

Exploring the #zerowaste lifestyle trend on Instagram

Tauheed A. Ramjaun

ABSTRACT

This study explores the Zero Waste lifestyle trend through the lens of user-generated content on Instagram. Social media platforms seem to have largely contributed to the growing popularity of this concept which encourages people to live a life causing as less waste as possible. This paper investigates the consumer-driven activities and the shared beliefs associated with the Zero Waste lifestyle movement from a consumer culture perspective. Towards achieving this, a textual analysis of profiles and biographies as well as a thematic analysis of visual and textual posts associated with the #zerowaste hashtag were carried out. Findings suggest a female-led lifestyle movement with ‘consumer leaners’ seeing themselves as embarking on a transformative journey and ‘consumer activists’ playing an educational and motivational role in the social media community. Zero Waste enthusiasts seem to believe in the power of community to cause an environmentally significant impact. Zero Waste seemed to be regarded as a long-term goal rather than an immediate radical action by members of the community. This study also identified different ways in which Zero Waste consumers were involved in product/brand reviews. Four different types of product/ brand influencers were identified as follows: (1) Product promoters (2) Product critics (3) Sponsored brand promoters and (4) Non-sponsored brand admirers. This research offers a richer understanding of a specific green consumer phenomenon which has grown in popularity through social media during recent years. In addition, findings allow for a better understanding of the role of consumer activists and social media influencers in promoting the Zero Waste lifestyle trend.

Keywords: Zero Waste, Instagram, influencer, green consumption, sustainability

Introduction

“We don’t need a handful of people doing zero waste perfectly.

We need millions of people doing it imperfectly”

(Anne Marie Bonneau @zerowastechef)

This study explores the Zero Waste lifestyle trend through the lens of user-generated posts on the popular social media platform Instagram – a growing online community where various lifestyle trends can be seen to be promoted (Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2018; Santarossa et al., 2016). Instagram is currently one of the most popular social networks worldwide with more than one billion monthly active users (Instagram, 2020). It can be described as a mobile social networking application allowing for the sharing of pictures and videos with the possibility for image indexing (Dorsch, 2018). Users can apply different photo manipulation tools to modify their contents before sharing them instantly to their friends on the platform itself as well as to other social networking sites (Hochman & Schwartz, 2012). Instagram also allows users the possibility of developing relationships with other users through its ‘follow’ feature (Zappavigna, 2016). Launched in 2010, the mobile app has rapidly grown in popularity with users taking advantage of the app’s high-quality resolutions for taking, editing and sharing pictures (and more recently videos) to tell their stories instantly (Lee et al., 2015). Moreover, a recent study by Hwang & Cho (2018) identified that the social interaction capabilities, the entertainment elements and the perceived ease of use of this social platform were the main drivers for its continued adoption.

Over the past couple of years, we have witnessed an increasing use of Instagram by individuals promoting certain lifestyles through the narration of their everyday lives (Aiello & Parry 2019). In this paper, the notion of lifestyle is used within the context of consumer culture where “it connotes individuality, self-expression and a stylistic self-consciousness” (Featherstone 1987, p. 55) and Instagram seems to be a platform that is being used to celebrate individual lifestyles through stylistic self-expression using visual and written texts. One key particularity of this platform is the emphasis that users place on the aesthetics of their posts (Su & Wu, 2018). This differentiates this social media platform from others, entrenching it as an “aesthetically stylized site for photo sharing” (Abidin 2016, p.7). Another major feature of the Instagram platform is the creation of hashtags by users to add more explanation or to better convey emotions through their posts (Dorsch, 2018; Lee & Chau, 2018). Hashtags could also be used as an identification tool resulting in the creation of various micro-communities on the network (Ferrara et al., 2014). For instance, hashtags can be crafted to regroup posts from those interested in a particular lifestyle (e.g. #vanlife) or can be made purposely ambiguous if, for example, content shared could be considered as promoting harmful practices (Moreno et al., 2016). For example, Chancellor et al. (2016) illustrated how the #thyghgapp hashtag was created to avoid restrictions imposed by Instagram regarding the promotion of pro-eating disorders. Also, some

hashtags may only be meaningful to a specific audience such as the #OOTD (Outfit Of The Day) hashtag popularised among young female fashionistas (Abidin, 2016b). Hence, Instagram users tend to use the hashtag tool in different ways for community building and engagement purposes.

Instagram has proved to be a valuable source for a better understanding of existing or emerging practices and behaviours among specific communities. For instance, in their content analysis of marijuana-related content on Instagram, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2016) found that these tended to “normalize and promote marijuana use” (p. 718) and could potentially influence social norms around its consumption. They argued that such findings captured through the Instagram lens could help inform public health policies. Allem et al. (2017) also found that analysing the posts around the #hookah hashtag on Instagram allowed for a better understanding of the growing popularity of waterpipe smoking in the USA and consequently could assist in devising prevention campaigns and regulatory policies. In her study of breastfeeding practices through the Instagram lens, Locatelli (2017) concluded that Instagram could be seen as a “means to promote awareness of breastfeeding with the aim of destigmatizing and normalizing this practice” (p. 12) and argued the social network could be used for various public support and awareness initiatives around breastfeeding. On the other hand, Ging & Garvey (2018) analysed the #thinspiration phenomenon on Instagram and argued that the platform can also have a negative impact by causing an aestheticisation of unhealthy lifestyles. There can also be the phenomenon of a new lifestyle trend emerging as a response to an existing one such as the #fitspiration versus #thinspiration (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Santarossa et al., 2016).

All these prior studies seem to indicate that Instagram could provide valuable resources in the investigation of emerging trends or consumer practices; especially with ‘lifestyle expertise’ being extended from celebrities to ordinary individuals due to social media platforms such as Instagram (Aiello & Parry, 2019). Recent studies have also demonstrated that many of these ordinary individuals can develop into opinion leaders of innovative lifestyle adoption or social media influencers described as “content creators who accumulated a solid base of followers” (De Veirman et al. 2017, p. 801). Some scholars have even argued that such influencers can be considered as micro-celebrities (Senft, 2008; Abidin, 2017) who are more and more taking an active role in promoting their online personas as well as monetising their performances on social media (Abidin, 2016a).

Sustainable consumption and the green consumer

Sustainable consumption has been recognised as being a complex issue (Kerr & Foster, 2011; McDonald et al., 2012) in an era where “material goods and services are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of our lives” (Jackson, 2014). The concept has been defined in various ways by organisations involved in influencing policy at national and international levels (Jackson, 2014), but we still know little about how ordinary people actually understand and interpret the concept (Miller, 2009). Early studies on the topic seemed to have favoured the term ‘green consumption’ in an attempt “to encapsulate the notion of a consumer who rejects grey alternatives in favour of environmentally friendly choices” (Oates et al., 2008). However, Gilg et al. (2005) argued for the need to substitute the concept of the green consumer for that of the sustainable consumer after having observed that consumers might be interpreting the notion of green consumption more broadly as part of “a wider shift in lifestyles that invokes both purchase-related and habitual behaviours in an holistic conceptualisation of everyday living” (p. 498).

Over the past decades, the green consumer has been the subject of fascination and scrutiny by academics from various disciplines (Peattie, 2001). According to Finney (2014), the term originated from the 1980s with the publication of the Green Consumer Guide (Elikington & Hailes, 1988) that provided “practical how-to instructions on living and purchasing more sustainably” (p. 194). There seemed to be diverging views regarding the consumer profile of the green consumer with some studies suggesting that males tended to be less engaged in green purchasing behaviours than females (Roberts, 1996; Gilg et al., 2005) though Diamantopoulos et al. (2003) warned about the difficulties in profiling accurately the green consumer. Moreover, Luch and Mooradian (2012) argued that personality traits might be a better indicator of sustainable consumer behaviour rather than relying only on socio-demographic factors such as biological gender. For example, in their study, they found that people with certain personality traits that are more likely to be associated with the female gender (e.g. agreeableness) would be more likely to engage in sustainable consumer behaviour (irrespective of their biological gender). Interestingly, recent research in that area seems also to suggest that the feminine stereotype associated with sustainable consumption might also be hindering some men to engage in such behaviour to preserve their macho image (Brough et al. 2016). However, more research needs to be carried out to better understand the influence of gender (as a cultural construct) on sustainable consumption practices. It is more likely that the green consumer exists

in various shades with different groups having different ways of engaging in sustainable consumption practices based on other factors (Straughan & Roberts, 1999; McDonald et al., 2012). Scholars have also suggested the importance of studying social and cultural contexts in which individual green or sustainable consumption practices are taking place (Dolan, 2002; Nair & Little, 2016). Haanpää (2007) even argues that green consumption behaviour might be influenced by the individual joining a particular postmodern consumer tribe (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova & Cova, 2002). Moreover, Han et al. (2018) found that, in general, user-generated content on social media sites can also have a significantly positive effect on sustainable consumption behaviour.

From Zero Waste to #zerowaste

Zero Waste originates from Japanese total quality management principles that aimed at achieving zero-defect production by combining principles of “eco-design, waste reduction, reuse and recycling, all within a single framework (Murray 2002, p.3). The idea was then transferred and applied into municipal waste management with municipalities in Australia and New Zealand experimenting with this novel approach to waste management which can be defined as:

“The conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of products, packaging, and materials without burning and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health” (Zero Waste International Alliance, 2018).

The Zero Waste method has been receiving increasing attention from policymakers and grassroots organisations around the world over the past decades with the issue of waste management becoming a major political concern (Murray, 2002). Zero Waste would later become a more mainstream concept popularised through social media when Bea Johnson, an affluent California-based French native, decided to use this term to describe her initiatives to live a life by causing as less waste as possible. In her first blog post on the subject published in December 2009, she wrote:

“I have put my family on a waste diet for the past 12 months, analysing whatever comes in contact with the bottom of our one home trash can and slowly trying to get it as close to zero waste as possible. In this past year, I have learned to shop, refuse (what is given to me), reduce, reuse, and recycle as little as possible (for only such a small percentage of our trash is actually recycled) along with up and downs

(boosts of self trash control esteem and let downs). You'll see what I am talking about. This is day one of my zero waste diary" (Johnson, 2009)

Her blog posts would spark a lifestyle movement around the world with many enthusiasts trying to follow her footsteps in applying Zero Waste principles in their homes. With more than 500k social media followers (262k on Instagram), Bea Johnson is widely credited as having popularised the principles of Zero Waste among many followers around the world by sharing "tried-and-true ways that have helped me to get as close to Zero Waste in the home as possible" (Johnson 2013, p.11). Other lifestyle influencers have followed her path using different social media platforms to share their own experiences and applications of Zero Waste living. This new wave of social media influencers is actively contributing to the growing number of Zero Waste enthusiasts around the world (Leahy, 2018).

Purpose of this study

This study was approached through the lens of Stern's (2000) concept of environmentally significant behaviour defined as: "a behavior that is undertaken with the intention to change (normally, to benefit) the environment" (p. 408). Therefore, in this study, the main aim was to investigate the intent rather than the impact of Zero Waste lifestyle adoption on the environment. We also approached our investigation from a consumer culture perspective with a view to gain better insights on the lived experiences of consumers as well as the shared beliefs and practices in this community of consumption (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). The following research questions, therefore, guided our exploration: (1) What is the profile and characteristics of #zerowaste enthusiasts on Instagram? (2) What consumer-driven activities associated with #zerowaste are being promoted on Instagram? (3) What are the predominant shared values and beliefs within the #zerowaste Instagram community?

Method

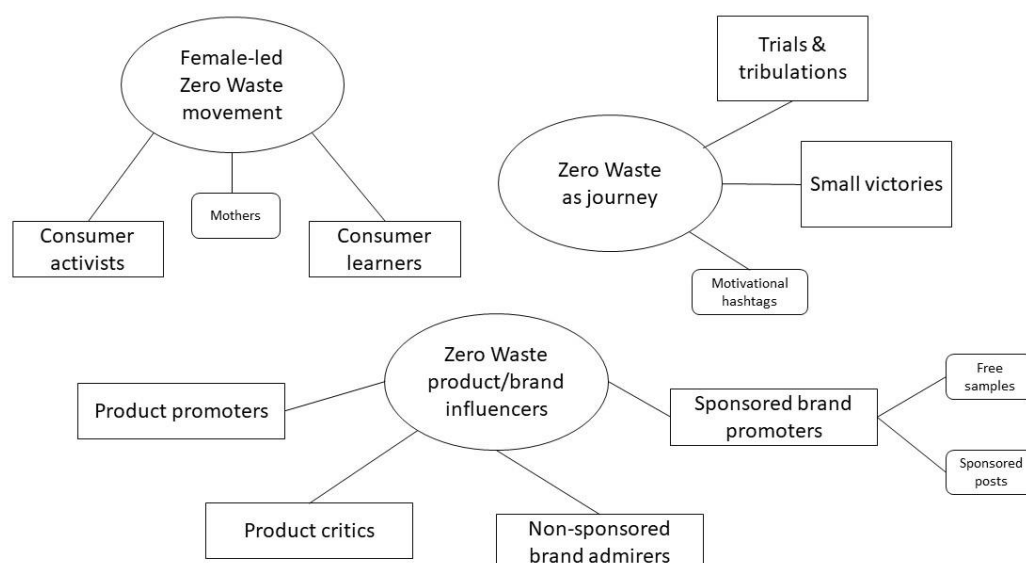
The sample for this study was drawn from Instagram's generated list of results when the search query "zerowaste" was made on the platform's desktop search facility. A first review of the posts called for further refinement based on a set of criteria as follows: (1) only posts from individuals to be considered (i.e. excluding brands, companies, non-profits and other types of organisations) and (2) only posts in English (or with English translation) to be selected so that

the comments can be analysed adequately by English-speaking researchers involved with the project. Three research assistants were hired to collect data during period December 2019 and January 2020. The lead researcher conducted a control check of the data collected and posts that did not fit with the criteria were rejected. The lead researcher also ensured that each post retained in the sample was from a unique account holder to get a variety of unique consumer voices. Therefore, in the end, the sample consisted of 313 posts from 313 individual users. Data analysis consisted of performing a textual analysis of profile biographies as well a thematic analysis of both visual and textual posts for a better understanding of the subject (Keats 2009).

Findings

Findings presented in this section are organised around four main themes as follows: (1) The rise of the female-led #zerowaste movement (2) The hero's journey to #zerowaste living (3) The new wave of #zerowaste product/brand promoters. All direct quotes used in this section have been anonymised to adhere to ethical guidelines from the researcher's host institution. Names of brands mentioned by participants in their posts have also been anonymised. In some cases, direct quotes have also been edited to allow for better clarity.

Figure 1: Thematic map indicating key themes and sub-themes



The rise of the female-led #zerowaste movement

Women seem to be leading the way in influencing Zero Waste practices on Instagram. Our analysis revealed that around 93 % of posts with the #zerowaste hashtag were from individual female profiles and only 7% were from individual male profiles. We also observed that the leading Zero Waste Instagram influencers seemed to be mostly females with the main figurehead Bea Johnson mentioning on her profile how she has been labelled as the “*mother of the zero waste lifestyle movement*” by a global news outlet. We also observed that a substantial minority of females (around 15%) explicitly described themselves as mothers on their profiles (e.g. using terms such as *mother*, *mom*, *mum*, *momma*, or *mama*) and seemed to be using the platform as a means to showcase their efforts at influencing their families into Zero Waste practices as well as sharing best practices around such initiatives as illustrated in the example below:

“A family that goes green together stays green together. Of course, I carry my steel straws with me everywhere because I know that being the foodie family we are, we are going to be drinking a lot of drinks on our outings together. And being the crusader I am, I make sure they join me in saying #NoToPlasticStraws. And when the steel straws aren't clean, I make sure that we drank our drinks directly, without the plastic straws. Share with me the ways in which you were able to influence your family to take up a green habit!”

The above example illustrates how some mothers are actively taking the lead in promoting more sustainable living in their households and also initiating exchanges with other mothers through the platform using several hashtags apart from #zerowaste.

Our analysis of user-profiles led us to categorise Zero Waste enthusiasts into two main groups: the first one seems to fit with Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) definition of consumer activists who seem to be using the social media platform to actively advance the Zero Waste agenda (e.g. mention of phrase like “*raising awareness about*” on their profiles). These Zero Waste consumer activists seem to be using several tools available within the platform to encourage their followers as illustrated in the example below:

“Are you wanting to go green in 2020? Being environmentally friendly doesn’t have to be hard or expensive. Making just a few swaps can make a big difference! Click the link in my bio to check out 5 easy ways to go zero waste!”

The second group could be described as ‘consumer learners’ whose prime motivation seem to be learning more about Zero Waste practices (e.g. terms like “*to learn more about*” or “*learning to live*” on their profiles). These consumer learners would also share their day-to-day efforts towards more sustainable living through their experiments with Zero Waste practices. Interestingly, the word “vegan” was also among the frequently used words in bios (around 17%) which could imply a relationship between veganism and Zero Waste lifestyle adoption. The environmental issues related to plastic use and fast-fashion consumption were also predominant topics of discussions associated with the #zerowaste hashtag. We also observed links between Zero Waste living and other lifestyle trends such as slow living and minimalism.

The hero’s journey to #zerowaste living

One predominant theme that emerged from our analysis was the use of the *journey* metaphor by Zero Waste adopters in order to share their stories on Instagram. It appears that shifting to a Zero Waste lifestyle was seen as a gradual rather than a radical process as illustrated in the following example:

“I am relatively new in this low-impact journey and in no way claim to be doing everything perfectly. I still do many many things that are considered to be “unsustainable” but I’m working hard to slowly change my lifestyle to reduce my carbon footprint on this planet. I am so excited to share this journey with you and making new friends who are on a similar path along the way”

The use of the *journey* metaphor by Zero Waste adopters on Instagram also seemed to be accompanied by the presence of several storytelling elements from the hero’s journey monomyth (Campbell, 2008); where users would sometimes refer to the trials and tribulations faced on their journey to “*find the correct directions to our lives someday*” with calls to “*stay focused on the positive and continually moving in the direction of rebirth*”. Users seem to take pride in the small steps or victories made on their Zero Waste journey by sharing their accomplishments using the visual aesthetics and platform vernacular of Instagram as well as sharing inspirational stories or quotes to support fellow Zero Waste enthusiasts on their journey. Our analysis also suggested that the average Zero Waste proponent tends to acknowledge his/her own shortcomings publicly and this mindset is reflected in the stories they post on their journeys to Zero Waste. For instance, one post sampled read:

“We’re far from perfect, and far from #zerowaste, but we’re trying and I love that we have the opportunity to do better and be better and grow through uncomfortable and new territory and teach our children to strive for better and be aware. On my stories I talk a little about what I bring to the store, and some tips and tricks.”

Our findings also suggest that Zero Waste proponents might be favouring more conciliatory and less zealous messages than those anti-consumption tribes identified in previous research which tended to develop a feeling of superiority and disdain for the mainstream consumers perceived as being “driven by weak-minded and unconscious urges” (Kozinets & Handelman 2004, p.702). We also found attempts to popularise motivational hashtags (e.g. #zerowastechallenge) as a tactic to further encourage or drive Zero Waste initiatives. Such examples illustrate some of the positive effects of Instagram with its potential for motivating users to “transcend their current selves and strive for self-improvement” (Meier & Schäfer, 2018).

The new wave of #zerowaste product/brand influencers

Our analysis revealed that many Zero Waste enthusiasts were frequently sharing information about new products and/or brands that they were adopting in their journey to Zero Waste living. We have categorised them into four groups as follows: (1) Product promoters (2) Product critics (3) Sponsored brand promoters and (4) Non-sponsored brand admirers.

Product promoters

Product promoters were those who were posting information about products that are aligned to or are necessary in their journey to Zero Waste. In many cases, these posts were about a product (with no mention of its brand) that would be regarded as more Zero Waste friendly such as in the example below:

“You every heard about good huggers? Well, I'm a huge fan since I've got them. No need for foil anymore, just pop a hugger on and it will stay fresh longer and looks pretty cool. They come in a pack of 4 different sizes so there's always one that fits your veggies or fruits, wash it and reuse. I'm gonna order myself some more soon, everything for fresh products without foil”

In this case, the user would not provide any specific information about the brand or where they have purchased the items. The objective of the post seemed to be strictly informational without trying to promote any particular brand. There also seemed to be a growing interest for second-hand (pre-loved) items rather than buying new. Some users were providing tips on finding style ideas online as well as new ways of finding such Zero Waste items; including mobile sales platform for the sale of second-hand items that seem to be growing in popularity among younger consumers. As we would expect on a platform like Instagram, the visual aesthetics of Zero Waste living was emphasized through the careful staging of products being showcased. We also observed that some consumers were also attracted to the aesthetic appeal of products considered as eco-friendly as illustrated in the examples below:

“She’s beautiful my eco-friendly safety razor. I no longer have to throw away razors ever. The first use was a little scary but the shave is amazing!”

“My guilty pleasure is natural beauty products; especially in pretty packaging.”

“A better option is Himalayan pink salt. Not just pretty and pink, this salt is mined from the salt beds created long before plastic was ever a thing...”

Product critics

On the other hand, we also found that users were also posting information about certain types of products that should be boycotted such as in the example below:

“Did you know most chewing gum contains plastic base? Chewed gum is not biodegradable. I’ve given up regular gum with all its plastic”

Apart from plastic-related issues, another major topic of controversy that seemed to engage Zero Waste consumers was related to products from the fashion industry. There seemed to be a growing concern regarding fast-fashion and the corporate ethics prevailing in that sector:

“I broke up with fast fashion! It wasn’t me, it was them. Did you know 10,000 items of clothing are being sent to landfill every five minutes, equivalent to £140 million every year? Not only is this shocking as those clothes likely could have been worn again, but if you think of all the resources, materials, energy, water, transportation and packaging that was used to get that product to you in the first place, then throwing an item away means those resources go to waste and the same type need to be used afresh to make something new! So how do you break up with fast fashion? Wear what you already own! Re-wearing something for an extra 9 months reduces its carbon footprint by 20-30%. Repair any damage and

look on Pinterest for fresh ways to style it if you're feeling bored"

Sponsored brand promoters

We also found a category of Zero Waste influencers who were actively involved in the promotion of brands through the #zerowaste hashtag and who were explicitly disclosing their relationships with the manufacturers or retailers of the products. Some would have received free samples to try and others seemed to have developed more serious collaboration in terms of producing sponsored posts for a particular brand. There is also evidence to suggest that some brands which have positioned themselves as eco-friendly or sustainable are actively involved in developing relationships with some #zerowaste influencers for brand promotion purposes as illustrated in the example below:

"When [anonymised] contacted me to try their low-waist Eco-Strips I was more than willing to give it a go and I'd like to report they are beyond amazing"

Most of these influencers seem to follow the principles of influencer disclosure by clearly mentioning their associations with the brand they were promoting and sometimes they would also use the hashtag #ad to reinforce this aspect. Some influencers might also be extending their reach beyond their followers through the use of sponsored posts.

Non-sponsored brand admirers

There also seemed to be another category of consumers promoting brands that they loved or admired without apparently getting anything in return from the brand. We labelled this category of influencers non-sponsored brand admirers, since they would be proudly promoting certain brands even though they were not being given any form of material rewards from the brand owners. For example, the caption below was accompanied by a picture of three superimposed toilet paper rolls displayed in an aesthetically pleasing way but without having any brand tags or mentions.

"Hey guys just got [anonymised] toilet paper delivered to my door. This is an amazing TREE FREE toilet paper company that gives 50% of their profits to those who need toilets. Everyone should be trying to do their part in helping..."

In some other cases, posts were promoting specific brands with links to their Instagram profiles but the users would reinforce the fact that they were not getting any favour from the brand by adding descriptions like “not sponsored” at the end of their post as illustrated in the example below:

“It’s all about the details. And yes, product packaging is a major detail. One of our go-to brands for household and personal care is [anonymised] They use strictly sustainable material for all of their packaging. For example, these bottles are made from sugarcane-based bioplastics instead of petroleum-based. They are reusable and the company supplies generous refills that come in - you guessed it - biodegradable packaging. Not only are we reducing our negative impact on our planet, but we are also positively impacting our eyes with the beautiful, simple, minimalist packaging. #warmminimalism for the win. And yes, these products were all purchased by me and not sponsored”

We also observed that some non-sponsored brand admirers also mentioned online marketplaces where a variety of eco-friendly products could be accessed easily. These kinds of posts seemed to indicate a growing need for #zerowaste proponents to find substitute brands that aligned best with their #zerowaste values:

“Tag your favourite sustainable/ethical/conscious/brands below and tell us what they’re all about! Let’s help each other find some new brands that are worth our love, money and support”

The above-written post which was accompanied by a photo of the consumer activist wearing a baseball cap with ‘resistance is our culture’ written on the front perfectly illustrates this mindset.

Discussion

This study extends previous research related to green consumerism by focussing on the promotion of the Zero Waste lifestyle movement on the popular social media platform Instagram. Findings suggest that the Zero Waste lifestyle movement being promoted on Instagram is largely female-led which tends to confirm findings from previous studies arguing that women were more likely than men to engage in green consumption practices ((Roberts, 1996; Gilg et al., 2005). We also observed that women made a significant amount of posts that related to everyday household products, which could be explained by the fact that females are still the main decision-makers regarding household shopping (Tanner & Wölfing Kast, 2003).

It appears that many people who have embarked on a Zero Waste lifestyle journey seemed to be motivated by the appeal of living a simpler lifestyle and tends to start taking actions in that direction in their homes first. This phenomenon could confirm predictions made by consumer trend forecasters Flatters and Willmott (2009) about the long-term trend for simplicity among affluent consumers after the 2008 financial crisis. They argued that such “mounting dissatisfaction with excessive consumption” (p. 4) observed shortly after the 2008 recession would persist in the long run where the adoption of a more frugal lifestyle and discretionary thrift among affluent consumers might even become fashionable.

Zero Waste proponents seem to be using the social media platform to encourage as many people as possible to adopt similar behaviours by sharing their own consumer journeys towards Zero Waste living. They seemed to believe that the more people adopt similar practices as themselves, the more likely the chances to create a direct environmentally significant impact (Stern, 2000). We also observed a strong manifestation of perceived market influence (Tripathi & Singh, 2016) where individual members of the Zero Waste community on Instagram seemed to believe that their small individual actions in the private spheres could have gradual significant effect on consumer and brand marketplace behaviour. This could explain the considerable amount of posts relating to product reviews and promotion of new products and services perceived as being viable green alternatives or ‘eco-swaps’ to use a term from the Zero Waste community.

Findings also suggest a growing number of individuals within the Zero Waste Instagram community who are actively involved in consumer activism (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Our analysis of posts from Zero Waste consumer activists on Instagram seem to indicate that most of them seem to favour a more conciliatory approach towards mainstream citizens rather than presenting themselves as “a type of modern day Puritan” (Kozinets & Handelman 2004, p. 701). It seemed that, instead of radically confronting dissenting consumers, the Zero Waste social media activist tend to favour an educational and informational approach. This strategy could potentially prove more effective in the long run especially in such types of virtual communities (Archer-Brown et al., 2013). The move to Zero Waste living seem also to be regarded by Zero Waste consumer activists as a gradual process towards more sustainable living (Gilg et al., 2005) that could combine the adoption or promotion of other lifestyle orientations such as veganism, minimalism or slow living.

This study also identified a new wave of Zero Waste product or brand promoters on Instagram engaging in product reviews or information dissemination about certain types of products. We described the first category as sponsored brand promoters with members of this category having some form of material connection with the brand they are promoting (e.g. being given free samples). This suggests that emerging brands which are positioning themselves as eco-friendly with clear points of difference vis-à-vis more mainstream brands are actively involved in identifying those Zero Waste influencers who have established some sort of lifestyle expertise (Aiello & Parry, 2019) and who are interested to have some form of monetary gain from their performances (Abidin, 2016a). The second category of influencers were described as brand admirers due to the fact that they were promoting certain brands that they considered as eco-friendly but without gaining anything in return from the brand owners (some would explicitly mention it on their post to reinforce their unbiased and informational intent to the virtual community). The abundance of product reviews seems to indicate a growing interest among a category of Zero Waste enthusiasts to get involved in product or brand promotional activities on Instagram. On the other hand, some are also posting about the importance of curbing current consumption and reducing activities that could lead to future consumption (Johnson, 2013).

Conclusion

This research provided a richer understanding of the Zero Waste lifestyle phenomenon through the Instagram lens. It appears that women lead the way in advancing the Zero Waste lifestyle concept with many harnessing the power of social media communities such as Instagram to inform, educate and share consumer experiences. Zero Waste enthusiasts seem to believe in the power of community action in order to create an environmentally significant impact by aggregating their individual actions. Consumer activists seemed to be favouring an informational and non-radical approach in advancing Zero Waste ideas and practices which seemed to be effective in motivating consumer learners in their journey towards a less wasteful lifestyle. It was also observed that many Instagram users advocating for this lifestyle were also involved in different forms of product or brand promotion. Therefore, brands which would make real efforts in their sustainable marketing practices would benefit from the support of influencers from such consumption communities. However, this study was limited to insights emerging from only one type of consumer collective on a specific social media platform that has its own distinct characteristics and vernacular. Future research in the area could explore

other types of Zero Waste consumer collectives that manifest on different platforms both online and offline. There is also a need to further investigate the motivations and antecedents of Zero Waste living as well as its long-term consequences and impact on both the environment and the marketplace. With the world entering a global recession in 2020, there could be even more consumers turning towards less wasteful lifestyles which could positively impact on the growth of Zero Waste communities around the world.

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