



# **From Reels to Real Change: Sustainability Messaging through Short-Form Video by Influencers**

A Qualitative Study of Central Asian Greenfluencers and Their Global  
Communication Strategies

Master's Thesis

Double Degree - Management in Sustainable Business

4<sup>th</sup> Semester 2025

Rabiya Tuktassynova

Management in Sustainable Business

Author Toktassynova Rabiya

Year 2025

Subject From Reels to Real Change: Sustainability Messaging through Short-Form Video by Influencers

Supervisor Dinesh Poudel

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This thesis explores how sustainability influencers construct and communicate environmental messages through short-form video content on platforms such as Instagram Reels and TikTok. Through a qualitative multiple case study design, eight influencers from Central Asia were interviewed to investigate their strategies, narratives, and audience engagement approaches.

Despite the regional focus, the study draws out globally relevant insights by applying four theoretical frameworks: Social Cognitive Theory, Diffusion of Innovations, Media Richness Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: emotional storytelling, simplification of complex information, modeling behavior, framing of personal vs. collective benefits, and interactive audience engagement. Influencers effectively use rich media to build self-efficacy, influence subjective norms, and shape sustainability discourse.

The study concludes that short-form video offers a powerful vehicle for informal environmental education. Limitations include regional sample, language translation, and scope. Recommendations include cross-regional comparison and content strategy insights for sustainable campaigns.

Keywords Sustainability, influencers, short-form video, Instagram Reels

Pages 48 pages and appendices 12 pages

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# 1 Introduction

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels have significantly transformed global content consumption patterns. According to Statista (2023), more than 70% of global social media users prefer short-form videos over traditional formats, particularly due to their engaging and accessible nature. This shift has also impacted marketing: recent surveys report that short-form video generates the highest return on investment for over 30% of marketers, making it the most effective content format across industries (Wyzowl, 2024). These platforms offer creators a unique space for fast, visual storytelling, creating new avenues for education, entertainment, and public engagement (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Abidin, 2015).

Influencers play a key role in this digital ecosystem. By leveraging their large followings and highly personalized content, they can shape not only trends but also public values and behavior. In particular, a growing number of influencers have begun incorporating sustainability themes into their messaging, presenting environmentally responsible behavior not just as a social obligation, but as a relatable lifestyle choice (König & Maier, 2024). Through emotional storytelling and platform-native creativity, they make abstract issues like climate change more tangible and personal, especially for younger audiences accustomed to consuming environmental information in visually engaging formats (Wang & Wu, 2022).

## 1.1 Background of the Study

The growing severity of the climate crisis has made effective sustainability communication more important than ever (IPCC, 2023). In parallel, the rise of short-form video platforms such as Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts has transformed how environmental messages are crafted and shared. These platforms enable rapid dissemination of visually engaging, emotionally resonant content, especially among younger audiences (Abidin, 2015; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

Influencers—individuals with a sizable and engaged following—have emerged as powerful communicators who not only entertain but also shape public opinion and behavior. When they integrate sustainability topics into their content, influencers can function as informal educators and behavior change agents, bridging the gap between awareness and action (Abidin, 2015).

However, communicating sustainability remains challenging. Issues such as climate change and waste management are complex, often abstract, and politically sensitive (IPCC, 2023). Influencers overcome these challenges by transforming dry or technical information into accessible, emotionally compelling

stories that resonate with their audiences. Their success in doing so suggests that informal, narrative-based digital communication can be a valuable complement to institutional sustainability messaging.

While many studies on environmental communication have focused on Western institutions or campaigns, there is limited research on how individual influencers—especially from non-Western contexts—use digital media to advocate for sustainability. This thesis addresses that gap by focusing on influencers in Central Asia, a region with distinct ecological, cultural, and digital dynamics. Although the data is locally grounded, the findings aim to provide insights applicable to broader global sustainability communication efforts.

## **1.2 Objective of the Study**

The thesis aims to investigate how short-form video content on social media sustainability influencers create and present environmental themes. Examining the tactics, stories, and communication choices influencers use to educate, interact, and impact their audiences, the study uses a qualitative approach.

The study aims to grasp not just the content of influencers' messages but also how they frame sustainability concerns, engage with followers, and modify their approaches to the possibilities and restrictions of short-form video forms.

Through this, the study adds to the increasing corpus of knowledge on digital sustainability communication and the part social media influencers play as unofficial environmental education and behavior change agents.

## **1.3 Main Research Question**

This research examines the intersection of sustainability communication, influencer culture, and short-form video production. The objective is to understand how individual digital media creators, functioning as informal educators, convert complex environmental challenges into accessible and entertaining messages through platforms like Instagram Reels.

While the data was gathered from influencers in Central Asia, the overarching aim is to extract communication tactics, patterns, and insights that may be relevant across other cultural contexts. The regional emphasis offers a valuable, inadequately studied instance for the examination of worldwide inquiries.

Accordingly, the central guiding question of this research is:

**How do sustainability influencers construct and communicate environmental messages through short-form video content on social media, and what can be learned from Central Asian experiences for global sustainability communication?**

The question supports the study's investigation into the narrative approaches, communication strategies, audience engagement, and information presentation employed by influencers to advocate for sustainability within limited temporal and visual formats. This also encourages discussion of how these approaches could influence overarching theories and methodologies in environmental communication.

## **1.4 Limitations**

This research is influenced by numerous significant limitations, which are recognized to define its scope and explain the interpretation of its findings.

Initially, while the study topic seeks to provide globally applicable insights, the empirical data is sourced solely from Central Asia, predominantly Kazakhstan. Six interviewees are sustainability influencers active in this regional context, with two coming from neighboring countries, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. The findings illustrate the social, cultural, and infrastructural features associated with this particular context.

The described communication tactics may be relevant to different areas, but the thesis does not assert worldwide applicability. It provides analytical generalizations and thematic insights that may guide future research in other cultural situations.

The study is qualitative and exploratory, including a limited number of participants. The influencers were deliberately chosen for their active involvement in sustainability content, allowing a comprehensive review, although potentially failing to cover a full variety of influencer groups or platforms. The findings should therefore be regarded as illustrative rather than comprehensive.

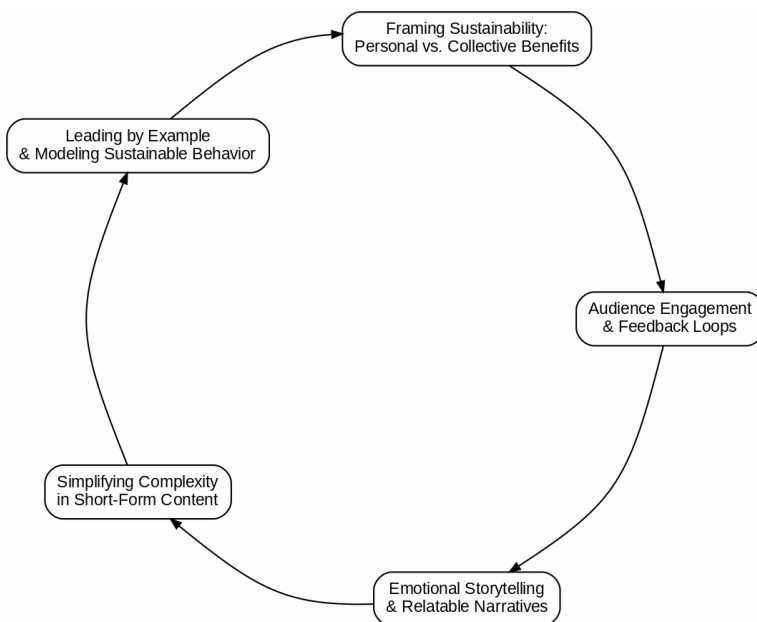
Ultimately, language and translation may present nuanced constraints. Interviews were performed in Russian and Kazakh, thereafter translated into English for analysis. Despite efforts to maintain meaning, certain cultural nuances may have been diminished or altered in translation.

Despite these limitations, the study presents significant insights into the communication strategies of sustainability influencers and establishes a basis for future research—be it through cross-regional comparisons or a more profound investigation of influencer dynamics on emerging platforms.

## 1.5 Overview of Key Themes (Preview)

In line with the study's aim of exploring how influencers communicate sustainability messages through short-form video, it is helpful to outline the main themes that characterize this communication. Figure 1 below offers a visual overview of the five key themes anticipated from the research findings, providing a preview of the core dimensions that will be explored in later chapters.

Figure 1. Visual summary of the five key themes identified in this study's findings.



The diagram illustrates the central thematic areas that emerged from the analysis: (1) Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives, (2) Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content, (3) Leading by Example and Modeling Sustainable Behaviors, (4) Framing Sustainability: Personal Benefits vs. Collective Good, and (5) Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops. By visualizing these anticipated themes at the outset, this figure provides a roadmap that links each theme to the theoretical perspectives discussed in the next chapter and guides the interpretation of the results.

These five themes encapsulate the crux of how sustainability influencers craft and deliver their messages, directly addressing the research question and objectives. With this thematic overview in mind, the following chapter will delve into the Theoretical Framework, examining the scholarly

perspectives and models that contextualize and help explain each of these themes. This transition to theory builds a foundation for understanding why and how the identified strategies may be effective in driving engagement and behavior change through short-form video.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on four complimentary theories that together offer a multidimensional perspective on influencer communication. Each theory provides insights into the methods by which influencers generate material and the ways in which audiences perceive and respond to environmental signals. Their combined use facilitates study ranging from individual behavioral change to the wider dissemination of ideas.

The theoretical basis for this study was established through a comprehensive and ongoing literature assessment. According to Webster and Watson (2002, p. 13), a literature review seeks to identify and integrate the theoretical discussion related to a study subject. The emerging field of influencer-driven sustainability communication on short-form video platforms shows a significant gap in academic research. Although extensive literature addresses influencer marketing and digital engagement (e.g., Abidin, 2015; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), limited research has combined established behavioral and communication theories to elucidate how sustainability messages get virality and significant engagement globally.

Given this gap, the theoretical framework for this study is developed utilizing both academic research and relevant sources from industry. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019) assert that in regions with restricted scientific research, frameworks should be intentionally constructed using a combination of academic and professional knowledge, rather than relying exclusively on personal experience or opinion. This strategy guarantees that the framework stays robust and methodologically strict despite the emergence of new insights throughout the study process.

### 2.1 Literature Overview

In recent years, the influence of social media personalities—often referred to as influencers—on shaping attitudes, consumption patterns, and behaviors has gained significant scholarly attention. Research shows that influencers serve not only as trendsetters but also as opinion leaders capable of impacting consumer decision-making (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Their ability to build trust, authenticity, and emotional intimacy with followers makes them effective communicators of complex topics, including environmental sustainability (Abidin, 2015).

A systematic literature review by Munaro, Yaghoobi, and Müller (2024) synthesizes recent findings on influencer-driven sustainability communication. Their study reveals that while much of the existing research is quantitative, there is a growing need for qualitative insights into how influencers use

storytelling, visuals, and engagement strategies to frame sustainability as relatable and actionable. Similarly, König and Maier (2024) examined “green influencers” and found that although they predominantly attract eco-conscious audiences, their content can reach broader demographics when it focuses on positive, solution-oriented framing and emotional appeals.

Storytelling in particular has been found to significantly increase the emotional salience and memorability of sustainability messages. Wang and Wu (2022) demonstrated that emotionally charged, narrative-driven posts on social media are more likely to motivate behavioral change than factual, neutral content. This supports earlier work by Furlow (2010), who argued that green communication campaigns should move beyond information transfer and instead evoke empathy, hope, or urgency through stories that resonate with everyday experiences.

Framing is another key dimension of sustainability communication. According to a meta-analysis by Florence et al. (2021), the most effective messages often combine both personal benefit framing (e.g., health or cost savings) and collective benefit framing (e.g., protecting the planet or future generations). This dual approach expands appeal across different motivational orientations and enhances message persuasiveness. These findings align with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which emphasizes that both attitudes and perceived norms contribute to behavioral intentions.

Despite growing attention to sustainability influencers, the academic literature still lacks detailed, cross-cultural qualitative insights—especially from underrepresented regions like Central Asia. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how influencers in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan use short-form video content to promote sustainable lifestyles.

## **2.2 Theoretical Perspectives**

The theoretical framework for this study was developed through an extensive review of the literature on influencer marketing, digital engagement, and behavioral change theories. This framework seeks to explain how sustainability messages disseminated by social media influencers on short-form video platforms achieve high engagement and virality. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, the study can capture both the individual-level psychological processes and the broader diffusion mechanisms at play.

### 2.2.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory offers a robust framework for understanding how behavior is learned through observation — a process that is highly relevant to digital influencer contexts. According to the theory, individuals acquire new behaviors by watching credible and relatable role models.

In the digital arena, influencers serve as these role models, demonstrating sustainable practices through short-form video content. This observational learning is critical: when influencers consistently model eco-friendly behaviors, their followers can learn not only the actions themselves but also the associated attitudes and expected outcomes.

A central construct of Social Cognitive Theory is self-efficacy — the belief in one's ability to execute a behavior successfully. In this study, this concept is particularly important. If viewers see influencers performing sustainable actions with apparent ease and success, their confidence in adopting similar practices increases (Bandura, 1986).

For instance, when an influencer on TikTok or Instagram Reels shows how to recycle creatively or reduce waste in daily life — and receives positive reinforcement from their audience — followers may feel more capable of implementing these practices in their own lives.

Another key concept is outcome expectations. Bandura suggests that if individuals observe a behavior resulting in favorable outcomes — such as social approval, improved environmental quality, or personal satisfaction — they are more likely to imitate that behavior.

In sustainability messaging, this implies that when influencers highlight both the environmental benefits and the personal rewards of eco-friendly practices, they increase the perceived value of those behaviors. As a result, their audience is more likely to view such actions as beneficial and worth emulating.

In summary, Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory helps this research by:

- Explaining the mechanism of observational learning, where influencers serve as credible role models for sustainable behavior.
- Highlighting the importance of self-efficacy in motivating followers to adopt similar eco-friendly practices.
- Emphasizing outcome expectations, which suggest that perceived benefits from sustainable actions will encourage behavioral change.

### 2.2.2 Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations Theory is a critical framework for understanding how new ideas spread within social systems. It provides several key constructs that are directly relevant to this study on sustainability messaging through short-form video.

According to Rogers, the adoption of an innovation is influenced by five main attributes: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability.

Relative advantage refers to the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than existing alternatives. In the context of sustainability messaging, if an eco-friendly practice is shown to have clear benefits — such as reducing environmental impact or offering cost savings — it is more likely to be adopted and shared.

For this research, assessing how influencers highlight these advantages helps identify which messages are most compelling to audiences.

Compatibility refers to how well an innovation aligns with the values, experiences, and needs of potential adopters. Sustainability messages that resonate with the audience's lifestyle, cultural norms, or existing environmental concerns are more likely to be embraced.

In this study, it is particularly important to explore whether the influencers' messages match the values of specific demographic groups on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels. Doing so will help explain which types of content have the potential to go viral within particular cultural or social contexts.

Complexity evaluates how difficult an innovation is to understand or implement. Messages that are simple, clear, and easy to grasp tend to spread more quickly. Short-form video is an ideal medium for simplifying complex sustainability issues into digestible content. This research explores how the clarity and simplicity of these messages influence audience engagement and shareability.

Trialability refers to the extent to which an innovation can be tested on a limited basis before full commitment. In the digital context, sustainability practices shown by influencers often allow viewers to "try out" eco-friendly behaviors without significant effort, cost, or risk.

For example, influencers may use challenges or tutorials to encourage small experiments — such as reusing packaging, composting at home, or reducing plastic use. Investigating how these interactive formats lower barriers to action can help identify effective messaging strategies.

Observability is the degree to which the benefits of an innovation are visible to others. Short-form video excels in this area, offering vivid, engaging demonstrations of sustainable behaviors and their outcomes. When viewers clearly see the benefits of an eco-friendly action — such as a clean space after a cleanup, or a DIY upcycled item — they are more likely to be inspired, engage with the content, or share it with others. This visual dimension is particularly important for this study, as it connects observability with tangible engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments on digital platforms.

By applying these five attributes, Rogers' (2003) framework helps explain why certain sustainability messages are more likely to go viral than others. For example, when an influencer uses a short, engaging video to demonstrate a simple but effective eco-friendly habit, two critical attributes are highlighted: relative advantage and observability. The behavior appears beneficial and its results are clearly visible.

When combined with compatibility (the habit aligns with the audience's values) and low complexity (the action is easy to understand), the content becomes highly accessible. If the behavior also offers trialability — meaning it can be tested quickly and without major cost — viewers are more likely to try it themselves and share the video.

Integrating this theory into the research provides a structured way to assess why some messages resonate more than others. The study explores how each of these five attributes relates to digital engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and viewer feedback.

In summary, Diffusion of Innovations Theory offers a powerful framework to identify which characteristics of influencer content drive widespread engagement — and ultimately, the adoption of sustainable behaviors through social media.

### **2.2.3 Media Richness Theory**

Daft and Lengel's (1986) Media Richness Theory focuses on how well different communication media convey complex or ambiguous information. The richer the medium, the more effectively it can deliver nuanced content.

Rich media — such as video — combine visual, auditory, and textual elements. This makes them particularly effective for delivering sustainability messages, which often require clarity, emotional appeal, and retention.

Clarity through Multi-Channel Cues: Videos enhance understanding by engaging multiple senses simultaneously. Sustainability topics — like carbon footprints or recycling — often involve data and concepts that can be abstract or technical. Using visuals, voiceover explanations, graphics, and captions helps make these ideas accessible. For example, a video showing side-by-side comparisons of waste before and after composting can communicate more effectively than text alone.

Emotional Engagement and Persuasion: Video content also triggers emotion more powerfully than other formats. Music, tone of voice, facial expressions, and imagery can all create emotional resonance. This is crucial in sustainability communication, where facts alone are often insufficient. Influencers use rich media to evoke empathy, urgency, or hope — motivating viewers to care and act.

Improved Information Retention: Research suggests that when information is delivered through multiple channels, it is more likely to be remembered. This is important for long-term behavior change, as viewers must recall not only the message but also the steps to implement it. Influencers who use storytelling, visual metaphors, and repetition in their videos increase the likelihood that their followers will remember and reuse the message in real life.

Facilitating Viral Dissemination: Rich media content is also more shareable. When messages are clear, emotionally resonant, and easy to understand, audiences are more likely to engage with and repost them.

In the context of this study, Media Richness Theory helps explain why short-form videos — with their layered sensory features — are particularly effective in driving engagement with sustainability content.

#### **2.2.4 The Theory of Planned Behavior**

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a widely used psychological framework for predicting behavioral intentions. It suggests that individuals are more likely to perform a behavior when three factors are present:

- A positive attitude toward the behavior,
- A belief that important others support the behavior (subjective norms), and
- A sense that the behavior is within their control (perceived behavioral control).

Attitudes Toward the Behavior: When people believe that a behavior will lead to beneficial outcomes, they are more likely to form an intention to engage in it.

Influencers shape these attitudes by framing sustainability in a positive light — for example, highlighting benefits like improved health, cost savings, or a cleaner environment. When eco-friendly behaviors are portrayed as rewarding, viewers are more inclined to adopt them.

**Subjective Norms:** TPB also emphasizes the role of social expectations. If individuals believe that their peers, family, or role models approve of a certain behavior, they are more likely to follow suit.

Digital influencers act as these social referents. By consistently showcasing sustainable actions, they contribute to making these behaviors feel socially accepted — or even expected. In turn, viewers begin to perceive eco-consciousness as part of a normal, desirable lifestyle.

**Perceived Behavioral Control:** This construct refers to how capable someone feels of actually performing a behavior. If a person feels confident and sees few barriers, they are more likely to follow through.

Influencers strengthen this sense of control by breaking down sustainable practices into easy, actionable steps. For example, a short video showing how to repurpose household waste into something useful can increase the viewer's confidence in trying it themselves.

**Connecting Online Engagement to Real-World Behavior:** One of TPB's strengths is its ability to connect digital messaging with actual behavior change. When sustainability content successfully improves viewers' attitudes, reinforces social approval, and increases perceived control, it becomes more likely that people will take real-world action.

This theoretical linkage is crucial for the study. It suggests that online engagement — likes, shares, comments — is not just a superficial reaction. It may signal deeper psychological shifts that eventually translate into sustainable behaviors offline.

## **2.3 Integrating Theoretical Perspectives**

Each of the four theories discussed provides a unique lens through which to understand how influencers use short-form video to promote sustainability.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) operate at the individual level. SCT focuses on how people learn through observation and how self-efficacy shapes behavior. TPB, in turn, explains how individual behavior is driven by attitudes, perceived social norms, and the belief that the behavior is within one's control.

These two theories intersect in meaningful ways. In fact, TPB's concept of perceived behavioral control is derived from Bandura's idea of self-efficacy in SCT. This connection is important because it highlights how influencers who model simple, doable actions are simultaneously increasing their audience's sense of control — and thus, their likelihood of acting.

While SCT and TPB explain individual motivation and intention, Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) takes a societal-level perspective. It focuses on how new ideas — such as sustainable practices — spread across communities through opinion leaders, communication networks, and peer influence.

In this theory, influencers are viewed as change agents who help disseminate behaviors by increasing their visibility, trialability, and alignment with audience values. This is especially relevant in social media ecosystems, where trends can go viral rapidly.

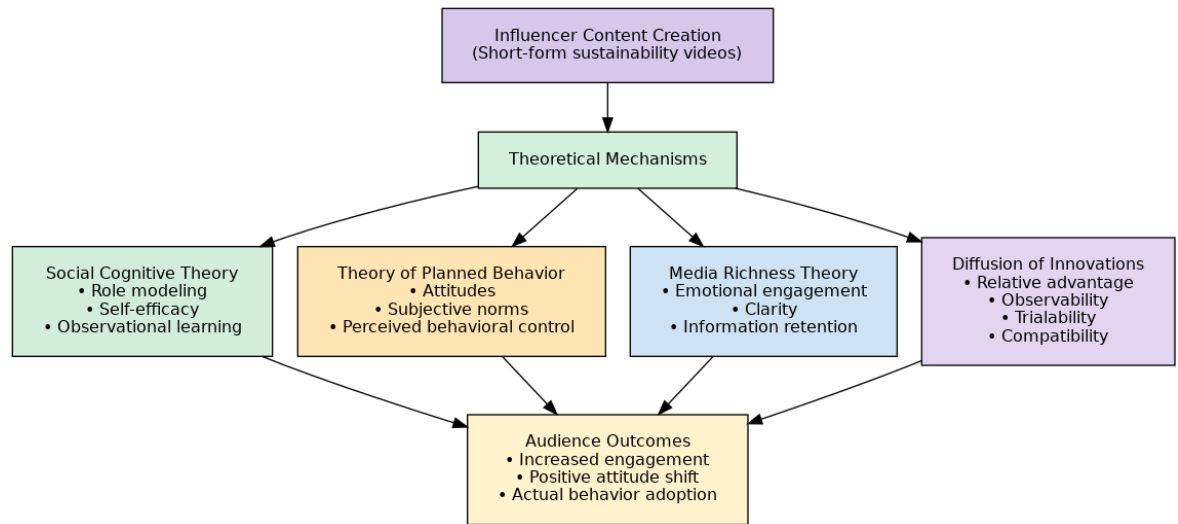
Media Richness Theory (MRT) complements these perspectives by focusing on the communication channel itself. It explains why short-form video is so effective: it combines visual, audio, and textual cues, making complex messages more engaging, easier to understand, and more memorable.

In other words:

- SCT and TPB help explain why individuals might be persuaded to act.
- DOI shows how behaviors spread through a network.
- MRT explains why video works so well as a medium for these messages.

By integrating all four, the framework connects an influencer's content choices (e.g. modeling behavior in a rich media format) to the internal changes they generate (e.g. attitude shift, perceived control), and finally to broader behavioral diffusion across audiences. To illustrate how the selected theories jointly explain the influence of short-form sustainability videos, this study integrates four key frameworks — Social Cognitive Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, Media Richness Theory, and Diffusion of Innovations — into a unified model (see Figure 2). The framework visualizes how influencers' content creation choices activate specific psychological and communicative mechanisms, which in turn contribute to increased engagement, attitudinal change, and ultimately, sustainable behavior adoption among audiences.

Figure 2. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Sustainability Messaging via Influencers



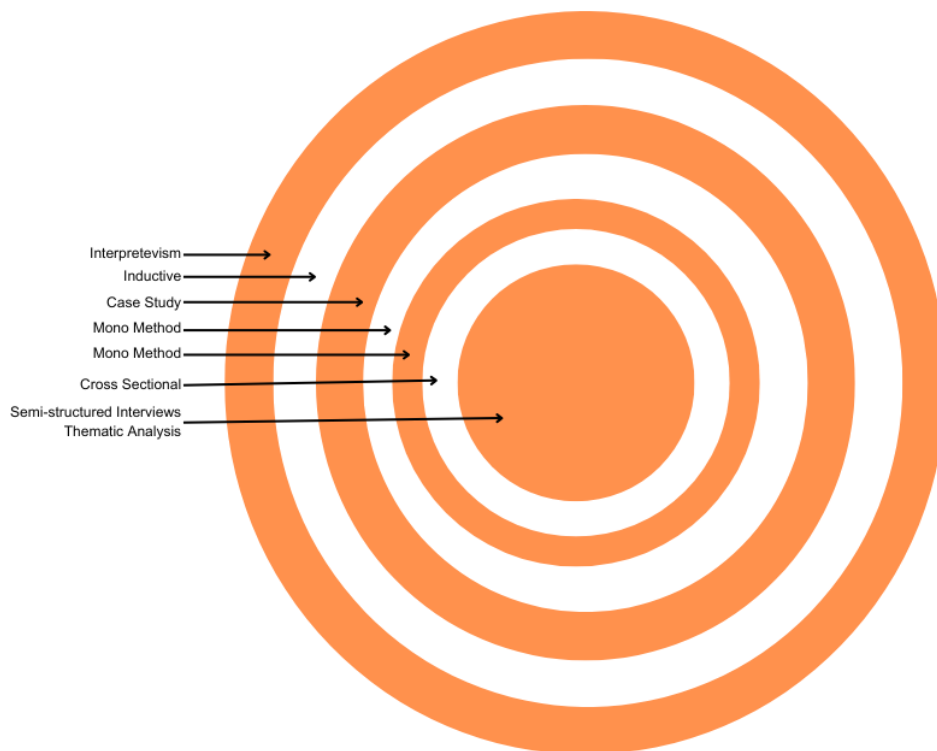
This multidimensional approach ensures that the study captures not only what makes sustainability messaging effective for the individual viewer — but also how it can influence cultural norms and spread widely through digital communities.

### 3 Methodology

The research methodology was designed following the framework of Saunders et al.'s (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019), "research onion," which encapsulates the layers of research decisions from philosophical stance to data collection and analysis. Adopting this structured approach ensures that each element of the methodology aligns logically with the study's objectives and research question.

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sustainability influencers and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Below, each layer of the research design is specified, from the underlying philosophy to the techniques, along with rationale as shown in Figure 1 (adapted from Saunders et al., 2019).

Figure 3. The "research onion" adapted from Saunders et al. (2019) to illustrate this study's methodology.



It highlights the interpretivist philosophy at the outer layer, then an inductive approach, a qualitative multiple case study strategy, a mono-method qualitative choice, a cross-sectional time horizon, and finally the core techniques of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

**Research Philosophy – Interpretivism:** This study is rooted in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is subjectively constructed and best understood by interpreting the meanings and perspectives of participants. Unlike a positivist approach that seeks objective facts, interpretivism “emphasises the influence that social and cultural factors can have on an individual” and focuses on people’s subjective thoughts and ideas (Saunders et al., 2019).

The goal is to understand how influencers create and convey meanings about sustainability in their own context. The researcher thus adopts an empathetic stance, recognizing that each influencer may have a unique approach and rationale shaped by personal and cultural factors.

This philosophical position aligns with the study’s qualitative nature, as it permits a deep exploration of sense-making processes (how influencers perceive their role and message impact) rather than trying to measure objective variables. It also acknowledges the researcher’s active role in interpreting the data (for example, understanding the nuances of the influencers’ messaging styles and motivations) (Saunders et al., 2019).

**Research Approach – Inductive:** An inductive research approach is employed, meaning the study moves from specific observations (interview insights and video content examples) to broader generalizations or theory. In inductive reasoning, rather than starting with a hypothesis, the researcher builds understanding and theoretical concepts from the data patterns. This suits the exploratory aim of the project: since there is limited prior research specifically on sustainability influencers’ short-form videos, an inductive approach allows new themes and theories to emerge from the interviews.

By analyzing the narratives and practices described by different “green” influencers, the researcher can induce common strategies or principles about effective environmental communication. This approach is iterative and reflexive; for instance, as transcripts are coded, recurring concepts (like using humor to convey eco-tips, or framing sustainability as a lifestyle trend) will inform tentative theoretical insights, which are then refined by checking against the data. The inductive approach aligns with interpretivism and qualitative methods, as it values rich detail and seeks to generate theory grounded in participants’ experiences rather than to test a predefined model (Saunders et al., 2019).

**Research Strategy – Qualitative Multiple Case Study:** The study employs a qualitative multiple case study strategy. In a case study strategy, each “case” (here, each sustainability influencer or “greenfluencer” interviewed) is examined in depth to understand their behavior in context. A case study is “a detailed study of a single subject to gain an in-depth understanding within the context of the study”.

Rather than one single case, this research looks at multiple influencers across different regions. Using multiple cases enhances the robustness of findings by allowing comparison and contrast – patterns that appear across several influencers' accounts can indicate more generalizable practices in sustainability messaging, while differences can highlight how context or personality leads to varied approaches.

Each influencer interview is treated as a bounded unit of analysis (a case), including their experiences, content style, and audience engagement strategies. By analyzing multiple such cases, the research can identify common themes (e.g., frequently mentioned motivations or challenges in communicating environmental issues) and also account for diversity (e.g., how an influencer in one culture might approach sustainability topics differently from another).

This strategy remains qualitative and aligned with inductive logic: the aim is to develop a rich, holistic understanding of the phenomenon of sustainability influencers, rather than to enumerate frequencies or test hypotheses. The multiple case study approach is appropriate because it balances depth and breadth – providing deep insight into each influencer's practices while also examining consistency of phenomena across several instances (Saunders et al., 2019).

**Methodological Choice – Mono-Method (Qualitative):** The research design uses a mono-method qualitative approach, meaning only one type of data collection and analysis technique is used (qualitative) without quantitative components. In this study, the mono-method is qualitative interviews.

All data come from spoken narratives and discussions (and, if applicable, qualitative content observations of example videos), with no surveys or experiments involved. This choice is deliberate, as the research question demands rich, descriptive data (influencers explaining their message construction, storytelling techniques, perceptions of audience engagement, etc.) that are best captured through interviews. A mono-method design ensures a concentrated and coherent approach; the procedures for data gathering and analysis are consistent across all cases. It also reflects practical considerations: the depth of semi-structured interviews is sufficient to address the research question, so additional methods (e.g., a quantitative content analysis or a follower survey) were not included within this scope.

Using a single qualitative method aligns with the interpretivist–inductive foundation, keeping the focus on understanding meanings rather than mixing in measurement. This coherence across philosophy, approach, and method increases the internal consistency of the methodology. (It is worth noting that while only interviews were used for data collection, the study could still triangulate insights by discussing the influencers' actual content examples during interviews, thus incorporating some content reflection without separate content analysis (Saunders et al., 2019).

**Time Horizon – Cross-Sectional:** The research is cross-sectional, examining the influencers and their messaging strategies at one point in time (the period during which interviews were conducted), rather than longitudinally following them over months or years. In a cross-sectional design, researchers compare observations from a sample at a single time “snapshot,” as opposed to observing changes over time.

Here, each influencer was interviewed once (or within a short timeframe), providing a snapshot of their current approaches and opinions on sustainability communication. A cross-sectional horizon fits the project constraints and objectives: it captures prevailing practices and perceptions in the given moment (for example, how influencers are currently leveraging trending platforms like TikTok or recent features like Instagram Reels). While influencers’ strategies may evolve, the study seeks to document and analyze patterns in how they construct and communicate messages in the present context.

This approach is efficient and appropriate for an academic study timeline, and it aligns with the diffusion aspect of the theoretical framework by situating the research at a particular stage in the diffusion process (when sustainability messaging via short videos is burgeoning). A longitudinal approach (e.g., interviewing the same influencers repeatedly over a year to see changes) was beyond the scope; thus, a cross-sectional study provides a valuable, if time-bound, understanding of the phenomenon. It also enables coverage of multiple cases within the available time, as the researcher can recruit and interview several influencers in parallel, rather than committing to long-term follow-up of fewer cases (Saunders et al., 2019).

**Data Collection – Semi-Structured Interviews:** The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with sustainability influencers (the “greenfluencers”). Semi-structured interviews are guided by a set of predetermined open-ended questions (based on an interview guide) but allow flexibility for the interviewer to probe deeper or follow new topics that emerge.

This format was chosen to ensure that key areas (e.g. how influencers plan their content, what messages they emphasize, how they engage viewers, perceived challenges) are covered with each participant, while still giving influencers freedom to tell their stories and introduce perspectives the researcher might not have anticipated. Each interview thus produced rich qualitative data – detailed narratives, examples of experiences with short-form videos, personal motivations, and reflections on audience interaction. The use of interviews is consistent with the mono-method qualitative design and the interpretivist stance: it prioritizes participants’ own voices and interpretations. Wherever possible, interviews were conducted in the influencers’ preferred language and later translated (if needed) to ensure comfort and depth of response.

The sample of interviewees can be considered a purposive or criterion sample (influencers known for sustainability content), aiming for variation in geography or follower demographics to broaden the insights beyond a single locale (addressing the earlier focus on broadening beyond Central Asia to a more global perspective). The semi-structured approach also enabled adaptation: for example, if an influencer brought up the use of humor or music in videos as important, the interviewer could explore that further, even if it wasn't originally in the question list (Saunders et al., 2019). This ensured that the data captured a comprehensive picture of content construction and communication tactics from the influencer's viewpoint.

To preserve anonymity, all interview participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., Blogger 1, Blogger 2, etc.). These labels are used throughout the analysis to attribute quotes and perspectives while maintaining confidentiality.

Table 1. Overview of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Language	Platform	Country	Follower Range	Interview Duration
Blogger 1	Russian	Instagram	Kazakhstan	10000-50000	45 min
Blogger 2	Russian Kazakh	Instagram	Kazakhstan	50000-100000	80 min
Blogger 3	Russian Kazakh	Instagram	Kazakhstan	10000-50000	80 min
Blogger 4	Russian Kazakh	Instagram	Kazakhstan	10000-50000	90 min

Blogger 5	Russian Kazakh	Instagram	Kazakhstan	10000- 50000	45 min
Blogger 6	Russian Turkmen	Instagram	Turkmenistan	3000- 10000	60 min
Blogger 7	Russian	Instagram	Kazakhstan	3000- 10000	90 min
Blogger 8	Russian Kyrgyz	Instagram	Kyrgyzstan	3000- 10000	90 min

While the empirical focus of this research is on influencers based in Central Asia, the communication strategies identified offer insights that may be applicable or adaptable to sustainability influencers operating in diverse cultural contexts.

Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of audio recordings, and the voluntary nature of participation. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to recording, and a copy of the consent script template is provided in Appendix 2.

A total of eight sustainability influencers were interviewed for this study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their active engagement with environmental topics and short-form video content on platform like Instagram.

The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation—the point at which no new themes or significant insights were emerging during the coding and analysis process. By the seventh and eighth interviews, thematic repetition became evident, indicating that the core patterns and strategies had been sufficiently captured.

**Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke):** The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework of Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within textual data.

After transcription, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading through all interviews multiple times. Initial codes were then generated line-by-line to tag segments of text that were meaningful or interesting (for instance, code labels like “Audience Engagement Strategy,” “Educational Content vs Entertainment,” “Challenges – Algorithm”). These codes were iteratively reviewed and grouped into broader categories.

Following Braun and Clarke’s approach, a six-phase procedure was applied: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes among codes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (integrating the themes with examples and theory).

Through this process, salient themes emerged, such as “Modeling Behavior through Relatability”, “Balancing Rich Content with Algorithm Demands”, or “Community-Building and Norm Setting”. These themes directly inform the research questions by highlighting how influencers construct their messages (e.g., by sharing personal eco-habits to model behavior) and how they communicate them (e.g., using engaging storytelling in short videos to make complex issues digestible).

Thematic analysis is appropriate because it offers flexibility to incorporate both anticipated themes guided by theory (a deductive element, such as looking for evidence of SCT or TPB concepts in the talk) and emergent themes purely from the data (inductive coding). This hybrid approach is often useful in applied research. The result of the thematic analysis is a set of well-defined themes that structure the findings chapter, each supported by quotes from influencers and interpreted in light of the theoretical framework. Ensuring rigor, the analysis process was documented and a second coder or peer examination was used to validate that the themes were grounded in the data (enhancing credibility). By using Braun & Clarke’s established method, the study maintains transparency and coherence in how raw interview data were transformed into meaningful insights about sustainability messaging in short-form videos.

To demonstrate the process of thematic analysis, Appendix 4 provides a sample coded transcript excerpt from one interview (Blogger 3), selected for its coverage of multiple themes. The full coding framework was developed across all eight interviews, as outlined in Appendix 5.

## 4 Research Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Theme 1: Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives

**Summary of Theme:** A prominent theme is the use of emotion and storytelling to make sustainability content engaging and relatable. Influencers frequently infuse their short videos with personal stories, emotional triggers, or empathetic narratives to capture attention in a crowded social media environment. Rather than presenting dry facts alone, they craft content that evokes feelings – be it hope, outrage, or empathy – to resonate with viewers on a personal level.

For example, one influencer described how an emotional video featuring her child's voice "touched people on a deeper level" and drew a strong reaction. Similarly, another noted that an Instagram Reel about air pollution "went in because there was an emotional trigger," whereas a purely informational approach "would have been much weaker" in response. Across the interviews, influencers observe that heartfelt storytelling (such as sharing real-life eco experiences or eliciting concern for tangible issues like wildlife or health) makes abstract environmental issues more concrete and compelling for their audience.

**Link to Theoretical Insights:** This emphasis on emotional, narrative-driven messaging aligns with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) in that it leverages attention and retention processes. Emotional storytelling grabs viewers' attention, a prerequisite for observational learning. By seeing an influencer passionately engaging in sustainability (for instance, showing distress at pollution or joy in planting a tree), viewers not only absorb factual information but also vicariously experience the influencer's emotions. This can alter observers' motivation and values, as Bandura notes that modeled behaviors can influence audience attitudes and even "emotional dispositions".

Additionally, rich emotional content takes advantage of the medium of video: according to Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), video is a "rich" medium with multiple cues (visual, auditory, verbal) that can convey nuanced emotions more effectively than text. Influencers exploit this richness by, for example, using tone of voice, imagery, or music in their short clips to evoke empathy or urgency that a plain post could not. There is also a strategic understanding, implicit in their comments, of how emotional appeal drives virality. This reflects insights from Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003): innovations (here, pro-environment behaviors or ideas) spread faster when communicated in a way that triggers social response.

Content that is "catchy and engaging" often has emotional or surprising elements that prompt viewers to share or discuss, increasing its observability in a social network. In fact, one influencer remarked that

sensational or shocking eco-content (e.g., images of pollution or animal harm) tends to garner more shares and reach, even though she personally prefers positive storytelling. This underscores a delicate balance they navigate: using emotion to drive diffusion, without resorting exclusively to negative shock tactics.

Finally, the use of relatable narratives and personal anecdotes can shape audience attitudes and norms, a concept from the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). By sharing emotional stories, influencers work to shift viewers' attitudes in favor of sustainable practices (for instance, fostering empathy for nature or outrage at waste) and to reinforce subjective norms – the sense that caring about these issues is normal and emotionally valid in one's peer group. In sum, emotional storytelling serves as a powerful tool in their communication, making sustainability not just an intellectual issue but a human one that audiences can feel and thus be inspired to act upon.

**Manifestation Across Influencers:** All interviewed influencers, despite differing styles, highlighted the importance of making an emotional connection. Blogger 1 relies on heartfelt vignettes (such as a child narrating an environmental problem) to move her viewers. Blogger 2 consciously injects emotion into her messaging – she gives the example of expressing personal outrage about polluted air to hook viewers, rather than simply reporting the pollution statistics. She also mentions choosing a positive emotional tone when possible, focusing on solutions and “what we can do” rather than doom and gloom, since constant negativity can overwhelm both her and her audience.

Meanwhile, Blogger 5 admires content that “identifies the problem, explains its importance and proposes a specific action” in a clear, motivating narrative – a structure that moves viewers from emotional concern to hopeful efficacy. Even influencers who consider their style more educational note that adding a human story or emotional angle “helps make the content livelier and more interesting” for followers (as Blogger 3 acknowledged when she began experimenting with lighter, more story-based presentations of information).

Thus, whether through sharing personal struggles (e.g., feeling discouraged by wastefulness) or successes (e.g., joy at community clean-ups), sustainability influencers use emotional storytelling as a key strategy to engage viewers and imbue environmental messages with resonance and relatability.

## 4.2 Theme 2: Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content

**Summary of Theme:** Another major theme is the careful simplification of complex environmental issues to fit the short-form video format (such as TikTok clips, Instagram Reels). Influencers frequently discussed the challenges of conveying nuanced, technical, or multifaceted sustainability topics in videos

often under one minute. In response, they employ strategies to distill information into clear, bite-sized messages without losing accuracy.

For instance, several influencers described breaking down big topics into mini-series or focusing each short video on a single key point or “tip of the iceberg” fact. Blogger 3 noted that Instagram Reels allow her to deliver “important information without too much ‘water’ (irrelevant detail)” and to keep it “short, clear and understandable” for viewers.

The brevity forces a focus on essentials: rather than overwhelming an audience, the influencers prioritize one or two takeaway messages per video, often supported by visuals or text captions for clarity. They also capitalize on the creative tools of short video platforms – quick cuts, on-screen graphics, subtitles, and trending audio – to efficiently communicate data or instructions. As Blogger 3 explained, maintaining viewer attention in a 60-second video requires high-quality presentation: dynamic editing, changing camera angles, and concise scripting.

Influencers find that this investment in clarity and engaging editing helps transform heavy content (like recycling regulations or climate science) into digestible, shareable knowledge nuggets. In summary, they adapt their message to the medium, ensuring that even complex sustainability lessons can be introduced within the fast-paced, attention-limited context of social media feeds.

**Link to Theoretical Insights:** This theme reflects an interplay with Media Richness Theory and Diffusion of Innovations. According to Media Richness Theory, an effective communication medium is one that can convey information with minimal loss or distortion. Short videos are a rich medium in some respects – they combine visual and auditory channels, allowing use of imagery, demonstrations, voice, and text to maximize clarity.

However, the inherent time constraint means that communicators must be extremely efficient; environmental issues are often “ambiguous and uncertain” topics that normally demand rich, detailed communication.

The influencers acknowledge this, noting that while video offers multiple cues, the short format limits the depth of content. They cope by increasing the information density and clarity of each second of video. For example, an influencer might use on-screen labels or infographics to convey statistics quickly, or rely on a narrative voiceover to explain a concept succinctly while showing visuals (thus using both visual and verbal cues simultaneously to enrich understanding).

This approach aligns with Media Richness Theory's notion that a message should match the medium's capacity: simpler messages can be conveyed quickly, whereas complex messages might be segmented or supported by richer cues. From the perspective of Diffusion of Innovations, simplifying complex ideas lowers the perceived complexity of the innovation and enhances its trialability and observability. Rogers (2003) identified complexity (i.e. difficulty to understand) as a barrier to adoption of new ideas.

The influencers directly tackle this by using layperson-friendly language and concrete examples. One influencer mentioned regularly decoding technical terms (like explaining recycling symbols or carbon footprints in plain language) so that an everyday viewer can grasp them quickly. This not only improves understanding in the moment but also makes viewers more likely to consider trying the suggested sustainable behavior themselves, since it now seems straightforward.

The influencers' use of short how-to videos (for example, demonstrating in 30 seconds how to compost at home or how to upcycle a product) provides observable examples of the behavior in action. Even within time limits, showing a quick before-and-after or a step-by-step visual makes the sustainable practice tangible. Blogger 5 articulated this strategy clearly: the goal of a short video is often to "attract the attention of those who have not yet thought about this issue" by showing just the compelling core of the idea (the "tip of the iceberg") to spark interest, and then guiding interested viewers to explore further resources for more depth.

This approach corresponds to the knowledge and persuasion stages in the diffusion process – a short video creates initial awareness and interest, which can lead viewers to seek more information or to follow the influencer for ongoing guidance.

In essence, the influencers are lowering entry barriers to understanding sustainability, thereby smoothing the path for their audience to progress from mere awareness of an eco-idea to active consideration and eventually adoption.

**Manifestation Across Influencers:** All interviewees recognized the need to tailor their content to the short-form format, though their tactics vary.

Blogger 1 lamented the difficulty of fully "disclosing the topic" in a short clip and sometimes creates slightly longer videos when necessary (e.g. touring a recycling plant), but generally she focuses on one idea per short video to maintain impact.

Blogger 3 takes a proactive approach by planning content in advance with the help of an assistant, ensuring that each 1-minute video is tightly scripted and edited for maximal clarity. She even noted that

Instagram increasing the Reel length to 90 seconds or 3 minutes hasn't tempted her to go much longer – she prefers to stay around one minute to respect the audience's limited time and attention.

Blogger 5, who operates both a personal page and a foundation page, discussed adapting content to platform algorithms and audience needs: on Instagram and TikTok, they present only the “highlight” of an issue in a quick clip, then perhaps direct viewers to a more detailed podcast or article if they want depth.

She and Blogger 2 both mentioned using seasons or series to cover big topics – for example, breaking a broad topic like sustainable fashion into a sequence of short videos each addressing a sub-topic (materials, waste, consumer tips, etc.), so that over time the audience gets the full picture in digestible segments.

Blogger 2 explicitly said for complex issues she finds it better to “break down complex topics into several posts” rather than force too much into one. In practice, this might mean a series of Reels on air pollution: one Reel focusing on health impacts, another on simple actions to improve indoor air, another on policy solutions – each short and focused, but collectively comprehensive.

Across different influencers, we see a shared commitment to clarity: whether through visuals like infographics, interactive Q&A formats to address confusion, or repeating key facts regularly (because new followers continuously need the basics), they simplify and reinforce important information so that the constraints of short-form media do not dilute the message's effectiveness.

This ensures that their environmental communication remains informative yet engaging, aligning with the fast consumption patterns of social media audiences while laying a foundation for deeper understanding.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Leading by Example and Modeling Sustainable Behavior**

**Summary of Theme:** The influencers consistently position themselves as role models, demonstrating sustainable behaviors in their own lives as a way to inspire and instruct their audience. This theme of “practice what you preach” emerges strongly: rather than just telling followers what to do, the influencers show followers how they do it. They film themselves performing eco-friendly actions – sorting their household waste, carrying reusable bags, planting trees, upcycling old items – thereby turning abstract advocacy into concrete action on screen.

Many noted that this personal demonstration builds credibility and relatability: audiences can see that the influencer faces the same daily challenges but finds creative solutions, making the idea of adopting these habits less daunting.

Blogger 4, for example, stated plainly, “I show everything by my own example – how exactly I sort waste, what habits I introduce into my life”. In her content, she often physically walks viewers through her routines (like a kitchen tour showing compost bins or a shopping trip using thrift stores), implicitly inviting viewers to mirror these behaviors.

Some influencers also create interactive challenges or campaigns that actively engage followers in doing the behavior alongside them. One memorable example is Blogger 4’s “avocado seed challenge,” where she posted videos of herself sprouting an avocado pit instead of discarding it, and encouraged followers to try the same. The result was a wave of subscribers sharing their own sprouted plants, effectively creating a community of practice around a simple sustainable act.

This modeling of behavior serves dual purposes: it educates viewers on the process (step-by-step how to do something eco-friendly) and it normalizes the behavior by showing that an ordinary person (the influencer themselves) can successfully integrate it into daily life. In summary, the influencers construct their messages not just through words but through embodied action, using short videos as a window into sustainable lifestyles in action.

**Link to Theoretical Insights:** This theme is a direct illustration of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) at work. SCT emphasizes that people learn new behaviors by observing others, especially when those others are seen as credible or similar to oneself. The influencers function as models for their audience. By watching an influencer sort recyclables or carry a reusable cup, followers gain knowledge about how to perform the behavior and also insight into the benefits and manageable nature of doing so. Bandura highlighted that observational learning can “short cut the tedious trial and error process” for learners.

In this context, an influencer’s tutorial on, say, making eco-friendly cleaning products at home, allows viewers to bypass some experimentation and confidently replicate the recipe shown. Additionally, seeing the influencer succeed builds viewers’ self-efficacy (“If she can do it, maybe I can too”).

Indeed, several influencers mentioned the importance of showing the process itself, not just the end result. Blogger 3 recounted that early on, she “started to show not only that I was sorting waste, but also the process itself, sharing it with others,” because this transparency answered questions and satisfied the curiosity of people who wanted to know how to do it.

Over time, as more people saw her doing these actions, they began to try them and ask more questions, which is exactly the kind of reciprocal interaction SCT predicts (the influencer's behavior influences the audience, which in turn gives feedback that influences the influencer's further content choices – a feedback loop of learning). Modeling in short videos also increases the observability and trialability of innovations, key factors in Diffusion of Innovations Theory. Rogers (2003) noted that when people can see a behavior being practiced and even try it in a low-risk way, they are more likely to adopt it.

By turning sustainability tips into visual demonstrations, these influencers make otherwise invisible personal habits visible to thousands of people. For example, one influencer's demonstration of how to set up a simple home compost bin demystifies that innovation for viewers – they can observe the steps and the outcome (rich compost) and are thus more inclined to attempt it themselves. Interactive campaigns like challenges further boost trialability: followers participate in a challenge (such as Blogger 4's seed-sprouting experiment) for fun, which gives them firsthand experience with a sustainable practice in a supportive, trend-driven context.

This strategy echoes classic diffusion techniques (e.g., community pilot programs) but transposed onto social media. It leverages peer influence too – as subscribers shared their avocado plants, others in the audience saw their peers doing it, multiplying the modeling effect beyond the influencer alone.

Furthermore, this “leading by example” shapes subjective norms in the audience, a concept from the Theory of Planned Behavior. TPB holds that people are more likely to form intentions to act if they perceive that important others (or many others in their social circle) perform and approve of the behavior.

By visibly engaging in eco-behaviors and often highlighting growing participation (e.g., “many of my subscribers started growing avocados too” after the challenge), the influencers send a signal that sustainable actions are popular and commendable. They often celebrate follower contributions – sharing user-generated content of followers doing beach clean-ups or reusing items – which reinforces a normative message that “our community values and does this.”

This encouragement can increase individuals' perceived social pressure (in a positive way) to also adopt the behavior, strengthening their intention. Additionally, observing step-by-step demonstrations can improve viewers' perceived behavioral control (another TPB component) because it breaks down the action into manageable parts and shows that it is feasible even for a regular person with limited resources.

For example, Blogger 2 focuses on showing “simple solutions” – easy eco-hacks that anyone can do at home – precisely so that people feel empowered rather than intimidated. This relates to SCT's concept

of self-efficacy and TPB's perceived control: modeling builds the belief, "I have seen how to do this, I trust it's doable, so I feel I can do it too."

**Manifestation Across Influencers:** Every influencer incorporated personal examples into their content, though the extent and style varied. Blogger 3, with her background as an environmental specialist, often visits recycling facilities or pilot projects and films herself on-site to give viewers a first-hand look at solutions in action .

By bringing the audience along (virtually) to a textile recycling plant or a tree-planting event, she acts as their eyes and ears, modeling both curiosity and active involvement.

Blogger 4 is very explicit about lifestyle modeling – her Instagram is described as “a narrative, educational blog” where she prefers to be known “specifically as an environmentalist” sharing eco-habits, rather than a general lifestyle influencer. She regularly shows routine acts like dropping off recyclables and celebrates small wins (like a follower telling her they finally started recycling batteries) as proof of impact.

Blogger 1 mentioned using creative approaches to modeling: in one case, she had her young child narrate a recycling activity, effectively modeling eco-behavior across generations and making it relatable to parents.

Blogger 2 and Blogger 5 also lead community initiatives offline (clean-up drives, workshops) and then share those experiences online, thereby modeling not only individual actions but also community leadership. Importantly, these influencers often share their challenges in adopting these behaviors too – for instance, acknowledging when they struggle or when something goes wrong – which makes the modeling honest and attainable. They are not portraying an unrealistic ideal; they show real-life application. This transparency further enhances learning, as viewers see problem-solving in context (e.g., what to do when a recycling facility rejects certain items, etc.).

The cumulative effect is that followers are not just hearing why sustainability matters; they are seeing how it can be lived, step by step, through the daily practices of people they admire and trust. Such visual, example-driven messaging is at the heart of their communication strategy and is clearly effective, as evidenced by many followers emulating their actions and reporting back successes.

#### 4.4 Theme 4: Framing Sustainability: Personal Benefits vs. Collective Good

**Summary of Theme:** A recurrent theme is how influencers frame the *benefits* of sustainable practices in their messaging – specifically, whether they emphasize personal, immediate benefits to the individual or the broader, long-term benefits to society and the planet. The interviews reveal a conscious awareness of this framing choice. Some influencers lean towards highlighting how eco-friendly actions can improve the follower’s own life (health, convenience, saving money, etc.), believing this pragmatic angle hooks a wider audience. Others focus on altruistic or collective benefits, aiming to instill a sense of responsibility and community impact. Often, influencers try to balance both, but their approaches vary in degree.

For example, *Blogger 2* observed that her audience (like most people) “think first of all about personal gain” and often will adopt an eco-friendly solution only if it clearly benefits them directly – “not because it is good for the planet, but because it is personally beneficial” (such as being healthier or cheaper). She gave concrete illustrations: families might buy non-toxic household cleaners for the health of their children (a personal motive) rather than for environmental purity, or choose reusable items to save money rather than to reduce waste. Acknowledging this reality, she sometimes frames her content to meet people where they are – for instance, posting about how reducing energy use can lower utility bills (personal benefit) as well as cut carbon emissions.

On the other hand, *Blogger 5* reported that the core of her community is driven more by the “desire to care and contribute to the common good” than by personal reward. Consequently, her messaging often centers on the collective impact of individual actions. She tells stories of how “even one person can change their environment and contribute to sustainable development” by inspiring others in their family or neighbourhood. This kind of framing appeals to viewers’ sense of purpose and social contribution.

All influencers recognize that these two angles are not mutually exclusive – an action can have personal advantages and serve the greater good. But the tone and focus of their short videos will reflect what they think will resonate best with their audience and what aligns with their own motivations.

*Blogger 4* explicitly avoids framing sustainability as something easy or immediately rewarding; she says she does *not* promise that eco-living is “profitable or easy” – in fact, she admits it “requires effort” and often inconvenience, especially given infrastructural gaps. Her approach is to appeal to viewers’ values and willingness to make small sacrifices for a larger benefit (like storing recyclables at home despite the hassle, because it matters for the environment).

In contrast, other influencers might showcase how small eco-habits can seamlessly integrate into one’s life and even improve it (e.g. DIY natural cosmetics being both eco-friendly and better for your skin).

Thus, the theme encapsulates a spectrum of message framing: from self-interest to altruism, and combinations thereof, used to motivate behavior change.

**Link to Theoretical Insights:** This theme closely relates to motivational components of the Theory of Planned Behavior and also touches on diffusion principles. In TPB, an individual's attitude toward a behavior is shaped by beliefs about its outcomes. By framing outcomes as personally rewarding (e.g., "riding a bike to work will improve your health and save you money") or as morally/rightfully rewarding (e.g., "riding a bike reduces pollution and helps your city"), influencers are trying to strengthen positive attitudes toward the sustainable behavior. Perceived behavioral *control* also plays a role: if an action is framed as benefiting the individual, the person may feel more in control and justified in doing it for themselves; if it's framed as difficult but noble, the influencer must instill confidence that the effort is worthwhile.

TPB also notes the influence of subjective norms – framing something as helping the community can tap into social norms of being a "good citizen" or "responsible parent," which can motivate those who value those identities.

In the interviews, Blogger 5 essentially describes a norm within her community: people are *proud* to be contributing and are not looking for personal gain, which creates a reinforcing cycle where altruistic behavior is the expected norm.

Meanwhile, Blogger 2 is trying to shift norms by first acknowledging self-interest (a norm of convenience) but gradually encouraging broader thinking, hoping her followers evolve from "I do this because it's good for me" to "I also care that it's good for everyone"

From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, this theme can be seen in terms of outcome expectancies – the outcomes an observer anticipates from adopting a behavior. If influencers show that sustainable actions lead to positive outcomes for the individual (feeling happier, saving money, receiving social praise) or for society (cleaner environment, helping others), these expected outcomes can motivate the observer to enact the behavior. Bandura argues that seeing valued outcomes reinforces the likelihood of behavior imitation.

Some influencers deliberately show tangible benefits in their videos: for instance, demonstrating how reusing items can create something useful or beautiful (personal satisfaction), or sharing before-and-after comparisons of a community clean-up (collective benefit) to highlight outcomes. By doing so, they address both individual and collective incentives for behavior.

The way benefits are framed also intersects with *Diffusion of Innovations*. Rogers notes that an innovation's relative advantage (the degree to which it is seen as better than the status quo) is a key

determinant of adoption. Framing sustainable practices as having clear advantages – whether personal (better quality of life) or societal (better future for all) – increases their relative advantage in the eyes of potential adopters.

Moreover, aligning the innovation with the audience's values (compatibility) is crucial. Audiences motivated by self-improvement will respond to messages about personal gains, whereas audiences with strong community values respond to messages about collective impact.

The influencers seem aware of their followers' value profiles. For example, Blogger 5 knows her followers (largely young women in Kazakhstan's eco-community) have altruistic leanings, so she frames content around contribution and caretaking values. Blogger 2, dealing with a perhaps more general audience, uses entry-point messages about convenience or health (compatible with people's immediate needs) to get a foot in the door, then gradually introduces the idea of thinking beyond oneself.

In diffusion terms, she is trying to bridge from early adopters motivated by practicality to later adoption that includes a shift in mindset toward sustainability as a social norm.

**Manifestation Across Influencers:** The influencers' interview responses revealed distinct but overlapping framing tendencies.

Blogger 2 candidly said that pragmatism often wins: she regularly points out personal benefits ("safer for your children," "saves you money," etc.) because those messages "go in" more readily. However, she also expresses a *desire* to move her audience toward a more empathetic stance – she shares facts that highlight unseen collective consequences (like the fate of released balloons harming wildlife) to spark broader concern.

Blogger 4 takes almost the opposite approach: she appeals to the audience's conscience and willingness to endure inconvenience for the planet. In her words, she doesn't dangle rewards or ease; instead, she might stress the *meaning* of the action ("huge benefit for the environment" even if personal cost is small) and the ethical imperative. In her interview, she echoed a famous sustainability adage: "the world doesn't need a handful of people living perfectly environmentally – we need millions doing it imperfectly," highlighting that *some* effort by many, motivated by caring, is the goal. This sentiment frames sustainable habits as a contribution to a collective solution rather than a path to individual perfection.

Blogger 5 provides an interesting mix: for the general public, her team occasionally highlights practical benefits (e.g. telling businesses that recycling can reduce costs), but for her main follower base, she doubles down on messages of community improvement and shared responsibility. She even operates in

the Kazakh language sphere specifically to reach communities that value group identity and might respond to culturally resonant narratives of protecting one's homeland and people.

Blogger 3 didn't explicitly dwell on this dilemma in her interview, but from her content one can infer she often appeals to future-oriented collective benefit (talking about "next generations" and the state of the world we leave behind), while also noting that living eco-friendly can have personal wellness ties (e.g. mental satisfaction, physical health from less pollution)

In practical content, these framings manifest in choices of words and examples in short videos. An influencer might produce one Reel that says "5 ways going green saves you money" – focusing on individual gain – and another that says "Small acts, big impact: how your 1 minute per day can help your city breathe cleaner air" – focusing on collective impact. Both types were reported in the interviews.

The key is that influencers are strategic about this framing: they are keenly aware of what motivates their audience and craft their messages accordingly, sometimes attempting to shift those motivations over time toward a more sustainable mindset. By aligning sustainability with either personal interest or moral values (or both), they increase the likelihood that the audience will form an intention to perform the behavior (in TPB terms) and actually follow through.

This thematic finding shows the ethical and persuasive tightrope these creators walk: encouraging eco-friendly behavior by appealing to self-interest enough to hook people, but ultimately hoping to foster a genuine ethic of environmental stewardship that transcends self-interest.

#### 4.5 Theme 5: Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops

**Summary of Theme:** A final major theme is the dynamic interaction between influencers and their audience – how feedback, engagement, and community-building shape the way environmental messages are communicated. Unlike traditional one-way communication, these social media "greenfluencers" experience a constant loop of input from their followers: comments, direct messages, questions, criticisms, and user-generated content all inform their ongoing content strategy. Influencers view their relationship with followers as a community or dialogue rather than a mere broadcast.

Many spoke about actively seeking or at least noticing audience reactions to gauge what works and what doesn't. Positive feedback – such as viewers reporting behavior changes or expressing gratitude – serves as validation that their messaging is effective, and it motivates the influencers to continue despite challenges. For instance, *Blogger 1* shared that initially some people were skeptical or mocking, but later those same individuals "write that they have started to see things differently" and adopt new eco-habits, even if in small increments.

These messages of personal change (“I started composting thanks to you” or “my family recycles now because of your videos”) are often described as the most rewarding aspect of their work. Blogger 4 said, “the best praise is when people start to sort waste... it means my blog has already done some good”. Such anecdotes indicate that influencers don’t measure success solely in views or likes, but in real-life impact as reported by followers.

Audience engagement also means influencers adapt content based on what the audience needs or responds to. Several described using Q&A formats, polls, or reading comments to identify common questions as inspiration for new content.

Blogger 4 gave an example: she became a go-to resource where followers would ask, “where do I recycle X item?” – noticing this, she created informative posts listing drop-off points, effectively directly addressing her audience’s queries.

Blogger 3 similarly noted that while she doesn’t formally crowdsource topics, she intuitively “understands what people are interested in” from their engagements and ensures her content meets those needs. In effect, the audience co-creates the agenda of the page through their feedback.

However, engagement is not universally positive. Influencers also face negative feedback and resistance, which is an important part of this theme. When sustainability content reaches beyond the already-converted audience, it can trigger backlash or criticism (e.g., accusations of being “too radical” or dismissive comments about the efficacy of individual actions).

*Blogger 1* mentioned receiving ridicule and hostile comments from broader viewers who were not environmentally minded, which was discouraging.

*Blogger 5* recounted the “balloon story” incident, where she and others campaigned against a mass balloon release; this led to a flood of negativity from people who felt the eco-activists were spoiling fun – they were called “evil pseudo-environmentalists” and worse.

These experiences taught the influencers to develop thick skin and refine their communication. In Blogger 5’s case, the backlash underscored the need for clearer communication and education, as many detractors simply didn’t understand the environmental issue at stake.

In general, influencers learn to handle negative comments by either engaging constructively (explaining patiently, providing facts) or by focusing on their supportive community to stay motivated. Many noted that *for every negative voice, there are many silent positive observers* who eventually come around or appreciate the content. Indeed, as their communities grow, influencers see normative shifts – what was

once viewed as extreme “eco-crazy” behavior might become more accepted among their followers over time, to the point that the community will even defend the influencer’s message against outside skeptics.

In summary, audience engagement is a two-way street: followers are not passive recipients but active participants in the communication process. Their reactions, whether enthusiastic, inquisitive, or critical, feed back into how influencers construct their messages – reinforcing effective tactics, prompting new content directions, and sometimes necessitating clarification or myth-busting when misunderstandings arise. The sense of community and shared purpose between influencer and followers strengthens the impact of the messages, as people feel part of a movement, not just consumers of content.

**Link to Theoretical Insights:** The interactive nature of this theme can be viewed through Social Cognitive Theory’s concept of reciprocal determinism – the idea that an individual’s behavior, personal factors, and environment (including social feedback) all influence each other.

Here, the influencer (behavior source) is influenced by the social environment (audience feedback). Positive reinforcement from the audience (success stories, praise) increases the influencer’s motivation to continue and possibly intensify certain types of messaging, while negative feedback might cause them to adjust their approach or double down on educational efforts. SCT also highlights that seeing others respond and change can reinforce the behavior for both influencer and other observers; for example, when one follower publicly comments that they started a new habit, another follower reading that might be inspired as well. This peer-to-peer influence within the audience amplifies the influencer’s impact.

The Theory of Planned Behavior also offers insight: the community aspect helps shape subjective norms. As followers engage and share their own sustainable actions (e.g., commenting “I tried this tip and it worked for me”), they create a social proof that “people like me are doing this,” which can encourage others in the audience to follow suit. The influencers often act as facilitators of this community norm formation, highlighting fan stories or creating hashtags for collective challenges. By doing so, they move the locus of influence from just themselves to the network of followers supporting each other. This is powerful for sustaining intentions and actual behavior change, as people feel accountable to a group norm of sustainability.

Moreover, Diffusion of Innovations theory underscores the role of interpersonal networks in spreading new ideas. In Rogers’ view, mass media may create awareness, but it’s interpersonal communication that often solidifies adoption decisions. The influencers’ engagement with their audience fosters a form of interpersonal communication at scale.

For instance, the Q&A sessions mimic one-on-one consultations, and comment discussions let followers troubleshoot and encourage each other, functioning like a peer support system. This kind of dialogic

communication can hasten diffusion by addressing uncertainties (through Q&A, myths debunking) and by providing social support for change. In diffusion terms, the influencer's early followers might be "early adopters" who enthusiastically give feedback and share outcomes. Their testimonies (fed back via comments or stories) then persuade the "early majority" who are watching a bit more cautiously. When *Blogger 1* says she sees people go from disbelief to eventually advocating within their own families, it illustrates how a feedback loop can propagate the message outward: the influenced becomes the influencer in their small circle, a hallmark of diffusion.

Finally, the way influencers handle negative feedback also ties to *Media Richness* considerations. Text comments can lack nuance and breed misunderstanding. Some influencers choose to respond with video explanations or live sessions (a richer medium for clarifying tone and intent) to resolve conflict or confusion, leveraging the higher cues of video to rebuild understanding. This was implied in a few interviews where influencers noted they sometimes needed to "show" or explain in a different way when faced with misinterpretation. It also reflects the need for a communication strategy (as *Blogger 5* mentioned after the balloon incident) to preemptively educate the public and frame their actions in a positive light to mitigate backlash

**Manifestation Across Influencers:** The interviews provided rich examples of this engagement theme.

*Blogger 1* described a transformation in her audience engagement over time: early on she drew a small like-minded audience, then as she went viral, she faced a wave of negativity, but eventually her consistent efforts "sowed seeds" that led even skeptics to change, and now those people "instill awareness in their loved ones". This illustrates a full feedback cycle – from resistance to acceptance to further diffusion via audience members.

*Blogger 4* actively cultivates engagement by answering questions and providing practical info on request, effectively making her platform interactive and user-driven in content at times. She measures success not by vanity metrics but by tangible feedback, as when a follower tells her about a new habit; those messages "incredibly inspire" her to keep going.

*Blogger 3* and *Blogger 5* both mentioned analyzing comments and messages to adapt their strategy. *Blogger 5* even has team members analyzing engagement data professionally to refine their content calendar. She gave a striking example of how engagement led to content reuse: noticing that *Blogger 3*'s posts addressing audience questions were very effective, *Blogger 5*'s team started to emulate that format on their own page. This cross-pollination happened because audience engagement (lots of comments on *Blogger 3*'s posts) signaled what content style works, informing others in the niche. On the flip side, when facing widespread backlash (as in the balloon campaign), *Blogger 5* and her colleagues realized they needed to engage in more communication – they followed up with explanatory posts and

even saw policy discussions emerge, showing how even negative engagement can lead to productive outcomes in the long run.

In essence, these influencers do not operate in a vacuum; their message construction is continually molded by the push and pull of audience interaction. They celebrate and amplify positive engagement (creating a virtuous cycle of encouragement) and learn from or attempt to correct negative engagement.

The community that forms around their content becomes part of the message itself – each comment section can turn into a mini-forum on sustainability. Through this participatory communication, the impact of their short-form videos is extended well beyond the 60-second clip: it lives on in discussions, in shared user stories, and in the real-world actions taken by viewers who feel connected to the influencer and to each other. This theme highlights that successful environmental communication on social media is not just about crafting a perfect video, but also about nurturing a network of engaged individuals who reinforce and spread the message in their own right.

The table in Appendix 8 presents illustrative quotes from the eight interviewed influencers, mapped to each of the five major themes identified through thematic analysis.

## 5 Key Insights and Recommendations

**Key Insights.** This study identified five interrelated strategies (“themes”) that Central Asian greenfluencers use to make sustainability messages resonate through short-form video.

First, emotional storytelling was found to be a powerful tool: influencers humanize environmental issues by sharing personal stories, evoking empathy or even humor to capture attention in crowded feeds. Rather than relying on dry facts, they use relatable narratives and emotional triggers (e.g. a child’s voice in a recycling video) to make abstract threats like pollution feel immediate and personal. This approach aligns with research suggesting that emotional, narrative-driven content boosts audience attention and retention (Bandura, 1986) and can prompt social sharing, thus expanding the reach of sustainability ideas.

Second, simplifying complexity emerged as crucial. Given the 60-second constraint of TikTok or Reels, influencers distill complex environmental topics into clear, bite-sized lessons. They focus each video on one key point or solution, often using visuals, captions, and concise scripting to convey “just the tip of the iceberg” and spark interest without overwhelming viewers. This strategy reflects Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), as short videos combine visuals and audio to deliver dense information quickly, and supports Diffusion of Innovations principles by lowering perceived complexity and making new ideas easier to grasp.

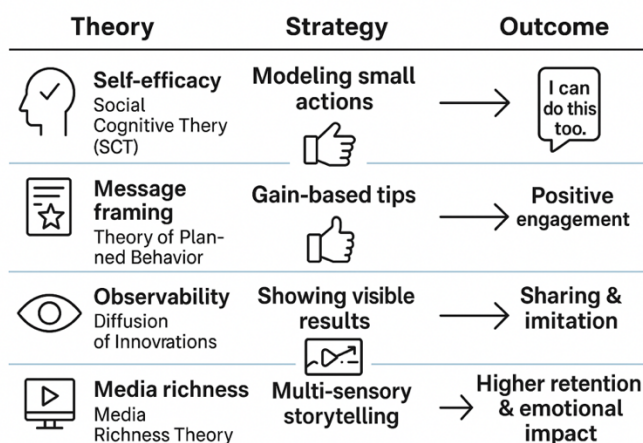
Third, influencers consistently model sustainable behavior on camera (e.g. sorting waste, planting trees), exemplifying the “practice what you preach” ethos. By leading by example, they boost their credibility and show followers how to perform eco-friendly actions in daily life. Viewers can observe step-by-step demonstrations – such as a 30-second DIY compost tutorial – which increases the audience’s confidence (“self-efficacy”) that they too can adopt these habits (Bandura, 1986). This observational learning approach is a direct application of Social Cognitive Theory and also enhances the observability and trialability of innovations (Rogers, 2003) – followers see a behavior’s benefits and are inspired to try it themselves.

Fourth, influencers are deliberate in framing sustainability benefits to appeal to their audience’s motivations. They toggle between emphasizing personal benefits (e.g. better health, saving money, convenience) and collective goods (e.g. community well-being, “a better future for all”). Several noted that many people “think first of all about personal gain,” so framing tips in terms of immediate rewards (like lower utility bills from saving energy or safer products for one’s family) can hook a broader audience

At the same time, they weave in altruistic messaging – stories of how one person’s action can benefit their neighborhood or the planet – to nurture a sense of purpose and collective responsibility. This balance echoes the Theory of Planned Behavior: shaping positive attitudes by highlighting desirable outcomes (for oneself and for society) and reinforcing social norms that caring for the environment is both normal and admirable (Ajzen, 1991).

Finally, audience engagement and feedback loops are key to these influencers’ impact. Rather than one-way broadcasting, they treat social media as a two-way dialogue with followers. Continuous feedback – through comments, DMs, polls, Q&A sessions – actively informs the content they create. Influencers celebrate messages from followers who report adopting new eco-habits (“I started composting thanks to you”), using these success stories as proof of real-world impact and motivation to keep going. They also respond to confusion or backlash by clarifying facts and adjusting their approach, turning even negative engagement into teachable moments. This participatory style builds a community around sustainability issues; followers feel like active participants, not just an audience, which strengthens social norms (people see peers supporting the cause) and accelerates idea spread via peer-to-peer influence. In summary, the greenfluencers effectively blend information with inspiration – using emotional appeal, clear messaging, demonstrative action, tailored benefit-framing, and interactive dialogues – to translate sustainability from reels into real-life changes.

Figure 4. Integrated Theory-to-Strategy Model in Sustainability Communication via Short-Form Video



This figure illustrates the relationship between theoretical constructs, influencer communication strategies, and observed or intended audience outcomes in the context of sustainability messaging on short-form video platforms. It visually synthesizes the four theoretical lenses guiding this research —

Social Cognitive Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, Diffusion of Innovations, and Media Richness Theory — and maps them onto specific content strategies used by sustainability influencers.

For example, the concept of self-efficacy (SCT) is reflected in influencers' tendency to model small, actionable behaviors, which encourages audiences to believe "I can do this too." Similarly, message framing (TPB) is operationalized through gain-oriented tips and positive emotional content that support favorable attitudes and social norms, leading to increased engagement. Observability (DOI) is enhanced when influencers show clear, visible outcomes of sustainable actions, which supports both imitation and social diffusion. Finally, Media Richness Theory explains why short-form video is such an effective vehicle for these strategies: its multi-sensory format supports emotional resonance, clarity, and retention — all of which amplify the impact of the message.

This model helps bridge theory and practice, offering a conceptual summary of how digital influencers strategically communicate sustainability in a way that resonates with and activates their audiences.

**Recommendations:** These insights suggest actionable recommendations for various stakeholders in sustainability communication worldwide:

**Policymakers:** Partner with social media influencers to amplify public environmental campaigns and policy initiatives. Governments and international agencies should treat credible green influencers as allies who can translate policy goals into relatable content for the masses.

For example, sharing climate tips or new regulations via TikTok creators could engage younger citizens who consume news through social media (Allgaier, 2023). Policymakers can provide influencers with up-to-date data or resources (e.g. infographics, toolkits) to ensure accuracy, while letting them craft the emotional narrative that will appeal to their communities. Importantly, supporting influencer-led sustainability initiatives (through grants, shout-outs or collaborations) can increase their legitimacy and reach.

Recent studies show that well-designed social media campaigns indeed increase environmental awareness and even influence behaviors among youth— a signal for public institutions to invest in these digital strategies rather than relying solely on traditional top-down messaging.

Finally, governments should consider the insights from these influencers when designing policies; the on-the-ground barriers and public sentiments that emerge in comment sections can inform more responsive and culturally tuned sustainability programs.

**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Environmental Campaigners:** Leverage influencer-driven storytelling to broaden outreach and galvanize communities. NGOs can collaborate with popular sustainability content creators to co-create campaigns that weave factual information with the kind of emotional, human-interest stories that thrive online.

For instance, an NGO promoting renewable energy might work with a local eco-influencer to showcase a family's joyful experience with solar panels in a 60-second Reel – packaging expert knowledge into an inspiring narrative. This approach follows evidence that social media content which is visual, authentic, and engaging spreads more effectively than dry reports. NGOs should also utilize the interactive features of platforms: host live Q&As or challenges with influencers to answer common questions and spur follower participation (e.g. a zero-waste challenge backed by a nonprofit, led by influencers).

Such tactics turn campaigns into interactive movements, as seen when hashtag challenges or community clean-up drives go viral. Additionally, NGOs can support influencers by providing verified information and training (to prevent inadvertent misinformation) and by amplifying influencer content through their own channels for greater credibility. In regions where environmental topics are sensitive or not mainstream, partnering with relatable local influencers can lend cultural relevance and trust to NGO messages, making audiences more receptive to topics they might otherwise ignore.

Overall, NGOs worldwide should embrace these digital “green ambassadors” as important messengers who can mobilize hard-to-reach audiences at scale.

**Educators and Communicators:** Integrate social media eco-content into education and outreach to bridge formal knowledge with real-world action. Teachers and sustainability trainers can incorporate short influencer videos (Instagram Reels, TikToks) as engaging case studies or discussion prompts in classrooms and workshops. These bite-sized videos – whether demonstrating a recycling hack or explaining climate science with humor – can make environmental lessons more relatable and current for students who are already immersed in social media culture.

Moreover, educators should acknowledge that influencers act as informal educators shaping youth attitudes (sometimes more powerfully than textbooks).

By critically examining influencer content in class, educators can both celebrate effective examples and teach media literacy – helping learners discern credible, science-based messaging from clickbait or “eco-fatigue.” This means guiding students to question sources and framing (e.g., discuss how an influencer uses emotion or what biases might be present) so that young people become savvy consumers of online sustainability content (Allgaier, 2023).

Universities and training programs might also invite sustainability influencers as guest speakers or collaborators, which validates their role and allows mutual learning (influencers share engagement tactics while academics ensure accuracy).

Finally, global science communicators (e.g. climate scientists, zoo educators) should borrow from influencer tactics by adopting storytelling and visuals in their own outreach. Embracing a more narrative, interactive style – for example, through institutional TikTok accounts or student-run green Instagram pages – can significantly boost public interest and understanding (Hakim et al., 2024)

**Social Media Content Creators (Green Influencers):** Apply best practices from the study to maximize impact on sustainability outcomes. Influencers should continue to harness emotional storytelling – personal anecdotes, relatable humor, even moral outrage – to make viewers feel why an issue matters, since content that triggers an emotional response is more likely to be remembered and shared.

Pair these stories with clear, simple calls to action: focus each video on a doable tip or insight rather than overwhelming viewers, echoing the mantra that “less is more” for short-form success. Using snappy editing, captions, and visuals will keep attention high (Daft & Lengel, 1986). It’s equally important to show the solutions – don’t just tell.

Demonstrating a sustainable behavior (how to compost, thrift, or organize a tree planting) on camera provides a model for followers to imitate, leveraging the power of observation and social learning (Bandura, 1986).

Frame your message strategically: highlight the personal benefits of acting green (health, savings, lifestyle perks) to hook those initially motivated by self-interest, but also remind viewers of the collective impact (“our community benefits when we all do this”) to foster a sense of shared purpose.

The data suggests this dual framing can appeal to a wider audience and slowly shift norms toward seeing sustainability as both personally rewarding and the “right thing to do”. Engage with your audience as a community: prompt questions, reply to comments, and consider follower feedback when planning content.

Simple actions like polling viewers on what eco-topics they struggle with, or featuring user-generated content (e.g. duetting a follower’s recycling victory), can make followers feel heard and invested. This not only builds loyalty but also multiplies impact – as followers see peers getting involved, a bandwagon effect can turn individual behavior changes into a social movement.

Finally, prepare for challenges: reaching beyond the “choir” may invite skepticism or trolling, so approach negativity with patience and facts rather than defensiveness. Some influencers turn common criticisms into new content (myth-busting myths or addressing excuses), using richer media like follow-up videos or live streams to clarify misunderstandings.

By staying authentic, transparent, and responsive, sustainability content creators around the world can maintain trust and encourage lasting real-life change – one short video at a time.

## 6 Conclusion

This research set out to explore how sustainability-focused influencers in Central Asia use short-form videos to communicate environmental messages, and what global lessons can be drawn from their experience. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study found that these “greenfluencers” employ a blend of emotional appeal, educational simplification, practical demonstration, strategic framing, and interactive engagement to inform and inspire their audiences.

In answer to the research question, the findings illustrate that short-form video platforms like Instagram Reels and TikTok can serve as effective channels for environmental communication when leveraged with creativity and authenticity. Influencers from the region were observed translating complex, often abstract issues (climate change, waste, pollution) into relatable content – for example, a 30-second garden compost demo or a heartfelt story about local air quality – thereby lowering barriers to understanding and action.

Notably, these practices map onto established communication theories: Social Cognitive Theory was evident as influencers modeled behaviors and built viewers’ confidence to imitate them; the Theory of Planned Behavior was reflected in how influencers shaped attitudes and social norms (e.g. making sustainable living seem desirable and common among peers); Diffusion of Innovations Theory underpinned tactics like showcasing relative advantages of eco-choices and encouraging peer-to-peer sharing; and Media Richness Theory was affirmed by the creative use of video’s multimedia cues to convey rich meaning in a short time. The convergence of empirical insights with these theories suggests that the influencers’ intuitive strategies have a sound theoretical basis, which helps explain their impact.

In practical terms, the study’s main findings highlight that informal digital educators can complement traditional institutions by engaging populations (especially youth) in ways that formal channels sometimes struggle to do. A 15-second TikTok, for instance, might spark a conservation action more effectively for a teenager than a lengthy report or lecture, not because the facts differ but because the delivery and messaging are tailored to the audience’s media habits and values.

The implications of this study extend beyond Central Asia. Globally, sustainability communicators can learn from these influencers’ success in making environmental content accessible and viral. As climate and sustainability challenges intensify (IPCC, 2023), reaching broad audiences with not just urgency but also hope and practical know-how is crucial. This research suggests that short-form videos – when crafted with emotional resonance and clarity – can turn passive scrolling into an opportunity for awareness and behavior change.

For global NGOs, activists, and even government agencies, investing in social media narratives and influencer partnerships could significantly amplify the reach of sustainability initiatives.

Likewise, companies and policymakers aiming to promote green practices might adopt some of these narrative techniques to avoid “green fatigue” and instead motivate positive action through relatable storytelling.

Another important implication is the power of community-building in digital spaces: the fact that followers in the study often reported changes in their own behavior (like starting to recycle) as a result of influencer content underscores how peer influence and online social support can drive real-world change.

Effective sustainability communication in the 21st century may thus require communicators to not only broadcast messages but to facilitate communities of practice, wherein people encourage and educate each other (as seen in comment sections that became mini-forums for eco-tips). In a world where misinformation and eco-anxiety are prevalent, the ability of trustworthy influencers to engage in dialogue, correct myths, and model constructive action offers a promising avenue to keep public engagement high and grounded in solutions. It must be acknowledged, however, that this study has several limitations.

The qualitative scope (eight influencers from Central Asia) means the findings are context-specific and not automatically generalizable to all cultures or influencer types. Central Asia provided a unique lens – with its mix of post-Soviet media culture, local environmental issues, and growing social media use – and influencers elsewhere might employ different tactics or face different audience expectations.

Moreover, data relied on self-reported experiences and perceptions of influencers; the research did not directly measure audience behavior or long-term impact, which introduces a potential optimism bias (influencers inclined to report success stories from their followers). The short-form content landscape also evolves rapidly – platform algorithms, features, and trends can change, meaning strategies that work today might need adaptation tomorrow.

Additionally, the study’s focus on Instagram leaves out longer-form and other platforms where sustainability content is shared (YouTube, blogs, etc.), and it predominantly captures influencers who have achieved some success. Those who struggled or failed to engage audiences (and thus weren’t as visible to interview) might have offered different insights on what doesn’t work.

Despite these limitations, care was taken to triangulate interview themes with theory and existing literature, lending confidence that the core insights have broader relevance even beyond the immediate sample. For future research, several avenues emerge. Comparative studies could examine sustainability

influencers in different regions or cultural contexts – for example, comparing Central Asian greenfluencers with those in Western Europe or Africa to see how tactics or audience reactions differ. Such studies would enrich our understanding of which communication strategies are universal and which are culture-dependent.

There is also room for quantitative research to build on these qualitative findings: surveys or experiments could measure how exposure to certain types of influencer content (e.g. an emotional story vs. a purely informational video, or a personal-benefit frame vs. collective-benefit frame) affects audience knowledge, attitudes, and behavior intentions. Early indications (e.g. the dominance of individual-action messages on TikTok) suggest that framing might influence credibility and engagement, so controlled studies could inform best practices on message design. Another fruitful direction would be to include audience perspectives – interviewing or surveying followers of sustainability influencers to learn what they find most persuasive or what motivated them to act. This would complement influencer self-perceptions with direct evidence of impact.

Furthermore, as the line between influencers and institutional communicators blurs, research might explore collaborations between the two: How effective are campaigns that join influencers with NGOs or government agencies, and what are the challenges?

Finally, given the ever-changing social media environment, continuous research is needed on emerging platforms (today's Instagram could be tomorrow's new app) and formats (e.g. virtual or AI influencers) in the sustainability space. By addressing these questions, future studies can build a more robust, global picture of how digital media can drive real change for sustainability.

In conclusion, *From Reels to Real Change* highlights that meaningful sustainability communication can thrive in 60-second videos. The Central Asian influencers in this study demonstrate that with creativity, authenticity, and audience rapport, even the most complex “green” issues can be made engaging and actionable for diverse online audiences. Their work exemplifies a new wave of grassroots environmental advocacy, one that complements traditional approaches by leveraging storytelling and social networks at scale.

As the world grapples with urgent environmental challenges, these insights offer hope that through innovative communication and community engagement, influencers and citizens together can translate awareness into real change. The task ahead for scholars and practitioners is to continue learning from these digital change-makers – and to support and amplify their efforts toward a more sustainable future.

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**Appendix 1. Interview Invitation, Influencer (Author's compilation)**

Dear [Influencer's Name],

My name is Toktassynova Rabiya, and I am currently completing my Master's degree in Management in Sustainable Business at HAMK University of Applied Sciences. For my thesis, I am conducting research on how sustainability influencers communicate environmental messages through short-form video content on platforms like Instagram Reels and TikTok.

I am reaching out because of your inspiring work in promoting sustainable lifestyles through social media. Your experience and voice as an eco-influencer would provide valuable insights into the strategies, challenges, and creative approaches behind effective sustainability communication.

The primary aim of my research is to better understand:

- How sustainability messages are constructed and delivered through short-form videos
- The role of storytelling, content format, and platform features in shaping engagement
- How influencers like you engage your audience and perceive your impact

I would be honored to speak with you in a semi-structured interview (45–90 minutes), which can be conducted at your convenience via video call, phone call, or written responses by email. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will be treated confidentially and used for academic purposes only.

Should you be open to participating, please let me know your preferred contact method and a time that suits you.

Thank you very much for considering this invitation — I truly admire your work and would love to learn from your experience.

Warm regards,

Toktassynova Rabiya

Master's Degree Student in Management in Sustainable Business

HAMK University of Applied Science

Email: [rabiya.uisenbieva@gmail.com](mailto:rabiya.uisenbieva@gmail.com)

**Appendix 2. Informed Consent Script (Verbal Use before Recording)**

Hello and thank you again for agreeing to participate in this interview.

Before we begin, I would like to briefly explain your rights and how your information will be used.

This interview is part of my Master's thesis on how sustainability influencers use short-form video content to communicate environmental messages. The purpose is to better understand your strategies, experiences, and impact as an influencer. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip any question or end the interview at any time, for any reason, without any negative consequence.

With your permission, I would like to record this interview for transcription and analysis purposes. The recording will not be shared with anyone else and will be deleted after transcription. Your identity will be kept confidential. In the thesis, I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name, and any identifying details will be anonymized. Some quotes may be included in the thesis to illustrate findings, but again, they will be anonymized and used respectfully.

Do you consent to participate in this interview and to have the conversation recorded under these terms?

*(Wait for verbal agreement "Yes" if done online)*

Thank you. We can begin now.

## Appendix 3. Interview Guide

### Introduction & Background

Purpose: Establish rapport, gather context about the influencer's background, and understand their motivation to create sustainability content.

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and describe your journey as a greenfluencer?

This question provides context on my interviewee's background and helps frame their experience within the realm of sustainability messaging.

2. What inspired you to start creating content focused on sustainability?

Understanding the initial motivation can help reveal the personal and professional drivers behind their commitment, linking to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) regarding role modeling and observational learning.

### Content Strategy & Message Design

Purpose: Explore the creation process, message framing, and content choices that contribute to high engagement.

3. How do you decide which sustainability topics to cover in your videos?

This question investigates the criteria and thought process behind topic selection, providing insights into how influencers align their content with audience interests and current environmental issues.

4. Could you describe your process for crafting a sustainability message? For example, how do you blend educational content with storytelling or interactive elements?

By examining their content creation process, you can assess how influencers balance factual information with narrative techniques—a key element in enhancing message clarity and emotional impact, as suggested by Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

5. Which types of sustainability messages (e.g., educational, narrative-driven, challenge-based) have you found to be most effective for engaging your audience, and why?

This question directly addresses my research question by asking which message formats drive higher engagement and virality. It also touches on the concepts of relative advantage and observability from Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003).

6. How do you frame the benefits of sustainable practices in your content? For example, do you emphasize personal benefits, environmental impact, or both?

This explores message framing strategies and ties in with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), where highlighting positive outcomes can shape audience attitudes and intentions.

## Audience Engagement & Impact

Purpose: Understand how influencers perceive audience reactions, measure engagement, and adjust their content based on feedback.

7. What metrics or feedback do you use to gauge the success of your sustainability messages (e.g., likes, shares, comments, watch time)?

This question connects directly to my quantitative methods by linking influencer feedback and engagement metrics with digital behavior.

8. Can you share an example of a post or video that received particularly high engagement? What elements do you believe contributed to its success?

Asking for concrete examples allows you to identify which content attributes (e.g., visual appeal, clarity, interactivity) resonate with viewers, reinforcing claims from both Media Richness Theory and Diffusion of Innovations Theory.

9. How do you incorporate audience feedback into your content strategy?

This question probes the iterative process of content improvement, which is essential for understanding how influencers adjust messaging to maintain or boost engagement.

## Challenges & Opportunities

Purpose: Identify obstacles and explore potential improvements in sustainability messaging.

10. What challenges do you face when creating and promoting sustainability content on short-form video platforms?

This question seeks to uncover common barriers such as limited video duration, oversimplification of complex topics, or audience skepticism. It also links back to the challenges mentioned in previous studies on digital engagement.

11. Do you encounter any difficulties in conveying complex sustainability issues in a short format? How do you overcome these challenges?

This question is linked to Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), as it examines whether the format constraints affect message clarity and engagement.

12. Have you observed any shifts in audience behavior or engagement patterns over time in response to your sustainability messaging?

This provides insight into longitudinal changes and the sustainability of behavioral impact, which is crucial for evaluating long-term effectiveness.

## Future Perspectives & Recommendations

Purpose: Gather insights on future trends and recommendations for enhancing sustainability messaging.

13. How do you see the role of sustainability messaging evolving on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels in the coming years?

This question encourages forward-thinking and helps position my research within the context of evolving digital trends.

14. What advice or recommendations would you give to new influencers or organizations aiming to promote sustainability through digital media?

Collecting recommendations can offer practical strategies that not only support my research findings but also contribute actionable insights for practitioners.

15. Is there anything else you would like to share about my experience with sustainability messaging or digital engagement that we haven't covered?

An open-ended question to capture any additional insights that might not have been addressed in the structured questions.

#### Appendix 4. Codebook (Coding Framework)

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes	Description
<b>Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives</b>	Personal stories that evoke emotion	"I started with a post about my own habits"; "My subscribers want real, relatable things"	Influencer uses personal or everyday stories to humanize sustainability issues.
<b>Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives</b>	Emotional appeal over facts	"I try to balance serious topics with light formats"; "You can't just shock people constantly"	Emotional tone is used to create connection or provoke action, not overwhelm.
<b>Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content</b>	Clear, concise messaging	"The key is one-minute videos with no 'water'"; "People lose interest fast"	Strategies to condense sustainability topics into digestible, engaging formats.
<b>Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content</b>	Series-based education	"If it's complex, I break it into parts or episodes"	Complicated issues are tackled through thematic video series to maintain clarity.
<b>Leading by Example and Modeling Behaviors</b>	Demonstrating sustainable habits	"I show how I sort waste – step-by-step"	Influencer visually models eco-friendly practices in her daily life.
<b>Leading by Example and Modeling Behaviors</b>	Consistency and integrity	"I don't make content just to hype – I post only if it has value"	Values-driven messaging aligned with influencer's personal practices.

<b>Framing Sustainability: Personal vs. Collective Benefits</b>	Practical/personal framing	“People are more interested if they see how it helps them directly”	Messaging highlights health, convenience, or savings to appeal to self-interest.
<b>Framing Sustainability: Personal vs. Collective Benefits</b>	Social/collective framing	“I talk about future generations and responsibility too”	Messaging focuses on shared responsibility and environmental ethics.
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	Feedback-driven content	“People ask questions in DMs – that’s how I choose new topics”	Influencer adapts content based on follower feedback and questions.
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	Motivation through impact	“When someone says, ‘my mom started recycling because of you,’ that’s the best reward”	Audience actions and thank-you messages motivate continued content creation.

## Appendix 5. Sample Coded Transcript (Blogger 3)

Transcript Excerpt (Blogger 3)	Code	Theme
<b>The short videos allow you to convey important information without too much 'water'.</b>	Concise messaging	Simplifying Complexity
<b>On the one hand, it helps keep attention, and on the other hand, to deliver the benefit in a short, clear and understandable way.</b>	Attention span strategy	Simplifying Complexity
<b>I started to show not only that I was sorting waste, but also the process itself.</b>	Demonstrating behavior	Leading by Example
<b>Step by step, people started asking questions.</b>	Feedback loop	Audience Engagement
<b>That's when I realized there's a huge need for this kind of information.</b>	Audience needs as motivation	Audience Engagement
<b>Sometimes I take trending formats and adapt them to eco-topics to make it more fun and relatable.</b>	Relatable storytelling; emotional appeal	Emotional Storytelling

**Appendix 6. Final Theme Overview Table**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Illustrative Quote (Blogger 3)</b>
<b>Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives</b>	Use of emotional, personal, or warm storytelling to make sustainability content engaging and human.	empathy, relatability, storytelling, tone	We talk about serious things, but the tone shouldn't be heavy all the time.
<b>Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content</b>	Strategies to convey complex sustainability topics in brief, engaging, clear formats suited to social media.	clarity, short videos, series, digestibility	The short videos allow you to convey important information without too much 'water'.
<b>Leading by Example and Modeling Behaviors</b>	Showing eco-practices in action to educate and inspire by example, building authenticity.	personal practice, integrity, modeling	I started to show not only that I was sorting waste, but also the process itself.
<b>Framing Sustainability: Personal vs. Collective Benefits</b>	The influencer frames eco-actions through personal benefits (health, cost) or collective good (future generations).	benefits, values, motivation	I talk about future generations and responsibility too.
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	Influencer adapts to audience responses, using DMs, comments, and real-life feedback to evolve content and stay motivated.	feedback, questions, community impact	People ask questions in DMs – that's how I choose new topics.

**Appendix 7. Quotes-by-Theme Table (All 8 Bloggers)**

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Influencer (Pseudonym)
<b>Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives</b>	Viewers are also attracted to emotional videos, such as when my child voiced a video about garbage in a child's voice.	Blogger 1
<b>Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives</b>	Emotional content always goes in better – especially when the authorities don't react. My popular Reel about air pollution had an emotional trigger.	Blogger 2
<b>Emotional Storytelling and Relatable Narratives</b>	Sometimes I want to say things more softly, more warmly, because it's not just about shocking people but about helping them understand.	Blogger 8
<b>Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content</b>	The short videos allow you to convey important information without too much 'water'. It helps keep attention.	Blogger 3
<b>Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content</b>	If you want to explain something complex, it's better to break it down into a series. One topic per video – that's how you keep it clear.	Blogger 2
<b>Simplifying Complexity in Short-Form Content</b>	We divide content depending on platform and capacity. Instagram Reels — only the highlight.	Blogger 5

	Podcasts — full explanation.	
<b>Leading by Example and Modeling Behaviors</b>	I show everything by my own example – how exactly I sort waste, what habits I introduce into my life.	Blogger 4
<b>Leading by Example and Modeling Behaviors</b>	People write that they started using cloth bags because of my video – that’s the best kind of feedback.	Blogger 6
<b>Leading by Example and Modeling Behaviors</b>	We didn’t just talk about recycling – we practiced it. Showed how to do it. From sorting to upcycling.	Blogger
<b>Framing Sustainability: Personal vs Collective Benefits</b>	Eco-friendly products are often chosen not for the sake of ecology, but because they are better for health or children.	Blogger 2
<b>Framing Sustainability: Personal vs Collective Benefits</b>	I don’t promise that sustainability is profitable or easy. It requires effort. But the benefit for nature is huge.	Blogger 4
<b>Framing Sustainability: Personal vs Collective Benefits</b>	We’re not trying to create hype. Our audience is interested in contributing, not gaining. That’s who we talk to.	Blogger 5

<b>Framing Sustainability: Personal vs Collective Benefits</b>	<p>At first, I saw it as a way to make money – selling recycled materials. But over time, it became part of my identity.</p>	<p>Blogger 7</p>
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	<p>People who used to laugh now message me that they started recycling. Even small changes matter.</p>	<p>Blogger 1</p>
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	<p>The coolest thing is when followers write that their family started growing avocado plants after my challenge.</p>	<p>Blogger 4</p>
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	<p>We don't have an SMM team. But people write us DMs with questions – where to recycle, what to buy. That drives the content.</p>	<p>Blogger 5</p>
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	<p>After the balloon story, we received so much hate. But also a lot of questions. So we made more videos – to clarify and educate.</p>	<p>Blogger 8</p>
<b>Audience Engagement and Feedback Loops</b>	<p>Even though I love writing, I had to adapt – now I make short videos because that's what gets seen.</p>	<p>Blogger 7</p>