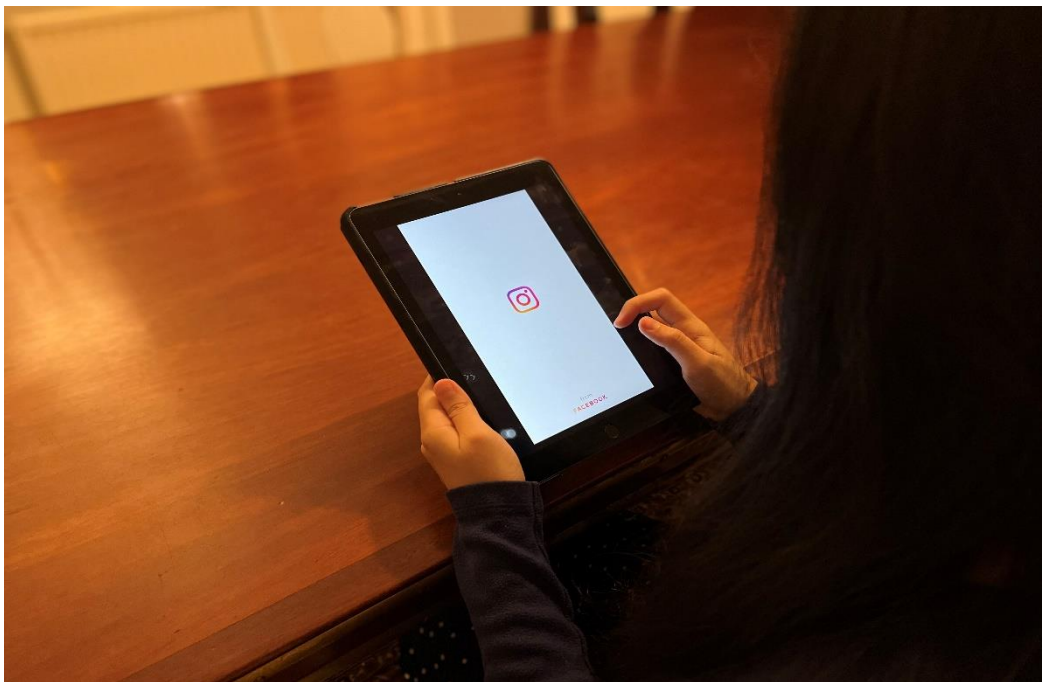# Instagram and sustainability
– How Instagram users make sense of their engagement within the sustainability context on the platform

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Instagram and sustainability – How Instagram users make sense of their engagement within the sustainability context on the platform

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Abstract

As mobile technology develops rapidly, social media has become an integral part of human daily life. One of the social media platforms that are popular nowadays is Instagram, the visual photo-sharing platform. Meanwhile, the term of sustainability also become more popular along with the growing awareness toward sustainability issues. Engagement with sustainability also happens on Instagram, as the influencers share their everyday sustainable practices and practical knowledge with their followers. There have been some critics that influencers on Instagram might encourage consumption that is not needed.

This research aims to explore how Instagram users view their perspectives about sustainability as influenced by their Instagram use. To achieve this aim, I investigate how Instagram users make sense of their engagement within the sustainability context on the platform using semi-structured interviews with ten Instagram users. Applying content analysis, the findings show that all interviewees had some awareness and knowledge about sustainability before using Instagram. However, they deepen their knowledge and interest toward sustainability by following influencers on Instagram – both blogger-type influencers, and organizations or movements promoting sustainability. Further, this research demonstrates that influencers can bring positive impacts to their followers. Sustainability actions have been perceived as a huge responsibility to do, yet the interviewees claimed that the influencers have been shown through their Instagram that we can take part by doing small actions in our daily life. Besides, Instagram users have also been encouraged to engage in sustainable consumption through advertising posted by influencers. Despite criticisms that influencers might push unnecessary consumption, the findings of this research empower the idea that Instagram is capable – and from some users' perspective, even powerful – to change someone's perspective about sustainability. To conclude, Instagram has become a favorable platform to address sustainability issues through its influencer culture.

Keywords: Instagram, social media, sustainability, influencers, consumption, sustainable consumption, sustainable, Instagram users, advertising

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1. Introduction

In recent years, social media has become omnipresent in society (Asur & Huberman 2010; Banda 2015). The term of social media is recognized as the broad range of internet-based and mobile services where the users can engage in online exchanges, take part in user-created content, and connect with online communities (Dewing 2010). It has been suggested that social media has become crucial for social networking and content sharing (see e.g. Asur & Huberman 2010; Mayfield III 2011). Within the 21st century, there is a rising phenomenon of social media usage, especially among young adults (Bekalu et al. 2019). It becomes customary to see people looking down at their phones and scrolling social media in everyday practices – for instance, while waiting for a bus or train. This phenomenon indicates the strength of social media which is accessible anywhere and at any time of the day, as long as internet access is available (see e.g. Dimmick et al. 2004).

The term sustainability has been an important concept of our time (Castro 2004). Sustainability has been perceived as "*maintaining well-being over a long, perhaps even an indefinite period*" (Kuhlman & John 2010 p. 3441). There has been a tendency to relate sustainability only within the environmental context (Morelli 2011), while actually the concept of sustainability comprises three dimensions – which are social, economic, and environmental (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Similarly, there is increased coverage of sustainability in popular media (Barkemeyer 2009), which is mainly linked with environmental concerns (Pottinger 2015). Furthermore, the awareness and enthusiastic attitudes into pro-environmental behaviors are also raising (Trudel & Cotte 2009). In order to actualize a more sustainable future, it becomes an urgent call to take actions to address climate change and preserve our nature (United Nations 2015).

Nowadays, changing consumption has been one of the sustainable actions that gaining attention. The rising levels of materials, energy, and services consumption bring a huge impact on global and local environmental change (Wilk 2002). To strive for a more sustainable lifestyle, there are practices of rejection, reduction, and reuse that emerge in consumption (Black & Cherrier 2010). Sustainable production and consumption also have been promoted as they are fundamental for sustainable development (United Nations 2015).

One of the popular social media platforms nowadays is Instagram, a visual photo-sharing platform which allows users to comment, like, and tag locations (Kuehn 2021). In this platform, the users can post their photography, such as pictures and videos, into their profile. The users also can follow accounts they feel interested in and might be followed back. Further, they also can like and give comments to other people's posts. There are various features on Instagram, including *Feeds* where we can see posts uploaded by accounts we follow, *Stories* to post content that only kept for 24 hours – then disappeared if not highlighted by the users in their profile, *Save tabs* to bookmark certain posts that we would like to check again, and *Suggested accounts* that we might be interested to follow (Instagram 2021).

Besides, the number of Instagram users worldwide is increasing year to year (Statista 2021). In 2020, there were around 1 billion users who accessed Instagram every month (ibid.). It has been suggested that the users like using Instagram as it offers a higher engagement level compared to other social media, with its visual nature, a lot of features that encourage its user to stay longer, and better control of spam (see e.g. Li & Xie 2020). It also has previously been observed that Instagram offers a new atmosphere in giving information and engaging with the audiences through digital culture (Geraldo & Pinto 2020).

The concepts of influencers and social media are inseparably connected (Haenlein et al. 2020). Influencers demand the exposure given by social media platforms to become famous, while those platforms can show a bit of their appeal through the content posted by influencers that engage actively on them (ibid.). Furthermore, Instagram also has been perceived as an influential platform to represent sustainability on social media (see e.g. Engelin 2020). Nowadays, many influencers share their everyday sustainable practices with their followers on Instagram (Shabir 2020).

Previous studies have investigated the relationship between social media use and conspicuous consumption (Thoumrungroje 2014; Wai & Osman, 2019; Widjajanta et al. 2018). Instagram users might choose to consume something after seeing other users sharing their private life on Instagram (Widjajanta et al. 2018). Furthermore, most Instagram users also might be exposed to advertisements on Instagram (Bafageeh & Ahmed 2021). Therefore, a higher frequency of using social media might lead to more conspicuous consumption (see e.g. Widjajanta et al. 2018).

In conclusion, the engagement of Instagram users within the sustainability context on the platform is beyond doubt. However, it is still less known whether the influencers and advertisements play a role in Instagram users' decision-making process to purchase or consume something. There is also still uncertainty, whether

how Instagram users comprehend their engagement within the sustainability context on the platform.

1.1. Research Aim & Research Question

In this research, I aim to explore how Instagram users perceive the impact of using Instagram toward their perspectives about sustainability. To achieve this aim, I will investigate how Instagram users' perspectives about sustainability are influenced by using Instagram. Therefore, my research question will be as follows: *How do Instagram users make sense of their engagement within the sustainability context on the platform?*

1.2. Outline of the thesis

The remainder of this thesis is structured in five chapters. The following, second chapter presents what other researchers have found on similar topics. It is built on three sub-topics connected to the research aim, which are sustainability and change of consumption, Instagram and consumption, and influencers. The third chapter describes the research design, data collection and analysis method, and discloses the methodological reflections. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the research as presented by the interviewees. It presents the definition of sustainability, activities within Instagram, the relation between Instagram and real life, feelings and reasons, and sustainability potential ascribed to Instagram. Chapter five analyzes the findings with similar previous research. It discusses sustainable behavior, Instagram and consumption, and influencers. In the final chapter, the thesis and its results are summarised.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainability and change of consumption

In this subsection, I will describe works of literature that are relevant to my research. To begin with, I will discuss sustainability and followed by the change of consumption.

The term sustainability has been studied for a while. The first definition originally comes from the World Commission on Environment and Development Report (1987), which defines *sustainability* as finding a balance between the well-being of future generations and irreplaceable natural resources by opposing the fulfillment of the present generation's needs that we call "well-being". The concept of sustainability encompasses three dimensions, which are social, economic, and environmental (ibid.). These dimensions are dependent on each other, and none of them can endure without each other principally (Morelli 2011). Most people tend to highlight environmental sustainability compared to others, but one cannot be apart from, but connected (ibid.).

The need for sustainability is not questionable (Morelli 2011). Human activities essentially change the planetary systems (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). These changes are caused by humans' inability to fit their activities into the pattern of clouds, oceans, soils, and trees. Further, the changes are also followed by life-threatening endangerments, which shape a new phenomenon that needs to be identified and managed (ibid.). It is important to regularly evaluate human activities' effect on the local ecosystems and the whole planet (Arora 2018).

One of the crucial drivers of global and local environmental change is the increasing levels at a great rate of consumption of materials, energy, and services (Wilk 2002). In other words, consumption plays a role in environmental implications (Leigh et al. 1988; van Dam & Apeldoorn 1996). There are anti-consumption practices along with their motivations and values to live a more sustainable lifestyle (Black & Cherrier 2010). These practices are built through the combination of individual

needs and environmental preservation, which usually comes in actions and efforts of rejection, reduction, and reuse in consumption (ibid.).

Ofstad et al. (1994) define sustainable production and consumption as the usage of goods and services that fulfill the basic needs and improve the quality of life; while reducing the exploitation of natural resources, poisonous materials, waste, and pollutants' emissions over the life cycle, in order not to threaten the future generations' needs. Power has not belonged to either producers or consumers, yet it appears in their mutual relations (Dolan 2002). Sustainable consumption can be approached within the social actors' motivation or psychology and in-between actors – about their connections and interdependencies. Besides, sustainable consumption has been arranged as the solution for sustainable development (ibid.).

One of the consumption categories that affect the environment is the food system (Carlsson-Kanyama & González 2009). Agriculture becomes the main contributor to the emissions of greenhouse gases which leads to global warming. The greenhouse gases emissions calculation differs on the food items if we calculate from farm to table. Beef, cheese, and pork have the highest emissions, compared to vegetables and fruits despite the emissions from processing and transportation. Therefore, there is a suggestion to change diet in the direction of more plant-based foods, meat from animals but with little enteric fermentation, and foods processed in more energy-efficient ways not to worsen climate change (ibid.).

Besides food, sustainability has also become a popular topic in the fashion industry (Kulsum 2020). There is a movement to make the fashion industry become more environmentally friendly and increase the workers' welfare. Sustainable fashion is defined as a practice highlighting the values of parties involved, especially humanity and the environment. Sustainable fashion aims to change how a fashion item is produced and consumed toward less carbon footprint and environmental impact (ibid.). Choi and Luo (2019) add that there should be social responsibility toward the economy, along with the raw materials, the process of production, marketing, and distribution with minimum waste. The concept of sustainable fashion can be shown by environmentally friendly waste management, giving the fashion products a second life, and slowing down fashion (Kulsum 2020).

Generally, there is also a tendency to buy environmentally friendly products (Huang et al. 2014). Consumers seem quite concerned about the environment, which influences their daily consumption preferences (Akehurst et al. 2012). These environmentally favorable attitudes and responsible behavior develop from environmental knowledge (Chan 1999; Mostafa 2007), defined as a set of facts, perceptions, and correlations worrying the natural environment and its main ecosystems (Fryxell and Lo 2003).

The popularity of using green marketing has been increasing within companies (Huang et al. 2014). The green brand delivers information about how its products have particular attributes and benefits that reduce their impact on the environment (ibid.). However, there are signs of a developing suspicion of green initiatives – where many consumers doubt whether a company's activities and contribution are sincerely environmentally-friendly (Raska & Shaw 2012). This situation leads to a growing public issue of green-washing when products or brands claim to be green while they are not (Huang et al. 2014).

Since the way of consumption can impact the environment, it also shows how sustainable a person is. Therefore, we turn to the next subsection – where I will discuss one of the social media platforms that influence humans' consumption, Instagram.

2.2. Instagram and Consumption

The relation between Instagram and consumption has been a phenomenon researched by scholars. There is a relationship between social media use, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption (Thoumrungroje 2014; Wai & Osman, 2019; Widjajanta et al. 2018). People who use social media often tend to have high self-esteem, resulting in conspicuous consumption or excessive consumption to show off (Widjajanta et al. 2018). In other words, social media becomes a tool for individuals to share everything associated with consumer goods or services to obtain praise (ibid.).

Furthermore, social media users upload content to present themselves strategically (Kertamukti et al. 2019). They attentively consider how the public might perceive the content they post. Further, they also consider the consistency of their self-presentation in between the online and offline worlds. As a result, users tend to do something in social media to give a "good image" (ibid.). Michaelidou et al. (2021) argue that Instagram gives a glimpse of people's lifestyle and how they spend their time in their daily lives, but only the good or happy ones – without showing the stressful event or difficult day. For instance, Instagram is recognized as a positive category of media (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol 2013). Some Instagram users follow specific accounts for inspiration and enjoy seeing images that are fascinating and positive, but even if they are actually not enjoying the images, they tend not to show their negative perception on Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017).

Additionally, people's self-esteem in showing off their private life to the public is also influenced by how often they use social media (Widjajanta et al. 2018). This might lead to conspicuous consumption indirectly, as someone might decide to

consume something unconsciously after seeing other people sharing their private life (ibid.).

This situation can be related to Bafageeh and Ahmed's (2021) research about how advertisements or promotions on Instagram influence someone's decision to purchase. Most Instagram users tend to be exposed to 1-5 advertisements or promotions on Instagram per day (ibid.). The number of companies that market their products and communicate with their consumers through social media escalates outstandingly, as social media becomes an essential media to reach more customers, create a desirable attitude and intention to purchase (Leskovec et al. 2007).

Furthermore, Instagram users can be influenced by the advertisements promoted from the brand page directly, or as well as the promotions from influencers (Bafageeh & Ahmed 2021). Most Instagram users purchase something after seeing the posts on Instagram to satisfy their crucial specific needs, while some others purchase for their happiness, enhance their social image, or even to cope with negative issues happening in their life (ibid.).

Lastly, Instagram plays a key role in consumption in general and advertisements in specific. In the next subsection, I will discuss further how advertisements promoted by influencers on Instagram can influence consumption.

2.3. Influencers

Instagram becomes the main platform for influencers since it creates a sense of closeness and communities (Casaló et al. 2020). It is most likely that direction will carry on in the future (#Hashoff 2017) since the engagement rate on Instagram is higher compared to other social networking services (Voorveld et al. 2018).

Social media influencer is defined as people or brands having a huge number of followers that actively engaged on their social media platforms, which the users could not know the influencers without following them (Haenlein et al. 2020). The influencers build a connection to a community and inspire this community to do something drew on his or her recommendations (ibid.). The originality of the content posted on an Instagram account can directly influence the follower's perception that the author is an opinion leader (Casaló et al. 2020). Both influencers and their followers mutually co-create value (Vargo & Lusch 2008).

The influencers have the persuasive power of their own presentation's trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity (Abidin 2015; Gannon & Prothero 2016). Successful influencers need to perform authenticity, yet they also must build

strategies to approach their followers to remain beneficial for advertisers (van Driel & Dumitrica 2021). Hence, they have been outlooked in terms of their capability to attract followers and influence purchasing decisions (Colliander & Dahlén 2011; De Veirman et al. 2017).

Instagram users can be influenced by product reviews on Instagram to a certain extent, depending on person-to-person interest and the category of influencers and accounts that they follow (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). As a consumer, Instagram users look for information through online reviews to reduce the anticipated risk that is inseparable from purchase decisions (Moore 2010). Thus, they purchase items they had known purely through influencers they trusted on Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). The influencers brought items to the followers' attention, changing an unknown product into a well-known product over persuasion and creating positive feelings through advertising (ibid.).

The trust in an influencer's review is built from the users' expertise and knowledge of the reviewed or endorsed products (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). Further, there are a few reasons why Instagram users consider influencers as trustworthy sources of online information. The users feel that lower-scale and blogger-type influencers are more relatable and less superficial than Hollywood celebrities (ibid.). Besides, the appearances and features presented by an influencer can strongly influence like-minded customers (Thoumrungroje 2014).

Further, the opinions shaped from social media are considered quite important, as Instagram users can build stronger connections by engaging online (Thoumrungroje 2014; Wilcox & Stephen 2013). The influencers can inspire their followers through their posts on Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). Some users would post similar kinds of posts as the influencers or even imitate them. On another note, the users might need a reasonable amount of time before they trust the influencers and can claim or feel whether an influencer account is genuine or not (ibid.).

As Wilcox and Stephen (2013) explained, opinions made by strong connections are essential to network members. When an influencer values a certain product or brand, their followers are most likely to have the same opinion toward the product or brand (Townsend 2015). In another word, the credibility of the influencers affects the credibility of a brand (Spry et al. 2011).

To conclude, influencers on Instagram can give information to their followers, inspire them, and shape their opinions. This subsection together with the previous subsections will be discussed further with my research's results in the discussion part.

3. Methodology

In this section, I will discuss the methodology that I use in this research. Firstly, I conduct a qualitative research design. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain that carrying out qualitative research design makes the researcher can examine individuals' perspectives and experiences, which leads to insight into human behavior. Similarly, Malterud (2001) discusses that a qualitative research design is suitable to explore the meanings of social phenomena experienced by the individuals in their instinctive context. Therefore, I believe that qualitative research design is relevant for examining individuals' perspectives and experiences regarding the social phenomena of sustainability within Instagram. This section will be divided into three parts, which are interviews as the data collection method, content analysis as the data analysis method, and methodological reflections.

3.1. Data collection: Interviews

The primary method of data collection of this research is the interview. As Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007) describe, that interviews explore individuals' experiences and how individuals give meaning to them, through a set of questions and answers. Similarly, Kvale (2007) explains that the researcher asks about and listens to interviewees' dreams, stories, perspectives, and learns from their situation in the family, work, or social life. He emphasizes that conversation is the foundation of human interaction, which is one of the reasons why I choose interviews as the data collection method. This subsection will be divided into two parts, which are the interviewees and semi-structured interviews.

3.1.1. The interviewees

In order to understand the interviewees' perspective about sustainability within Instagram, I decided to interview Instagram users. Firstly, I interviewed two of my friends as the trial of the interview, which ended up as the real interview as well. Then after the first two interviews, I posted on my Instagram story about my research and ask if there are people interested to take part. Some of my friends also helped repost my post through their stories, and through this process, I manage to

find other eight interviewees that voluntarily willing to take part in the research and have an interview.

After the interviewees get in contact with me, then we book time for the interviews. The anonymity of interviewees is secure as I change their real names with coded names to be written in this thesis. As Baez (2002) mentioned that we could protect the participants by anonymizing the interviewees. Besides, all the interviewees also agree with the recording of the interviews, which later will be deleted after the thesis process is finished.

3.1.2. Semi-structured interview

In conducting the interviews, I decided to perform semi-structured interviews. Adams (2015) explains that the researcher conduct conversation with one person at a time in a semi-structured interview. The researcher also uses a combination of closed-and open-ended questions, as they are often followed with potential follow-up why or how questions. This situation allows the interviewer to get deeper into certain topics that show up during the interview (Cohen & Crabtree 2006). In this research, I made a set of closed-and open-ended questions as the interview guide, which can be found in Appendix 1.

Leech (2002) explains the technique of asking questions during a semi-structured interview. She emphasizes the importance to differentiate what we already know, and what we want to know. As what we want to know will shape the questions we will ask during interviews. And what we already know will influence how we ask the questions. Therefore, I keep Leech's concept in mind while writing the interview guiding questions. As Grossoehme (2014) says in his article, writing an interview guide is not easy and should not be taken lightly. The quality of our interview questions defines the quality of data we collect, as well as the quality of our study becomes.

In total, I conducted ten interviews with ten Instagram users. The duration of these interviews is between 12-45 minutes long. The table of interviewees with the duration can be found in Appendix 2. As the Covid-19 pandemic was still going, all these interviews were conducted online with video calls through the Zoom platform. By doing so, the interviewees can sit in any places they feel comfortable with during the interviews. Even it might be a bit limited with video calls, I am still able to follow the interviewees' facial expressions and small body languages like with their heads, shoulders, and hands. Besides, all interviews were recorded with Zoom features of automatically recording both video and audio. Later, these recordings went through the analysis process.

3.2. Data Analysis: Content Analysis

To analyze the data collected, I decided to choose the qualitative content analysis method. Schreier (2014) describes this as a method when the researcher assigns consecutive parts of the material to the categories of a coding outline, in order to methodically describe the meaning of collecting qualitative data. She also explains that this method is also data-driven. Even the researcher begins from wider themes or research questions, the text is coded directly as the material is analyzed, and the categories are growing out of the coding.

Furthermore, Boréus and Bergström (2017) describe the steps of analysis for the qualitative content analysis method. The first step is choosing and collecting the texts that will be analyzed. Then, the researcher will begin selecting what should be noted and considered from the material, which is referred to as a coding scheme with the context units and coding units.

In this research, I collect all the recordings of audio and video from Zoom. Then I transcribed these recordings using the otter.ai website. Afterward, I check the transcription manually, word by word. Later, I move the transcription to the Microsoft Word documents, reading them again while giving different colours of highlights (Appendix 3). These highlights become the quotes from the interviewees, which also become the coding units. Finally, I create the coding scheme in a Microsoft Excel document, creating a table out of the transcription (Appendix 4) with the context units – which are the subcategory or patterns to group the coding units.

3.3. Methodological reflections

The subsection below describes the advantage and drawbacks of my research methods based on my observation. First, I would like to examine the fact that my research is conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hacker et al. (2020) explain that web-conferencing systems like Zoom raise as a social technology that promotes a new virtual togetherness by accommodating access that is blocked away due to Covid-19 mitigation struggles. The authors emphasize how a web-conferencing system facilitates meetings that might not be able to have taken place under normal conditions. Personally, I believe that using Zoom enables me to conduct interviews with interviewees coming from different countries – which gains more diverse material collected for the research.

On the other hand, I have tried to keep in mind to remain neutral and unbiased while conducting the research. Mehra (2002) describes that oftentimes researchers choose to study a certain topic since they have a personal connection to the topic at a certain

level, either simply as an individual, or as a practitioner in the subject. This can be applied to my research as I decided to research sustainability in Instagram since I saw a personal connection with it. I have been using Instagram since it was firstly released for Android phones in 2012. I came from a country where Instagram has become a part of our culture and daily life. And as I began interested in sustainability topics while I went to college, I also began following sustainability accounts on Instagram. Therefore, during this research, I always remind myself to be more driven by what I want to know – instead of what I already know. As Mehra (2002) states in her journal, "we start thinking like a researcher when we begin to question what we know and what we believe" (p.8).

4. Results

The following section describes the result of my interviews with Instagram users about the research topic. I have interviewed ten people, which I call Linda, Anna, Stefi, Joni, Cody, Thori, Clary, Fyr, Jose, and Mady.

Upon observation of the results, I categorize them into five topics, which are (1) how the interviewees define sustainability and what they have done within the sustainability in real life; (2) the interviewees' activities in Instagram generally and within a sustainability context; (3) the relation between Instagram and real life; (4) feelings and reasons; (5) sustainability potential ascribed to Instagram. In the following subsections, these topics will be presented in detail.

4.1. Definition of sustainability

Most interviewees define sustainability as we need to do something to prolong our nature for our future generation, as we degrade our nature nowadays. In other words, sustainability also means doing something in the same way for a long time without causing any problems. Thori emphasized that "*the spirit of the sustainability is responsibility. And you think, it is not to only think about yourself, but it is also to think about others*".

Some interviewees described how they look at sustainability. Fyr argued that "*sustainability can also be not just environmental term*". Likewise, Jose mentioned that "*the classic way*" of looking at sustainability is through its three pillars – which are social sustainability, economical sustainability, and environmental sustainability. While other two interviewees said we can look at sustainability by thinking about what is not sustainable.

Most interviewees agreed that being sustainable is seen as a huge deal and a difficult thing to do. However, most interviewees said that Instagram has shown to them that we can take part to become sustainable by doing small sustainable actions in our daily life – which may gradually develop as time goes. Everyone can be a learner while contributing to inspiring each other at the same time. These statements are further strengthened by Linda:

"I will say because it makes I feel like sustainability and green before was a very, very left very academic elite issue that if you want to be sustainable, you got to go through the extreme…you got to be this hippie, hardcore environmentalist radical. And this kind of brings that issue to the mainstream, that it is not [that radical or extreme], it is a part of your life. And it is very easy to do, and you do not need to be some social justice, environmentalist warrior – that kind of what I think Instagram does, for this kind of issue."

4.1.1. Sustainable activities in real life

All interviewees have been doing sustainable activities in their daily life. Mainly, they demonstrate how they change their consumption to be more sustainable. Jose even emphasized the importance of reducing our consumption and against unnecessary consumption. Furthermore, some interviewees said that they buy sustainable products and think about what they choose to consume. Another alternative that some interviewees do is buying second-hand products, for instance, clothing and furniture. Linda further highlighted the importance of how we need to think further than the things we want to buy, for instance thinking about "*where it came from*". She explained how the choices that we make every day can affect people that work for making those things – which might live in other countries that far away – and how these choices "*affect in the long run globally*".

Fast fashion has become the main sustainability issue that most interviewees talked about and are concerned with. These interviewees prefer eco-friendly labels and organic brands when it comes to buying new clothes. While some interviewees buy second-hand clothes, Fyr shared how he used clothes that were sewed and re-use old clothes that his father "*used when he was my age*". Linda also emphasized the importance of the workers in the fashion industry, as follows:

"…they [Instagram accounts Linda follows] have like fashion revolution week, in which that week, every day, basically, people were encouraged to post about, like, who made my clothes, you know, and then people. And then also there are pictures of workers in various stages of the fashion line like, they posted like I made your clothes, I made your yarn. And then all those things to kind of show as well the personification of this industry. And that is just a global supply chain by some brands."

The ecological focus of food production was also a sustainability issue that was raised by one interviewee – Jose, as the sustainable way should be "*in this way that no nature is basically harm, which worsening the climate change or like how biodiversity should prosper from it and not be degraded*". Besides, food consumption also has been an issue brought up by the interviewees. The choice of food matters for some interviewees, while they reduce their food waste by eating leftovers. Some interviewees also decide to consume less meat, while some others become flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan. Clary, that needs meat for her iron protein sources, chooses to buy meat that is locally produced.

All interviewees have been doing recycling, while some of them talked about it further during interviews. Joni explained that "*I have always recycled and raised with environmental friendly parents, so I am very used to recycling. It comes natural for me*". Some other interviewees joined the picking up garbage events, follows the zero-waste guide, and use fewer single-use plastics.

Most interviewees reduce their energy consumption. Some of them prefer to bike or take public transport whenever it is possible – instead of driving cars. Some others also consume water wisely, turning off lights and other electrical devices that are not needed.

Some interviewees have been doing other various activities to be more sustainable. Cody has been "*religiously*" donating to World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Greenpeace, while some other interviewees participate in campaigns and movements on Instagram. For instance, Jose partakes in the *klimatstudenterna* – climate students association. Besides, Fyr has been "*trying to nudge others*" to do sustainable activities – especially changing their consumption, "*but it is not always possible*". Moreover, Stefi claimed that she has been "*really trying to read up on what sustainability is*" to gain her knowledge about sustainability.

4.2. Activities in Instagram

In the following pages, I will elaborate on how the interviewees discuss what they do on Instagram. They explain some features of Instagram they use, the frequency of using Instagram, and how they choose which accounts they follow. Some interviewees also explain what they do with the sustainability accounts, along with the posts about sustainability on Instagram.

4.2.1. General activities in Instagram

All interviewees have been using some features on Instagram. They have been scrolling the feeds and seeing posts that are shown. Some interviewees often check the Instagram stories, use the feature of *Save tabs*, upload photos or videos to their own profile. Some interviewees highlighted the advertising, which sometimes also provides a link to click on. The advertisements always show randomly, so Instagram users might not get the same advertisement even if they are looking for it. Other interviewees mentioned how they believe the algorithm on Instagram works. The algorithm learns what kind of contents Instagram users are interested in – which leads to the recommendations of similar posts and accounts.

The frequency of using Instagram also varied for the interviewees. Three interviewees confidently said they check Instagram daily. One of them – Mady,

also explained how she often checks intentionally a specific influencer account sharing her sustainable lifestyle, since she does not want to miss any posts. Thori also claimed he even used the feature of screen time usage to balance his screen time while scrolling Instagram. On the other hand, three other interviewees said they are not frequent users of Instagram.

The interviewees were also questioned about why they follow certain accounts on Instagram. Mainly, seven interviewees follow accounts they feel interested in. Two of them also follow accounts that inspiring and educational. Some other interviewees also explained how they follow accounts depending on what is going on with their life, such as aligning these with new hobbies, travel interests, or moving to a different country. Furthermore, four interviewees follow accounts that give information with numbers, data, facts, graphs, infographics, and statistics. They claimed these kinds of posts make them easier to grasp the information as the posts are more attractive to read further.

4.2.2. Activities in Instagram within the sustainability context

All interviewees were aware of advertising about sustainability on Instagram. During the interviews, some interviewees showed advertisements from the brand pages, organizations, or posts uploaded by influencers. One of them – Jose, claimed that once she bought a rain jacket made from recycled plastic bottles after seeing its advertising on Instagram. However, she explained her thought further:

> "But still, but I sometimes feel like it is such a greenwashing when you advertise your products. It is, like oh, this is the sustainable thing and maybe it is just, they just want people to consume it, to get money, and then maybe it is unnecessary consumption. So, it is a bit, I have that thought in mind that it is not really sustainable anyway, because it has been encouraging your consumption by guess. I guess it is good that they still produce like more sustainable stuff. So yeah, I do not know. It is, I think both ways regarding it, I guess."

Two interviewees talked about Instagram posts regarding sustainability that usually display the bad news or negative side of our impact on the environment. Fyr pictured it as "*negativity is going on*" Instagram. The other interviewee – Jose, emphasized the need to have both good news and bad news:

> "And I think for me, it is necessary to have both good news and bad news. So, I can keep just stay in mental health. Because as I said, when I started following a lot of environmental accounts or climate accounts, I just got anxious, and I could not. I just felt bad all the time. So, I think it is for me, it is I think I need to have a balance between good news and bad news, maybe more of the bad news. So, I can still be interested in doing what I am doing. But I need something positive too."

Further, Jose shared she realized that she follows a lot of movements that "*are working towards a more sustainable future*", such as @*jordensvanner* (Swedish branch of Friends of the Earth) and @fridaysforfuture. These accounts gave her positive vibes "*to see there are other people that are working with this issue*" (Jose).

Similarly, another interviewee – Fyr, talked about how he is more interested to follow accounts posting about positive perspectives:

> "…I tried to focus on like to have stuff that makes me feel better, not worse. So like positive news and stuff like that…they should kind of inspire me to do something not scare me from doing something else…I also love like this, where they are actually talking about how Europe is getting more wild again. So, it is not like sustainability per se, in the sense that it is not something they are not telling you like, what you could do or what you should do. But they, by showing these pictures, I kind of remind myself how beautiful nature is and how much we should protect it."

Interviewees of this study noted that they get inspired by Instagram. Linda said that posts about things she does not know inspire her more than the posts that she already knows. Fyr also shared his thought:

> "At best, they make me think about something I never thought of before. Or they make me change, like my behaviors. And yeah, they kind of inspire me to do something in a new way."

Further, the interviewees also try to inspire others about sustainability through Instagram at the same time. Five interviewees repost some posts that they think might be interesting for others – or as Linda said, whenever she feels "*I should tell other people*". Stefi explained her thought further:

> "…when you read something that it is and you know, someone is saying the exact right thing, according to your opinion, of course, or my opinion, but I am like, yeah, this is easy. I want to share this because maybe someone else can see it as well. It is important, so I do that."

Some interviewees even directly send the posts to their friends on Instagram or discuss them when they meet and talk directly with their friends in real life. Mady also sorts her posts that she will share with the public to make sure they will inspire others:

> "I try to sort whatever things I will bring out to public space. Well, Instagram is like one of those public spaces now that we cannot be in person and talk in person with other people…So, I tried to sort stuff, so I would not post like, all the things that I am doing, what I have tried to post some [of] that…well, I tried to bring more attention to whatever I am posting, so I tried to post fewer noise posts. Sort of like that. Also, I am not as cool as whatever my Instagram caption [is looked like]. I wrote myself describe [the picture or content I uploaded]. But I also kind of like the person [I looked like that shown through my Instagram caption]."

4.3. The relation between Instagram and real life

As Instagram becomes part of human life, this raises the question of how Instagram and real-life relate to each other. The interviewees will explain how they see this relation in the following subsection.

Some interviewees talked about how Instagram and real-life are influenced by each other. Mady shared her own experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. As people were stuck at home, there was a trend of having our own food in our homes by buying green plants and growing them. Mady pictured that began "*from one person sharing on Instagram stories, and another one asks where did you buy that, and then more people buying green plants or starting to grow [them]"*. Similarly, Joni talked about how an Instagram account sharing sustainable cleaning solution – also showing the before and after cleaning – becomes popular, then bring impacts to the offline stores.

> "It just you can see the effects in the stores because they are selling more of those products because the kind of movement is growing, people are seeing the benefits of it, and this is the buyer and is actively changing to do that. And it is a very small step for the environment, but it is still a little resulting in awakening the mind of the common people."

Two interviewees claimed they got new friends after following certain movements and organizations' accounts. When the organizations posted a campaign, they interacted in that post and afterward, they got new followers and followed them back. Eventually, they joined a WhatsApp group together with other followers of the organizations and grew their sense of community through discussion in that group. One of the interviewees – Thori, pictured that "*the spirit of…campaign, I think it is huge, an immense, fearfully impressive…and I was impressed to that"*.

Some interviewees claimed that influencers on Instagram influence their real life. Five interviewees purchase something after seeing posts uploaded by influencers, and three of these posts are advertisements. Clary shared how she learned from an influencer living in a village in Norway – that Clary has been following for some years on Instagram. The influencer said that the best sustainable actions someone can do when they cannot "*give up meat totally"* is going to local farms, seeing how the farms grow the animals, and buying the meat directly from them – as the influencer did. Clary adapted this inspiration by purchasing meat that has the label "*från Sverige*" (from Sweden) in the packaging – which indicates the meat is locally grown. Clary explained her situation as follows:

> "…choosing food let's say…I cannot only eat vegetables because somehow, I really need meat, which contains iron. Because if I only get vegetables, I will feel weak. And because of that, I cannot be vegan. But in order to solve these problems, I choose to eat local. So even though I eat something from meat, I make sure that it comes from a nearby farm, for example. So that

is how I calculate it. You know, like, it benefits me because it is necessary for my health. But it also benefits like I am doing the best that I can do for the environment as well."

Similarly, Fyr found new vegan recipes from influencers he follows on Instagram. He said he has tried a lot of those recipes. Fyr also further claimed that many people who "*are not into sustainability at all or never got so interested like me*" begin new sustainable habits since they got inspired by the influencers.

Some interviewees talked about how Instagram changes their perception and helps them to think critically. Joni claimed that Instagram can debunk the myths. He shared about an influencer he has been following:

"…he focused a lot on how you can exercise a lot and still be vegan because that is very still a very sensitive topic because a lot of people think they cannot be vegan and train hard in getting big muscles. And he is a professional trainer…so he is trying to share the posts, sometimes some scientific facts to show that you still can get all the proteins needed, the right amount of gains to build muscle just to debunk the myths that come to me and just to inspire people to eat less meat, think of the biggest animals, think of the climate."

Further, Fyr also shared his experience of how Instagram changed his perception of clothing. He was surprised that we "*can actually still get something beautiful from something that is broken*". Fyr further explained:

"Like, you know, like matching patterns and stuff like that…for example, these pants were broken. But then they found this part here that matches, so they put it there [and sew them together] or this like, it is super nice… I like to follow them. And I often end up saving their stuff because it is like to remind myself that it is something that it is actually funny and can be very, very nice to do and I can maybe use in the future when I have something broken."

The interviewees in this study also talked about other positive influences that Instagram impacts their real life. Some of them claimed that Instagram becomes a guide by giving sustainable tips. Further, Stefi got concrete tips of what she can do, as she gets inspired to take part in coastal cleaning after seeing posts from *Håll Sverige* (keep Sweden clean). While for some other interviewees, Instagram gives a reminder about sustainability. Two other interviewees said that Instagram gives insight to them about more options of sustainability products.

Despite these positive influences, some interviewees expressed their doubts about products and companies that are branded as sustainable on Instagram. They thought some companies might only want to get money, therefore they encourage people to consume their products. Cody even emphasized the importance of not buying products from the suspected companies:

"So, there are many ways like [to label the companies or brands as sustainable] and also like you may get fooled by the company's greenwashing. So, this kind of post [about greenwashing]

also reminds you that, be careful, this is greenwashing. This is not real. So, you cannot support this."

However, Fyr argued that "*maybe I do believe that, like, certain companies or people are actually thinking about sustainability, and they are doing something for it*". He further claimed that he would like to buy sustainable products from a specific brand – instead of others since "*I know what they stand for. I know, the story behind and I identify with that story*".

Fyr also explained how the content posted by companies or organizations on Instagram influences how their followers think about the companies or organizations. He follows the account of Ecosia, a search engine company that plants trees around the world every time people do search on their website. However, Fyr felt the content of its Instagram account is not looked that interesting:

> "But sometimes I feel the pictures they show…are not the best to kind of convince me [that] they are actually doing that…if you go on their Instagram page direction, it seems that they are not talking so much about like the trees they are planting, but about the people who are planting them, which is super interesting. But for me myself, I am more like, I am using that because of the trees not because of the people…sometimes I would like to see more…like the pictures of them actually planting the trees or the trees growing – than they are talking about planting the trees, which I know they do so it is kind of I prefer when they show me what they are doing more than just talking about it."

Some interviewees talked further about how all these relations between Instagram and real life can happen. They claimed that we need to take time and energy to learn or get something from Instagram posts that we see. Stefi even emphasized that we could not be influenced by Instagram accounts that we follow for a short time.

Besides, most interviewees admitted that they have a personal interest in sustainability and have been following accounts promoting sustainability on Instagram. Some of them were even already interested before the term sustainability becomes popular. They also claimed that they already have previous knowledge within sustainability topics – before even following Instagram accounts promoting sustainability.

Clary also said that "*the most people who do something for sustainability, maybe they are not on Instagram, and they are not particularly showing it through their Instagram*". She argued that she knows someone that deeply conscious about sustainability, yet "*not really in Instagram*". Furthermore, Clary also explained the phenomenon of shaming others that "*not follow or taken options* [both in real life or Instagram] *that considered as sustainable*". She argued that a movement or creating something that "*educates people…makes people aware…something that*

interests people, something that makes people question" more about sustainability is better rather than shaming other people.

Fyr also emphasized the importance of "*walk the talk"*. He raised the issue that some influencers might be sponsoring something because the companies pay them, not because they believe in the product. He explained it further:

> "Because it is super funny if they actually pay you for sponsoring something you believe in. But then if it is too much, if you are sponsoring too many things, I am afraid it might be kind of I am like, oh, maybe it is, maybe you do not really believe that stuff. And then, I might unfollow or think about it or kind of value like, trust you less?"

4.4. Feeling and reasons

The subsection below describes how the interviewees feel towards some accounts or posts on Instagram. They also talked about what their reasons are behind doing some sustainability actions, following some Instagram accounts, and seeing some Instagram posts.

4.4.1. Feeling

Three interviewees said they are afraid of how people perceive if they share about sustainability actively within their Instagram. Cody said as follows:

> "I told occasionally like tell people that do not buy this or do not buy that but not all the time, because it will be annoying… if I keep continuously posting things like sustainability I can be perceived as preachy. So, I have tried also to avoid that kind of thing."

Some interviewees shared how they feel when they purchase something after seeing the posts on Instagram. Two interviewees feel happy to do their obligation or responsibility – as Thori pictured as "*part of me doing something for the nature*". Some other interviewees also feel happy to get the result they wanted, such as doing the cleaning cheaply and sustainably, getting affordable second-hand clothes that "*speaks to my style*" (Clary), also eating tasty foods that are currently available and still grow in the season. Joni even said, "*this is definitely a positive thing for me…*[as] *I always strive to slowly become better and better in everything I do in life*". Clary also explained further that the second-hand clothes she bought, initially would be thrown away – therefore, she feels happy to help reduce the waste.

Similarly, Stefi expressed her happiness regarding an Instagram account organized by a group of young people that were part of a program with WWF. Following this account, Stefi claimed that "*it is so nice to see that young people care and they try to inspire other young people…and kids*". She felt "*so happy to see that there are*

so many people engaged". Further, Stefi emphasized the importance for young people to begin raising their voices as *"it is our future that this is about"*.

Some other interviewees also shared their different feelings. Jose explained how some Instagram posts about climate change can give her anxiety:

> "I think, actually, I had a few years ago when it was so hot in Sweden, like, in two or three years ago, I started following a lot of climate accounts, and they got so... I got so anxious because I just read bad news all the time. So, I had actually unfollowed them, because I could not manage the depressing…And these kinds of graphs, really, I think they are really interesting to see. And I learned a lot from it. But it is sometimes it just freaks me out too. Like, I get copper anxiety, for real."

Another interviewee – Mady, shared how previously she has doubts to post about sustainability on her Instagram. She claimed that she had *"personal level concerned"* but she never used her social media to share her thoughts. She felt *"not really sure"* since she thought she had zero knowledge about sustainability – nor learning or experiencing the result of climate change first-hand. Mady argued that *"I should not have the talk without putting any weight"*.

However, Mady changed her mind and began to be more vocal about sustainability after experiencing the result of climate change when she went to Zimbabwe. She also got inspired by an influencer she follows on Instagram, to take part in sharing sustainability content on Instagram. Mady explained further as follows:

> "…she said one thing that I remember…that it was not what we need right now. What is not, you know, everybody doing things perfectly. But a lot of people do the imperfectly, we still make that change. So, I was like, oh, I do not need to do it, like, really perfectly. Well, I do not have the knowledge and experience to you know, talk about these issues like, probably Nat Geo [National Geographic] does. Well, I can still, like raise up this issue to my friends. And hopefully, they would start to get interested in this stuff, and we can, you know, learn together."

4.4.2. Reasons

Some interviewees acknowledged that they do sustainability actions inspired by influencers they follow on Instagram since they are easy to relate to, practical, cheap, and environmentally friendly. Joni pictured it as *"it is very simple…it is not just a big work; it is actually practical"*. He believed that accounts promoting sustainability have been successful since they *"always talk about how easy it is, how cheap it is, and how environmental friendly it is"*. Furthermore, Anna claimed that *"for some posts, it has like personal related"* that makes her able to understand the *"why"* and its importance.

The interviewees also shared various reasons why they follow certain accounts on Instagram, such as coming from the same city and donating to certain organizations.

Furthermore, Joni claimed he follows an influencer since he has concerns that are addressed in the posts:

> "Yeah, definitely feeling inspired. Because I also have had those concerns, because I train a lot and I want to eat as good as possible to get the right gains and the results, and I am also not very educated about the vegan lifestyle and could cost eating. So that is why I follow his page, is to get inspiration and confirmation that now this works."

Jose also explained how an Instagram post can be more interesting if we know the people who post it and follow their accounts. She claimed that we "*can connect to it* [the post] *more*" when her friends or some artist that posting – compared to "*if there was like some old geezer posting about it*".

Another interviewee – Stefi shared her reason why she took part in coastal cleaning after seeing the posts from *Håll Sverige*. She emphasized that she "*wants to be a part of that movement*". Further, Stefi explained how she felt "*a little bit guilty*" every time she saw posts from *Håll Sverige*, since she has been wanted to take part for some years, yet she hasn't managed to do it yet until she felt "*I realized that maybe I should*" this year. She pictured that "*maybe that is the backside of it* [Instagram]*, that you were sort of put people into guilt*".

4.5. Sustainability potential ascribed to Instagram

The interviewees in this study presented their perspective of Instagram's potential to change the users' perspective about sustainability. Joni mentioned that Instagram content – picture, rarely text, has strength as it is easier to digest compared to Facebook with a lot of text. He further said that there are Instagram users that are *"becoming more and better at creating content that relates to people"*.

Some interviewees believed that Instagram is powerful to change someone's perspective about sustainability. Anna pictured that "*there is a good chance that you can actually change people's perspective about sustainability using Instagram*". Further, Linda specifically emphasized how content about sustainability can influence people, as follows:

> "And that is that one thing that kind of changed my whole perspective. And of course, like, there is a power in like, sharing those sustainable things that you do. And there is someone that actually decides to do that. And who knows, maybe there are others who are, you know, affected and changed, but just did not tell me." (Linda)

Two other interviewees also mentioned how Instagram can be very powerful if the users curate their Instagram and find "*the people with the same goal and interest*" (Mady). Fyr further explained how the users can curate their Instagram:

"…because you just can make like a post or a short video. So, you might end up having a very kind of simplistic way. And you have to simplify a lot…Because I mean, you have to give something quick to understand – to people who might not be so interested. They have little time to give you…so you have to simplify but I think that might, if it is done properly, that it is super good." (Fyr)

Besides, some interviewees claimed that Instagram is a good tool for involving sustainability in life as "*all the trends are existing maybe that could be something that Instagram could contribute to like sustainable trends or something similar*" (Jose). Further, Joni claimed that "*Instagram will grow in that sense of communication to the broad mass of people on all kinds of level of advertising, selling products, sending out messages*". He also added that environmental accounts, environmental and climate issues, "*will benefit from using the platform*".

Eight interviewees claimed that Instagram posts can help Instagram users to gain knowledge, as long as the users have initial care within the topic. Cody shared that he follows certain accounts promoting sustainability and gain more knowledge from those accounts as "*I have an attachment to these kinds of issues*". Mady further added, "*because otherwise, it will be you know, just like another post on your feed, which you will probably like, and then scroll up*". Similarly, Stefi emphasized how hard it might be to reach people that are not already interested in the topic. However, she explained that if "*somehow in another way we can get them a little bit interested*", then we might be able to reach new people "*to find that way*".

Further, Jose mentioned Instagram as "*a source of learning*" as she learned a lot from reading on accounts specifying sustainable practical information. However, Stefi claimed that Instagram might only give a one-sided picture unless the users follow various accounts with different perspectives. This can be explained, "*because I am only getting the information that I have chosen to get. And that is the information that Instagram thinks I would like*" (Stefi).

Five interviewees also mentioned that Instagram raises its users' awareness of sustainability topics. One of the interviewees – Fyr, highlighted that Instagram influences his awareness of the sustainable brand unconsciously. Further, Clary claimed that she becomes more aware of "*the costs and benefits*" of sustainable issues since "*sometimes something that seems sustainable, is not sustainable*". Besides, Jose mentioned her thought that "*people are learning slowly….by sharing and seeing what others are doing…*[as] *a lot of people are sharing news and stories*" about sustainability topics.

5. Discussion and implications

The term of sustainability has become a popular concept (Spindler 2013). Most interviewees define sustainability as we need to do something to prolong nature for our future generations, as nowadays the nature has been degraded by humans. Therefore, sustainability is also defined as doing something in the same way for a long time without causing any problems. These definitions are similar to the first definition of sustainability from the World Commission on Environment and Development Report (1987) as mentioned in the literature review. This understanding is seconded by one of the interviewees who mentioned that there are three pillars to look at sustainability, which are social sustainability, economical sustainability, and environmental sustainability. Another interviewee emphasized that sustainability is not only about the environmental term, thus reflecting arguments that environmental sustainability tends to be overemphasized compared to the other pillars (Morelli 2011).

As human activities need to be adjusted to preserve nature and the livelihoods of billions of people (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), there are some sustainable activities that interviewees have been doing in their real life. The importance to do sustainable activities to decrease human impacts on the environment is inevitable. Generally, the interviewees report that they indeed change their consumption, one even repeating arguments that everyone needs to reduce their consumption and avoid unnecessary consumption (e.g. Black & Cherrier, 2010).

Further, the actions and efforts to live a more sustainable lifestyle come in the form of rejection, reduction, and reuse in consumption (Black & Cherrier 2010). This can be observed when some interviewees mentioned how they prefer to buy sustainable products and think about what they choose (see e.g. Huang et al. 2014). Even more, most interviewees mentioned buying second-hand products, including clothes and furniture.

Most interviewees admit that their tendency toward a more sustainable lifestyle comes as they already have knowledge within the sustainability topic. This finding is in line with arguments that environmentally friendly attitude and responsible behavior evolve from environmental knowledge (see e.g. Chan 1999; Mostafa

2007). Further, this finding also can be related to previous research suggesting that reflection about sustainability is omnipresent in modern societies (see e.g. Asur & Huberman 2010; Banda 2015). Reporting on what sustainability means, two interviewees made explicit reference to commonly cited definitions that include social environmental and economic sustainability, one of which suggested that environmental sustainability alone is not sufficient. They report having gained knowledge about sustainability by actively looking for more information and reading more literature about what sustainability is.

Also, there is another interviewee who doubts posting about sustainability on her Instagram as she does not feel she has enough knowledge to share. In her and other interviewees' perspectives, the idea of being sustainable sounds like a huge deal and a difficult thing to do. This finding shows that sustainability issues seem more to belong to people who have a high education background, like researchers (see e.g. Longo et al. 2019). However, these interviewees hold the same opinion about how Instagram shows to them that we can begin from small actions in daily life to be sustainable. With this opinion, they are in line with previous research suggesting that sustainable actions can begin from small actions and then it can gradually increase (see e.g. Eyskoot 2018). From the interviewees' perspective, we do not have to become extreme or radical environmentalists, as everyone can be a learner at the same time while also contributing to inspiring other people as well.

As Akehurst et al. (2012) discuss, consumers' daily consumption preferences can be influenced by their concern about the environment. Moreover, some interviewees take more actions that come from their concerns. One interviewee donates regularly to sustainability organizations, while some other interviewees take part in campaigns and movements on Instagram, for instance, *klimatstudenterna*. Another interviewee also shows his concern about the environment by nudging other people to change their consumption preferences whenever it is possible.

Sustainable production and consumption aim to reduce the exploitation of natural resources, poisonous materials, waste, and pollutants' emissions (Ofstad et al. 1994). Most interviewees reduce the energy they consume by turning off the lights not needed, prefer to bike or take public transport instead of driving cars, and consume water wisely. Further, recycling also has been the main thing that has been done by all interviewees.

Principally, all consumption can bring an impact on the environment. One main category of consumption as a human is the food system. One of the interviewees brought up the ecological focus of food production, which should not harm nature, worsen climate change, or even degrade biodiversity. The choice of food also

matters for the interviewees; therefore, they reduce their food waste by eating leftovers. Some of them also choose to consume less meat or at least buy the meat that is locally produced, and some others become flexitarian, vegetarian, even vegan. With this opinion, they are in line with research about sustainable food consumption (see e.g. Carlsson-Kanyama & González 2009) that discusses how agriculture contributes enormously to greenhouse gases that cause climate change. If we calculate the processing and transportation from farm to table, vegetables and fruits have decreased emissions compared to beef and pork. As a result, there has been a suggestion to reduce meat consumption and consume foods processed in an environmentally friendly way (e.g. Carlsson-Kanyama & González 2009).

Further, the idea of sustainable fashion has also become popular (see e.g. Kulsum 2020). Most interviewees brought up the issue of fast fashion, which caused them to choose eco-friendly labels and organic brands. They are also eager to give the fashion products a second life and slow down fashion (see e.g. Kulsum 2020), which is shown in buying second-hand clothes or sewing old pieces of stuff – like re-using their parents' clothes. One of the interviewees shared about the fashion revolution week, where people were encouraged to post about who made their clothes. She emphasized the importance of workers in various stages of the fashion line, which reflects arguments that there is a growing movement to increase the welfare of workers in the fashion industry (see e.g. Kulsum 2020).

5.1. Instagram and consumption

The subsection below describes Instagram as the social media platform that influences humans' consumption. Generally, the interviewees believe that Instagram is powerful to change someone's perspective about sustainability. From the interviewees' perspective, Instagram is perceived as a good tool for involving sustainability in life as it contributes to the trend of sustainability, therefore it can be beneficial to address the environmental and climate issues (see e.g. Shabir 2020).

Instagram has become an essential medium for companies to market their products through advertising (Leskovec et al. 2007). All interviewees were aware of advertising about sustainability on Instagram, either directly from the brand page, organizations, or posts uploaded by influencers. This result further supports the observation of how Instagram users tend to be exposed to 1-5 advertisements on Instagram daily (see e.g. Bafageeh & Ahmed 2021). Further, three of ten interviewees admit that they saw advertising about sustainable products on Instagram, which they end up bought them afterward. This finding confirms how advertisements on Instagram can influence someone's decision to purchase (Bafageeh & Ahmed 2021).

Purchasing sustainable products can be a way to fulfill basic needs while reducing the environmental impacts, which is referred to as sustainable consumption (Ofstad et al. 1994). However, buying green things or sustainable products can be seen as conspicuous consumption (Johnson et al. 2018). There might be possibilities that someone buys sustainable products to be seen responsible for the social issues that currently happening in the society (Johnson et al. 2018), which in this research are sustainability issues. This reflects the argument that conspicuous consumption is an indicator of pro-social behavior (see e.g. Johnson et al. 2018). To conclude, using Instagram can lead to conspicuous consumption (see e.g. Thoumrungroje 2014; Wai & Osman, 2019; Widjajanta et al. 2018) but of sustainable products.

In addition, three interviewees of this study admit that they check Instagram frequently. One of them even used the feature of screen time usage to balance his screen time when scrolling Instagram. It is noteworthy that three out of ten interviewees actually bought something after seeing Instagram posts, but only Jose that uses Instagram frequently. Jose illustrated that she has bought or purchased stuff in conscious response to seeing Instagram posts – which also shows how a higher frequency of using Instagram does not necessarily lead to conspicuous consumption (cf. Widjajanta et al. 2018). On the other hand, one other interviewee shared that she intentionally and consciously checked specific accounts on Instagram to get inspired and 'consume' new knowledge within sustainability from that account. This result shows that there are possibilities that Instagram users can decide to consume something after seeing other people sharing their private life, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The results of this study indicate that some interviewees purchase something after seeing the posts on Instagram as they feel happy to do their obligation or responsibility for nature. They are also happy to get the result they wanted, for instance, do cleaning cheaply and sustainably, eating tasty foods that grow during the season, and getting affordable second-hand clothes. One interviewee mentioned that she is happy to purchase sustainable products, which also helps her concern and anxiety related to climate change issues. These findings are in line with a previous study that Instagram users purchase something after seeing posts on Instagram to satisfy their crucial needs, their happiness, or to cope with specific issues (see e.g. Bafageeh & Ahmed 2021).

One interesting finding is one of the interviewees mentioned how she pays attention to the content she posts on her Instagram. This seconds suggestion that social media users have a strategy in presenting themselves through content they uploaded in their social media accounts (see e.g. Kertamukti et al. 2019). Some interviewees emphasized the importance of curating our Instagram and simplifying the message we want to deliver through the content; therefore, people can understand the content

quickly. They also mentioned how Instagram can be very powerful if we curate our Instagram well and find people with the same interests.

Besides, one interviewee shared how she always sorts the post she will share in public space, as "*Instagram is like one of those public spaces now that we cannot be in person and talk in person with other people*". She admitted that she tried to pay more attention to the content she posts and ensure that her posts have more weight to make sure that people will get something from them. Therefore, she felt like herself in the real life is different compared to her internet profile or herself that is shown on Instagram. These findings also reflect the previous study that social media users attentively consider the public in presenting themselves differently between online and offline worlds (see e.g. Kertamukti et al. 2019).

Moreover, some interviewees discussed how Instagram posts about sustainability usually portray the negative side of our impact on the environment, therefore they are more interested in the posts and accounts showing the positive vibes of it. They emphasized that "*it is necessary to have both good news and bad news*". With this, the interviewees seem to disagree with Michaelidou et al.'s (2021) recent finding that Instagram only gives a glimpse of the good or happy perspective. It also has been suggested that Instagram is recognized as a positive category of media (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol 2013). This does not appear to be the case from the perspective of the interviewees.

Consequently, one interviewee even shared that she got anxious and felt bad every time she saw the bad news about climate change on Instagram, to the point the news affected her mental health. Therefore, she unfollowed accounts that posted bad news and began following a lot of movements that are working toward a more sustainable future. These accounts gave her positive vibes that there are still people that working with this issue. Similarly, one other interviewee tried to focus on posts that make him feel better, not worse. He gave an example of an Instagram account that posts more about how Europe is getting greener and wilder again. He stressed that this kind of post inspired him to do something, instead of scared him. These results reflect those of Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) who also found that Instagram users tend to follow specific accounts for inspiration and enjoy seeing images that are fascinating and positive. However, they tend not to show their negative perception when they are not enjoying the images (see e.g. Djafarova and Rushworth 2017) which is shown in this study by unfollowing accounts that made the interviewees feel bad.

5.2. Influencers

The concepts of influencers and Instagram are inseparable (Haenlein et al. 2020). In the following pages, I will discuss how influencers on Instagram can influence someone's consumption. Some interviewees get inspired to do something drawn on the influencers' recommendations. For example, one interviewee followed an influencer living in a village in Norway, where she buys meat from local farmers. Therefore, this interviewee also buys meat that has locally grown labels, like *från Sverige*. Another interviewee found new vegan recipes from influencers he follows on Instagram, and he tried a lot of those recipes. Further, this finding also confirms that influencers can attract followers and influence their purchasing decision (Colliander & Dahlén 2011; De Veirman et al. 2017). This result may be explained by the fact that Instagram users tend to have the same opinion toward certain products or brands as the influencers they follow do (Townsend 2015). Likewise, a brand's credibility is influenced by the credibility of the influencers that promote them (Spry et al. 2011).

Most interviewees followed influencers on Instagram, both the individual influencers and organizations or movements' Instagram accounts. Two interviewees acknowledge they got new friends after following specific organization and movement accounts. As Casaló et al. (2020) discuss that Instagram creates a sense of closeness and communities, these two interviewees got new followers and followed them back after interacting in a campaign posted by the organizations. Afterward, they joined a WhatsApp group together with other followers of the organizations and develop their sense of community through discussion in that group.

One interesting finding is influencers appear to be able to change the interviewees' perception and help them to think more critically. For instance, one interviewee believes Instagram changed his perception of clothing, that we can still get something beautiful from broken clothes. He followed an influencer that showed matching patterns to sew the broken clothes together. Similarly, one interviewee shared how Instagram can debunk the myths of cannot train hard to get muscles because of becoming vegan. These results are in accord with recent studies indicating that influencers are opinion leaders, as their content can directly influence their followers' perception (Casaló et al. 2020). Further, these results also show how influencers value certain opinions and perspectives, their followers become most likely to have the same opinions and perspectives (see e.g. Townsend 2015) as the followers trust the influencers' reviews (see e.g. Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). By sharing the same opinions and perspectives toward certain things, both influencers and their followers mutually co-create value (Vargo & Lusch 2008).

Besides, the popularity of using green marketing (Huang et al. 2014) was also discussed by the interviewees, as they call out greenwashing. Some of them doubt with products and companies branded as sustainable on Instagram, as some companies might only want people to consume their products to get money. One interviewee even emphasized that we might get misguided by the company's greenwashing, therefore he recommended not to support the companies that doing it and not buying their products. This developing suspicion of green initiatives was also reported by Raska and Shaw (2012). The doubt rather certain products or brands claimed to be green while they might not – also have been observed by Huang et al. (2014).

Similarly, the interviewees felt that the advertising of sustainable products on Instagram is not very sustainable actually, as it might encourage unnecessary consumption. Even on the other hand, one of the interviewees recognized that it is still good to know that the companies produce more sustainable stuff. Another interviewee also mentioned that he might believe that certain companies and influencers are thinking about sustainability and doing something real for it. This finding further supports a previous study indicating the dilemma of successful influencers as they need to perform authenticity, yet they also have to create strategies to maintain their followers, to remain beneficial for advertisers (van Driel & Dumitrica 2021). However, this also can be related to previous studies which show that influencers also have persuasive power over their own presentation's trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity (Abidin 2015; Gannon & Prothero 2016).

Interviewees of this study noted that in most cases they would get more knowledge from Instagram as long as they have initial care within the topic. With the previous knowledge they have about sustainability, most interviewees purchase things or use services after seeing specific posts on Instagram. This result may be explained by the fact that the expertise and knowledge about reviewed or endorsed products build the Instagram users' trust toward an influencer review (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). Besides, like-minded customers can be deeply influenced by influencers' appearances and features that are presented on Instagram (Thoumrungroje 2014).

Further, some interviewees said they do sustainable actions inspired by blogger-type influencers since the actions are practical, cheap, easy to relate to, and environmentally friendly. This finding is in accord with recent studies indicating that lower-scale and blogger-type influencers are considered more relatable and less superficial compared to Hollywood celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). Further, the interviewees can be influenced by product reviews by influencers as they have a huge interest in sustainability and have been following influencers and accounts that promote sustainability (see e.g. Djafarova & Rushworth 2017).

In this study, most interviewees get inspired from accounts they follow on Instagram. This result may be explained by the fact that influencers can inspire their followers through their posts on Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). Further, most interviewees also repost some posts they think might interest others – which in their opinion is the exact right thing that other people should know too. Some of them even directly send the posts to their friends through Instagram or discuss it when they meet and talk with their friends in real life. This further supports the idea that some Instagram users would imitate the influencers by posting similar kinds of posts as posted by the influencers (see e.g. Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). These interviewees believe that as they get inspired from Instagram, they want to inspire others as well. On the other hand, three interviewees expressed their fear of how people perceive if they share about sustainability actively within their Instagram. They are afraid if they will be perceived as preachy, annoying, or seems to become such environmentalist warrior (see e.g. Söderlund 2021).

It is interesting to note that in a few cases of this study, the interviewees feel that we need to take time and energy to learn or get something from Instagram posts. This result may be explained by the previous study (see e.g. Oliveira & Fernandes 2020) that the consumers' level of energy, effort, and time spent in a specific consumer interaction—which is Instagram posts in this research—can influence their emotional and behavioral activities during and after seeing the posts. Further, one of the interviewees also emphasized that we could not be influenced by Instagram accounts that we just follow for a short time. A possible explanation for this might be that Instagram users might need a certain amount of time to build their trust toward the influencers, and to be able to confirm if an influencer account is genuine or not (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017).

Another important finding was the content posted by companies or organizations on Instagram, influences their followers' perspective toward the companies or organizations. One interviewee mentioned how he follows the account of a search engine company that plants trees around the world with every search people do on their website. However, its Instagram account does not look that interesting, as they only post about the people who plant the trees – not the pictures of them actually planting the trees or the trees growing, which might be more interesting. A possible explanation for this might be that opinions made by powerful connections in social media are crucial for the network members (Thoumrungroje 2014; Wilcox & Stephen 2013), as the opinions made by the search engine company's posts on Instagram are crucial for their followers – including the interviewee.

Finally, these relations between the results from my research and what other people have researched will be concluded in the next chapter, 6. Conclusion.

6. Conclusion

This thesis started with the observations that, firstly, Instagram has become an integral part of human daily life and, secondly, the growing awareness of sustainability issues. In this qualitative research, I aimed to discover how Instagram users see their perspectives about sustainability influenced by their social media use. To this end, I interviewed ten (10) Instagram users to explore how they make sense of their engagement with Instagram, especially within the sustainability context. Conducting content analysis, the themes that have been discussed are the *definition of sustainability, activities in Instagram, the relation between Instagram and real life, feeling and reasons,* and *sustainability potential ascribed to Instagram.*

It is noteworthy that in opposition to some existing academic literature that suggests that Instagram almost exclusively amplifies positive or happy perspectives (Michaelidou et al. 2021), in this study I found that Instagram users recall that many posts about sustainability tend to portray the negative impacts on our environment. Based on this, I suggest that there is a rising emphasis on the need to have both good news and bad news on Instagram. Additionally, I found that there is a developing interest from Instagram users toward posts that present how our environment has become wilder and greener again. By showing this kind of post, Instagram users can embrace how beautiful nature is and how much we should protect it. This is seen to be more effective by users than posts that directly tell what we could do or what we should do.

Besides, the findings indicate that Instagram users have previous knowledge and awareness about sustainability. They develop their interest and knowledge within sustainability through following influencers, both blogger-type influencers, and organizations or movements promoting sustainability. This study shows that influencers may bring positive impacts to their followers by sharing their perceptions and practical information to live a sustainable lifestyle. Sustainability actions have been seen as a huge responsibility to do, yet the influencers show through their Instagram that we can begin by doing small actions in our daily life – which also makes the followers feel that influencers are easier to relate to compared to celebrities.

Further, this study shows that Instagram also encourages sustainable consumption to its users through advertising posted by influencers. As the followers build trust toward the influencers, some followers get inspired with new opinions and perspectives from the influencers – while others who are already aligned from the start get their similar opinions and perspectives strengthened. Therefore, when influencers promote sustainable products, then the followers tend to be interested in those sustainable products and decide to purchase them. However, there is also a criticism that influencers on Instagram might push unnecessary consumption. Despite the criticism, the results from this study strengthen the idea that Instagram is capable—and from the perspectives of some users, powerful—to change someone's perspective about sustainability. In another word, through its influencer culture—following, building trust, reposting, being exposed to new ideas or stuff—Instagram has become a beneficial platform to address sustainability issues.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Ice-breaker
- How are you doing?

Introduction
- This thesis project: Instagram & sustainability
- Confirm: audio-recording & screen-recording

Prompts
- Could you share about how do you define sustainability?
    - Could you give me some examples of sustainability that you have done in your real life?

- Could you share your screen, and show to me how do you usually use Instagram?
    - *If the interviewee says, "only use Instagram on app" :*
    - Would you mind showing me how do you usually use the app?
        - OR Would you mind showing me how do you explore the app?

- Could you show me accounts that you follow?

    Assuming the interviewee shows accounts that post about sustainability:
    - What do you like from these accounts?
    - Have you ever checking his/her posts intentionally?
        - Do these posts often show up in the feeds?
    - How do you think about sustainability within Instagram?
    - Could you show me of other accounts that you follow?

- How do you think about sustainability within Instagram?
- Could you show me accounts that post about sustainability that you follow?
- What do you like from these accounts?
- Have you ever checking his/her posts intentionally?
    - Do these posts often show up in the feeds?

- Could you tell me what do you find interesting within his/her posts?
    - How do you feel when you see his/her posts?
    - Can you show me a few posts that made you feel this way?

*Assuming the interviewee answers feeling **inspired / touched**:*
- Do you do something about it afterward?
- How do you feel after doing it?
- What do you think that triggers you to do it?

*Assuming the interviewee answers feeling **nothing / usual**:*
- Do you learn something from these posts?

Ask more questions when finding some interesting things or worthwhile exploring.

- How do you think about Instagram's potential to change someone's perspective about sustainability?
    - Can you show me a few posts that made you think this way?
    - Could you explain why or the reasons behind your thoughts?

Closing
- Thank you, that was very inspirational/interesting for me. I have no further questions. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

If the interviewee is interested or asking about the research,
- Would you like to see the results later?

Appendix 2: Table duration of interviews

Interviewees	Duration
Linda	19 min 20 s
Anna	12 min 12 s
Stefi	32 min 06 s
Joni	31 min 55 s
Cody	18 min 39 s
Thori	41 min 40 s
Clary	43 min 25 s
Fyr	44 min 58 s
Jose	34 min 43 s
Mady	35 min 31 s
Total	**5 h 14 min 29 s**

Appendix 3: Interview transcription – highlighted with different colours that categorize the quotes

Sustainability
Activities within sustainability in real life
Activities within his/her Instagram - SUSTAINABILITY
Activities in Instagram - GENERAL
Correlation Instagram & Real life
Feeling
Trigger / reasons
Good for analysis

Caroline 0:00
And yes, I guess that works. So. First thank you for down for being participant, being participant in this project. So the project is basically about Instagram and sustainability. Could you share me about how do you think about sustainability?

Joni 0:25
Well, it's, I think it's very important that we become more aware of it and and try to implement it more in our daily life. Because people are not so aware well informed about it, and especially not engage in it. But it's very concerning and important issue. So we can't ignore it and it must be people have to be more engaged, engaged.

Caroline 1:05
Could you give me some examples of what people actually have to be implement or how to be engaged with?

Joni 1:14
Well, of course, recycling is an easy step, more, people more aware at recycling, the daily use of groceries and the things they are buying. And people could also drive less car, travel more by bike and commute. Even in the back, in the and out in the country, we can still use less, drive less car even if it's well well.. what it's called.. it's a common practice that you always take the car everywhere you go, but you don't have to.. except for the long distance of course, but

Caroline 2:35
have you done that as well, implemented as well in your daily life?

Joni 2:42
Yeah, I am. I used to take the bike to work, work. Rarely now. Unless I have a lot of stuff to take with me or some other things but normally, I take my bicycle. And I've always recycle and raised with environmental environmental friendly parents, so I'm very used to recycling. It's comes natural for me. And with food, I I always eat leftovers. I never throw anything away that isn't bad. I try to use the commute, as much as I can. Yeah, now this this time I live now, I don't. I rarely use for buses or trains. But when I lived in Gothenburg, I always take the bus or tram or a walk.

Appendix 4: Table of transcription results

1. Definition of Sustainability

Sub-category / pattern	Interviewees	Quotes
	Stefi	"And I mean, the way we humans live today, for example, you know, we're exploiting nature, and we, we sort of just take and take and take. And that's not gonna work in in the long run."
	Stefi	"Some, some examples of doing, like living sustainably would be to, to of course, use nature, but not too much of it. So I'm thinking, if we're fishing, for example, you don't take more than you need. And you make sure that even I mean, because we are a a lot of humans on this planet. But that doesn't mean that we can, you know, take too much from nature, because if we do that we ruin nature. And in the end, both we and nature will die kind of this was a really hard question. I'm trying to come up with examples. But yeah, I mean, if you think about forestry, for example, I mean, we use in Sweden here we use a lot of wood, for building and so on. And one example of that is it's not sustainable to just chop down a lot of trees and get all these cut overs. I think it's called cut overs"
Sustainability: our nature is degraded by human nowadays. We need to do something to prolong the nature.	Cody	"I think it's more focusing on **economical growth**, its less focusing about how is the environment in the future gonna be like? So we keep on, we keep focusing on economical growth by doing that we keep on degrading the environment. So it's not really it's not really sustainable point of view, actually."
	Clary	"It's basically something that's related to maybe calculating the costs and benefits in doing everything. And then how you make sure that using that calculations, a process or an activity can last for a long time and can benefits everyone."
	Mady	"I will define it as being kind to the nature, like, treating the nature kindly. Well, we well a human being destroyed a lot of the nature like, wait how do I say, I think I think we destroyed a lot of the nature, we caused a lot of problem. Which, recently, we started to feel the impact more enhanced, like with climate change, etc. So I think, for me, it's try to, like persevere, whatever we have left, because I love being in the nature......... So yeah, I think it's just being kind to the nature, which will be beneficial for us, human in the meantime."
	Fyr	"**for me sustainability is doing**. If I do something sustainably, for me, it means that **I can do that for a very long time. In the same way.** So a sustainable society for me is one that can continue working that way for a very long time **without having problems caused by the way it works.**
more for everything, not only nature context
Sustainability: doing something, in the same way, for long time, without causing any problems	Fyr	"Yeah, so like, yeah, I mean, like, let's say car, like, the emissions we make as a, as a society are, at the moment are so much that are kind of changing the climate, which is, so changing the world like the kind of the structure on our on which our societies build. So that is not sustainable because our society would have to change. In order to be Yeah, so maybe I see more sustainability as like, something that society actually does. "
Sustainability: not only environmental term	Fyr	"sustainability can also be not just like environmental term. But let's, for example, think about money. Me as a person, I could say that I'm more sustainable when it comes to spending."
	Stefi	"So when I think about what sustainable sustainability is, I also think about what it's not, of course."
Thinking about what it's not	Fyr	" I'd also say that probably the most unsustainable things thing I do is the fact that I go from one place to another with a plane. And that's kind of the thing that really, because that's very unsustainable because it pollutes a lot. But it's also the only way that I can get here or there because the train, well, this is not a moment where I can take the train because of COVID. But anyway, would take like days, like three days, probably. So that is kind of the things that I would love to change, but I cannot. "
	Thori	" I think the words that can describe sustainability is responsibility and taking actions for the future, I mean that so the next generations or the day after the one that we live, the life after us can also enjoy the natural resources or the fresh air and also other resources."
(the sentence above)... for our future generation	Clary	"But now now that we can think rationally, we can think we can calculate that we can can calculate, how much should we consume in order for us to survive and survive sustainably, you know, like, not survive just for our generations, but also the rest?"
	Mady	" I enjoy, like, I enjoy the nature. So I would like like my kids and my grandkids to enjoy them the same hopefully. When their time their time comes, it will be as beautiful as how I know the nature is right now. And it was already changed from my grandparents time"