SUSTAINABILITY INFLUENCERS: BETWEEN MARKETERS AND EDUCATORS

Taylan Yalcin
California State University Channel Islands

Cristina Nistor
Chapman University

Ekin Pehlivan
California State University Channel Islands

SUMMARY: *Sustainability has recently become a mainstream research and managerial interest topic, as consumers worry about climate change and the effects of consumption. Social media plays an important educational role: #zerowaste has more than 4 million posts on Instagram, with consumers showing their efforts to produce less trash and conserve. We propose that marketers have an educational role: to share information about products through content marketing. We use examples from main venues of social media, such as YouTube and Instagram, and adapt the conceptual framework from Nistor et al. (2018) to capture omnidirectional content sharing of influencers as both educators and marketers.*

Keywords: Influencer marketing, content marketing, sustainability, minimalism, zero waste.

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

Ever-increasing exploitation of Earth's natural resources pushed a sizable segment of millennials to react by reducing their consumption (Cheng, 2019). Moreover, the intangible value exchange shifted the purchase-based understanding of consumption to a learning-based one (Ind, Iglesias & Schultz, 2013). In the past decade, the rise of content sharing platforms has allowed this minimalist approach to create its own consumption culture, with consumers becoming influencers who share content about sustainable techniques and products with other consumers.

As Bill Gates remarked in 1996, "Content is king!" Information technologies adapted to new marketing approaches enabled content to become an important part of the marketing managers' quest to connect with consumers. Social media platforms connect consumers easily across the world and thus establish a space for consumers to create and share content about their lives, beliefs, and product preferences. Marketers recognized the potential for influencing the content created and shared on social media platforms and have started using sponsored content as a way to reach consumers (Linqia, 2019). Top social media influencers with millions of followers who engage in content marketing might earn $100,000 or more for a single photograph or post (Kapner & Terlep 2019). The value of these posts is not only dependent on the breadth of the influencer's reach but also the depth of their engagement, with some industry trends indicating that engagement is actually bigger for influencers with smaller followings (TapInfluence, 2018).

As the practice of consumption changes, marketing practices are evolving to engage consumers differently. By virtue of providing meaningful and relevant content for their followers, influencers try to balance between informing, educating, entertaining, and promoting (Lieb, 2012). In this paper, we propose that influencers of all scales and consumers (i.e. their followers) are in an omnidirectional conversation on social media and create content, both organic and sponsored, with the role to educate, promote and entertain. Thus, the culture of sustainable consumption community is emerging organically through consumers' interactions.

In the sustainability area, the omnidirectional content sharing capability social media platforms provide has helped create a consumer community with the common mission of consuming in a sustainable way. We propose that in the social media environment, especially among eco-influencers, there is added emphasis on the educational role of marketing as a way to share information about products and their uses through content marketing while also changing the consumption mindset of 'more is more' to a minimalist (i.e. 'less is more') consumption mindset.

In this paper, we rely on the conceptual framework discussed in Nistor et al. (2018) about omnidirectional dynamics in marketing relationships to understand how consumers can contribute to the conversation by creating content and sharing that content with other consumers. In this framework, information is shared between marketers and consumers in all directions, allowing everyday actions, like minimizing trash or living in a tiny house, to have educational power and incentivize other consumers to follow suit.

Social media platforms are unique in that consumers are influencers themselves and can have a role in marketing and sharing information about new products, while also disciplining other influencers who may not be truthful in their content production. Influencers with many followers, called celebrity influencers or mega influencers, are a powerful way of reaching many consumers. At the same time, influencers with fewer followers, called micro (if they have a few hundred thousand followers) or nano influencers (if they have a few thousand followers) may reach fewer, but deeply committed and engaged consumers. While large celebrity influencers may have more followers, higher reach, and thus a bigger speaking platform, it is the micro and nano influencers who lead in the consumer engagement metric (TapInfluence 2018) and have deeper ties with their followers.

In the following sections, we further explore how Youtubers and Instagram influencers use omnidirectional content sharing to create information about a sustainable economy. We focus on Youtube and Instagram as the main venues consumers use for social media (Statista, 2019). Facebook is also widely used but has a focus on sponsored social ads rather than influencer content creation. We researched lists of top eco-influencers extensively and gathered data on influencer characteristics around the world in order to understand how marketing communications travel in the social media environment. In this paper, we give a few selected examples from influencers with a focus on eco or sustainability influencers.

Marketing and Consumption in a Sustainable Economy

Recent marketing literature has emphasized the role of consumers' choices for sustainable brands and products, and how important it is for businesses to acknowledge these sustainability preferences and have a strategic plan for incorporating sustainability into their business model (McDaniel & Rylander, 1993; Connelly, 2011). As consumers become more aware of the impact

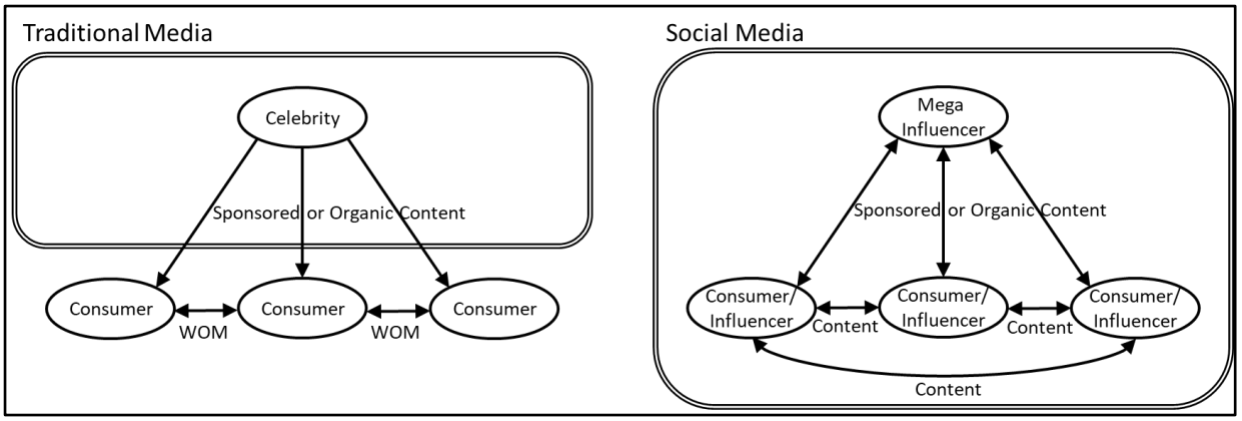
production and consumption has on the environment, they may choose to minimize their consumption or offset their choices by making more thoughtful purchases. Businesses have to adjust their approach to sustainability efforts and adopt a customer-centric approach to sustainability marketing (Sheth et al., 2010). As a result, marketing messages that incorporate salient environmental or sustainable messages can overperform traditional marketing communications: researchers have been developing toolboxes for measuring sustainability messages and their effectiveness (for example, see Balderjahn, 2013; Lim, 2017).

A PROMOTIONAL STRATEGY FOR A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

Omnidirectional Content Sharing

In Figure 1 below, we illustrate the omnidirectional content sharing that has become more common due to the use of social media in marketing communications. In a traditional media channel, the marketing messages reach consumers easily, but consumers have little chance of sharing these messages with each other or distorting the message to personalize them. While consumers are the audience, they are not contributors to the content creation (therefore outside of the medium). One way consumers can improve the messages or share them is through word of mouth, which is difficult to disseminate and also difficult to analyze and study by researchers and advertisers (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). However powerful word of mouth can be in a traditional marketing channel, it is limited to a consumer's direct circle of friends, as each consumer can potentially reach a limited number of other consumers. In contrast, in a social media environment, each consumer is linked to many other consumers and can easily disseminate "word of mouth" about products and services (Goldenberg et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2010). Moreover, consumers themselves become powerful creators of marketing content. Consumers can rely on their followers and friends and share their opinions about products or react to marketing messages that reach them in real-time. As pointed out in Nistor et al. (2018), the social media environment has changed the way consumers behave toward marketing messages, allowing each consumer to act as a personal brand: marketing communications become omnidirectional. Nistor et al. (2018) focus on omni-directional deceptive messages, while in this paper, we extend the framework to include all types of messages. In this environment, all consumers can be influencers and able to reach many other consumers, depending on how interesting their content is and how many followers they have.

Figure 1
Marketing Communications in Traditional Media and in Social Media



The Content Marketing Institute defines content marketing (CM) as "the marketing and business process for creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience - with the objective of driving profitable customer action" (Content Marketing Institute, 2019). According to Rowley (2008), CM is a management process where a firm identifies, analyzes, and satisfies customer demand to gain profit with the use of digital content distributed through electronic channels. While there are many definitions provided in the literature (see Rancati and Gordini, 2014 for a summary of definitions), most have overlapping core components represented in the two definitions cited.

Figure 1 illustrates how consumers in this framework share marketing content: in a social media environment, all consumers are able to freely interact with all other consumers and information flows in all directions. Marketing content can be organic or sponsored by a brand who then has some control over the content created. This is in stark contrast with marketing content diffusion by end consumers in a traditional media environment in two critical ways. First the consumers have no way to disseminate the messages beyond a few geographically connected friends via word of mouth. Second, the consumers also have no way to give feedback or interact with the celebrity or brand sending the marketing content. Similarly, sponsored messages in the traditional media environment allow brands the most control over the message, unlike the social media environment where the influencer will have more control over the message that ultimately reaches consumers.

Content creation and consumption has increased with the spread of content sharing platforms such as YouTube (video content), Reddit (text content), Instagram (visual content) or SoundCloud (audio content), with the most popular platforms for brands and consumers being Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and blogs (Linqia, 2019). With the increase of the consumption, online content has also become a way for brands to reach consumers directly and has thus become commoditized, with sometimes the large monetary value associated with sponsored content. Content creators such as influencers have followers that constitute both a target for marketing purposes and an audience for the message that is being disseminated by the influencer. Thus, the influencer becomes an important channel of communication between the company engaging in influencer marketing and the consumer, with direct feedback coming through the influencer from

the followers who can engage with the content and also create their own content through shares, reposts or messages etc.

INFLUENCER MARKETING

Influencer marketing has been steadily growing on social media, with most brands aiming to commit an increasing share of their ad dollar to influencer campaigns: 54% of advertisers (with a total ad budget above $500,000) plan to spend more than $250,000 in 2019, with 17% of these planning to spend more than $1 million in 2019 and with 39% of those surveyed planning to increase the share of their advertising budget dedicated to influencer marketing. (Linqia, 2019).

Influencer campaigns tend to share the spotlight with organic content created by the influencers themselves. Indeed, it is the authenticity of the online persona of the influencer that seems to matter most to consumers who follow the content created by that influencer, sponsored or not (Dziuban, 2016).

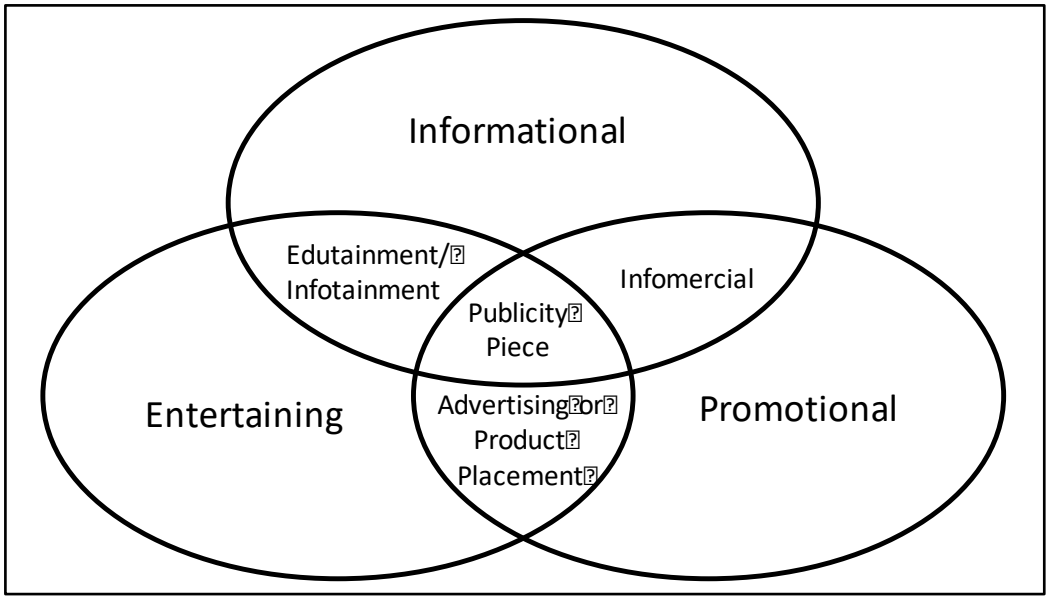
Most visible influencers are in several industries like food, travel, fashion, and style, photography, lifestyle, design, beauty, sport, and fitness (Forsey, 2019) with niche industries like eco-influencers or sustainability influencers becoming more visible as global sustainability worries get traction with consumers in general (Jordans, 2019). Brands themselves are trying to reach consumers newly worried about sustainability and the environment by reaching out directly to consumers and promoting their own sustainability practices (Bertelli, 2019).

Eco-Influencers, as all other categories, are consumers who have followers on social media online. They may be linked to just a few followers or millions of other consumers. Advertising agencies that rely on influencers usually categorize the influencers based on their following: nano influencers have the smallest follower number, micro-influencers can have up to several hundred thousand followers, while mega influencers even get millions of followers. For big celebrity influencers, several million other customers may be following them every day. The eco-influencer world is still very new, so it is difficult to find celebrity eco-influencers, but there are many who have over a million followers: Greta Thunberg is just the latest sustainability influencer to gain celebrity status. While it is difficult to imagine Greta would post a sponsored post for a brand, most of the other eco-influencers, even the mega influencers, do sometimes share content that is sponsored in addition to the organic content they produce.

Purpose: Informational, Entertaining and/or Promotional

Influencers create content that includes information about products, educational posts about sustainable living, and content with entertainment value for the followers. The content does not always fit into just one category. In addition, the content can be organic or sponsored by a brand, particularly if the brand has a sustainability mission and image. Figure 2 illustrates the overlaps that characterize the eco-influencer world.

Figure 2
Content May Have Educational, Informational and/or Promotional Value



Lieb (2012) suggests that content marketers create content to serve a variety of purposes. It can aid in brand management by increasing recognition, credibility, or authenticity, and thus may have a promotional purpose. Content marketing can also create value by providing information to inspire consumers and entertain them. In most cases, there are hybridized appeals that have been given their own name in the industry. For instance, content that is both informational (education or news) and entertaining are considered "Edutainment" (or "Infotainment"), whereas "Infomercials" combine informative content with clearly promotional content. Most promotional videos containing an element of entertainment can be considered advertising or product placement by influencers. Quite like traditional publicity, publicity on social media is also achieved through conveying sponsored information to the consumer in an entertaining way that does not necessarily push to sell the product. In this category, companies provide clear guidelines when contacting influencers; influencers then create content that contains the information provided by the company, in an entertaining and engaging manner, with the clear intention of featuring the product.

In Table 1, we offer some examples of the types of content marketers create, both in the traditional marketing environment as well as in the new social media ecosystem. All the examples are from the intersection of types of content created, as these are where the brand's interest would be in the social media world. We focus on examples from California but also select a few other influencers from all over the world: our examples are representative of the sustainability movement rather than geographic location.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The influencer marketing industry is now entering an exciting phase, with companies adopting "always-on" campaigns (Linqia, 2019; TapInfluence, 2018) and tracking engagement and ROI in increasingly sophisticated ways. Brand managers have options in terms of what

influencers to use and what platforms to target, as well as being able to tailor campaigns via full-service platforms and not be limited by in-house, ad-hoc campaigns that have plagued the industry in the past (Kapner & Terlep, 2019). However, there are still important questions to consider for industries that are not clearly established as mainstream.

Sustainability is becoming both a required product attribute for a new generation of shoppers as well as a way for brands to distinguish themselves and cater to millennials (Gibbons, 2019; Nielsen, 2015). In this context, eco-influencers who focus on sustainability issues have a dual role in creating content to educate other consumers while also promoting eco-friendly, sustainable products.

Managers in charge of eco-friendly products have an opportunity to reach consumers through social media by engaging influencers. They can utilize either big celebrity influencers, like Gwyneth Paltrow, who regularly advertises products like sustainable water "Flow," who have a large following of consumers, or smaller micro-influencers who may have just a few thousand followers. One potential benefit of working with micro and nano influencers is that they command less money for their efforts while their followers are more engaged in general (Smith, 2016). There is, however, the problem that small influencers are difficult to find and hard to manage: more of them are needed to reach the same total number of consumers. Companies have struggled in the past to run large campaigns of small influencers, leading to ad-hoc campaigns with little tracking of results (Pathak, 2016). Online automated platforms and full-service influencer agencies are currently vying for managers' attention while the industry is still adjusting to a quickly changing online social media landscape (Linqia, 2019).

Table 1
Content Types Focusing on Sustainable Living and Consumption

Content	Traditional	Social/New Media Influencers
Advertisement or Product Placement	"Evolution of Organic" (2016) a documentary about California organic farming (Rose 2017).	Jeannette Ogden, a micro influencer from Orange County CA aka "shutthekaleup" who focuses on clean eating and sustainable practices, had a post on Instagram sponsored by Siggy Dairy with dairy zucchini molds for Halloween (Ogden 2019). Leah-Jane Musch, a nano influencer from Brisbane Australia who writes about slow, eco-friendly fashion under the name "The Unmaterial Girl" used a sponsored post by Sydney based brand "milkandthistlelabel" to advertise sustainable fashion (Musch 2019).

Infomercial	"Grab Bag Infomercial" as a solution to California's ban on plastic bags (Infomercials 2014).	Kathryn Kellogg in San Francisco, CA has more than 100k followers on Instagram at going.zero.waste and shared a sponsored post about eco-friendly organic towels she planned to take on a trip to SoCal beaches (Kellogg 2019). Gittenmary, a micro influencer from Aalborg, Denmark who writes about zero-waste and vegan practices, described an app called Plant Jammer that she used in order to create recipes from plants and to "clean out her fridge" (Gittenmary 2019).
Edutainment or Infotainment	Captain Planet: show teaching kids how to save the planet (IMDB 1990).	Marie Kondo, born in Japan who now lives in Los Angeles, made organizing and living a minimalist lifestyle popular through her Netflix show "Tidying up with Marie Kondo" (Kondo 2019). Samira Kazan, a celebrity influencer who writes from London under the "alphafoodie" name, shared a series of information on how to reduce food waste. The series was produced with Haier appliances and featured entertaining videos of her fridge and plant-based food storage solutions (Kazan 2019).
Publicity Piece	An article in the LA Times describes sustainable tableware and lists companies that produce it (Daswani 2019).	Nano influencer Shae Burns who lives in San Diego CA and promotes sustainable living, shared with her followers a Ford promotion for a zero-emission electric car in a reveal mystery post (Burns 2019a), with the follow-up reveal a few days later (Burns 2019b). Mega influencer "Ree" Drummond who writes The Pioneer Woman blog from her home in Oklahoma, hosted an event in New York City in collaboration with Purina, featuring her new line of dog biscuits, where customers could adopt a puppy or interact with other consumers who are fans of the blog (Pioneer Woman 2019).

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

Our paper argues that in the area of sustainability, marketers have a dual role as educators and promoters. In particular, we focus on marketing using social media, where consumers can directly communicate with many other consumers and influence their beliefs and behavior. These influencers create both organic and sponsored content that can have three roles: to inform, educate, and entertain other consumers. We use a framework developed in Nistor et al. (2018) to argue that content flow is omnidirectional in the social media environment, and influencers are vital to this flow of information.

Our paper uses content examples from the US and also around the world with a focus on eco-influencers. There is yet no research that we know of extending the framework to other industries. Industries like beauty and fashion or travel and leisure have been using influencer marketing for at least a decade and are extremely sophisticated in employing influencers in all three roles we identify. Future research could analyze how influencers evolve over time and combine the three roles in order to grow their following and monetize the content they produce.

Corresponding author: Ekin Pehlivan, ekin.pehlivan@csuci.edu

REFERENCES

Balderjahn, I., Buerke, A., Kirchgeorg, M., Peyer, M., Seegebarth, B., & Wiedmann, K. P. (2013). Consciousness for sustainable consumption: Scale development and new insights in the economic dimension of consumers' sustainability. *AMS Review, 3*(4), 181-192.

Bertelli, B. (2019, December 11). What marketers can learn from Greta Thunberg. *AdAge.* https://adage.com/article/opinion/what-marketers-can-learn-greta-thunberg/2221201

Burns, S. (2019a). Instagram post. Retrieved Decmeber 31, 2019, from https://www.instagram.com/p/B4-usw0AnBp/

Burns, S. (2019b). Instagram post. Retrieved Decmeber 31, 2019, from https://www.instagram.com/p/B55c1bfARQv/

Cheng, M. (2019, June 17). 10 ways millennials are saving resources and how innovators can take advantage. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/margueritacheng/2019/06/17/10-ways-millennials-are-saving-resources-and-how-innovators-can-take-advantage/#a50866273f4f

Connelly, B.L., Ketchen, D.J., & Slater, S.F. (2011). Toward a "theoretical toolbox" for sustainability research in marketing. *Journal of the Academy Marketing Science 39*(1), 86-100. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0199-0

Content Marketing Institute. (2019). *What is content marketing?* Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/what-is-content-marketing/

Daswani, K. (2019, September 3). Tableware goes eco-friendly. *LA Times*. https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2019-09-03/eco-friendly-tableware

Dziuban, M. (2016, May 18). *6 influencer marketing questions, answered*. TapInfluence. Retrieved Decmeber 31, 2019, from https://www.tapinfluence.com/blog-6-influencer-marketing-questions/

Forsey, C. (2019). *The ultimate list of Instagram influencers in every industry.* HubSpot. Retrieved Decmeber 31, 2019, from https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/instagram-influencers

Godes, D., & Mayzlin, D. (2004). Using online conversations to study word-of-mouth communication. *Marketing Science, 23*(4), 545-560. https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1040.0071

Goldenberg, J., Sangman, H., Lehmann, D. R., & Hong, J. W. (2009). The Role of Hubs in the Adoption Process. *Journal of Marketing, 73*(2), 1–13.

Gibbons, S. (2019, February 28). 3 ways to make sustainability a part of your business. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/serenitygibbons/2019/02/28/3-ways-to-make-sustainability-a-part-of-your-business/#49b15bfc6637

Gittenmary. (2019). Instagram post. Retrieved February 6, 2020, from https://www.instagram.com/p/B2bsYkLp3oe/

Ind, N., Iglesias, O., & Schultz, M. (2013). Building brands together: Emergence and outcomes of co-creation. *California Management Review, 55*(3), 5–26. https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2013.55.3.5

IMDb. (1990). *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098763/

Infomercials Grab Bag. (2014, December 18). *Eco friendly reusable shopping bags*. Retrieved December 31, 2019 from https://www.infomercials-tv.com/grab-bag-reusable-shopping-bags/

Jordans, F. (2019, November 28). 'Generation Greta': Angry youths put heat on climate talks. *APNews*. https://apnews.com/0070e5b1f63742b7a68cd7038fbde4fc

Kapner, S., & Terlep, S. (2019) Online influencers tell you what to buy, advertisers wonder who's listening. *WSJ.* Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/online-influencers-tell-you-what-to-buy-advertisers-wonder-whos-listening-11571594003 on 12.31.2019

Kazan. (2019). Instagram post. Retrieved February 6, 2020, from https://www.instagram.com/p/B2UOB8ngc3_/

Kellog, K. (2019). Instagram post. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://www.instagram.com/p/By8BhX5njJF/?hl=en

Kondo, M. (2019). *About Marie*. KonMari. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://shop.konmari.com/page/about

Kozinets, R., Wojnicki A. C., Wilner S. J., & de Valck, K. (2010). Networked narratives: Understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. *Journal of Marketing, 74*(2), 71–89.

Lieb, R. (2012). *Content marketing: Think like a publisher – How to use content to market online and in social media*. Que Publishing.

Linqia. (2019). The State of Influencer Marketing 2019 Report. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://linqia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Linqia-State-of-Influencer-Marketing-2019-Report.pdf

Lim, W. M. (2017). Inside the sustainable consumption theoretical toolbox: Critical concepts for sustainability, consumption, and marketing. *Journal of Business Research*, 78, 69-80.

McDaniel, S., & Rylander, D. (1993). Strategic green marketing. *Journal of Consumer Marketing, 10*(3), 4-10. https://doi.org/10.1108/07363769310041929

Musch, L. (2019). Instagram Post. Retrieved February, 6, 2020 from https://www.instagram.com/p/B4uOnnDAFo4/

Nielsen. (2015, May 11). *Green generation: Millennials say sustainability is a shopping priority*. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://www.nielsen.com/uk/en/insights/article/2015/green-generation-millennials-say-sustainability-is-a-shopping-priority/

Nistor, C., Yalcin, T., & Pehlivan, E. (2018). Duplicity in alternative marketing communications. *Markets, Globalization & Development Review, 3*(2), Article 4. DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2018-03-02-04

Ogden, J. (2019). Instagram Post. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://www.instagram.com/p/B3VkpCgJUID/?hl=en

Pathak, S. (2016, May 12). Confessions of a social media exec on influencer marketing: 'We threw too much money at them'. *DigiDay.* Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://digiday.com/marketing/confessions-social-media-exec-no-idea-pay-influencers/

Pioneer Woman. (2019, June 3). *PW, Purina, and puppies in the park!* Retrieved on February 6, 2020, from https://thepioneerwoman.com/products/pw-purina-and-puppies-in-the-park/

Rancati, E., & Gordini, N. (2014). Content marketing metrics: Theoretical aspects and empirical evidence. *European Scientific Journal, 10*(34), 92-104.

Rose, J. (2017, April 21). *Earth Day watch list: 17 films about sustainability and climate change*. PBS. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/earth-day-watch-list-17-new-films-about-sustainability-climate-change/

Rowley, J. (2008). Understanding digital content marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management, 24*(5-6), 517-540. https://doi.org/10.1362/026725708X325977

Sheth, J.N., Sethia, N.K., & Srinivas, S. (2011). Mindful consumption: a customer-centric approach to sustainability. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 39,* 21-39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0216-3

Smith, K. (2016, August 11). *Marketing with micro-influencers: Engagement, relevance and authenticity*. Brandwatch. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/marketing-micro-influencers/

Statista. (2019). *Most popular mobile social networking apps in the United States as of September 2019, by monthly users.* Retrieved February 6, 2020, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/248074/most-popular-us-social-networking-apps-ranked-by-audience/

TapInfluence. (2018, May 16). *Influencers: Micro & macro.* Retrieved December 31, 2019, from https://www.tapinfluence.com/