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Lifestyle politics narratives without full political self-identification: A qualitative study of Italian eco-influ-activists active on Instagram[*]

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This article explores the motivations, beliefs, and self-identification of a qualitative sample of 20 Italian environmental communicators active on Instagram. The analysis of the biographical interviews and the specific focus on the self-categorization of being or not being an activist suggest that we can consider all the sample participants as falling within the category of eco-influ-activists. The majority do not consider themselves "pure" activists, and there are different reasons for this: some narratives can be related to political lifestyle activism, while the "self-identified" science communicators explicitly indicate their need to be recognized as "scientists" and not activists or politicians because they discuss scientific facts and knowledge, and they constantly show the need to be considered as "objective" as possible. The discussion of the results sheds new light on the environmental communicators and their originality based on the following: a) the interpretation of their self-identification as non-activists, and because they debate activists' and political topics, they can be included in the realm of eco-influ-activism, wherein environmental issues are debated and connected to consumer choices and lifestyles and/or scientific facts, and b) the blurred borders of the private and public spheres and of political and nonpolitical narratives.

Keywords: environmentalism; lifestyle politics; digital activism; Instagram; self-identification

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Introduction

This article analyzes 20 biographies of individuals who consistently, but not always as their main jobs, create and share digital content concerning environmental and social sustainability in different areas: climate and energy, environment and health, and lifestyles that are respectful of individual and collective well-being. The transmedia dimension characterizes all online narratives, but the people who participated in the biographical interviews were selected after 12 months of netnography, which made it possible to reconstruct the *media boundaries* of the individuals who were most involved in discussions on sustainability and the future of the planet, sustainability and food, sustainability and transport, and sustainability and fashion. The semantic fragility of the word "sustainability" reflects the porousness of the boundaries of the digital ecosystem in which this topic is discussed and has led to the emergence of profiles that can be, according to our analysis, considered ecological influ-activists (later: eco-influ-activists). By eco-influ-activist, we mean a subject who produces online content about consumption choices and/or shares scientific phenomena that is closely related to the environment and that incorporates an implicit political sense of everyday practices or longer-term action. Examples include vegetarian and vegan eating styles and the choice to boycott fast fashion in favor of adopting responsible fashion practices or, as a scientific fact, how human activity can impact climate change.

While the study of narratives was used for the netnography and to create the qualitative sample, the article debates the data of a specific selection of the entire biographies related to the beginning of the participants' life trajectories as environmental communicators, the descriptions of their efforts, and their self-identification—or not—as activists. When we refer to "environmental communicators," we include all the self-identification definitions provided by the research participants. The theoretical framework, as well as the results section, the discussion section, and the conclusion, will explain how all the interviewees can be considered ecological influ-activists. As part of the growing academic literature dealing with digital activism, this research study has two peculiarities: it gives a voice to those who share online content concerning environmental and social sustainability, and it contributes to enriching academic reflection on the motivations that drive individuals with highly diverse backgrounds to engage in producing online content to raise awareness of responsible consumption choices and behavior. This article is divided into eight sections. Two sections are devoted to discussing the literature review, while the theoretical framework aims to explore how eco-influ-activism can be adopted to interpret the data. This is followed by the section on the method and research questions, the results (two sections), the discussion, and the conclusion. The concluding paragraph emphasizes the peculiarity of the study and suggests research questions to consider to continue developing academic reflections on eco-influ-activists.

Literature review 1: Connecting consumption, politics, and lifestyle activism[1]

This article uses a cultural sociology lens to study the narratives of consumption and everyday life routines while recognizing that the ambivalent relationship between subjects and the market, including everyday practices, is affected by neoliberal logic (Maturo and Setiffi, 2020). Writing about political (or critical) consumption is always an attempt to underline the blurred boundaries of individual and collective action (Micheletti, 2003; Paltrinieri, 2012; Forno and Graziano, 2016; Pattaro and Setiffi, 2016), which inevitably reverberate in media narratives. This leads to further transformation of (narrated) consumer action as the academic core of the article: the blurred border between activists and non-activists. This synthesis can be seen as a digital mirror of what happened in 2003 when Michele Micheletti published her provocative book *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action* (New York: Palgrave, 2003). In it, she declared that shopping could be seen as a "political act" because the (individual) action of buying a product was not reducible to specific needs but could also include the rest of the society (the conditions of workers, eco-sustainability, etc.). In short, we can see the so-called political practices in a different light. It is well known that buying fair-trade products is different from participating in a purchase solidarity group, and the level of political engagement is different (individual vs. collective choices, among other dimensions); however, we can state that the rigid distinction between the public and private spheres no longer explains consumer choices and political actions. It should also be noted that there has been an increase in the political and hedonistic intentions of consumers: a fair-trade product can be bought for its quality or to "monetize" a status symbol (Degli Esposti, Riva, and Setiffi, 2019) as well as for ethical reasons. Shifting from the individual to the lifestyle, as a constellation of everyday choices that consumers usually take for granted, another clever academic "word marriage" has been created: lifestyle anarchist. This term refers to "someone who intentionally lives one's life according to specifically anarchist principles, attempting to incorporate their political philosophy into the minute activities of everyday life" (Purkis and Bowen 2004, p. 8).

Beginning with Max Weber, sociologists consider lifestyle to be a "set of routines and practices," and it is considered highly relevant in sustainability practices, as demonstrated by Welch and Warde (2015). Self-identity—who people think they are—is reflected in lifestyle choices, as is social identity—who people would like to be. Moreover, lifestyle is not confined to consumer practices but also includes the choices one makes in everyday aspects of "the reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991, p. 5), such as career and family. This set of choices can be overwhelming in consumer society, as Binkley (2007) stated.

More recently, *lifestyle politics* has referred to "all cultural formation around the use of everyday choices as a legitimate site of political expression." (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 9). The discourse of lifestyle politics reaches beyond radical movements; indeed, it is also a feature of mainstream contemporary politics in the United States. Politically inflected lifestyle

practices contest the division between what counts as “the personal” and “the political.” “Since personal acts hold political meaning for people, it becomes necessary to rethink what it means to engage in political activism” (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 9).

According to Portwood-Stacer, when activism is focused on lifestyle, it can be called *lifestyle activism.* The focus on lifestyle, individual choices, and sustainability cannot be considered a form of “academic fashion”; this position is in keeping with Beck’s reflections on the so-called risk society (1992). The market has re-politicized itself as a consequence of the risk society, which explains the inability of modern states and international bodies to resolve complex issues that inextricably intertwine environmental and social sustainability (e.g., the well-known “mad cow disease”). In this sense, responsible consumption becomes a space in which consumers and consumer groups can make their voices heard in national and international debates on issues that are traditionally discussed in the public sphere of citizenship.

If we are ready to accept the ambivalence of lifestyle and consumer choices and practices between the public and private spheres, a step forward should be made, and we should start being aware of the potential crucial role of environmental narratives. Environmental communicators represent a source of socialization for a sustainable lifestyle and, in some cases, collective and individual action that can be pursued for one to be more environmentally active. Sustainability communication has been investigated for many decades within traditional media; however, as Huber et al. (2022) pointed out in a recent article on eco-influencers on TikTok, more research is needed on social platforms in this regard. One of the critiques of news reporting on sustainability in traditional media is its inability to focus enough on solutions (Atasanova, 2019), while the structure and content of social media could overcome this weakness: “Social media and new online video formats have great potential for communicating environmental and science topics around the world,” (Huber et al., 2022, p. 713). The article does not investigate whether videos found on Instagram adhere to or challenge scientific consensus views; its primary aim is to interpret a part of the biography of the online communicators. However, scholars are now closely monitoring whether or not social media content refers to scientific consensus views. In a recent article, Allgaier (2019) analyzed a sample of 200 videos comprising environmental online content on YouTube, concluding that the majority of them supported worldviews that opposed scientific consensus views on climate change.

Literature review 2: Digital aspects of sustainability and the role of environmental communicators

Connection technologies have generated a culture in which the dynamics of social networks occupy a central position in daily life, profoundly influencing interactions with the networks. In this process, the Web is transformed into a flexible and adaptable platform based on data

and information sharing between individuals (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017; Bentivegna et al., 2019).

The emergence of new profiles and phenomena, thanks to the advent of the Internet and social networks, has made it more complicated to separate life online and offline. Owing to the "democratization" of celebrities (Cashmore, 2014; Pedroni, 2014; 2022), more and more people are capable of influencing others. The academic literature on these topics paints a fascinating picture of how activists and content creators use social media for collective action (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

Increasingly, online and offline forms of activism constitute inseparable and complementary social and psychological tools for politicization, debate, mobilization, and conflict (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Delving into the narratives of sustainability experts, environmental communicators, and eco-influencers reveals a unique form of communication. These individuals possess a special knack for personalizing political–environmental struggles; this trait is also observed in other public debates about, for example, the Arab Spring and political oppression (Howard and Hussain, 2013). This ability to humanize complex issues is a powerful tool in their arsenal, and it fosters empathy and connection with their audiences.

Owing to the emergence of climate change and the need for people to better understand this phenomenon and take individual actions toward it, new profiles of communicators have gained more visibility on online platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Regarding environmental content, many etiquettes—eco-influencers, content creators who focus on environmental issues, and green influencers, among others—have been used within the academic literature. Their published content comes in various forms, including advice on adopting "small" daily practices (e.g., vegan recipes), the climate crisis and greenwashing, minimalism, slow fashion, renewable energy, pollution, and waste. The concept of sustainability is used both to build an identity within the social network, showing a lifestyle achieved through the choice of certain practices and values, and as a marketing activity to sell products that are considered eco-friendly or sustainable (Chwialkowska, 2019).

Yildirim (2021) found that influencers have communication potential that can be used to support policymakers by promoting sustainable consumption models. The rise of green or sustainable influencers can be seen as an important source of help for politicians to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals identified by the United Nations. One of these influencers' stated goals is to guide and teach people to have a sustainable lifestyle. Considering the growing importance of digital communication, these influencers could play a significant role in disseminating responsible consumption practices.

These profiles can be seen as "information catalysts," as they can direct the community toward practices and actions that are accessible to all without having to recognize themselves as activists. In our case, the key elements of many sustainability experts are the narration of their personal (everyday) lives and the communication of their expertise[2]. Digital media offers many ways to express oneself, including photos, videos, and stories. At the same time, they favor the creation of a sort of *self-imposed disciplinary apparatus*, which is a series of unwritten rules implemented by those who work through social networks. This

can be seen as a kind of prison that limits an individual's expression and manifests itself through the performance anxiety generated by the constant connection. The individual who is exposed to social networks is continually pushed to interact and be "present." This results in constant pressure to attract attention and increase their visibility and number of followers, thus leading to continuous training in interpreting a self-imposed role (based on the results obtained). Those who use social networks are aware of being both objects and subjects of communication. To better perform their jobs, they reflect on what and how to publish to maintain and increase their social relationships, which are fundamental to carrying out this type of activity. For example, through collaborations between influencers or interactions in the comments of posts and reels, they strive to create, as much as possible, the illusion of a direct connection with their followers. Therefore, within an individual's profile, the story of their personal life becomes fundamental and is functional in terms of fueling social connections, sparking discussions, and taking positions. In this way, the people who follow them feel as though they are participating in their lives (Polesana, 2023).

According to Jenkins et al. (2016), there are various forms of political participation, including sharing information via social media; participating in online conversations via forums, blogs, and social media; creating original content, such as videos or memes, to comment on a current debate; using Twitter (now called X) or other microblogging platforms to mobilize a community to take collective action; and, finally, proposing solutions to address contemporary problems.

Theoretical framework: Eco-influ-activism

This paper's theoretical framework combines literature on (1) political consumption and (2) the narratives of digital communicators, both of which were briefly summarized in the two previous sections. The originality of the paper resides in two aspects: the combination of the two academic fields of study and the discussion of the findings. The latter, debated in specific sections, helps shed new light on the academic literature on influencer and digital activism. Taking its lead from this debate, this article provides shared visions of the self-identification of communicators, combining the sociopolitical sciences literature and the media studies literature.

There is growing interest and engagement in political consumerism practices and behaviors; however, within the academic literature, there is insufficient analysis of digital environmental narratives with a sociopolitical academic background in political consumerism. The theoretical framework presented here aims to enrich the academic literature in this regard, combining the classification of lifestyle politics provided by de Moor in 2016 and, more recently, that provided by Murru, Pedroni, and Tosoni (2024). The authors focus on understanding how activism is influenced by the practices of influencers and how mainstream influencers engage with and are transformed by activist practices. This is where the authors find room for what they call "influ-activism": moving from the simplistic dichotomy

of “pure activism” versus “commercial influence” to the exploration of the complex and fluid space of influ-activism. Although we can no longer consider digital activism and influencer culture to be separate strands of literature, we can analyze these new profiles of communicators by recognizing that their voices fit within a neoliberal and commodifying logic of social media communication (Poell and van Dijck, 2015), albeit with some unexpected specificities.

In de Moor’s (2006, p. 6) classification, the author defines lifestyle change as the most basic strategic logic of lifestyle politics: “It advances societal change either by changing one’s own individual lifestyle, or as a collective that supports the conscious lifestyle choices of its adherents. Individual lifestyle change (Type 1) is mainly discussed in the growing literature on political consumerism, which shows that citizens are increasingly using their role as consumers to directly address their political concerns.” Examples can be lifestyles that consider limiting carbon footprint, buying local seasonal products, and consuming a vegetarian diet. de Moor’s classification comprises six categories of political lifestyle politics around the axis of the level of organization (individual vs. collective) and strategies: direct vs. indirect and, for the direct strategies, the inward/outward orientation. However, the majority of the environmental communicators’ narratives of self-identification can be included within the Type 1 lifestyle. The remainder of the online narratives refer to scientific facts that are discussed to underline the impact of human activity on the planet. It should be noted that de Moor explicitly refers to practices and routines, which combine to create lifestyle politics, while in this article, we explicitly consider how environmental communicators described their contents and the narratives themselves; we do not consider their personal behaviors. de Moor’s classification helps underscore the shift between “classical” political forms of participation (e.g., voting) and (individual) consumer political participation. If the “light” political part of the environmental communicators can be interpreted through the lens of the sociopolitical science literature, the media studies literature provides insightful ideas for understanding the blurred borders between influencers and activists. The former are rather included in the political science literature, while the latter are obviously widely discussed in all the participation forms. Following Murru, Pedroni, and Tosoni (2024), influ-activists challenge the media arena not because they can be considered activists but because their narratives are implicitly a new form of civic engagement.

The topic of influ-activism needs to be treated carefully: the narratives do not always represent an attempt to participate online by adopting a clear activist or political perspective; however, their narratives consider the political implications of consumer choices. In fact, it should be noted that the communication of environmental sustainability as an arena of political space translates into a narrative that inevitably reduces the complexity of the ecological transition on a semantic level and personalizes the logic of political action mediated by digital platforms (Murru and Vicari, 2021). However, such a media narrative covers a knowledge gap that is derived from traditional socialization agencies (family and school), constituting an imprecise vade mecum that is conditioned by media ecosystems that are governed by specific affordances (Poell and van Dijck, 2013). The narrative is “ready to use” because it is based on recipes and sustainable solutions that are mainly adoptable

in everyday life, imperfect and potentially contradictory, but also easily acquired as a routine practice.

The following sections of the article interpret the data underlying how all the research participants can be included in what we refer to as eco-influ-activism, in which the blurred borders between influence and activism explicitly refer to sustainability and environmental issues: the impact of lifestyle and human beings' activities on the planet. In both cases, one challenge is missing: the narratives and self-identification of the communicators can be framed within a(n) (un)contested capitalist society (Forno and Graziano, 2016). In other words, their narratives and self-identification can be seen as a way to communicate responsible consumer strategies and choices within the frame of neoliberal society (Maturo and Setiffi, 2020).

Method and research questions

The design of the research study includes two phases of netnography[3]: spring 2022 and then 2023 (an overall period of 12 months). This phase was devoted to defining the qualitative sample. Regarding the netnography period, hashtags were initially used on Instagram, as they were popular on other social networks. However, finding Italian hashtags related to sustainability was challenging, and the term was often misused for spam and advertisements. Many profiles stopped using hashtags as they gained followers, keeping them mainly for sponsored posts or reels. Our research into Italian online communicators (specifically self-reported as green influencers and content creators related to environmental issues, among others) shifted focus from hashtags to analyzing interactions in comments and collaborations. It has been noted that Instagram's algorithm promotes related content based on user engagement. A network of people interested in sustainability emerged, and several topics, such as the environmental crisis of pollinators and related issues, went viral during this period. When someone begins to discuss a topic, many others begin to talk about the same issue. These individuals vary in regard to communication styles, academic backgrounds, and approaches (e.g., within the vegan community, honey consumption remains a controversial issue). However, assembling the initial sample by utilizing netnography and studying the interactions among these influencers became feasible. During the netnography period, the initial sample was expanded to include some self-reported science communicators who spoke about environmental sustainability during the same study period, interacting with the content published by the initial sample. The labels of eco-influencers, green communicators/content creators and science communicators were used at the beginning of the research; after the interviews, we used each participant's preferred label or none at all to respect their self-representation. The article does not explicitly refer to the netnography findings (ethnographic notes will not be included here); however, we think that clarifying how the sample was created could make it possible to grasp the article's main contents. While the netnography was used to select the sample, the article refers to the

narratives as a "back scenario," providing evidence related to the 20 biographical interviews, collected and debated within the article, which shed new light on a topic that is less investigated within the academic literature: lifestyle politics and the self-identification of online communicators. The biographical interviews (Bichi, 2002) were conducted with the self-reported eco-influencers and science communicators, and this article will interpret the data collected from the interviews. The biographical trace included many areas of investigation (e.g., opinions on specific topics debated online); however, the article aims to focus on the motivations and choices of creating online content as well as on self-representation. The three research questions (RQs) are as follows:

- RQ1: Why did they start?
- RQ2: How do they describe what they do online?
- RQ3: Do they consider themselves activists?

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and the main profile information. The interview participants are aged between 22 and 60: Group 1, 22–30 years old (n = 9); Group 2, 31–40 years old (n = 8); and Group 3: 41–60 years old (n = 3). All the respondents have a high level of education (bachelor/master/PhD). The qualitative sample is well balanced between people who say that the online activity can be considered a job and those who disagree.

Table 1 – Sample of interviewees

Pseudonym	*Sex*	*Age (range)*	*Education*	*Full time job?*
Andrea	M	1	Ph. D.	No
Marta	F	2	Bachelor degree	Yes
Alessandro	M	2	Master degree	Yes
Giada	F	2	Master degree	No
Roberto	M	3	Ph. D.	No
Alessia	F	3	Bachelor degree	Yes
Marco	M	1	Master's degree	Yes
Giovanni	M	2	Master degree	No
Francesca	F	1	Master degree	Yes
Michela	F	1	Bachelor degree	Yes
Nicola	M	1	Bachelor degree	No
Erika	F	1	Master degree	No
Augusto	M	3	Bachelor degree	Yes
Gianni	M	2	Master degree	No
Simona	F	2	Master degree	Yes
Veronica	F	2	Master degree	No
Tiziano	M	1	Master degree	Yes
Enrico	M	2	Ph. D.	No

Pseudonym	*Sex*	*Age (range)*	*Education*	*Full time job?*
Carla	F	1	Master degree	Yes
Eleonora	F	1	Master degree	No

Results (1): The starting point

A crucial and interesting aspect investigated based on biographical tracing is why people started posting online content related to the environment.[4] The COVID-19 pandemic encouraged many people to start sharing posts and content online. Many respondents declared that they had more time to think about how they could share specific scientific knowledge, and in other cases, the pandemic was a crucial moment for people to start shaping their future in a different way. One study participant stated,

> Then there was the pandemic. I started teaching part-time at a school, along with my other job, during a period when I was doing two jobs. When there was a pandemic, obviously, I no longer worked at events, because there were no events anymore. So, since I had all the qualifications, I entered public school, initially as a temporary teacher with annual substitutions. Then I took part in a competition to become a tenured teacher, and I passed. In the meantime, however, I had launched my online science outreach project, which was giving me a lot of satisfaction, but also taking up a lot of time, so I decided, despite the tenured position, not to continue in the Italian public school, and I resigned a year ago. For a year now, I have been working as a full-time science outreach worker; the book I published last year sold very well, so at the moment, I can support myself in this way. – Alessandro

> So, initially during my studies, mainly when I was studying nutrition, I realized how much misinformation there was in this area [and] how much I myself had strongly mistaken beliefs dictated by circulating false myths. So, I gave myself a goal, after I was qualified and everything, to regulate everything—even to be able to talk about it. I gave myself this as a goal, as a mission, to try to do a little bit of dissemination in this area to encourage a slightly more serene, slightly healthier relationship with food. – Giada

Sharing online content related to environmental issues and, in some cases, reflections on social justice require an implicit interest—for some interviewees, passion—regarding the topic, as stated below:

> […] for several reasons: it has always been something that I took care in, and I was passionate about… I remember other kinds of activities I did when I was a high school student and during my first period at the university. In these two periods of time, I talked about the environment quite often and was involved in peer-to-peer activities related to how people could engage in a more sustainable lifestyle. Then, the Fridays for Futures movement and Greta Thunberg made the first steps, [and] the urgency of dealing with the impact of human activity on the planet became a thing for everyone, including me. – Simona

Table 2. Motivations of online communicators

Pseudonym	*Motivation*
Andrea	Pandemic; job aspiration
Marta	Pandemic; job dissatisfaction
Alessandro	Pandemic; passion
Giada	Passion; fake news
Roberto	Follower request; fake news
Alessia	Passion; job aspiration
Marco	Passion; job aspiration
Giovanni	Pandemic; job aspiration
Francesca	Passion
Michela	University and work path; passion
Nicola	Passion; job aspiration
Erika	Passion
Augusto	Job
Gianni	Passion; Job
Simona	Job; Pandemic; Passion
Veronica	Pandemic; fake news
Tiziano	Passion; job aspiration
Enrico	Passion
Carla	Passion
Eleonora	Pandemic; passion

Results (2 and 3): Self-reported label and activists/non-activists

The interpretation of data on how the environmental communicators in the sample describe themselves depicts a fragmented scenario: science communicators, content creators, and green influencers, among others. Considering the formation of identity as a social dialogue and the use of the biographical interview, we did not investigate the veracity of the self-identified identity; rather, we focused on analyzing how the self-reported label was interpreted[5]. One interviewee stated,

> I always presented myself as a “content creator”; however, I think that I am a real “green influencer” because it puts more stress on the work I do. I like producing content related to sustainability, and I think that is totally new right now talking about sustainability issues in Italy that I perceive belong to a niche. – Marta

Another interviewee stated:

This is a very difficult question because the job of the influencer is primarily based on sponsorship…Am I wrong? The advertising—something that I refuse to do—is against my deontology because I am a medical doctor. If I decide to promote some products, I could get a fine… Instead, my "salary" comes from other sources. For this reason, I would not define myself as a influencer. However, a person who shares content online tries to influence others, right? Therefore, I can include myself in this category. Perhaps science communicator would sound better; I would gain more respect. That's why I do not like labels. – Eleonora

Table 3. Self-reported labels of environmental communicators

Pseudonym	*Self-reported label**
Andrea	science communicator
Marta	content creator/green influencer
Alessandro	science communicator
Giada	science communicator
Roberto	science communicator
Alessia	green content creator
Marco	science communicator
Giovanni	content creator
Francesca	she does not like to be labeled
Michela	content creator
Nicola	science communicator
Erika	content creator
Augusto	green influencer/sustainability communicator
Gianni	journalist/content creator
Simona	content creator
Veronica	science communicator
Tiziano	activist/science communicator
Enrico	science communicator
Carla	activist/science communicator/ content creator
Eleonora	science communicator/no label/content creator

It is difficult for the sample participants to identify with the activism label, and one that can conform to or identify their new type of action within social networks has not yet been created. This is precisely why it is necessary to think and theorize about the phenomenon of influ-activism.

When discussing specific issues, such as environmental sustainability and climate change, online communicators feel the pressure to demonstrate and build their expertise on the subject. Credibility plays a central role in eco-narratives. Competence emerges as a fundamental root of credibility, tracing its origins to the depth of knowledge and preparation

that an individual demonstrates in a particular field (Gili, 2005). Beyond this, trust is built on shared values and common ground where individuals recognize each other. Those who embody ideal behavior models and align themselves with the ethical principles shared on the network naturally become more credible in the eyes of those who observe them, such as the content creator's followers. Personal integrity and consistency in actions play a key role in confirming trust through ethical and cohesive behavior.

In our sample, the participants who were interested in discussing animal welfare produce expectations in their followers regarding a full overlap between what is narrated—consumption behavior with a reduced environmental impact—and what is adopted as a personal private practice—adherence to a vegan lifestyle. The affective dimension is conceptualized through emotional bonds with others, which becomes an essential pillar of the credibility of eco-influencer activists. Creating positive relationships, sharing emotional support, and experiencing illusory closeness contribute to establishing fertile ground for building a bond of trust. In digital contexts, online interactions, such as likes and comments, become vehicles for expressing this relationship, thus strengthening the fabric of relationships. These three roots—competence, values, and affection—intertwine to form a solid foundation for the credibility and reliability of the influencer.

The narratives are implicitly political, as they openly criticize the lifestyle of the *turbo-capitalist society* and shed new light on the indefinite boundary between personal positions, which are taken to respond to techno-commercial logics, and the manifestation of one's (political) position, corresponding to a personal belief. This boundary is constantly being redefined, as it emerges from their descriptions of themselves as communicators. In fact, the majority do not consider themselves "pure activists." The refusal to be recognized as being in a standard (or traditional) sphere of action is consistent with the awareness of being able to exercise influence by placing oneself in a border position between the private and public spheres and between the maximization of individual action and the pursuit of a collective purpose. In other cases, the activism dimension reflects their idea to "mobilize" people, not only to inform them. This is referred to in the following interview excerpt:

> Yes, it's a form of activism that reaches more homes, so it crosses the material boundary. Yet, when I'm referred to as a qualified person, I somehow don't like being called a content creator. Still, I really like to be called an activist because what I try to do is mobilize people beyond the screen to create political pressure in their spheres of competence or their geographical areas. – Carla

As Bobel's (2007) research on the identity narratives of activists in social movements demonstrates, one can be an online and offline activist without perceiving oneself as such, owing to a lack of self-recognition in the identity of an activist who is considered to be of high moral prestige. Bobel questions the choice to consider the self-perception of identity as a crucial element for participation in social movements, arguing that one can engage in activism without necessarily identifying as an activist. As demonstrated in prior studies (e.g., Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2023), new classifications are required to define the most recent climate activists, as strategies, motivations, and communication tactics have become widely

diversified. In some cases, associations with the term “activist” or the collective actions carried out by activist associations, such as Ultima Generazione and Extinction Rebellion, led some of the interviewees to distance themselves from the term, insinuating that some environmental activists are guilty of creating misinformation or carrying out actions that are detrimental to the cause. This outlook is evident in the following excerpts:

> They [participants who belong to a movement] are people who truly dedicate a large part of their existence to certain struggles and also have a huge expenditure of time, energy, and commitment [...] It is what I mainly define as activism, and as much as I support this kind of initiative [...] on my channels [...] I absolutely do not want to define myself as an activist. […] I do not want to be defined as an activist in any way, because I want this thing to remain theirs, and it is right that it remain theirs; I create content and disseminate information. – Marta

> You can use Instagram or TikTok or any other social media as a megaphone to amplify your voice and your intention or to talk about a problem and build aggregation around it, but it cannot end—be born and die—solely on social media […] Let us say I am definitely not…I will never be Angela Davis. I do not think I can ever be. – Francesca

> In a post-normal science context, the communicator and the scientists are activists. That is, you can be more or less, you can play more or less the role of crowd mobilizer, but what you are doing is political because in contexts of this kind, the relationship between science and society, which is already never extricable [...] in those moments, it is unique: When I deal with certain topics that we can potentially consider post-normal science, yes I believe I am an activist. When I talk about the ideal gas law, no. – Tiziano

> I believe that, first of all, any form of disclosure is also a form of activism to some extent, in the sense that activism is taking action to change society—that is, carrying out actions that try to bring actions outside…let us say, the politics of trying to induce positive social change. […] We could call it information activism. – Alessandro.

Although there is an understanding of why these actions are taken and of the importance of activism, there is also criticism of the type of communication adopted and the type of action carried out. This is evident in the following quotes:

> I would not define myself as an activist if I had to compare myself to all those people and groups who act in a way that I do not consider correct. Let me explain better: attitudes like those of the Ultima Generazione, which I do not judge from an organizational point of view. I only judge facts that they put forward in my opinion are wrong. It makes no sense to deface art, for example, to make people talk about themselves. – Augusto.

> Fridays for Future, at least until now—so, in the last five years—in my opinion, has had a positive effect on reality. I repeat, for me, the effect is important, right? I am practically a utilitarian, a consequentialist, so if they have had a positive effect, I see it clearly. I fear that in other realities, however, the overall effect they have had or are having is more negative. [...] For example, with Ultima Generazione, overly strong actions could polarize the community so much that public opinion is in favor of the opposite position, and the overall result could be negative. – Marco

A more recent article titled “Are You a Researcher or an Activist?” (Bhopal, 2023) explores the dilemma between the roles of researcher and activist. This issue also surfaced in the interviews conducted, particularly in the context of climate change debates. Some individuals strive to clearly separate their identities as researchers or activists, while others do not. Numerous interviewees expressed similar sentiments, such as “I studied this subject at university, so I am qualified to discuss it” or “I completed a specific university course that gives me a deeper understanding of this topic.” This trend is particularly noticeable among science communicators. Some of them prefer not to be labeled as activists so that they can discuss certain issues with thoughtfulness and impartiality. They perceive themselves as conveyors of truth and objectivity, utilizing platforms such as Instagram and YouTube to make scientific knowledge accessible to a wider audience (Rubin, 2020). Some interviewees emphasized the importance of upholding the integrity of scientific facts rather than presenting personal beliefs or viewpoints. This is evidenced in the following excerpts:

> I consider science communication and activism two things that are separate, must be separate; the objectives are different […] the objective (of the activists) is not to inform in their case but to advocate one and only one thesis. – Roberto

> A mix should not be expected between personal opinions and real data. Activism leverages data to convey an opinion, perhaps even inflating certain data with quotation marks, inflating through words, for example, or by choosing not-very-reliable sources not corresponding to reality, and all to convey someone’s own ideas. – Nicola

Discussion

The motivations for starting to share content online vary; however, the pandemic played a crucial role in pushing this participation: sharing lifestyles, calling attention to the effect of meat consumption, and so on. For a small proportion of the sample, sharing contents online can be considered a “job aspiration,” while passion is perceived as a common driver that is more or less explicit. It should be noted that self-identification represents a very fragmented scenario: more labels are considered for describing themselves, and this also reflects the fact that almost half of the study participants do not consider this online work an official job. Different profiles emerge, and they are necessary for understanding why they can be considered eco-influ-activists or not.

Paradoxically, we found forms of eco-influ-activism despite people’s complete self-recognition as activists. This is precisely how the interpretation of the data suggests that all the participants should be included in this category for their narratives and blurred self-identification. The main reason why they do not always explicitly refer to themselves as activists is that they want to be perceived as “neutral” (this is more common among the self-identified science communicators), while the other participants who refer to other self-identification etiquettes (content creator, green influencer, etc.) consider activism a noble activity that is not strictly related to their work online (especially if they compare themselves

with people who engage in social movements). Their opinion is in line with the academic literature but is also consistent with political action that is mediated by lifestyle. In their case, we cannot consider the "lived" lifestyle but rather the narrated one and their self-identification.

All the sample participants can be included for their narratives and/or their self-identification as eco-influ-activists for three reasons:

1) They occupy an arena of ambivalence between the private and public spheres regarding issues related to social and environmental sustainability.

2) Sustainability becomes part of a narrated political lifestyle that implicitly or explicitly involves the impact of human action on the planet.

3) They present themselves with different "identity etiquettes"; however, they all want to sensibilize and/or mobilize people as a kind of "soft power."

Conclusion

This article has provided data and explanations that support the new key-role profile: the eco-influ-activist. All the participants in the qualitative Italian study present characteristics that could be included in this new (soft) form of political action. None of the sample participants can be considered "mainstream influencers"; therefore with their narratives and self-identification, they all engage with political and social aspects related, in our case, to environmental issues.

In short, if we accept the blurred line between the public and private spheres in consumer practices and sustainability, we can also consider that eco-influ-activists can provide reflections on sustainability that have (or do not have) scientific roots and sustainability tips that can be implemented in everyday life. With the development of the profile of eco-influ-activists, we should be aware of two risks: on the one hand, that few academic studies investigate the credibility of the sources promoted online and, on the other hand, what can happen in the future, as well depicted by Beck (1992), referring to the possibility of creating a common global narrative wherein the individual choice completely substitutes the collective actions, reducing the political action and the pressure on companies and public institutions to make a change within environmental politics.

Being conscious that these individuals act in the logic of the market (they all receive payment in some form: sponsorship, festival participation, book sales, etc.) and cannot have full control over the power of algorithmics and their role in neoliberal society (in our case, Instagram), we argue that they should be investigated even more closely because they contribute to the online debate on environmental and social sustainability that attempts to close the gaps between communication from public institutions and private companies and to the adoption of specific behaviors in everyday life as well as create space for reflections on and engagement in political actions.

Biographical notes

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Notes

[1] In the editors' interpretative proposal (Murru, Pedroni, and Tosoni, 2024), digital influencer culture can be interpreted through three levels of analysis: the influencers (who they are and their self-promotion and activism strategies), the digital ecosystem of influencers (e.g., the discursive strategies used to position themselves in the media ecosystem), and the influencers' audiences (the influencer–follower relationship, etc.). Picking up on the curators' interpretative scheme, the article aims to delve into the motivation and life choices at the origin of the work trajectory of sustainability communicators (first dimension).

[2] Some participants describe themselves as "science communicators," among other etiquettes.

[3] Netnography is a social research technique that involves analyzing people's interactions and behaviors within online communities. This approach combines the concepts of "internet" and "ethnography," providing a way to study online cultures and social contexts in a similar way to traditional ethnography. Netnography allows researchers to dive into the digital environment and explore various aspects of the experiences and dynamics that unfold online. The primary goal is to understand and interpret the social practices, interpersonal relationships, communication patterns, and cultural phenomena that arise within virtual communities (Morais et al., 2020).

[4] As previously stated, all the respondents use different platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.). We focus our analysis on Instagram (selection of the sample), but the content of their narratives can be applied to different platforms.

[5] Only one participant holds an academic position. Within the article, the term “science communicator” is used as a self-reported label; therefore, their narratives related to how they describe themselves cannot be interpreted through the lens of the literature that investigates how the science is debated in the public sphere (Neresini, 2020) nor that of the specific role of academic science communicators in the public debate (Pellegrini and Rubin, 2017).