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Can Marketing Content Strategies Help Promote Sustainability On Social Media?: Comparing the Effectiveness of Owned Versus Earned Endorsement

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Can Marketing Content Strategies Help Promote Sustainability On Social Media?: Comparing the Effectiveness of Owned Versus Earned Endorsement

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ABSTRACT

The importance of sustainability is rising as consumers make more environmentally conscious purchases (Neilson, 2018). Despite the growing demand for sustainable products, there is still a consumer attitude-behavior gap concerning sustainability. Social media has proven to be an effective way to promote sustainability (Saeed, Farooq, & Kersten, 2019), and social media influencers are more effective advertising agents compared to traditional advertising (Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2016). However, the best way to advertise sustainable products through social media-based advertising has not yet been studied. This study examines the different content marketing strategies on social media - owned social media posts and earned social media posts to explore the most effective marketing content strategy to promote a brand's sustainable products. The findings of this study indicate that consumers generate similar attitudes toward the sustainable product regardless of the type of advertising method used, but there are significant differences in brand trust and source credibility.

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<u>Introduction</u>

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are individuals whose opinions have great influence on consumer perceptions of brands and products on a social media network (Zeljko, Jakovic & Strugar, 2018). SMIs have become significantly more important to brand's because of their ability to effectively promote brands and products through social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). As traditional online advertising becomes less effective due to advertising avoidance (Duff & Faber, 2013), brands need to find more personal ways to connect to their consumers. Glossier, a makeup brand founded in 2014, is known for their effective influencer marketing strategies (Brown, 2020). Glossier refers to their influencers as "Glossier Girls", and have attributed their 600% growth to their social media engagement between 2015 and 2016 (Grin Technologies, 2018).

SMIs are particularly effective at creating personal bonds with their followers, one study showed that 40% of consumers view SMIs as friends rather than marketing agents (Emarketer, 2015). As younger people react more positively to non-traditional advertising like influencer marketing (Van Reijmersdal, Smit, & Neijens, 2010) and brands are seeing a high return on investment -an average of $5.78 per dollar (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020), brands are increasing the amount of money they are spending on influencer marketing, (Mediakix, 2019).

Because of the nature of a consumer's relationship with a SMI, actually endorsing a product or brand can be risky to both the SMI and the brand. Unethical practices on social media (like nondisclosure of advertisements) is often highly publicized on Instagram and YouTube. This highly publicized "drama" can cause negative brand publicity, and has often led to SMIs losing followers, in some cases, thousands (Wischhover, 2018). Because of the

risks associated with promotion, it is important to understand how the consumer views different types of endorsement. In addition to this, there is little information on how consumers respond to different social media promotion methods used by SMIs, like OSMs (owned social media posts, or brand generated content) and ESM (earned social media posts, or user generated content) (Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels, & O'Connor, 2018). The FTC regulates that any endorsement be fully disclosed to the consumer (FTC, 2017), and research shows that disclosing a brand relationship using hashtags like, "#sponsored" can increase ad recognition in consumers (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). Despite this, influencers still struggle with disclosing endorsement, which can create problems for the influencer and the brand.

With all of this being said, there is little to no information about how to advertise sustainable products through social media, specifically, on the social media platform Instagram (the focus of this study). Sustainability is becoming more important to consumers, and the importance of sustainability to consumers is relatively new. Consumers have a higher favorability to brands that are sustainable (Schmidt et al. 2017), but it is not known if an SMIs promotion of a sustainable product is more effective as an OSM or ESM. The intent of this study is to determine how brands should bring sustainable products closer to the consumer by studying OSMs and ESMs in SMIs on Instagram.

First, this study will compare a sponsored Instagram post by a SMI, an unsponsored Instagram by a SMI, and an Instagram post made by the brand. By comparing the three it can be determined which type of social media promotion is most effective at creating a positive reaction from consumers. There is differing information about disclosure of endorsement, Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa (2017) showed that disclosure of endorsement can lead to distrust of the brand and influencer, and can lead to lower eWOM (electronic word of

mouth) intentions, while Dhanesh & Duthler (2019) found that disclosure leads to higher

purchase intentions and eWOM intentions. Secondly, this study will determine the most

effective way to advertise a sustainable product on social media, and gauge consumer

reactions to sustainable fashion products in a social media setting. We know that consumers

react positively to eco-labeling (Schmidt et al., 2017), but little is known about advertising

sustainability on Instagram.

<u>Conceptual Background</u>

Reactance Theory

The reactance theory states that when a person experiences a perceived threat to their

behavioral freedom, they will purposely act against any behavior perceived to be coercive

(Brehm, 1966). Specifically, consumers who become aware of the intent of sponsored content

develop negative views of the brand and report reactance, leading to avoidance behavior (Van

Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019). Therefore, if the social media post is perceived to be owned

(regardless of whether or not it discloses any sort of sponsorship), the consumer should

respond with reactance. An experimental study by Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal (2019)

conducted on adolescents showed that the adolescents expressed reactance when it became

apparent that the YouTube video they were being shown was sponsored. The reactance they

felt led to a more negative perception of the brand being advertised and influencer creating the

content.

Persuasion Knowledge

Persuasion knowledge refers to when a person becomes aware that they are being

advertised to, and the meaning of the content they are consuming changes because it

becomes less genuine (Friestad, & Wright, 1994). When an advertisement is disclosed as

such, persuasion knowledge increases (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012).

Persuasion knowledge is related to reactance because language that expresses an intent to

persuade is likely to induce reactance (Quick, Shen, & Dillard, 2012). A study by

Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa (2017) compared brand-generated content,

disclosed-sponsored celebrity content and undisclosed-sponsored celebrity content and

found that the brand content is more likely to activate persuasion knowledge in

participants, followed by the disclosed-sponsored post, and the undisclosed-sponsored

post. Thus, consumers are more likely to view brand-generated content as advertising,

generating higher reactance.

This study focuses on how different promotional social media methods affect

consumer responses, specifically, how disclosure type their responses to product attitude,

brand trust, source credibility, and how it affects purchase intention. The conceptual

module used for this study is based how persuasion knowledge and reactance affects
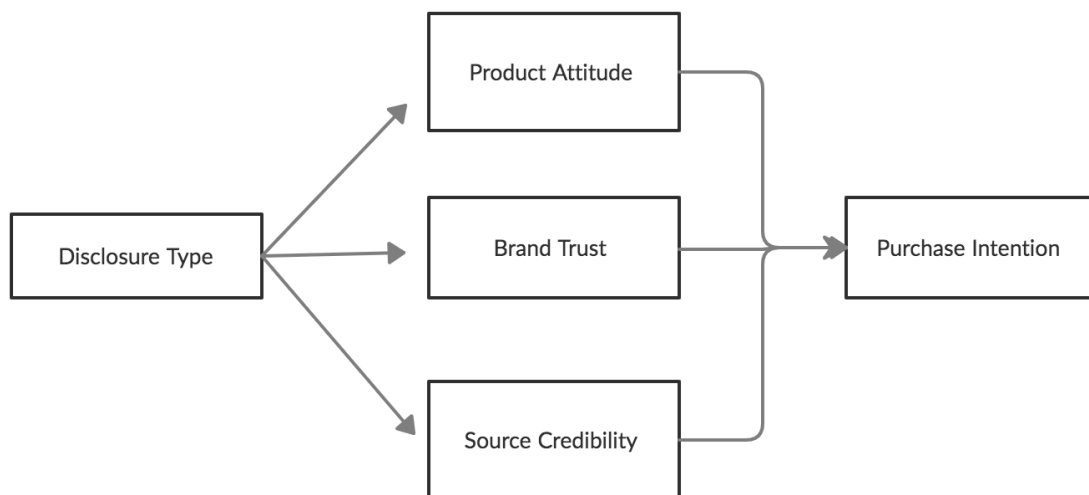
consumer responses (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Literature Review

Social Media Influencers & Types of Disclosure

In general, social media outlets promote higher sales per event than traditional media outlets. Promotion through social media can also reach a niche audience more effectively than traditional media (Stephen & Galek, 2012), and can largely impact consumer decisions (Stephen, 2016). Brand content on social media is well received by viewers, especially when the content emulates user generated content. When users can relate to brand content, there is a higher eWOM, as well as brand attitude (Colliander & Marder, 2018). This study is particularly interested in user-generated content, specifically, OSMs and ESMs made by SMIs.

According to De Vierman, Cauberghe, & Hudders," Influencers are content creators who accumulated a solid base of followers" (2017, p. 801.). SMIs can be described as, "famous to a niche group of people" (Marwick, 2013, p. 114), making them less recognizable to the general public than a typical celebrity brand ambassador. It is also important to recognize that influencers are different from celebrities because they began as a typical social media user who gained popularity through it, they are also different from celebrities because they typically specialize in an area of expertise, (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and are more trusted by consumers as well (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2019). Instagram is the most popular social media network for influencers (Enberg, 2018), and a SMI can work for a brand by being a brand ambassador, and by creating sponsored content featuring the promotion of products (Abidin, 2016). Unlike other forms of endorsement, SMIs are capable of diffusing a brand's messages before it reaches the consumer, making them effective non-traditional advertising agents (Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2017).

In 2017, "86% of marketers used influencer marketing, 92% of whom found it effective" (Linqia, 2017). As brands continue to have positive consumer engagement through influencer marketing, influencer marketing is expected to experience $9.7B in growth in 2020 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020).

Promotion on social media falls into two categories, OSM and ESM (Corcoran, 2009). OSMs are posts that are generated or controlled by the brand or its agents (in this case, influencers) (Stephen, & Galeck, 2012). These posts can be made by the brand and posted on the brand's account (Colicev et al., 2018). OSMs can be especially effective marketing agents for brand awareness and consumer satisfaction, however they can affect purchase intention negatively (Colicev et al., 2018). Brand attitude, purchase intention and eWOM decreased when ad disclosure on an Instagram post is used (Evans, et al., 2017). ESMs can be made by influencers or consumers who are speaking about the brand without any kind of association to the brand. When ESMs are posted, the user often includes a hashtag like, "#notsponsored", to ensure the viewer knows the SMI (or consumer) is not being compensated for speaking about the brand (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). These impartiality disclosures lead to higher source credibility than explicit sponsorship as well as leaving no form of disclosure at all (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). This high source credibility in unsponsored SMIs lead consumers to have a higher brand trust as well (Hu, Zhan, & Wang, 2019).

Confusion can occur as to what is sponsored content and to what isn't because promotional messages by SMIs are often made to look like content that is typically posted by the influencer (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Abidin (2017) notes that sponsored posts made by influencers are "intertwined" with their regular posts

that simply make a record of their daily lives. This makes it more difficult to detect a sponsored post because of the effortless way it flows with the rest of the influencers' feed.

Sustainable Products & Sustainability on Social Media

In a Neilson study, 81% of global respondents felt that companies should help improve the environment, this sentiment is especially prevalent in Millennials and Gen Z (Neilson, 2018). In 2021 sustainable products are expected to make up 25% of sales (Neilson, 2018). Consumers are more likely to respond positively to sustainable products when they are educated about the product (Lim et al., 2017). Brands that are more, "iconic", and have a strong brand community are more likely to have consumers that adopt new, sustainable products (Catulli, Cook, & Potter, 2016).

Consumers do react positively towards a sustainable products; however, this does not mean they intend to purchase it (Lim et al., 2017). One article cites a few reasons for the lack of consumption of "green" products, despite the urgent need to adopt them as lack of understanding about the products, ignorance, and low customer value (Catulli, Cook, Potter, 2016). Another study shows that consumers associate risk with sustainable products, which lowers the purchase intention of the consumer (Brach et al., 2018). The lack of consumers purchasing sustainable fashion products is attributed to a "focus on the self", "importance of fashion", "perceived barriers to sustainable consumption", and "motivations to change" (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

Consumers view social media networks as a positive place to learn about sustainability and sustainable products (Saeed et al., 2019). There is also data that shows consumers who are exposed to social media posts related to sustainability (including influencers who post about a

sustainable lifestyle), there is a higher intention to partake in more sustainable choices (Lenne & Vandenbosch, 2017). The preceding information shows us that social media is an effective place to advertise social media, however there isn't any information about which method of social media advertising is most effective.

Hypotheses

The Effect of Promotional Strategies on Social Media on Product Attitude

Positive influencer credibility has a positive effect on product attitude (Pick, 2020), and SMIs that use a nondisclosure in their posts have higher source credibility (Stubb, & Colliander, 2019). When a consumer trusts the promotional posts made by a SMI, this can lead to higher product attitude (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2019). The preceding information leads to the following hypothesis.

H1: A unsponsored post made by a SMI will lead to the highest amount of positive product attitude followed by a sponsored post made by a SMI, and then a post made by a brand.

The Effect of Promotional Strategies on Social Media on Brand Trust

In general, consumers tend to be skeptical of advertising (Calfee & Ringold, 1994). The trust a consumer has for a SMI can be transferred to the product or brand they are endorsing (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2019). Data shows that persuasion knowledge leads consumers to be suspicious of brand advertising (OSMs) (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). In addition to this, there is a stronger brand trust associated with ESMs (Bantra & Keller, 2016). Social media brand communities have a positive effect of consumer/product relationships, which in turn have a positive effect on brand trust (Laroche et al., 2013).

Because recent studies have shown that increased ad recognition leads to lowered brand trust:

> H2: A unsponsored post made by a SMI will lead to the highest amount of positive brand trust followed by a sponsored post made by a SMI, and then a post made by a brand.

The Effect of Promotional Strategies on Social Media on Source Credibility

When consumers are given disclosure of sponsorship, or given no information about sponsorships at all, they are more likely to regard the product review as credible (Stubb, & Colliander, 2019). Devierman (2019) found that an Instagram post that was non-sponsored was viewed as more credible that a disclosed sponsored post. When a promotional product review post is made by a SMI using an impartiality disclosure, not only is the source credibility higher than when an explicit disclosure is used, but the credibility of the product review is higher as well, (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). When bloggers disclose their posts as promotional, the parasocial interaction (feeling of a relationship with the media felt by the audience) decreases alongside the credibility of the blogger (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015). Social media advertisements using a, "snapshot aesthetic" (an image intended to look as if it was taken by a consumer) have a higher source credibility than images that look more professional, (Colliander & Marder, 2018). Another study found that consumers believe Instagram SMIs are more trustworthy than traditional celebrities, and that they have a stronger social influence presence. This strong social presence led to higher source credibility, (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). The preceding information leads to hypothesis 3:

H3: A unsponsored post made by a SMI will lead to the highest amount of positive source credibility followed by a sponsored post made by a SMI, and then a post made by a brand.

The Effect of Product Attitude on Purchase Intention

The trust a consumer has for a SMI can lead to positive product attitude, which in turn leads to production adoption, (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2019). The credibility of an SMI can lead to higher product attitude, which in turn leads to higher purchase intention (Pick, 2020).

H4: A unsponsored post made by a SMI will lead to the highest amount of positive product attitude followed by a sponsored post made by a SMI, and then a post made by a brand. The positive product attitude by the unsponsored SMI will lead to greater purchase intentions, followed by a sponsored SMI post, and then a brand post.

The Effect of Brand Trust on Purchase Intention

Brand trust is positively related to purchase loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Data shows that persuasion knowledge leads consumers to be suspicious of brand advertising (OSMs), and thereby decreases purchase intention (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). In addition to this, OSMs tend to have less control over purchase intention because of the strong brand trust associated with ESMs (Bantra & Keller, 2016). Trust in a SMI leads to trust in the brand or product being endorsed, this in turn leads to product adoption (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2019).

H5: A unsponsored post made by a SMI will lead to the highest amount of positive brand trust followed by a sponsored post made by a SMI, and then a post made by a brand. The positive product attitude by the unsponsored SMI will lead

to greater purchase intentions, followed by a sponsored SMI post, and then a

brand post.

The Effect of Source Credibility on Purchase Intention

According to Dhanesh & Duthler (2019), a positive SMI-follower relationship can lead

to high purchase intentions. Weismuller et al. (2020) found that source credibility in SMIs

leads to a high purchase intention, similarly, Pick (2020) found that when an influencer has a

high perceived credibility, there is a positive effect on purchase intention).

H6: A unsponsored post made by a SMI will lead to the highest amount of positive

source credibility followed by a sponsored post made by a SMI, and then a post made

by a brand. The positive product attitude by the unsponsored SMI will lead to greater

purchase intentions, followed by a sponsored SMI post, and then a brand post.

Method

The above hypotheses were tested through an experimental design conducted

online. The study was conducted with three levels of types of Instagram content

marketing (sponsored, non-sponsored, brand-generated post) as the between-subjects

factor.

Stimuli Development

An experimental design was used in which participants viewed several mock

Instagram posts designed to look like posts made by an influencer (Marianne Marie) who is

promoting a brand (Sierra & Rose) - with the exception of one post which is the brand

promoting their own product. A mock influencer and brand were used so that the participants

would not be influenced by previous knowledge of an existing brand or influencer. The

number of likes on the photo (124,614) were the same across all the images, as well as the

number of followers (4.5 million), comments, and the number of people the account was

following (1,323). To determine the number of likes, followers, comments, etc. the popularity

of the influencer needed to be considered. The number of followers that an influencer has does

not affect likeability or credibility (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), so the number

of followers only impacts the believability of our made-up influencer. The influencer used in

the stimuli can be categorized as a mega influencer, meaning they have over 1 million

followers. Popular influencers like Cristine Rotenberg (2.3 million followers), Safiya Nygaard

(2.2 million followers), and Emma Chamberlain (10.1 million followers) reach similar

audiences to the demographic being studied, as well as create similar content to the mock

influencer in our study (Noxinfluencer, 2020). The number of followers of the mock

influencer was a rough average of real influencers who were similar to our mock influencer.

The number of likes on the mock post was determined by taking a rough average of the most

popular posts by people with a similar number of followers as the mock influencer.

Before seeing the Instagram posts, the participants viewed either the influencer's or

brand's profile, which included their profile picture, number of followers, number of people

the account was following, number of posts, and the accounts bio (see Appendix 1). The

influencer's posts (see Appendix 2) are captioned with either a disclosure of sponsorship or a

disclosure of non-sponsorship. Each of the images are also captioned with the words,

"sustainable" and "recycled fibers" to indicate sustainability to the consumer, thereby

increasing the chance they will respond positively to the product (Lim et al., 2017). In the

disclosed sponsored condition, the caption read, "Shoutout to @sierra_and_rose for sending

me their new Sierra Denim Jacket!! I absolutely love that this jacket is made of recycled

fibers, and I love working with a brand that is so committed to sustainability. Link in bio", and

included the hashtags, "#sponsored #ad". In the non-sponsored condition, the caption read,

"Not sponsored, but I feel better wearing denim knowing it's made of recycled fibers" and

included the hashtag, "#notsponsored". The brand conditions caption read, "Introducing the

Sierra Denim Jacket. Made of recycled fibers. Made to last forever. Link in bio". All three

conditions included the hashtags, "#sierraandrose #sustainable". A denim jacket was chosen

as the product because of its neutrality. The experiment began by asking participants to view

one of the posts and then respond to a set of questions pertaining to each post. Before viewing

the post, participants were asked to view a prompt that read, "Imagine you are scrolling

through your Instagram feed and come across the following profile of a popular fashion

influencer Marianne Marie on Instagram. Please carefully read her profile" before viewing the

influencer posts, and a prompt that read, "Imagine you are scrolling through your Instagram

feed and come across the following profile of a popular sustainable brand Sierra & Rose on

Instagram. Please carefully read the brands profile." before viewing the brands post.

Sample

This study used female consumers who live in the US. A study by Brough et al. (2016)

found that women are more accepting of green behaviors than men. In addition to this, 56.3%

of all Instagram users globally are female (Omnicore, 2020) and as of August 2020, 57.3% of

the Instagram users in the US are female, (Clement, 2020). Gen Z and Millennials combined,

79% of them are regular users of Instagram (Clement, 2020).

To ensure sample homogeneity, consumers were selected between the ages of 19-34.

This group represents the majority of Instagram users (Omnicore, 2020), 75% of people ages

18-24 use Instagram, 57% of people ages 25-29 use Instagram, and 47% of people ages 30-49

use Instagram (Tran, 2020). This is also the demographic most interested in living more

sustainably (Neilson, 2018). Participants for the pretest and the main experiment were recruited from a Qualtrics consumer panel that represents the US population. A total of 216 female US consumers participated in the survey.

Data Collection and Procedure

The self-administered, internet-based questionnaire used an experimental design where participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (sponsored, non-sponsored, branded) and viewed one of the Instagram posts. The internet-based questionnaire started with screening questions that verified that the participants were females ages 19-34, and frequent Instagram users (at least once a week). Each Instagram post was followed by the following scale measure: purchase intention, brand attitude, and source credibility (Stubb & Colliander, 2019) were based on previous literature and present on seven-point Likert scales (see Table 1).

Pretest

A pretest was conducted to verify that:

1) the product and brand were perceived as sustainable

2) the Instagram posts are seen as either an ESM or OSM.

A selection of 100 participants with the same age and demographic as the main study participants were selected to evaluate the effectiveness of the stimuli. The participants were asked to view three different profiles: the unsponsored SMI, the sponsored SMI, and the brand. After viewing each Instagram post they were asked to respond to a set of prompts. The prompt for the sponsored SMI [unsponsored SMI] stimuli was as follows:

(1) Sponsored SMI stimuli: "The fashion influencer Marianne Marie was paid by the Sierra & Rose brand to post its sustainable denim jacket and endorse the product. How clear was the post in communicating these details?",

(2) Unsponsored SMI: "The fashion influencer Marianne Marie was not paid by

the Sierra & Rose brand to post its sustainable denim jacket and endorse the

product. Therefore, the post was not sponsored and included a personal opinion

of the influencer. How clear was the post in communicating these details?"

(3) Brand post: "The purpose of the post made by the brand Sierra & Rose was to

promote its new sustainable denim jacket. How clear was the post in

communicating these details?"

In all three scenarios the participants were asked to respond to the following question: "The

denim jacket being endorsed in the Instagram post is made of recyclable fibers and is

considered a sustainable product. How clear was the post in communicating these details".

Participants responded using a scale ranging from 1 (unclear) to 7 (clear) (Grossbart et al.,

1986).

To verify that the Instagram was perceived as an ESM the following question was

asked: "The fashion influencer Marianne Marie was paid by the Sierra & Rose brand to post

its sustainable denim jacket and endorse the product. How clear was the post in

communicating these details?"

Table 1.

Variable	Measures	α
Source Credibility	In my opinion the Influencer [the brand Sierra & Rose] is convincing. In my opinion the Influencer [the brand Sierra & Rose] is believable.	.89

	In my opinion the Influencer [the brand Sierra & Rose] is unbiased.	
Brand Attitude	I like the brand Sierra & Rose. My impression of the brand Sierra & Rose is good. My impression of the brand Sierra &Rose is positive.	.91
Brand Trust	I trust the brand Sierra & Rose. I think this brand Sierra & Rose is honest. I think this brand Sierra & Rose is safe.	.92
Purchase Intention	I would consider buying this sustainable denim jacket. I will purchase this sustainable denim jacket. There is a strong likelihood I will buy this sustainable denim jacket.	.91

Results

The manipulations of the types of Instagram content marketing were successful and all scaled measures demonstrated adequate reliability and were confirmed to be unidimensional. H1 was tested using MANOVA with types of Instagram content marketing as the between-subjects factor and brand trust, product attitude, and source credibility as dependent variables. The types of Instagram content marketing had no significant main effect on product attitude [$F(2/213) = .84$, $p = .44$]. Therefore, *H1* was rejected. However, a significant main effect was found for the types of Instagram based

marketing on brand trust [$F(2/213) = 9.25$, $p < .05$. The brand trust was higher for the brand-generated post, followed by the unsponsored post, and sponsored post. Therefore, *H2* was partially supported. Furthermore, a significant main effect was found for the types of Instagram based marketing on source credibility [$F(2/213) = 10.50$, $p < .00$, η^2 = 9.0%]. The brand-generated post was perceived as significantly more credible than the sponsored post [MBrand = 4.97, MSponsored =3.89, $SE = .24$, $MD = 1.08$, $p <.001$] and unsponsored post [MBrand = 4.97, MNon-sponsored =4.26, $SE = .24$, $MD = .71$, $p <.01$]. However, results revealed no significant differences between the sponsored and unsponsored post on source credibility [$MD = -.37$, $SE = .24$, $p = .12$]. Therefore, H3 was partially supported. Results of the multiple linear regression to test H4 revealed that brand trust [$F(3/212) = 63.69$, $p < .001$, $R2=.47$, $b = .27$, $t = 3.87$, $p < 0.001$], product attitude [$b = .32$, $t = 5.03$, $p < 0.001$], and source credibility [$b = .22$, $t = 3.01$, $p < 0.01$] positively influence purchase intention; hence, supporting *H4*.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how different types of promotional Instagram posts affect consumer responses to a sustainable brand, influencer, and a sustainable product. The findings of this study indicate that consumers generate similar attitudes toward the sustainable product regardless of whether the content marketing strategy used in the post has a clear intent to advertise. However, although brand trust was highest when the Instagram post was made by the brand and not a SMI, a post made by an unsponsored SMI had significantly higher brand trust than a sponsored SMI post. In addition to this, the brand-generated post was perceived to be the most credible,

followed by the sponsored and non-sponsored Influencer posts. The source credibility did not differ between the sponsored and non-sponsored Influencer posts.

The present study offers useful guidance for effective social media marketing, as well as effective promotion of sustainable brands and products. First, the study found that consumers' attitudes towards the product are unaffected by the type of promotional social media posts used. A sponsored, non-sponsored, and brand generated Instagram post would elicit the same attitude towards products in consumers. This is different from what was hypothesized in H1, however the studies used to create the hypothesis were specifically examining types of disclosure in advertising (Colicev et al., 2018). Evans, et al. (2017) found that brand attitude, purchase intention and eWOM decreased when participants were presented with ad disclosure on an Instagram post, however, this was in comparison to a post with no disclosure at all, which is different from specifically disclosing that the post was not sponsored. The perceived barriers to sustainability could have affected the results of the product attitude. People are more likely to adopt sustainable products when the brand is established (Catulli, Cook, & Potter, 2016), and because the brand used in the study is unknown to the participants, this may have affected their perception of the product.

The result showed that H2 was partially accepted. The brand Instagram post resulted in the highest amount of brand trust; however, the brand trust was significantly higher for an unsponsored SMI post compared to a sponsored SMI post. It is interesting that the brand trust was higher in the unsponsored SMI, as one study shows that the source credibility of the SMI leads to higher brand trust (Hu, Zhan, & Wang, 2019), but

there was no difference in source credibility between the sponsored SMI and the unsponsored SMI.

Source credibility was highest when a brand-generated post is used, followed by non-sponsored and sponsored post. There is no difference in source credibility between the sponsored and non-sponsored posts, both were received similarly regarding credibility. This is also different from what was hypothesized in H3. It is interesting that the brand generated post was considered the most credible source compared to the influencer posts. Past studies have shown that influencers are perceived to be more credible and trustworthy, but this comparison was made to celebrities, (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2019). The brand posts being perceived as the most credible might be explained by the fact that OSMs are effective at creating brand awareness (Colicev, et al., 2018). It has also been determined that SMI content is not effective in increasing brand awareness (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The SMI and brand being mock also could have affected the perceived source credibility of the SMI compared to the brand. Source credibility is made up of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Trustworthiness and expertise could have been determined by the bio and background description of the SMI that was provided before viewing the promotional post, however, this is a different experience than being familiar with an SMI, especially because of the relationships that they have with their viewers (Emarketer, 2015). The attractiveness of the image used in the post could also be evaluated by the participants. The image used for the SMI was intentionally as nondescript as possible. The participant could not see the face of the SMI on the image, but they may be able to assume the ethnicity of the SMI, and determine perceived attractiveness based on her figure and hair. The trust and

attractiveness aspects of source credibility affect the credibility of a branded Instagram post, (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Lastly, brand trust, product attitude, and source credibility all positively influenced purchase intention. These results demonstrate that a brand-generated post would result in the highest amount of purchase intention in consumers. These results are interesting, especially because previous research found that OSMs negatively affect purchase intention (Colicev et al., 2018). Evans, et al. (2017) and Colliander & Erlandson (2015) also found that OSMs decreased purchase intention, however, this was based on ad disclosure, and not a promotional brand message. The brand post resulting in the highest purchase intention does align with the brand post also resulting in the highest amount of source credibility, as previous studies have found that source credibility leads to purchase intention (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2019).

Implications & Areas for Future Research

This study is unique to similar studies because it focuses specifically on how sustainable products should be marketed, and the results provide information that may be helpful to small or indie brands. The findings make two major contributions to social media influencer literature.

First, this study focused on the difference between ESMs and OSMs exclusively in SMIs. There is literature that discusses disclosure language and how it affects ad-recognition in influencers (Boerman, 2020), but no research has been done on SMI promotional posts that are unpaid and unaffiliated with the brand (ESMs). There have been studies on OSMs and ESMs in social media, but these were not focused on influencer marketing, and were not experimental in design (Colicev et al., 2018). Future

research could focus on testing consumer responses to real influencers instead of mock influencers. This may affect the source credibility of the SMI. It may also benefit future researchers to use a real brand instead of a mock brand as well. This may affect how the SMI is perceived compared to the brand.

Second, this study is the only one to compare OSM and ESM media in the promotion of a sustainable product and brand. The perceived barriers to sustainable consumption make it difficult for brands to sell the idea of sustainability and sustainable products to consumers (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Because of these barriers it is important to understand how consumers view sustainable advertising. This study is the first to look at how social media based advertising affects consumers' perception of sustainable products and brands, and it is also the first to test a consumer's ability to recognize a sustainable brand and product on social media through the use of hashtags and keywords. This information may be extremely helpful to small, sustainable businesses. Future research could benefit from focusing on comparing a well-established brand to an unknown mock brand to test some of the existing barriers to sustainability on a social media platform.

Limitations

This paper will be concluded with an exploration of the limitations of the experiment. First, it is important to note that both the brand and the influencer were mock, and unknown to the consumers. This could have influenced consumers attitudes and responses towards the product because of their unfamiliarity with the brand as well as the influencer. The results may have been different if the participants had a previous relationship with the brand or the influencer. The brand being unknown also affects the

perceived barriers to sustainability, as consumers prefer purchasing sustainable products from brands that are well known (Catulli, Cook, Potter, 2016).

Next, it is also important to recognize the limitations made by the selection of participants used in the study. The study employed a nationwide US female sample because it was the most relevant demographic for Instagram users interested in sustainable fashion products, but this narrow scope of the sample characteristics limits the validity of the results. It cannot be determined if men respond to promotional Instagram influencers and posts in a similar fashion.

Lastly, this study uses a denim jacket as part of the stimuli, however, the results of this study could be adapted to other sustainable fashion products such as bags, jeans, purses, or wallets as well.

Reflective Critique

When I began this project, I knew it was going to be challenging, but it is challenging for reasons that I did not expect. Looking back this is a crazy project to throw at an undergraduate sophomore with zero research experience. I had to learn a lot in a very short amount of time, and I still feel like I don't know enough. It's hard to explain to friends and family who don't know anything about academic research how detailed, and time consuming this work is. It's difficult to ask questions or express that you need help because you don't know what you don't know. This is, academically, the most challenging thing I have ever done. With all of that being said, I wouldn't change anything about the experience. I joined the honors program knowing I would have to work in addition to leadership positions and taking care of my classwork, but I wanted to challenge myself and be surrounded by people that wanted to do the same. With challenges comes growth, and I know that I am a better student because of it. I

am grateful for the experience and how much it has helped me grow, not only as an academic, but as a person who is learning to balance the varying responsibilities of life.

Because of this project I am more capable of doing research on a personal level. This is a skill I can bring to the workplace as well. Reading and understanding how academic research works is challenging, but it is something I am well adjusted to now. My writing has improved because of this project as well. During this project I have learned to take advantage of the people around me that have been through what I'm going through now. The seniors in my class have been some of the most helpful people to me. Most importantly this project has helped me overcome personal challenges in my life. It has been a challenging year for everyone, and I have a lot to be grateful for. This semester has still been a very difficult one, and this project was a constant reminder that no matter what happens, I have the opportunity to do something great. I am proud of myself for the work I put into this project, and that is not something I often think about myself.

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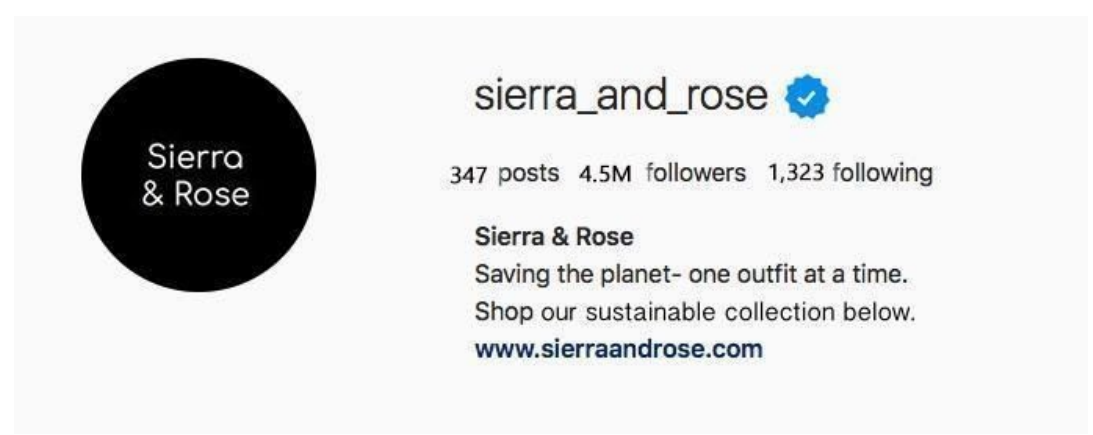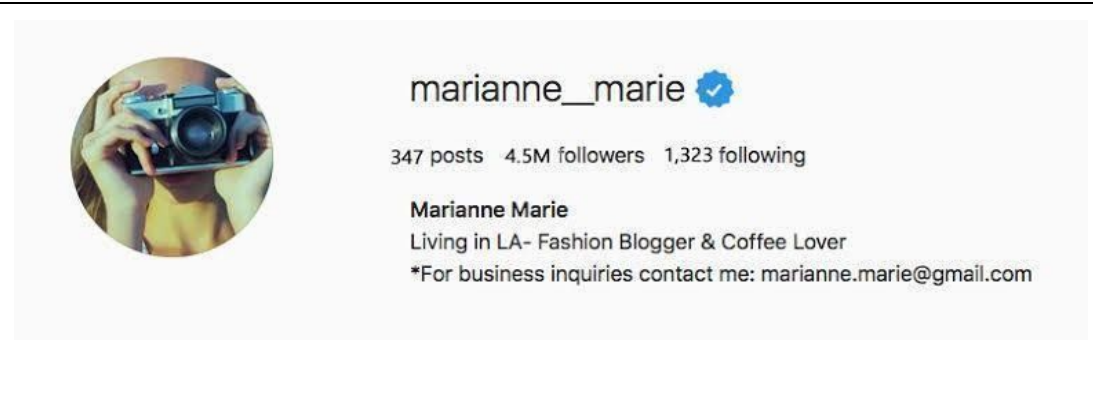
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Appendix

Appendix 1. Brand Profile Stimuli

Brand Bio

SMI Bio

Appendix 2. Disclosure Type Stimuli

Unsponsored SMI Instagram Post

Sponsored SMI Instagram Post

Brand Instagram Post