers build and maintain legitimation within their relevant fields and reflects on the enabling and constraining nature of digital technology use (Darmondy and Zwick, 2019; Thompson and Patterson, 2022). The first section ‘performing your greenness’ pays attention to performance and offers understanding of further algorithmic logics and how eco-influencers unconsciously appeal to this for legitimation. This then leads onto the emergent theme of dissonance and presents data where influencers talk of presenting an aspirational self-online rather than an accurate reflection of their actual lived reality; their awareness and fulfilment of this lived reality is facilitated by a logic of self-surveillance. Before concluding, the final section explores the theme of surveillance further revealing how it is both constraining and enabling to the eco-influencer’s pursuits.

## 7.2 ‘Performing your greenness’

You do become someone else in a way. Even if you try not to, I think it’s almost impossible because you’ve got a camera in front of you and that automatically changes your behaviour, right?

[Samantha]

As an eco-influencer, Samantha’s quote offers an accurate and pithy description of how human behaviour is altered by digital technology. It poses questions as to whether it is the technology itself that alters our behaviour or our perception of who is observing the footage. In the case of the influencer, their thousands of followers assist in curation as engagement prompts the flow of content and so the camera itself becomes symbolic of the watchful eye of fellow followers. As Samantha puts it, avoiding this alteration is ‘impossible’, something Abidin (2018) agrees with when they say ‘all self-presentation in digital and physical spaces is curated and controlled’ (p.1). Technology can offer tools for enhancement and exaggeration of these performative curations. This is ‘visibility labour’: the arduous work that goes into content creation on Instagram, which is posited by Abidin (2016) as being ‘the curation of a self-presentation as to be noticeable and positively prominent amongst prospective

employers' (p.90). Another eco-influencer, Jane sets the scene of what is going on backstage of this curation:

It has become my weekend chore now to do them [photos] for the week. I enjoy it but I'm just like [...] yeah ok I have to get my photos done or get all dressed up and everything and do my hair. I have to be in the right mood. You can tell in my pictures when I'm not in the right mood when the smile is not there [laughs].

[Jane]

Jane depicts the laborious task of creating content for an audience whom she perceives to anticipate her every move, describing it as a "chore" as she gives the run-through of her schedule of doing her hair and makeup. Describing content creation as a chore reinforces the idea that this content is a necessity and an act of duty, a theme previously outlined in chapter 5. Further, Jane's curation of content resonates with Goffmanesque ideas of impression management and the idea of front stage and backstage performances to which Jane relates to the mood of the dressing room Goffman (1959). This work is commonly cited in social media research as performance, and in this context, is intimately tied to authenticity (Murthy, 2012: Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2017; Smith et al. 2021). In using institutional theory, this analysis is reflexive of how the participant's behaviours are enabled and constrained by field level logics. The logic of performance is introduced here as being exaggerated by digital technology. How performance is an enjoyable 'chore' reveals the enabling and constraining nature of influence as one of the many paradoxes that technological use inhibits (Darmondy and Zwick, 2019; Thompson and Patterson, 2022).

Performance is generally a contested subject as it is debated whether or not one should reveal intimate details about themselves to a social media audience or whether this is simply 'too much' (Schau and Gilly, 2003). It is questioned whether an audience would prefer to see Jane's real mood or whether Instagram audiences have become conditioned to expect to see the highlights of people's lives. Samantha struggles with this, as she reveals in the following extract:

I'm really aware, I don't know whether that's because of my theatre background or whatever, but social media is very performative and people show you parts of their life or perform parts of their life for you. You don't necessarily see a lot of it and I'm

not saying that we should see it because that would just be too much. But yeah, that's something I kind of struggle with.

Samantha continues:

It's really hard because I worry that within the Instagram community you're performing your greenness, you're performing that eco-ness and I worry that there is some people for who it might be a bit too much. I worry that I do that – I'm giving across this persona that I'm this perfect eco-person and I'm really not and so for me I make it my priority that I've done posts that been like that vibe – that I go on my stories and I'm like, "this is me and this is what I'm doing" so people see I'm less perfect or less of an expert. I think as soon as you get followers, I think people assume you're an expert on everything or on your eco lifestyle.

[Samantha]

Samantha acknowledges her awareness of digital space as comparative to performance witnessed in her days of performing at theatres which hints that influencer culture is an invitation to those with natural stage presence and a confidence in acting roles. Samantha worries about the prevalence of green performance in the community, suspecting that it is not only herself that exaggerates an eco-lifestyle for green capital and legitimization. This seems to be done for validation in a culture which, despite its friendly ethos, encourages competition and hierarchy to enhance prospective employment ventures, or social capital (Abidin, 2016). There is ambiguity when Samantha talks about this subject, as if she cannot decide whether her performing is inevitable as her intentions may be swayed by the dominant logics of the field. Samantha expands further and expresses her worry that the Instagram platform pushes an in-genuine persona of eco-perfection. Appealing to a green logic legitimates the desire of the influencer to share and trigger change in others, whilst simultaneously allowing public signalling which attains green capital. Although this green logic assists in visibility, both Jane and Samantha face an internal struggle with respect to showing how public legitimacy may be discrepant with how one views themselves.

The confusion over whether to disclose intimate details is echoed further in Rio's interview:

I sometimes be a bit more positive than I've been feeling because who wants to air their dirty washing online? If I'm feeling crap, I don't need to be like "hi guys I'm feeling crap". What's the point in bringing down the mood of everyone's feed?

[Rio]

There seems to be a perceived gravitational pull when it comes to the influence that influencers believe they have, as if revealing bad moods leaks out into the collective. Rio chooses not to make her problems or struggles public by “airing out her dirty washing” and feels if she was to do that, her honesty would negatively influence those who follow her. Green logic here appears to omit the personal when it’s bad but allows the personal when it is good and therefore, this shows hyper-awareness of the audience; anticipating moods and feedback. The oscillating with green logic can be therefore be argued to appeal to an algorithmic logic as the behaviour of omitting and performing certain green behaviours is resonant of an algorithm itself. The algorithmic logic is presented here as being selective and recursive as it amplifies existing trends to reproduce the field (Chaney and Slimane, 2019). Although Rio perceives her concealment as something which will benefit her followers, disclosure of personal details and emotions can be viewed as a valuable commodity. As Patterson & Ashman (2020) observe, the success of influencers relies on high levels of self-disclosure. Despite this, social media is more showcase than an accurate narrative and is notorious for leaving out the scars, lumps and bumps of reality.

The alignment of both online and offline selves is further underscored by Adelaide who adds:

This is the general view I have of them [influencers], maybe a bit like, deceptive and even though they’re influencers and presenting this persona of like being your friend, and loving like when they’re like “love you all” to their followers who they don’t even know. Erm...there’s like a feigned closeness to their followers and it’s meant to be authentic and it’s not. I don’t get how they can love them.

[Adelaide]

Adelaide’s extract depicts a suspicion to emotions on the platform which she calls a ‘feigned closeness’. Adelaide expresses her opinion that many influencers in the field are concealing their true nature and finds messages of positivity, or perhaps loving remarks, insincere and forced. This forcing can be viewed as attempts to gain consumer acceptance and contribute to an eco-influencer’s overall legitimacy as is the same with mainstream brand-consumer relationships, trust and loyalty ‘encourages affective connection based on authenticity and sincerity’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 37).

Contributions to legitimacy can also be acquired in using props on social media and self-managing in a bid to leverage green capital:

Kind of when I've grabbed a [vegan] burger or something like that, I haven't exactly jumped to my phone to be like...I'm going to put this on, but if I'm having a honey mango...[laughs].

[Nadine]

Nadine's articulation of the honey mango making the cut as a prop on her social media profile, whilst the vegan burger is omitted, reveals how she curates her digital image according to green capital (Horton, 2003). Green logic becomes an investment in social relationships with expected acquisition of non-tangible capital (Gandini, 2015). Nadine's profile is one which is associated with health and wellbeing as well as part of her eco-friendly lifestyle and centres around her sustainable business which works with raw, plant-based ingredients, and her herbalism studies. This description alone reveals why a honey mango holds prestige over a greasy, gluten unfriendly processed burger as certain behaviours can be omitted on social media whilst others are made visible, and even exaggerated, to build or maintain capital and subsequently, appeal to the norms of the field. The decision to add or omit props is constantly reshuffled as per the green capital of the online community (Ulusoy and Firat, 2018). Subsequently, as Nadine's example reveals, in order to gain or maintain legitimacy in the eco-influencer community the algorithmic logic looks like an influencer reading and interpreting the expectations of their audience. A vegan burger would notably integrate well with certain vegan groups of eco-influencers, whereas in the case of Nadine, it was omitted and food items such as honey mangos are showcased, which are better received by her health-conscious audience. When Nadine was pressed on why certain food items and rituals make the cut over others, she shared:

A lot of the time I think my life is devoted to this and I do invest in a lot of things and I think it's not like I'm posting this one image online and then going out and being this completely other person, partying or something – it's not like this. It's definitely aligned but I can see moments where I have done that.

[Nadine]

Nadine finds devotion and alignment through contesting institutionalised consumption practices, yet she is reflexive in that she sees there have been times where her output has not been simultaneous with her actual physical reality. Therefore, practicing green logics operate as a means of maintaining normative legitimacy. Digital platforms provide a means of exaggerating our adherence to institutionalised norms and the omission of props and practices shows how as well as producing content, the eco-influencer is also processing data simultaneously through feedback loops to make predicted calculations based on self-monitored trends (Cotter, 2018; Bishop, 2021; Kozinets, 2022). Algorithms are amplifiers of existing normative systems and function in a way which prioritises profit over ethical decision making (Kozinets, 2022). The algorithmic logic functions in this way as it reproduces the content of the field through the relative behaviours of the influencers. However, it is understood as not wholly constraining. In the same way actors can manipulate algorithms to ‘go viral’ with an alternative message (Mitchell, 2020), influencers too can leverage this logic in an attempt to ignite change within the field. Samantha speaks of this:

If I post stuff that's maybe more information based or educational, it like drops, 100 percent drops, it's not eye catching. I think Instagram is very much eye catching, it's got to look pretty. It's got to be pretty. It's got to be interesting. I think as soon as you put words to something, everyone's just like, no, that's not what I'm here for. It's just fair enough. You know, like a lot of people scroll Instagram just to kind of forget about everything, they don't want to be bombarded with some activists. So yeah, I try to show my face on videos and like reels and stuff. I think Instagram is very much pushing away from photos towards video.

[Samantha]

Samantha talks of acting tactfully so that she has increased visibility on the platform. She understands that her more activist, educational posts gain less traction and so she peppers her message with visual content which include her face. Samantha proclaims agency in her understanding of the algorithmic constraints, yet is funnelling her message in more creative ways. Appealing to an algorithmic logic can mean that influencers are always looking out for symbolic gestures which are popular in the field. The next section observes some of the influencer’s aspirations and how they manage the dissonance between this and their physical, current self-while managing an online account.



### 7.2.1 Dissonance: ‘The aspirational self’

As a continuation of the theme of performance, dissonance is explored as a theme. Dissonance is the outcome of an incongruity in selfhood – a tension which has been confirmed by eco-influencers themselves. In spite of her previous claim that she finds influencers deceptive, Adelaide reveals the contradictory nature of her physical self:

I wouldn't post a picture of me eating fish on my social media. I would only ever post a picture of me eating vegetarian food so I would try and keep up and show the idea of my aspirational self. My offline self makes loads of contradictory decisions and conflicts with that sort of digital self.

[Adelaide]

The idea of only showing an ‘aspirational self’ hinges on the idea that what is posted on social media is in some ways prophetic. In this sense, Adelaide uses social media as a divinatory tool – posting what she wishes to become: an idealised self with is congruent with institutionalised norms. Adelaide further elaborated that their end goal is to be vegan and currently labels themselves as a vegetarian (although pescatarian) because they like “having that view of themselves”. This example highlights how the legitimised practice of veganism sways the individual’s online behaviour and, with the ‘aspirational self’ in mind, the individual does not wish to present their true way of eating to their following. This sentiment is echoed by Tiffany who also conceals their non-vegan eating habits from the eco-community:

I put my identity around being vegan and I thought if I was to post anything that shows otherwise – I would get a lot of backlash so that was something I didn't talk about for quite some time.

[Tiffany]

It is proposed that the dissonance that this output creates is fuel for individuals to change their lived behaviour to align with their digital self. In Tiffany’s case, she reveals how she battled with this challenge, despite recognising that her body was deficient in certain vitamins to which she thought a non-vegan diet would be beneficial. Instagram feeds act as a sort of digital archive and in this case, can create tension in identity when a person’s behaviours change and no longer resonate with earlier, archived content. Tiffany was of the belief that

her 5k held very strong beliefs about animal consumption and a discrepancy between her digital self and physical self-provided a safe haven away from online backlash which would negatively affect her legitimacy as both an influencer and passive activist. In theory, this may make it more likely for individuals to stick with the behaviours of their ‘aspirational self’ to prevent dissonance. Linking to the idea of the prophecy, this may show a strong indication that those with large followings will commit more successfully to their eco-consumption goals. In the context of an eco lifestyle movement, and if followed through, this can be seen as a positive driving force as the practices and rituals that are first performed and then solidified are environmentally favourable acts. Paradoxically, green and algorithmic logics are shown to marginally disrupt market logics in this way and perhaps small ruptures can have a considerable effect (Kozinets and Jenkins, 2021). Although put forth as a consideration which may contribute positively to an environmental movement, there are ethical considerations of how this pressure can make an individual feel and although this consumption behaviour can lead to goal attainment, it is impacted by a pressure relating to constant surveillance and a hyper-awareness of who is watching. I refer to a self-surveillance logic, which can be thought of as reinforcing anticipatory and disciplinary behaviour on social media, to describe this phenomenon (Cotter, 2019; Darmondy and Zwick, 2020).

Stella below reveals more about digital personas and discusses the difficulty of consistency on social media and how there is mental discomfort in navigating two conflicting routes of behaviour at the same time

I try to be consistent but yeah, I’ve definitely felt that cognitive dissonance in a way. I say one thing and then for different reasons I don’t really act that way. It’s really bad because I try to be a consistent person and live by my values but it’s hard sometimes and lots of things get in the way, so yeah, it’s important to balance our wellbeing with being environmentally friendly.

[Stella]

Stella’s jump in conversation to wellbeing suggests that her eco-behaviours and affirmations online put pressure on her physical self to conform to appropriate norms. In agreement with other interviewed eco-influencers, the twists and turns of life are usually omitted from eco-influencer posts and in agreement with Stella, ‘lots of things’ get in the way of being eco-friendly. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic is one example of unexpected single-use

plastic use. Stella already uses a critical tone to describe her lack of consistency and labels this 'bad' behaviour, hinting that her wellbeing is already impacted by discrepant behaviour despite her strong values.

Lucy also admits to posting content which does not mirror her lived reality. She explains that once her following started increasing, she felt the pressure of the numbers and began posting and boasting eco-tips that she herself had not yet mastered, again, indicating the presence of adherence to a logic of self-surveillance. Part of this revelation gives the impression that this behaviour is a result of competing with others:

So it is quite intimidating seeing others progress, and I think I mentioned it as well online like it's difficult to see their achievements because then it makes you always feel not as relevant, or like as good, like you still feel like you're in that like learning and growing phase...you haven't quite got it all sorted.

[Lucy]

Lucy admitted that she did not feel great about this intimidation and mimicking of other eco-influencer's behaviour. To deal with the dissonance she felt, she took down the post, 'putting up something similar but more transparent' but also expresses that her goals are set on becoming the self that she deleted. It is interesting that participants feel their accounts grow and start in organic fashion and quickly become preoccupied by their growth in followers, echoing data fetishist critiques of social media as the self becomes increasingly worthy when quantified (Sharon & Zandbergen, 2017). Perhaps this is something of a journey to legitimation and ego shedding, as Nadine with 20k followers tells:

I think I felt that I needed to be a certain way on social media and maybe put like pictures out of me kind of looking a certain way or behaving a certain way – just to get engagement really. Suppose it was just like an ego thing because now I'm a lot more like "it's received however it's received."

[Nadine]

Only a longitudinal analysis would reveal whether all eco-influencers forgo this journey, yet Nadine's articulation reveals that once engagement was received, she could afford to let go of some of her more egoic tendencies of following others and allow her behaviour to be more aligned with who she believes she is.

Despite the majority of participants admitting to a feeling of dissonance, Jane feels as if social media has encouraged her digital self and physical self to collide in a beneficial way:

I think I'm pretty much the same. I'm doing a few more videos like talking on stories and stuff like before it was more like pictures and stuff and I'd never talk on there. I think the more I've started talking on there, the more it's felt like the real me. You can't hide much when you're talking on camera.

[Jane]

Jane's suggestion that the more something is done online, the more it is embedded into the person's psyche is a suggestion in alignment with the aforementioned idea of prophecy. It also contrasts with Samantha's earlier proclamation that the camera 'automatically changes behaviour' and Jane's proclamation that depict mood altering and changing of appearance for her social media content. Perhaps in doing this, her physical behaviour has changed and become more consistent with norms of the field. Isla echoes this sentiment:

Yes, you feel a bit like a fraud, like you're not practicing what you preach – 100%. But actually, it does make you more eco-friendly because you're constantly, you know, promoting eco-friendly products.

[Isla]

The above gives another example of the influencer influencing themselves – becoming more 'eco-friendly' in the physical through the process of receiving, using and reviewing eco-friendly products for brands and thus, this indicates another instance of fulfilled prophecy. Isla follows a similar pattern of behaviour to Jane, in that her perhaps once fraudulent showcasing of eco behaviour and props that she did perhaps not use, has become who she believes she now is. This is what I coin 'virtual osmosis' as behaving in character (for the purpose of gaining engagement), results in permanent character changes. The eco-influencer is putting their aspirational self forward, quite often before what they would recognise as being their physical self. This can be actualised through acting in accordance to a green logic and algorithmic logic as the eco-influencer scans the field for practices laden with green capital to aspire to, live out digitally and eventually self-actualise. This process of 'virtual osmosis' is pressurised by their adherence to a self-surveillance logic whereby eco-influencers feel the speculative pressure of their followers, and they are therefore compelled

to follow through or mend any discrepancies. This virtual osmosis effect is further underscored by Tiffany below:

I post things that I've heard about and I'll talk about like this is something I'm working towards but I haven't done it yet.

[Tiffany]

Tiffany also admits to posting things she has heard about and has not yet actualised. Perhaps, it may not always be so wise to put an aspirational self forward in digital space, for example, labelling yourself with a term that is unattainable. As Billie explains:

I actually don't like the word zero-waste. It's too perfectionist, too much pressure, it's also impossible. I don't know anyone who actually produces zero waste.

[Billie]

Billie's quote above shows how discourse holds power over individuals. Billie stopped using the term 'zero-waste' and omitted it from her content as she felt that it creates a movement led by pressure and which sets impossible, idealistic and unachievable goals. With a similar focus on what is signified, Billie continues and stresses she wishes to 'reclaim' the negative connotations of the word influencer by calling herself an 'eco-influencer': 'it's mostly about reclaiming it, putting an extra word in so people go "well what do you mean by that?". Again, it is suggested that public affirmations in digital space navigate an individual's behaviour in the physical and adds to the pressure that they feel. This could mean that it boosts environmentally favourable behaviour, but has an undesirable effect on mental health. Billie echoes this sentiment later on in the interview when she says:

I'm scared of being called a hypocrite like every day of my life, so part of me is like if I'm going to talk about this stuff, and talk to my MP about it, or I'm going to talk to my followers about it, or get change from up above, then I do to an extent need to live it out. I do need to say well I'm playing my part, you play your part and let's meet that.

[Billie]

Billie reveals her fear of being called out for her discrepant behaviour, again revealing how a self-surveillance logic operates and disciplines the eco-influencer into alignment of digital and physical selves.

It becomes evident then, that an influencer's digital self-presentation can become actualised through their unconscious adherence to logics made possible by technology. Although verbal commitments create pressure in the physical world, the digital world allows real time surveillance of a plethora of content which is archived as a digital feed. The extended self, the self which leaves 'virtually limitless digital traces' (Belk, 2013), and as witnessed in these interviews, is subject to omnipresent 'panoptic' viewing. This section has revealed how these technocratic logics: performance, algorithmic and self-surveillant, present themselves as constraining and enabling. Paradoxically, they can apply pressure yet assist in self-actualisation. The next section shows further evidence of a self-surveillant logic.

### **7.3 Hyper awareness: who is watching?**

The previous section showcased some of the journeys which eco-influencers encounter and how dissonance and discrepancies can motivate the individual to become their idealised self through a process of self-surveillance. This section explores the reasons why, and asks, who is watching? Billie for instance, speaks of having to write a disclaimer before posting:

It's silly because I mean I had to write a disclaimer on one of my posts once when I posted a picture of me with a disposable coffee cup and I was like, in what world would someone have to do that "oh by the way I've forgot my cup so I've got to use a disposable one"—that's bonkers that I had to do that...

[Billie]

Writing a disclaimer ultimately means a refusal to take blame or criticism and, in this case, for an eco-influencer with over 50k followers, it acts as armour, defending them from attack of those who take exception to behaviour. If the eco-influencer does not filter or omit certain parts of themselves, then it seems a reason is needed for these alternative, uncouth parts of reality to be shared. The findings suggest that these eco-influencers need to be ahead of their own game and ensure that all potential slip ups are covered. Writing a disclaimer about a green faux-pas shows how the eco-influencer regulates themselves as a way to conform to societal norms. If eco-influencers are their own businesses, they are also their own crisis management team and ultimately, a lack of foresight can lead to loss of legitimacy. Nadine below shares how being an eco-influencer comes with increased responsibility:

I think it is a responsibility because there are people who are influenced – I don't really like that word influencer – but there are people who are influenced by what you say and do...you've got to be aware of that and I think. I've always been very open and honest with what I've put out there and what has been my journey. You can actually see that when you look back at the posts of that kind of unfolding through first lockdown when I started making all my products myself and going through my skincare and thinking what's in this product. I think that uncovering has been documented as it's happened, so I think people almost think they've been on that journey with me. But I think the content that I put out now, compared to back then, you can see the transformation and it shows that the transformation can happen and it's all just a path and a journey.

[Nadine]

Nadine reveals that she feels her followers are on a similar journey with her and she has to be consciously aware about what she says on the platform. She feels she is truthful and honest, despite her talking about how she omits parts of her life in section 7.2. Samantha below shows a similar sentiment in how she feels her followers rely on her content:

To me, it's the sense of feeling that people are relying on my content, like relying on what I'm posting. And that in itself is quite a narcissistic thing to say, because actually, right, they're not. They don't care, but it doesn't matter.

Samantha continues:

You're constantly being like oh god, I need to research this – I need to plan out these posts – I need to reply to these people who have messaged me...all kinds of stuff I feel like it's an important thing I should be doing, which kind of sounds very self-important.

[Samantha]

Samantha's extract reveals an uncertainty as to whether people are watching or not. Samantha, as well as many others collectively agree on the insurmountable pressure of the eco performance and how people assume her expertise and absolute greenness. Whereas here, Samantha expresses that same pressure, a reliance on her, whilst also dismissing this as being 'self-important'. This raises questions as to where exactly the pressure comes from that is perceived by influencers - is the surveillance real or imagined, or both? The large followings of influencers and that they are approached by brands proves that there is an audience, yet the

pantopic nature of Instagram means that who is watching remains unknown. In this way, the logic of surveillance is felt but seldom seen, ubiquitous and free flowing (Bauman and Lyon, 2012). This uncertainty seemingly increases pressure to self-censor and alter behaviour at the mere thought of displeasing imaginary or real audiences (Das and Kramer, 2013; Marder et al. 2016).

Sharon below reveals a similar pressure in committing to ‘meatless Monday’ posts:

I got to the point where I was like ‘okay I have to do this every Monday, I’m committed to my community!’ But you get to a point where...actually the game changer was I spoke to someone and he said you know you could probably categorise your blog as a meatless Monday blog and I was just like “oh no I don’t want that!” because I was putting so much pressure on myself each week to get out a meatless Monday post and my other content each week.

[Sharon]

Meatless Monday is a campaign to not eat meat on Mondays, an initiative which promotes a healthy lifestyle and a healthy planet (*Monday Campaigns*, 2023). Sharon reveals how her commitment to the community made her more accountable, showing how surveillance logics can and do motivate eco-consumption practices. She too felt imaginary ‘pressure’ and cringed when a follower noticed her tenacious posting on the campaign. This suggests that Sharon is ever-calculating how she is received, resonant of the ‘always on’ marketing that the digital world makes possible (Manovich, 2018). Similarly, Tiffany discusses Instagram as keeping her accountable:

It’s like a little accountability platform – they hold you accountable to stick to something you’ve said [...] it keeps you on a path I think. It stops you making up excuses I find because if I’ve said I’m doing something, I don’t want to be called out”.

[Tiffany]

Tiffany reveals how her account keeps her ‘on a path’ as the fear of being ‘called out’ has a disciplinary effect on her behaviour (Cotter 2019). Again, this reveals the paradoxical nature of some of the logics supported by technology. The logic of self-surveillance is obviously constraining to the individual due the pressure it applies, yet it assists in supporting the eco-influencer’s consumption goals



## **7.4 Conclusion**

This chapter draws attention to some of the ways that digital technology effects the goals of the eco-influencer. Green and algorithmic logics which are embedded within the Instagram field allow the eco-influencer to highlight or omit certain behaviours in accordance to green capital (Horton, 2003), and appealing to these logics ultimately maintains the influencers legitimacy. Appeals to an algorithmic logic involves influencers reading and interpreting the expectations of their audience which then can lead to a reproduction of content within the field. This logic can also be leveraged more strategically because eco-influencers tactfully increase the visibility of their messages by interweaving their more activist, educational posts with video/reel content which includes their face, as such posts can gain higher traction. The next chapter offers discussion on the contributions of this thesis and proposes innovatory frameworks. I then conclude with consideration of the theoretical and practical implications; limitations, and directions for future research.

# Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion

## 8.1 Introduction

In this section, the findings in regards to the research questions of this body of work are synthesised together. The research questions are revisited in this chapter and the key contributions of thesis are provided using an institutional lens (Scott, 2001). The chapter begins by discussing the finding of eco-influence as a paradoxical ‘middle ground’ before introducing the first key finding which presents how eco-influencers leverage paradoxical logics (Cherrier et al. 2019). For contribution one, I use *The Yin Yang of Paradoxical Logics* to support the finding that multiple, dualistic logics can be unifying and counterbalancing. I then discuss this in relation to the following dialectical tensions: consumerism/activism, individualism/collectivism, spiritual/mechanical and nature/technology. A second contribution speaks to the body of literature on digital technology and surveillance as I present *The Surveillance Paradox* and outline the process of *The Digital Discipline Model*. The third contribution is a methodological contribution and sees the introduction of ‘chronological contemplation’. The chapter then progresses to discuss how this thesis is of value to policy makers and practitioners. Before concluding this chapter, the limitations of the study and potential future research directions are considered.

## 8.2 Research Purpose

My overall objective in writing this thesis was to further understanding of eco-influence and how paradox operates in this field. I was also motivated by an overarching aim to deepen understanding of how technocultural logics affect an eco-influencer’s goals of marketplace change. In this thesis I introduce the eco-influencer as a paradoxical field-level innovation. Despite previous hypothesising around ‘greenfluencers’ (Kapoor et al. 2022), this thesis introduces this phenomenon to the CCT research program as I qualitatively investigate the novel ways eco-influencers attempt to reform the structures of the marketplace (Arnould and Thompson, 2015). Using institutional theory to investigate this phenomenon allowed a viewing of influencer culture and environmental activism as two ‘fields’, meaning that interactions which take place within these social arenas use a common meaning system for communication (Scott, 1994). More specifically, fields can be thought of as places of

structure which operate on the exchange of certain types of capital (Swartz, 2019). These fields were investigated in this thesis by analysing their institutional logics: ‘the frames of reference which allow actors to make sense of their choices (Thornton et al. 2012, p.2). In using institutional analyses, I was able to view eco-influence through a lens which investigates their ‘embedded behaviour’ which accounts for the continuity and constraint of dominant structures, yet does not shy away from agentic behaviour which can create, maintain and transform institutional fields (Scott, 2001; Askegard and Linnet, 2011). Institutional logics have a profound impact on how we perceive and judge legitimacy. Indeed, Bitekine & Song (2022) discuss how research which studies the interaction of legitimacy and institutional logics is absent in the current literature, thus highlighting the importance of the findings of this research. Not only is the relationship between legitimacy and logics explored but also logic plurality. Gümüşay et al. (2020) elaborate that we must ‘become aware of institutional logic plurality to better capture how climate change is understood and can be tackled’ (p.1). To address gaps in the literature and address the knowledge discrepancy in this under researched field, this thesis addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1. How do influencers build and maintain legitimacy in paradoxical fields?*

*RQ2. How does an eco-influencer’s use of digital technology affect marketplace logics?*

These research questions were addressed via a netnographic enquiry where I immersed myself within the eco-influencer field by creating a research account on Instagram. I subsequently collected 17 semi-structured interviews from eco-influencers to capture an understanding of consumption activity and technocultural meanings related to eco-influence (Arnould and Thompson, 2018; Kozinets, 2019). To analyse the data, the abductive method of hermeneutical analysis was utilised to reach a holistic understanding of the phenomena (Paterson and Higgs, 2005; Arnold and Fischer, 1994). The next section discusses eco-influence as a paradoxical ‘middle ground’.

### **8.3 Eco-Influence: A Paradoxical ‘Middle Ground’**

The eco-influencer is conceptualised in this study as providing a ‘middle ground’. The review of the literature and field revealed an ideological tension which exists with this conception as

eco-influencers are both, at once, attempting resistance to the marketplace whilst partaking in it. I coin the term 'eco-influencer' to depict those with entrepreneurial, consumerist endeavours who are at the same time realising theirs and others consumption is an issue of concern. The eco-influencer is concerned with both environmental activism and consumerism to which they both strategically and unconsciously reject and accept in various forms. They are, in relation to Scaraboto & Fischer's (2013) work, both a 'resistant rebel' and a 'comfortable collaborator' in relation to marketplace change. Although quantitative studies exist on 'greenfluencers' (Pittman and Abell, 2021; Kapoor et al. 2022), this thesis is the first to address this context qualitatively and contribute to understanding it from a CCT perspective. This thesis contributes to the literature by considering this phenomenon as being a case of institutional entrepreneurship as the eco-influencers resonate as: 'actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones' (Garud, 2004, p 657).

Investigating this context has revealed many plural institutional logics at play which are not only plural, perhaps due to the increasing liquidity and flexibility of markets as a result of digital contexts (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), but are also paradoxical in the sense there are tensions between them which can cause concern for the actor's legitimacy (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015). The findings reveal tensions in how the participants defined their craft and some expressions of this, such as 'being instagrammers without being instagrammers' and 'passive activists', highlight logical tensions and identity conflicts (Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019). Further, the findings show that activist and influencer are not mutually exclusive and eco-influence is a carrier of plural, paradoxical logics belonging to these dual fields (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019; Cherrier et al. 2018; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). Eco-influence is both a more 'passive' activism and a more 'active' form of influence. The next section introduces how the participants leveraged logics from paradoxical fields to build and maintain their legitimacy as influential figures on social media.

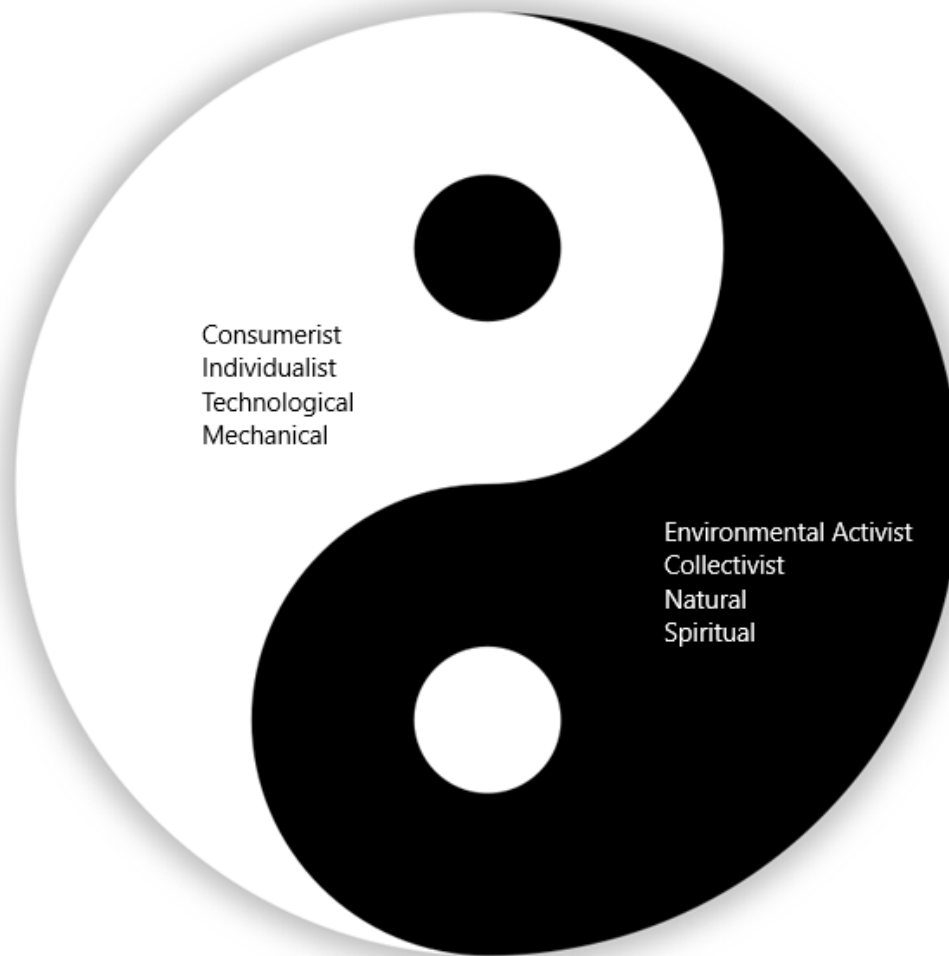
#### **8.4 Key Finding: Leveraging Paradoxical Logics**

A key finding which directly answers RQ2 is how eco-influencers leverage logics from paradoxical fields to which these logics then coexist. These plural logics are not only tense

and paradoxical but on the surface level, present an apparent dualism. For example, the eco-influencer is made manifest by the logics of both nature and technology which are juxtaposed in their principles. Such dualisms are also apparent within the ontology of the eco-influencers in the study as an actor's spirituality meets a mechanical logic on social media with its smart algorithms. These counterintuitive logics present an array of tensions which I argue serve as triggers for field level change and evolution (Cherrier et al. 2018). The findings demonstrate that eco-influencers balance these dualisms and find a 'middle ground' which serves the continuation of their legitimacy. Paradoxical institutional logics have been previously explored in a study which investigates identity conflict for consumers of women's shapewear (Zanette & Scaraboto, 2019), yet no study has connected this identity conflict with legitimacy as an institutional entrepreneur.

In answering the research question of how eco-influencers build and maintain legitimacy, the two ways which presented themselves from the analysis are: (1) by *leveraging paradoxical logics* in ways which are complementary to their institutional work and, (2) *resisting the seduction of excess or risk of deficiency*. These findings pivot on the work of Scaraboto & Fischer (2013) who found that consumers will leverage powerful actors and logics which help support their cause, thus their study reveals 'the leveraging of logics adjacent to the field that lend support to consumers' longings within it' (p. 1250). Their study however does not investigate a context where not only adjacent logics are leveraged but paradoxical ones. Within the field-level paradox of the eco-influencer are many plural and dualistic sub logics which are displayed below in figure 8: *The yin-yang of paradoxical logics*. The eco-influencer's maintenance of legitimacy depends on a careful balance of these logics, to which they can be presented as complimentary opposites. In the next section I introduce *The Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics* and consider how paradoxical dualisms can be viewed as unifying and counterbalancing.

## 8.5 The Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics



**Figure 8.** The Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics

Source: Author

The figure 8 consists of a yin-yang symbol taken from ancient Taoist philosophy and which embraces paradox (Mattson and & Tidström, 2015). The yin-yang symbol describes a balance between two opposite forces which are seen as ‘interconnected and counterbalancing’ (*Dictionary*, 2023). Merging Taoism with institutional theory, the notion of duality and leveraging paradoxical logics is formed from the basis of the findings of this thesis. The white side of *yang* typically represents masculine energy and activity and in this case is associated with the influencer field in that it operates on the logics of: consumerism, individualism, technology and machines. The black side of *yin* is associated with feminine energy, earth and passivity and is here associated with the environmental field in that it is associated with the logics of: activism, collectivism, nature and spirituality. Taken together,

the yin-yang model denotes that there is paradox within these dual forces which is represented by the dot in either side of the symbol (Mattsson & Tidström, 2015). For example, activism can be more active than passive and consumerism is often more passive than active. The case of the eco-influencer shows how they leverage green logics associated with activism to which creates a 'passive activism' as a result. Equally, a marketplace, consumerist logic is leveraged from a dualistic field to which provides the influencer opportunity to 'eco-influence' audiences online.

CCT Scholars have previously understood the existence of multiple logics and institutional complexity as an 'enabling constraint', as indicated by Cherrier et al. (2018) in their study, which focussed on the dual application of institutional theory and paradox theory on social ventures in India. However, Taoism has rarely featured in marketing or business literature as a tool for understanding paradox and complexity. Research is limited to Zu's (2019) adoption of the approach to investigate purpose-driven leadership and Mattsson & Tidström's (2015) use of Yin-Yang principles to investigate the interaction between competition and cooperation as two independent, yet interdependent opposites. They suggest that further research on market shaping or restructuring benefit from observing dualities and their subsequent interaction. The next section outlines the dialectical tension of dual logics and how influencers must resist logical excess or deficiency.

### **8.5.1 Resisting the Seduction of Excess or Risk of Deficiency**

In order to create balance which is needed to both build and maintain legitimacy in two dual fields, the eco-influencer must resist the seduction of excess and risk of deficiency. These risks are relevant to logics in either field as leveraging a logic to excess or under-leveraging a logic can have detrimental results for the eco-influencer's continuation and legitimacy. The prime example of this is highlighted in chapter five: findings one, where the participants talk of the 'seductive' nature of paid partnerships with brands and also how they risk losing followers if they were to take up too many paid opportunities. The results of this would be a marketplace logic in excess. An excessive leveraging of one logic, usually entails that the dual logic will be deficient. In this example, a green logic which is resonant with environmental activism, will be deficient if a marketplace logic is excessively leveraged. This dialectical tension which became apparent during the data analysis, highlights the

counterbalancing and interdependent nature of paradoxical, dual logics. To maintain legitimacy, it is important for eco-influencers to resist these excesses and deficiencies and if detected, leverage the opposing logic for balance and equilibrium. The following sections further give an in-depth discussion of excess and deficiency in respect of dual logics.

### **8.5.2 Leveraging Consumerism/Activism**

A consumerist logic can be articulated as a logic of growth in which consumers seek fulfilment, autonomy and freedom through consumption (Bauman, 1988). Environmental activism on the other hand, can be explained by a green logic of which the materiality and symbolism of this logic support contemporary activist movements. This logic opposes growth and sets limits to the expansion of the marketplace as it ‘balances biophysical and human needs of current and future generations’ (Gümüşay et al. (2020). Instagram as a platform operates on a logic of consumerism (Lee et al. 2021) and an influencer’s initiation onto the platform is usually one of strategy and to assist in their institutional work of changing the marketplace. Instagram is used as a tool for communication, recognition, influence and even ‘digital intimacy’ (Reade, 2021). Even if the participants view their activity as recreational and at first express a non-interest in being an influencer, as indicated in the findings, the platform offers a service where content is exchanged for likes, comments and shares. The platform itself is consumer-centric in the way it operates and promotes and this is reflected in findings which show participant acknowledgement that they consume content whilst being consumed themselves. The findings reflect this consumer logic in varying ways. For example, Rio shares how her and others in the community would go on ‘liking sprees’ of each other’s content to make an account more legitimate. Networking in this way introduces these individuals to others who share the same frustrations. It moves their passions and frustrations into the spotlight and there is sentiment amongst some interviewees that it builds momentum and mobilises others into action. Further, buying followers was also discussed as a route for appearing legitimate and which indicates a consumer logic *in excess*, meaning that if this was revealed to an influencer’s audience, they risk appearing illegitimate. The findings support the idea that actors need to leverage a marketplace logic to thrust themselves into existence as an influencer.



Not only do influencers leverage a consumeristic logic in using social media, but they also pursue paid opportunities presented by marketers. Their existence on the platform not only interweaves with consumption by just being on the platform itself, but by interacting with retailers and marketers, much alike the bloggers in the ‘fatshionista’ study by Scaraboto & Fischer (2013). Whereas social media as a form of consumption is more of a passive activity; receiving gifts, partaking in paid partnerships and creating sponsored content is a more conscious interaction with consumerism and it becomes the duty of the influencer to strategically balance this entrepreneurial work with environmental activism. The marketplace logic must meet and balance with a green logic for the eco-influencer’s successful continuation. Consumerism is seductive, ever more so when it is leveraged for the benefit of gaining physical and symbolic capital. In excess, this can appear as partaking in too many paid partnerships and ‘doing it for the money’ or even working too much as many participants spoke about suffering from bad mental health as a result of overexposure to social media. As will be further dissected in the following subsections, to counterbalance this excess, the findings detect that social actors use the dual logics of nature or spiritual practice to recalibrate their positioning. For example, participants reference meditation and yoga as an antidote to the stresses of their online work.

An over-leveraging of consumer logic leads to a deficiency in green logic. Likewise, the green logic can too be over-leveraged to which a strategic harnessing of consumer logic may counterbalance this. As the fundamental logic which underlies the eco-influencer’s output, the environmental logic opposes marketplace growth. At its most extreme, an excessive green logic can result in behaviours which cause upset and disruption. Eco-influencer participants frequently spoke of becoming fixated with upsetting environmental content and this also effecting their mental health. ‘Dangerous’ activism was also sometimes treated as an extreme example. One participant (Miranda) echoed the view of many others and provided an example of how she balances environmentalism with consumerism as she prefers ‘passive activism’. Furthermore, she finds activism to be radical and damaging to her reputation and a more passive activism allows her to ‘be careful’ and ‘professional’. Likewise, Samantha speaks of activism as ‘going off the rails’. The leveraging of consumerism can be antidotal to an eco-influencer in excess of green logic: repairing and maintaining their legitimacy. This section provides evidence of the seemingly paradoxical, yet complimentary nature of

consumerism/activism. The next section continues dialectic discussion and considers the leveraging of individualism/collectivism.

### **8.5.3 Leveraging Individualism/Collectivism**

Following on from the logical dichotomy of consumerism/activism, collectivism/individualism are also presented as two dual logics which are leveraged in tandem. When eco-influencers talk about their inspiration of others and their felt responsibility they are appealing to an individualist logic; entrepreneurialism emphasises ambition and personal responsibility; the idea that one can be an agent of change (Scharff, 2015). An eco-influencer's needs and wellbeing as an influencer accumulating profit from paid partnerships signals their individual interests (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018). An individualist logic is leveraged in the instance an actor feels they have power to influence and change the consumption of others and can be attributed to the term 'institutional entrepreneur' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The term 'institutional entrepreneur' itself can be indicative of a balance of individualism and collectivist logic: the eco-influencer is seeking to leverage resources to change unsatisfactory parts of the marketplace and feels they have the agency and the power to do so (Garud et al. 2007; Weik, 2011). A collectivist logic emphasises interdependence and community where the needs and wellbeing of a social group is upheld (Hoftsede et al. 2010) and the output of the eco-influencer can be viewed as an amplification of voices of those who lack representation, for example, participants frequently reference garment workers in the global south. This study answers Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) call for papers to research a context where bloggers want to change an institutionalised aspect of the marketplace and are not themselves marginalised. Eco-influencers, unlike the bloggers in the 'Fatshionista' study who want more choice, proclaim that they want less choice and 'privilege' for themselves and others, to benefit the lives of those most effected by environmental change. The realisation of their privilege and how they can use it collectively is in itself a rebalancing act of individualism *in excess* as socioeconomic advantages are being redirected into collective causes. Some participants willingly discussed how their case of wanting less marketplace choice comes from the socioeconomic privilege of having it, for example: Billie discusses how her consumer sacrifices have only been of consumer goods that she had the privilege of having in the first place.

This emphasis on independence, individual autonomy and sovereignty is in contrast to a collectivist logic. A balanced collectivist logic promotes cohesion, sharing and collaboration (Lee and Kacen, 2000). There is a level of conformity and this formation is a requirement for mobilisation (Sturmer et al. 2003). In Scaraboto & Fischer's (2013) study, the emergence of a collective consumer identity, the 'Fatosphere' allows the institutional entrepreneurs in their study to increase their chances of being identified by powerful marketplace actors. This sentiment is echoed by the eco-influencers as they feel that together online they are 'one big voice'. They share the sentiment that social media is fundamental for mobilisation and taking action and leveraging a collectivist logic brings the eco-influencers into community where they can share their successes and mirror kindness to one another. Unlike other influencers promoting materialism (Lee et al. 2022), eco-influencers exist within a community where they encourage each other and call each other out where necessary. This seemingly offers a utopian vision or 'wetopian' vision where digital community reinforces bonds which are engaged in improving market systems (Kozinets, 2008; Mick and Fournier, 1998).

This feeling of cohesion is on the whole positive, yet the findings show more sobering instances where individualism/collectivism are out of balance. An influencer may believe they are part of a group with collective power, yet algorithms on social media are amplifiers of trends (Pariser, 2011) and can reduce consumer agency (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022). Algorithms will be discussed further in the following section, yet here they are discussed in the context of 'echo chambers'.

Echo chambers signal a problem with collectivism and more so signals individualism *in excess* as a lack of diversity within groups can recycle an individual's beliefs back to them. Participants spoke of feeling 'stuck' within echo chambers and as if the community was sometimes a 'bubble' where their opinions were repeated to them. Such utterances are resonant with social media 'filter bubbles' which are enabled by algorithms (Pariser, 2011). 'Filter bubbles' are described as the way that personalised automation creates intellectually isolating conditions and can in extreme cases, lead to radicalisation (Pariser, 2011; Etter and Albu, 2021). The findings did not indicate this extremity, yet there was evidently a skewed vision of how much progress eco-influencers think they are making as well as the belief that the world and its citizens are greener than they actually are. Such findings show algorithms to perpetuate an undercover individualism. I coin the term 'covert logic carrier' to

this phenomenon as institutionally framing the work of algorithms reveals how they carry logics to which the eco-influencer is largely unaware of and which create the illusion of a collectivist logic. This supports the continuation of the embeddedness of systemic power and privilege (Eurbanks, 2018).

In considering the dialectic relationship of collectivism and individualism, the consideration of institutional entrepreneurship literature is revealing. Institutional entrepreneurship considers the ‘paradox of embedded agency’: that the individual agency of an actor is subordinate to prevailing norms and structures of the field (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). This paradox does not wholly constrain agency but considers how actors can be reflexive of their actions when they are bound to the dominant logics of a field; where their agency may be ‘restricted’. The findings reveal that participants were largely aware of their restriction and they were desperate to access people beyond the echo chamber or ‘bubble’. That a majority of eco-influencers realised their constraints is significant and shows that they are seeking novel ways to institutionalise alternative rules and pathways (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Some eco-influencers displayed this already when they spoke of novel ways to override the rules written into the algorithms (Cotter, 2019). This activity shows a resistance to the excessive individualism posed by algorithms and subsequent echo chambers which drowns out the collective voice. This very activity also poses a paradox as to fight against algorithmic forces, assumed individual agency is realised (Garud et al. 2007). The next section continues with a discussion of spiritual/mechanical logics.

#### **8.5.4 Leveraging the Spiritual/Mechanical**

A spiritual logic was an emerging theme in the data which was unexpected as participants described how spiritual practice supported their online work. Santana et al. (2021) introduce the concept ‘digital consumer spirituality’ which considers how consumers seek out the spiritual on digital networks to affirm their spiritual identities. Their research encourages scholarly investigation into this emergent research stream to unpack the intersection of the digital and the spiritual. This thesis contributes to this area as it considers how the existent dualism of mechanical and spiritual logics can be leveraged accordingly in a way which is interdependent and complimentary. This dynamic between human consciousness and mechanical consciousness is explored further in the latter part of the discussion session as a

part of answering the second research question of this study which is concerned with *the surveillance paradox*.

That the influencers are trying to change the marketplace but are not marginalised themselves indicates that their motivations are rooted in spiritual and moral concern. Although not openly shared by all participants, talk of morals and showing compassion for the earth is included within this logic as these attributes reflect the human spirit. A spiritual logic is therefore defined as practices and symbolism which signals ‘a connection to God, nature, others, and surrounding’ and it can be thought of as a logic of intention and compassion (Victor, 2020). On the other hand, a mechanical logic refers to automation, unfeeling and rationalism. It seeks optimisation and operates in a more positivistic fashion. This logic is adhered to when participants spoke about strategic posts which work well with Instagram’s algorithms, ‘playing the visibility game’ (Cotter, 2017) and using Instagram engagement metrics to feel better about themselves and their efforts as content creator (Li et al. 2018). Alike the prior section, this section also considers algorithms but from a perspective which considers how eco-influencers appeal to this logic by acting like it: becoming mechanical and automated in their behaviours. As both of these logics were shown to be counteractive and complimenting to each other, there were times when the eco-influencers harnessed a mechanical logic to allow them to feel more control over their difficult emotions. Participants spoke about a wide range of emotions raging from guilt and anxiety, to more existential crises where posting online and creating work for themselves provided a comfort to them and a channel for their moral concerns. Posting on Instagram and optimising oneself in order to receive engagement was discovered as being a way for eco-influencers to navigate the uncomfortableness associated with feeling their feelings. Instagram, initially, filled a void and provided purpose and a sense of control and acted as a coping strategy (Li et al. 2018). Evidently, Instagram was leveraged and the mechanics of it favoured to counteract an excess of the spiritual: where moral concern and emotions became overwhelming and debilitating. This dialectical tension provides insight into an area with growing importance as consumers use social media to search for meaning and transcendence (Kale, 2004; Santana et al. 2021).

If a machine logic is in excess and thus a spiritual logic is in deficiency, eco-influencers may appear robotic or monotonous and lack humanness and/or relatability. Their online work can become chore-like, as described for example by Jane as she recalls dressing up to take her

photos for the week and there is an obsession with getting the right photograph and fitting in. A symptom of mechanical excess/spiritual deficiency could be that an eco-influencer embodies automation and their output is dependent on predeterminations of what is legitimate. Other participants, notably witnessed a recovery from these behaviours when they began to connect more to themselves and nature. This recovery involved posting from a more intentional, genuine place rather than automatically posting content that is likely to be popular or well received.

This shows that a spiritual logic can soothe the excesses of mechanical automation. A spiritual logic was also shown to be leveraged as a way of counteracting the mechanical to deal with the pressures that come with the automatic expectations of the online world, as participants seek solace in the spiritual through finding a connection in nature, meditation or yoga for example. Yoga was a commonly cited coping mechanism to deal with the stresses of the online world which shows an example of how a spiritual logic can be leveraged when a machine logic is in excess, as yoga although with its physical benefits, is linked to spiritual outcomes (De Michelis, 2008). Instagram was portrayed as a field where mechanical logic is excessive and where people can forget their humanness and soon take on excessive unpaid duties that become a prerequisite for being noticed on the platform. A spiritual logic soothes some of these stressors and was portrayed in the findings as being both catalytic and counteractive: it both invokes a sense of being on a mission and enables institutional entrepreneurialism, and it serves to maintain a level of harmony and mental fortitude in the process. The spiritual catapulted many of those interviewed into existence as an eco-influencer and gave them a plan of action for compassionate work. The next section discusses the leveraging of nature/technology.

### **8.5.5 Leveraging Nature/Technology**

The dance between nature and technology is one commonly referenced in our society and is a dualism which featured in the analysis. However, unlike other logics there is a clear ontological tension when considering nature as an institutional logic. How do we define nature when using institutional theory if logics are socially constructed? If an institutional logic is 'the rules of the game' (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 802) and nature as an ecosystem is self-organising and beyond human devised rules? Gümüşay et al. (2020) pose the

suggestion that the discourse surrounding an environmental logic should address ‘materiality of logics as well as the relationality between humans and nature which brings a focus on the socio-material’ (p.1). Therefore, even though nature as a larger ecosystem is beyond our full comprehension, we can generalise the logic bound to it to decipher the ways humans interact with it and understand it. Given the aforementioned and coined definition of green logic, I refer to it again here as caring for planet, future generations and supporting human-ecosphere symbiosis (Gümüşay et al. 2020, p.1). This study accepts this logic to describe nature to a degree whilst acknowledging that ontologically, nature is itself is an ecosystem beyond logic and whether humans interact with it or not it is a complex, interconnected system which encompasses all life on earth. Ironically, technology can also be thought of as a system beyond our control as ‘it is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions’ (Greenberg, 2016, p.166).

The findings show that eco-influencers seek out nature when they are looking for a feeling of deceleration and inspiration to slow down in a fast-paced world (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019). Upbringings in nature also acted as a catalyst for green logics as participants had identified with nature from an early age; often feeling the need to protect and preserve what they had experienced as nature provides an an attuning which counterbalances technological noise. It can be considered that even though eco-influence is paradoxical, the tools that are available to them through nature e.g. seeking grounding and humbling from nature, supports their continuation and sustainability as an influencer who is healthy and valuable. An influencer who frequently finds themselves lured in by *the seduction of excess* only tips the scale further towards disequilibrium as they favour individualism, consumerism, the mechanical and technological over all else. The findings show that nature was a catalyst for transcendental experience and a feeling of ‘oneness’ or awareness of something bigger than oneself (Kunchambo et al. 2017). As a dualism, nature is cyclical whereas the growth pattern of technology is linear and progressive (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019). An eco-influencer leverages these logics in a way that they use technology for growth in terms of followers and mobilisation, and the logic of nature is interacted with for the purposes of deceleration i.e. slowing down from a fast-paced world.

Technology can be fundamentally damaging to nature but it is also leveraged as a logic which can assist in changing the marketplace for bettering the environment. Technology provides a

medium for eco-influencers to adhere to green logics and the findings show they do this through public purification of rituals. In this way, eco-influencers share their commitments to others and mundane, private practices became culturally significant expressions of legitimacy. Although technology and its relative logics help the eco-influencer become manifest, the technological was often cited as being damaging to mental health and intrusive. The technological in excess is relative to influencers always being on their phone, checking for engagement and partaking in 'always on' digital marketing (Manovich, 2018). Checking for engagement is the act of checking for legitimacy, it is asking, am I well received? Am I still relevant? In this act of constantly checking, the influencer is in a sense losing their autonomy. They are not convinced of their own validity by what they post, they are convinced by its engagement and quantified results.

The technological in excess is underscored by surveillance logics which are further discussed in section 8.6. This logic facilitated hyper-aware behaviour where the eco-influencers felt constantly viewed, echoing ideas of the 'panoptic' (Foucault, 1997; Bucher, 2012). This logic itself was diffuse and ubiquitous and could appear at times as a logic of self-surveillance as participants hyperawareness of being watched could not be determined as real or imagined. Returning to a connection with the natural and strengthening a green logic is argued counteract the real and imagined pressures of social media. As participant Stella suggested when musing on indigenous principles: sustainability cannot be bought or flaunted, it is much more about our connection to the land and what we understand and learn from it. Perhaps in our explorations of the nature/technology dialectic, indigenous wisdom has much to teach us. Wisdom which upholds the idea that self-identity is entwined with the natural world and where social status is built via connection and reciprocity to nature, can perhaps offer valuable solutions to a culture which over-leverages the technological (Kennedy et al. 2020). The next section concludes the discussion of this contribution and discusses the key contributions.

### **8.5.6 Beyond Dualisms**

The Yin-Yang principle poses a challenge to the logic of paradox in the West which treats dualities as independent opposites (Chen, 2008). This study contributes to limited research that adopts Yin-Yang by harnessing an institutional approach to show the complexity of dual



logics at play in the case of the eco-influencer. Consumer research and marketing theory has up to now only briefly touched upon the Yin-Yang principle to look into interdependence between cooperation and competition within SMEs (Mattson and Tidstrom, 2015). The theoretical development of this thesis uses a Yin-Yang perspective to explore how influencers gain and maintain legitimacy in paradoxical fields. The findings show that paradoxical fields and their corresponding dualistic logics are interdependent and leveraged in a complimentary way depending on excesses and deficiencies. Whilst Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) study does recognise the coexistence of paradoxical logics such as commerce and art, their research does not explore the dynamism of the logics themselves. Despite the opposing logics present within these two paradoxical fields, there is also the consideration that the tension between the dualisms are mutually beneficial to each field and that dialectical tensions birth innovation (Cherrier et al. 2018).

It is easy to take a purely critical view of influencer culture and social media but since this field is evolving it is more appropriate to seek understanding of the dynamism within these fields and how opposing forces can be counterbalancing. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) acknowledge that 'both profit and social justice motives, as well as others, may animate an institutional actor to attempt to bring about changes' (p. 1237). This is of course true of the eco-influencer yet the paradoxical interaction of the underlying logics of these 'motives' is absent from their work. This thesis contributes to this understanding and *The Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics* contributes to the emerging body of work which considers how coexistence of multiple, paradoxical logics can become resources for actors in emerging markets (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019; Cherrier et al. 2018; Hartman and Coslor, 2019). Perhaps scholars themselves can leverage 'a spiritual logic' and further infuse academic discussion with ancient philosophy as modelled in this thesis with Taoism. The next section presents *the surveillance paradox* as the second key finding.

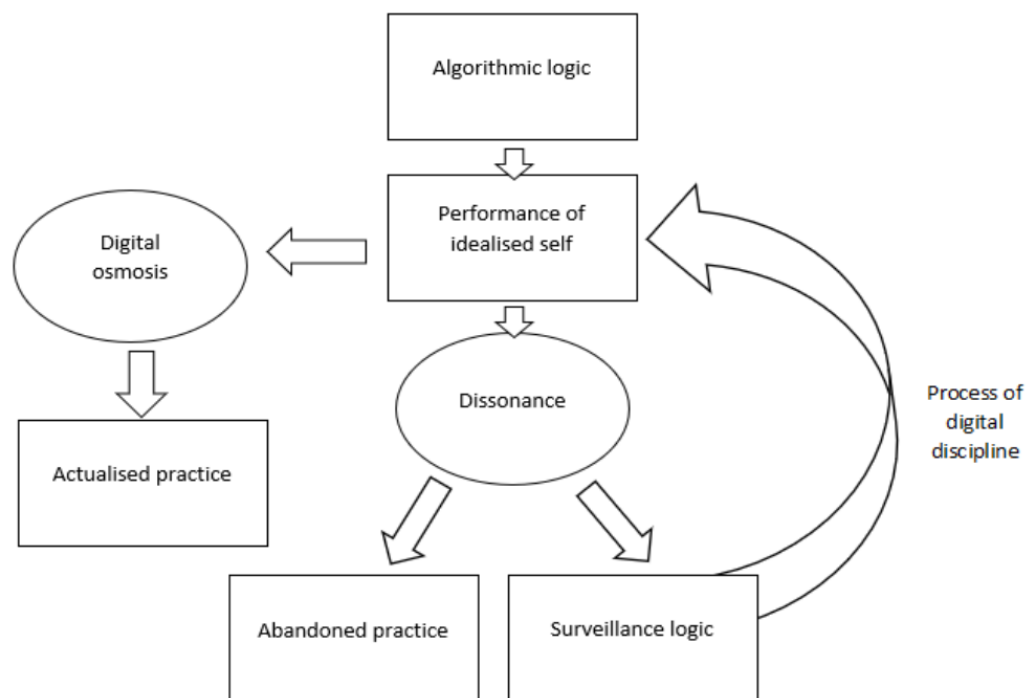
## **8.6 Key Finding: The Surveillance Paradox**

This section speaks to the second research question which is: *how does an eco-influencer's use of digital technology effect marketplace logics?* Technocultural logics are particularly focused on to support this question and how these logics operate *in excess*. This theorises a

surveillance approach to institutional logics and reveals how the logic of surveillance is both a ‘parasitic economic logic’ (Zuboff, 2019, p.9) and ‘a logic of accumulation’ (p.91). As a result of the findings, there is the consideration that eco-influencers began to identify with logics related to technology. Zuboff’s (2019) description of surveillance capitalism as ‘parasitic’ suggests that influencers are the hosting body to ubiquitous, diffuse logics which sustain surveillance capitalism. This invasion of the private is cited as wholly critical (Zuboff, 2019), but what if these logics which are difficult to cognitively unbind from are equally enabling? This thesis makes a contribution here in revealing how the pressures of surveillance create the means for eco-influencers to become their ‘idealised self’.

Previous literature has highlighted the ways in which actors ‘self-censor’ and constrain their digital personas to suit expectations of an imagined audience (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Das and Kramer, 2013). Theorisations of this effect have further investigated the ways in which people’s offline behaviour is also altered as a result of the threat that their offline behaviour becomes exposed online, again communicating the idea of displeasing imagined audiences (Marder et al. 2016). This thesis expands on literature in this area to reveal how surveillance can assist in actualising the goals of eco-influencers. In doing this, it answers the call for further research from Marder et al. (2016) which has been ignored to date, to explore a case where surveillance interacts with the ‘could’ self – ‘the person that we would ideally like to be’ (p. 589). To illustrate this, I develop *The Digital Discipline Model* in figure 9 to theorise the ways in which technocultural logics enable the eco-influencer to actualise their eco goals. The following sections discuss this process.

**Figure 9:** The Digital Discipline Model



**Source:** Author

### 8.6.1 Leveraging an Algorithmic Logic to Scan the Field

As previous sections have indicated, algorithms are tools which reinforce already dominant trends and are often cited as reductive of consumer agency (Parsier, 2011; Airoidi and Rokka, 2022). An algorithmic logic featured heavily in chapter 7 and is thought of as functioning in a way which reproduces normative content of the field (Kozinets, 2022). In appealing to an algorithmic logic, eco-influencers scan the field for symbolic gestures which are popular in the same way algorithms categorise and reduce data (Bishop, 2021). This could be an object or practice which is a carrier of green logics and which can ultimately assist in attaining green capital and maintained legitimacy. In leveraging this logic, the eco-influencer can discover new aspirations and practices they wish to actualise in the future to become their ‘could’ self (Marder et al, 2016). This process is likely a continual one as what constitutes as green capital within these diffuse fields is constantly in flux and eco-influencers are actively on the lookout for trends, which can assist in bolstering their legitimacy (Ulusoy and Firat, 2018). As the model in figure 9 reveals, this process leads on to performance of idealised self.

### **8.6.2 Performance of Idealised Self**

Performance featured heavily in the findings sections which is indicative of Instagram as a platform as it provides strategies for self-presentation and curation of one's identity where arguably all presentation is 'curated and controlled' (Spracklen, 2015; Abidin, 2018, p.1). It became apparent that eco-influencers frequently used social media as a means to live out their idealised self. This idealised self hinges on the idea that actors will post their 'could self': who they wish to become in their lived reality (Marder et al. 2016). For example, participant Adelaide would only post pictures of her eating vegan food despite her eating a pescatarian diet as this practice attains higher green capital (Horton, 2003; Piwonka, 2018). Likewise, others omitted certain objects from view in their stories and posts, and talked about posting content related to eco-items that they had heard about but not yet actualised into their practice. Others wrote disclaimers to indicate reasons why they were using certain items which could be considered a green faux-pas. Not only does performance relate to the attainment of green capital, it also links to legitimacy and provides means for eco-influencers to become noticed by brands seeking partnership (Abidin, 2016). This instance also highlights how digital technology can skew the concept of legitimacy, for involved actors and for academics as online and offline legitimacy can be two different things. Technology offers tools for enhancement and exaggeration of self-presentation (Abidin, 2016), likewise 'self-censoring' can involve omitting practices or parts of the self which are not resonant with an actor's expected audience (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Das and Kramer, 2013). As the model illustrates, this stage has two outcomes, the influencer can either reach a state of 'digital osmosis' or experience 'dissonance' between their digital and physical reality. The next two sections outline these two possible outcomes.

### **8.6.3 Digital Osmosis and Actualised Practice**

I coin the term 'digital osmosis' to conceptualise the way in which eco-influencers performing and behaving in character of this (for the purpose of gaining engagement) results in permanent changes in their lived reality. Digital osmosis occurs when performing an idealised self-online creates the conditions for this to manifest in the physical by osmosis, meaning 'gradual or unconscious assimilation' (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). The eco-influencer puts their aspirational self forward, quite often before what they would recognise as being

their physical self. The self can be actualised through acting in accordance to a green logic and algorithmic logic as the eco-influencer scans the field for practices laden with green capital to aspire to, live out digitally and eventually self-actualise. As influencers test out products or merely ‘unbox’ them live to their feeds (Geysler, 2022), they live out these behaviours to an extent and the gradual assimilation of these practices can lead to actualised practice. Actualised practice is when the practice has been performed enough to become integrated into an eco-influencer’s physical reality. In the literature, there is little research on this effect. Information systems academics coin the term ‘ontological reversal’ to describe the phenomenon of digital technologies shaping physical reality where a digital world is created first and physical version second (if needed) (Baskerville et al. 2020, p.28). This idea can be ascribed in understanding the process of digital osmosis and how assimilation follows the digital performance. The next section discusses the other alternative outcome to the ‘performance of idealised self’ process; that of dissonance.

#### **8.6.4 Dissonance**

Cognitive dissonance is a psychologically uncomfortable phenomenon where there is a discrepancy between a social actor’s belief and the information which calls this into question (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance in the findings is described as being an incongruity of selfhood: a discontinuity between digital performance and lived reality. Participants revealed a self-critical reflection when they spoke about practices they perform which they were not consistent with – often feeling that this was ‘bad’, ‘contradictory’ and not ‘aligned’. The uncomfortable nature of this feeling could either have two outcomes. The first outcome of dissonance is ‘abandoned practice’: where the eco-influencer chooses to suspend and remove incongruent practice or information from their digital performances. Influencers may choose to delete or archive incongruent posts from their Instagram feeds. The other outcome of dissonance becomes subject to a surveillance logic which initiates the process of digital discipline. This is discussed in the following section.

#### **8.6.5 Surveillance Logic and The Process of Digital Discipline**

If dissonance leads to a surveillance logic, it is likely a process unconscious to the eco-influencer as the source of this surveillance is relatively unknown as discipline is ubiquitous,

liquid and diffused in technocultural contexts (Darmondy and Zwick, 2020). This part of the model is actualised when, instead of abandoning practice, eco-influencers become occupied with whether or not any of their followers or peers notice their digital/physical incongruity. This could occur as actual feedback, comments or even backlash which would confirm their surveillance from others. Most likely, this is an imagined and internalised pressure which can be thought of as a logic self-surveillance: a patterned assumption that one is being watched and so thus must self-discipline (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Bucher, 2012). It is theorised that this then commences the process of digital discipline where under the imagined or actual watchful-eye of followers, the eco-influencers pressurise themselves to perform a practice until it is actualised. As indicated in figure 9, the arrow directs the eco-influencer back to performance and subsequent digital osmosis. The process can also eventually be abandoned if integration of the practice does not occur. The digital discipline model makes a significant contribution to the literature on surveillance and invites this discussion into CCT (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Das and Kramer, 2013; Marder et al. 2016). The model outlines a theorised process of how surveillance logics enable digital discipline in creating the ‘could’ self (Marder et al. (2016), depicting a paradoxical case of surveillance enabling prosocial behaviour. In answering the question *How does an eco-influencer’s use of digital technology affect marketplace logics?* The surveillance paradox gives example of how technocultural logics can affect marketplace change as digital discipline can motivate actors to behave in more eco-friendly ways in order to align with an idealised self. Further studies on the longevity and ethics of this process are discussed in section 8.10. The next section highlights a methodological contribution of this thesis.

### **8.7 Methodological Contribution: ‘Chronological Contemplation’**

Whilst collecting data for this thesis, I developed an innovative data collection technique which I call ‘chronological contemplation’ which builds on the photo-elicitation method where researchers gain insight from participants using photographs (Richard and Lahman, 2014). Chronological contemplation involves the participant sharing with me, the interviewer, three Instagram posts which will assist them in narrating their Instagram journey so far: their start, middle and end. These posts were shared privately via Instagram chat or screenshot and sent to my university email account and were used during the interview. These

images, whilst rich in visual data, helped the participant describe the timeline of their accounts with more accuracy. I found the posts helped in prompting forgotten memories and humble beginnings of the influencers that I interviewed. The technique allowed novel insight to occur as some participants were taken back to a time that now feels illegitimate to them as it also prompted them to tell me about other posts which they have deleted or archived. This method can be of great utility to researchers investigating social media contexts as this technique crossed the boundaries of time and added validity and reliability to the eco-influencer's recalling of their past Instagram posts. By asking for visual representation of the start, middle and end of their accounts, I was able to more holistically understand their journey. The next two sections discuss some of the practical implications for both policy and practice.

## **8.8 Practical Implications**

### **8.8.1 Policy**

The UK government and regulatory bodies are increasingly interested in how influencers are reshaping digital media and recent enquiries call for an addressing of regulations and ethical implications of the industry (UK Parliament, 2022). The report, titled titled *Influencer Culture: Lights, Camera, Inaction?* seeks clarification in areas surrounding unpaid working hours as influencers often work for free when building their engagement. Their report also notably acknowledges the pressure influencers may feel in maintaining their audience and how content creators 'offer up much of their time and private lives for public consumption.' The findings in this study can assist in informing government and regulators in understanding these concerns more fully. The findings indicate that influencers work tirelessly to build and maintain their accounts, ever more so since their accounts are addressing environmental concern in tandem. This thesis highlights some of the ways in which influencers feel pressurised and constantly surveilled on digital platforms and supports the report's recommendation for industry review.

Further, this research could be of interest to All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) such as the APGG on online safety on social media (Social Media APPG, 2023). Despite launching

investigation into areas such as ‘the selfie generation’, indecent images and the addictive nature of social media, there is currently no inquiry into influencer marketing at present. I argue a strong case for this to become an APPG as this area is in need to policy recommendations regarding online work and pressures. Other sustainability focused APPGs may benefit from inquiry into this topic. Given the rise of eco-influencers in particular and the dual role they play in creating educational content and advertising for brands, their voices could be beneficial in policymaking discussions. This thesis could propose a case for discussions that their contributions would be valuable to a regulatory body such as the ASA.

In regards to policy, this thesis could also be useful to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). Their available information includes guidance recommendations and rules to influencers to ensure that their adverts are clearly disclosed and includes examples of best practice (ASA, 2023). There is scope for this thesis to inform the ASA to further disclose best practice for influencers in regards to their wellbeing and which outlines potential harms of digital surveillance.

Finally, this thesis might be useful for those companies engaging in positive environmental sustainability and may also encourage further discussions around providing tax incentives or subsidies to eco-influencers who support and promote environmentally conscious brands/products. These might also link more broadly to the UK sustainability goals and more importantly, the UN2030 Sustainability development goals (UNDP, 2023).

### **8.8.2 Practice**

The findings can inform marketers interested in using eco-influencers. Increasingly, marketers are interested in the impact of influencers and their impact on sustainability as indicated in recent research by Unilever and the Behavioural Insights Team (*Unilever, 2023*). This thesis can inform potential marketers on how to best approach paid partnerships and inform brands on some potential boundaries the eco-influencer may have when it comes to working together as the findings reveal that eco-influencers are unlikely to jeopardise their ‘green capital’ for excessive physical capital. In keeping up to date with influencer marketing



trends, companies and not-for-profit organisations can refine their segmentation, targeting and positioning appropriately. Navarro et al. (2020) find that content-based metrics which qualitatively monitor: relevance of topics, the quality of content and comment sentiment, are much more appropriate than quantitative metrics when assessing the suitability of using influencers in campaigns. This is to ensure that influencers are congruent with the images, values and goals of a brand. Therefore, this thesis provides adequate qualitative content for marketing managers seeking to use influencers for eco-campaigns as it provides in-depth insight into individual and community values and goals. Ye et al. (2021) notes that influencers with high followings are not always the best choice for marketing managers and that their 'fit' is more important. Since this thesis provides insight into the successfulness of eco-influencers with varying follower counts, managers can use the data to consider an influencer's usefulness at these varying engagement levels.

Influencers themselves may use this thesis to inform their operations. The findings can inform them of how to counterbalance their practice if they feel they have over or under leveraged a particular logic, for example, they may be interested in counterbalancing excessive time spent online with mindfulness practices such as yoga or meditation. The thesis may also increase their awareness of surveillance and how algorithms effect their consumption behaviours. In this respect, the findings can also inform app designers about the harmful affects of algorithms can have and how they apply pressure to individuals who use social media.

## **8.9 Limitations**

There are several methodological limitations associated with this thesis. The sample of this study consisted of 17 white women with middle-class occupations. Whilst this provided rich data, this study consisted of all white, western women who commonly have had the privilege to identify with nature from a young age – often referencing childhoods spent camping with their families or living close to beaches and forests. The participants emerged by way of snowball sampling and all participants resided either in the UK or Australia which according to Hoftsede et al. (2010) are countries where individualism is prevalent. I did endeavour to collect data from participants of different ethnicities and social class, yet found this challenging and failed to achieve this sample. As indicated by Sobande (2017) in her study on

black, female YouTubers, social media contexts are 'primarily white' (p. 660). The sample also mostly consisted of micro-influencers with a following between 1-10k with only 4 of the influencers considered a 'meso influencer' with followings between 20-55k (Harrigan et al. 2021). To gain a more balanced insight into the influencer journey, it would have been beneficial to interview eco-influencers with larger followings and who have greater legitimacy in the field. This was an aim whilst recruiting, yet one which was unsuccessful as most influencers with larger followings are managed by third party agencies.

A potential limitation could be that all interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and the majority of the thesis was completed during a period of significant flux. This presented various challenges to me as a researcher adjusting to working from home and life during the pandemic. This applied to my participants and also meant that eco-influencers were spending more time online than usual. This could mean that technology use was higher which would have an effect on the findings. All interviews took place online using Zoom which sometimes meant it felt difficult to build rapport with participants as facial expressions or gestures were sometimes hard to interpret. As a new researcher, I ensured that I stuck to my interview protocol and used 'warm up' questions to enhance rapport (Arsel, 2017). Netnography also posed several limitations as a method when interviewing influencers. The influencers who took part reflected on some of their timeline images using, what I above call 'chronological contemplation'. These rich-in-data images could not be used alongside the anonymised names of the participants and had to be omitted from the research to respect confidentiality.

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to represent the wider population (Hennink et al. 2020). The findings are, however, transferable and methodological techniques can be transferred to other contexts, as indicated in section 8.10. The overarching goal of this quantitative study was to provide a rich, contextualised exploration into a cultural phenomenon. Further, interviewer bias is a common problem in qualitative studies and although I tried to remain neutral, in the initial round of interviews, I encountered the issue of trying to spot marketing problems as they were being discussed. In using a post-structuralist approach, it was however, a prerequisite to attempt to understand the relationship between culture and behaviour (Fischer et al. 2014).

## 8.10 Future Research Directions

To further assess an eco-influencer's legitimacy or the longevity of the outcomes posed by *The Digital Discipline Model*, a longitudinal study could be carried out to track the progress of an eco-influencer and how further plural, paradoxical logics are introduced to the field over time. Longitudinal design of up to three years could give significant indication of this progress and further develop the frameworks and models of this thesis. Further, a study which considers the ethical dimension of *The Digital Discipline Model* would be beneficial to further explore the constraining and enabling nature of this phenomenon. Although this process leads to prosocial behaviour, the pressure of surveillance can have a detrimental effect on an individual's mental health and further research is needed on this variable. The model can also be applied to other contexts where actors feel the need to perform rituals and practices to be socially accepted online. This opens avenues for research into contexts such as health and fitness and further spiritual fields such as New Age communities. The validity of this model could also be further investigated by quantitative design to collect a larger sample and more generalisable results (Hennick et al. 2020).

Studies which investigate contradictory logics (Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019) could benefit from applying the *Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics* to seek out the ways in which plural, contradictory logics in fields can work in complimentary ways. Contexts which could benefit from this are ones where identity conflicts are present (Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019) or where institutional complexity may be present such as social entrepreneurship (Cherrier et al. 2018). I recognise many contexts within spiritual communities which could benefit from this analysis i.e. mindfulness coaching on Instagram. This would answer the call for scholarly investigation of the digital/spiritual (Santana et al. 2021).

This thesis was limited to research on the Instagram platform. Future research could extend investigation to sites such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube and TikTok. The 'chronological consideration' method could be extended in these investigations by sharing videos or links to earlier videos to gauge an insight into the start, middle and end of account journeys. Whilst this research investigated the activity of influencers, further research could gain a further

understanding of this phenomenon from the followers of influencers and explore whether there is congruence between perceived surveillance and actual surveillance.

## **8.11 Conclusion**

This thesis shows how eco-influencers leverage institutional logics from paradoxical fields in order to build and maintain legitimacy. It introduces the *Yin-Yang of Paradoxical Logics* to show how dual logics from paradoxical fields are conflicting yet counterbalancing and complementary. I show how this dialectic operates with dual logics: consumerism/activism, individualism/collectivism, spiritual/mechanical and natural/technological. Theoretical attributes from institutional theory such as logics, legitimacy and institutional entrepreneurship guide this application (Meyer and Scott, 1983; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton et al). I further introduce *The Model of Digital Discipline* to theorise the process of eco-influencers appealing to their idealised self in the digital and subsequently actualising this in the physical; drawing attention to *The Surveillance Paradox* and how surveillance is both enabling and constraining. Both contributions support the contention that we must go beyond duality to find ways of understanding and managing institutional complexity. I further introduce a form of methodological contribution called ‘chronological contemplation’ which can be utilised in social media research. The findings of this thesis can be used to inform policy makers, governments and practitioners in better understanding the utilities and boundaries of eco-influencers.

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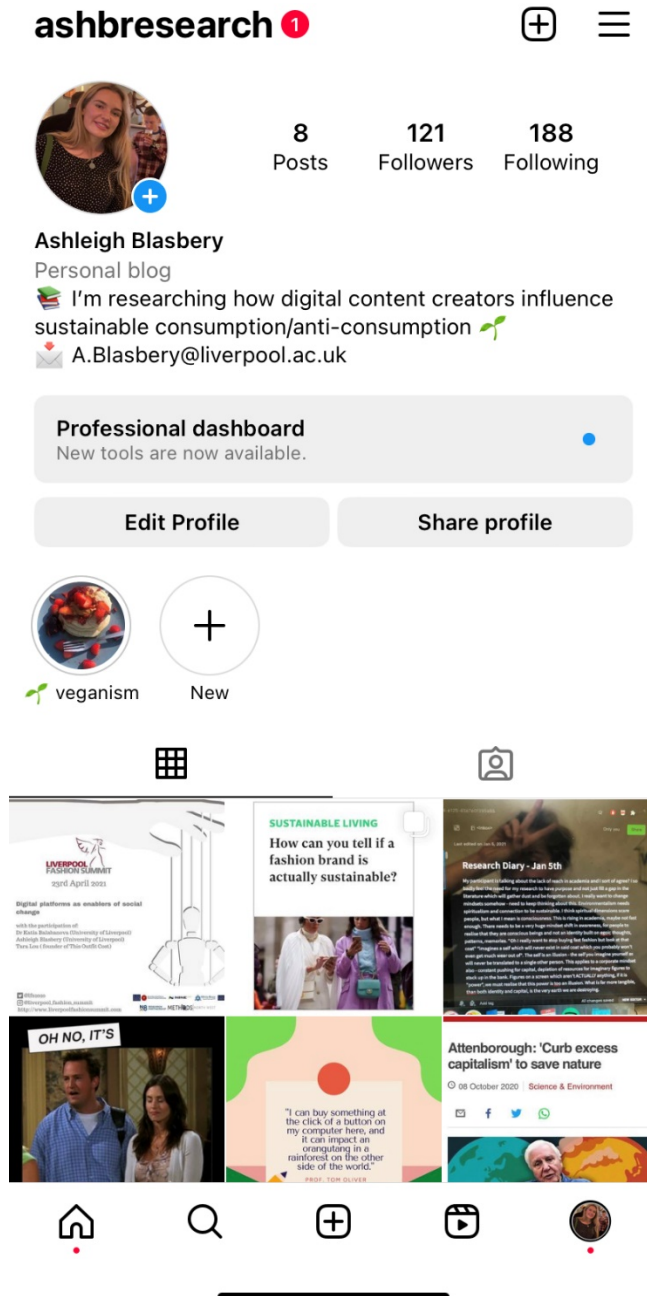
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# Appendix

Figure 1. Screenshot of research Instagram Account



**Figure 2:** Example of Interview Protocol

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **1. Introduction and brief description of the research study**

- **Aim of the study:** the aim of the study is to explore the motivations of eco-activists or eco-influencers and how they use their digital spaces to influence their follower's consumption behavior. I'm hoping to talk to individuals who post eco content, advertise eco products and services or have been influenced by these types of posts. This will allow a better understanding of experiences, attitudes and motivations associated with online eco-influence.
- **Exclusion criteria:** No exclusion criteria but I do want to confirm that you are over the age of 18
- Is that okay?

#### **2. Interview procedure**

- In a moment I'll ask you to fill out a short survey to find out more about you and ask you to tell me a little about yourself.
- Then we'll talk about your experiences of eco-influence on social media and discuss some of the print screens that you sent over
- Rather than a Q+A, we'll just have an informal conversation about your experiences.
- If there is a question you don't feel comfortable with, that's no problem at all, just let me know and we can move on.
- Any questions so far?

#### **3. Consent**

- **Record Zoom** - I'm just going to go over the consent procedure, is it okay if I start recording the interview now?
- Just to check you've had the chance to read both the consent form and information sheet?
- If verbal consent is needed - read through consent form.



- So just to confirm, any information you provide in the interview may be used in a research output. But the information will be treated confidentially, and your anonymity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym.
- Any questions?
- Just before we go into the interview, I'll send you over a short survey to fill in. It's just to gain background information about you, this helps when analysing the data and ensuring that we get a representative sample.

**Background Q: Please can you tell me a bit about yourself?**

- Family/job/lifestyle/hobbies/age

**Opening Q: "Please can you tell me about your experience posting eco-content online?"**

- Use prompts from here
- At a suitable point - ask to share the screen to view screenshots.

**Prompts**

**General use**

- When did you first begin posting/following eco content?
- What prompted you to start posting/following eco content?
- Were you concerned about the environment before your engagement with eco content online? What sparked this concern? e.g. media, word of mouth, books or documentaries?
- What are the main eco topics that you are concerned about? Is this reflected in your posts?
- How often do you post? Do you only post eco content? What other content do you post?
- How has your online narrative evolved/developed over time?
- How eco do you believe you are? Do you have any 'eco-goals' to improve on?
- What is the most popular subject in your posts? E.g. yourself/your journey, eco products, information about the environment
- Do you ever delete posts after some time? If yes, why? Engagement or no longer fits in with your digital narrative/ethical beliefs?
- Do you use multiple platforms to post your content on?

- Do you purposely post to ‘beat’ social media algorithms or post at certain times for higher engagement? Do you try to draw attention to your posts by posting on your story?
- Do many of your friends use social media to post eco content? Have you made friends/connected to people by posting eco content?

### **Social Media**

- Where do you normally post? Which social media platform?
- How do you feel about feedback features on social media, such as likes and comments? Do you think they influence what you post?
- If a picture did not receive an adequate number of likes in your eyes, would you feel differently about it? Would you consider deleting it?
- How long have you had Instagram/social media? How important do you consider it to your everyday life? How much time do you spend on it?
- How many times a week do you post on social media/Instagram?
- Have you been contacted by eco brands on Instagram who are interested in collaborating? What are the conditions? How is this content perceived? Have you made a business out of posting this content?
- What do you think about posting eco content on Instagram in comparison to other social media platforms?
- What do you think Instagram is generally used for? Versus other social media platforms?
- Do you feel pressure to act or post in a certain way on Instagram versus other social media platforms?
- What kind of accounts do you follow on Instagram? Do you follow others who post environmental content?
- In what ways do you think your online narration style is influenced by others on Instagram?
- Do you use hashtags on Instagram? Why? Why not?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your Instagram page and the type of content you post?
- Do you feel the need to look/act a certain way on social media - what do you think the ideal “eco” person looks like on social media?
- Do you perceive yourself to have an Instagram persona? How would you describe that persona? Who is that person?

- How do they differ from your offline self?
- How does you feel your Instagram represents you?
- How do eco products and practices help you achieve this representation?
- How does posting eco content make you feel?
- Would you ever post a picture of a less eco-concerned practice?

### **Environmentalism/Social Change**

- What do you feel are the main challenges that come with changing our behavior to be more eco?
- Do you feel optimistic about environmental change? YES/NO – Why?
- What does the word ‘activist’ mean to you? Is optimism linked to activism?
- Which cultural figures do you look up to for their environmentalism? Why?
- How do you perceive the general societal attitude towards environmentalism?
- Do you think social media and digital technologies are a key tool for mobilisation/ social change?
- What impact do you think these technologies are having?
- Is this impact long term/meaningful?
- Is there any practices that you have tried and had to give up?
- Do other eco accounts make you feel any negative emotions i.e guilt?
- Do you think these technologies and medias can hinder progress in any way?
- What personality traits or personal beliefs do you think are common for environmentally mindful people to have/follow?
- Has your environmental concern coincided with any other changes in your life? i.e personal mindfulness?
- How do you feel about your ‘past self’ before environmental mindfulness? How does this make you feel?
- Is environmentalism convenient to you? Was there any difficulties adjusting your lifestyle? Did you feel like giving up on certain aspects?

### **Feedback**

- Do any of your friends or family use their accounts for similar purposes?
- What do people close to you think about your social media content? How do you feel if they make comment on your content?

- How do you think people generally perceive your content? Do you ever receive backlash?

### **Wider thoughts about the practice**

- What environmental practices do you feel make the most difference? How do they make you feel when you practice them?
- Why do you think eco accounts (zero waste/eco influence accounts) are becoming so common?
- What does the word 'influencer' make you think/feel? Does it define your work?
- How do you think this culture is changing? Do you think it has a timeline?
- What people do you think your content influences? Are there any audiences that you think this content does not get through to/does not have the desired effect on?
- There has been changes in laws for how influencers embed their business endeavors on their posts, i.e. paid partnerships. Do you think this is necessary?
- Where do you see the future of influencer culture going? More mindful? Ethical?
- Do you perceive any new trends within influencer culture?
- Do you think Covid-19 pandemic has influenced your eco practice/the content you post?

### **Closing remarks**

- Is there anything that we haven't talked about in this interview regarding your experience of posting eco content online that we haven't spoken about?
- Thank you for taking the time to share your experience and thoughts with me - I really appreciate it.
- If there is anyone you know who uses social media to influence eco practice/consumption patterns and would be happy to have an interview, please feel free to share the information sheet - that would be amazing.
- I'm going to stop recording now.