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"I want to be honest…but how much can I share?": Sustainable influencing and experiences of moral residue☆

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ABSTRACT

Transparency is the cornerstone of social media influencing. Research has explored how influencers disclose commercial interests, yet little is known about influencers' self-disclosure of private consumption. Building on the transparency management and moral hypocrisy literatures, this paper explores how sustainable influencers navigate moral dilemmas as they communicate about sustainability. Through interviews and analysis of media articles, we find that sustainable fashion influencers experience persistent emotional baggage, which we frame as moral residue as well as moral hypocrisy, in navigating three moral dilemmas: (anti)consumption; (non)promotion; and (non)commercialization. To reconcile this, sustainable fashion influencers engage in transparency management, choosing between strategies of confessing, concealing, and/or conning. These strategies may inadvertently lock sustainable influencers in perpetual cycles of moral residue and moral hypocrisy. In explicating the process and potential outcomes of managing transparency around moral dilemmas, we provide an intrapersonal view of moral hypocrisy and offer implications for theory and practice.

1. Introduction

The Fashion Influencer Market report estimates the marketing spend on fashion influencers to be worth $16.78bn in 2025, rising to $52bn by 2030 (Researchandmarkets.com, 2025). Yet we know little about what happens "backstage" in this growing and complex industry (Leban et al., 2021), especially regarding the emotional toll influencers are subjected to as they balance their online and offline personas, and the moral choices they make regarding transparency in content creation (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Kaivonen et al., 2024).

Influencers are often portrayed as antagonists to sustainable consumption, accused of fueling overconsumption and unrealistic lifestyle aspirations (Euronews, 2021). Yet there is a growing group of *sustainable influencers* challenging this narrative by using social media to promote more environmentally friendly and socially conscious lifestyles. These influencers work in an environment of complexity: they must navigate moral expectations around sustainability, while also engaging with the commercial expectations of influencing (Pittman & Abell, 2021). This is particularly challenging in sustainable fashion, an industry where the definition of "what is sustainable" is ambiguous, difficult to communicate, and inherently paradoxical (Henninger et al., 2016; Mukendi et al., 2020). For this study, we define sustainable fashion as the production and consumption of fashion in a manner that is generally perceived to be environmentally and/or socially acceptable (Mukendi et al., 2020).

While research on sustainable fashion influencers (SFIs) is emerging, recent insights suggest that these influencers struggle immensely with balancing transparency about their sustainable lifestyles with their desire for financial compensation (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Transparency is a concern for all influencers; but it becomes especially fraught for SFIs, who aim to inspire lifestyle and behavior changes through personal example while navigating scrutiny from the public (Kaivonen et al., 2024; Thomas & Fowler, 2023). Self-disclosure (the sharing of an influencer's private life) has thus become central to how SFIs manage transparency and authenticity (Leite et al., 2022). As social media influencers are cultural intermediaries, the challenges they face and how they choose to share them, impacts broader sustainability narratives and societal understanding of what sustainable lifestyles might look like.

Recent work highlights how influencers carefully curate the "front-stage" and "backstage" of their online personas (Leban et al., 2021), yet

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we know little about how transparency is managed in practice, or the emotional toll that this balancing act takes (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Kaivonen et al., 2024). Influencer authenticity, made up of elements such as passion and transparency (Audrezet et al., 2020; Dekavalla, 2020), is an important guide to how influencers navigate social media spaces. However, specific insight into how transparency is managed by influencers, and what they choose to share is under-explored. We know that influencers experience role conflict, which creates tensions and moral dilemmas they must resolve to maintain their authenticity (Čop et al., 2024), however we do not know how the resolution of these dilemmas affect their transparency choices and feelings of authenticity.

This paper addresses this gap by integrating literature on transparency management, which refers to the concept of openness, and moral hypocrisy, which describes how people may want to *appear* to be morally good to others, whether or not they are *actually* being good (Batson et al., 1999). We explore these concepts in the context of sustainable fashion influencers to ask: what moral dilemmas do SFIs face and how do they navigate these dilemmas through communication?

Drawing on 25 semi-structured interviews with SFIs and analysis of media articles, we identify three moral dilemmas navigated by SFIs in pursuing their work: (anti)consumption, (non)promotion, and (non) commercialization; and three transparency management strategies: confessing, concealing, and conning. We examine the intrapersonal nature of moral hypocrisy, with influencers navigating their own expectations alongside those of their audiences, sponsors, platforms, and society (Graham et al., 2015). Through this we contribute to the influencer marketing literature in several ways. We introduce a conceptual framework that links moral dilemmas, transparency management, moral hypocrisy, and emotional consequences, which we frame as moral residue: the lingering emotional impact of unresolved ethical tensions (Marcus, 1980). We illustrate how these leftover emotions may exacerbate moral hypocrisy, meaning that moral residue becomes amplified and persistent. In doing so, we extend understanding of moral dilemmas in social media influencing (Borchers & Enke, 2022; Čop et al., 2024; Leban et al., 2021) by revealing how deeply inter- and intrapersonal tensions are intertwined (Graham et al., 2015), and how these tensions might be resolved and communicated as SFIs professionalize their personal brands (Čop et al., 2024; Kaivonen et al., 2024; Mardon et al., 2018; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). We contribute to the literature by exploring the boundaries of self-disclosure and identifying aspects that influencers prefer to keep hidden and why (Klostermann et al., 2023; Leite et al., 2022). Our research not only provides empirical insight into moral residue but also reveals the nuances of transparency management and the hidden anxieties behind content creation activities in the online sphere.

2. Literature review

This section reviews literature on sustainable influencers, transparency management, and moral dilemmas and hypocrisy.

2.1. Sustainable influencers

Social media influencers are "normal people" who have become well-known, have a large following on social media, and are paid by brands to advertise their products (Abidin, 2016; Leung et al., 2022). Research has increasingly begun to focus on influencers with a specialized interest in sustainability (Pittman & Abell, 2021). These influencers are often referred to as sustainable influencers (Li et al., 2024) or "greenfluencers" (Breves & Liebers, 2022) and may engage in practices such as influencer activism (supporting social causes) (Thomas & Fowler, 2023) or de-influencing (a trend where influencers share what not to buy) (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023; Vladimirova et al., 2023). We therefore define sustainable influencers as *individuals who create and disseminate social media content on topics including but not limited to sustainable products, services, ideas, and ways of living.*

Studies on sustainable influencers investigate the efficacy of their advertising messages for green products and whether influencers help reduce the gap between followers' attitudes and their purchase behavior (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Kim et al., 2020; Pittman & Abell, 2021). Nascent research has also begun to consider how image congruence affects sustainable influencers' credibility and the efficacy of their messages (Boerman et al., 2022).

Specifically in fashion, few papers consider the influencer behind the content, bar some notable exceptions (i.e., Bly et al., 2015; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Kaivonen et al., 2024). Kaivonen et al. (2024), for instance, investigate the forms of work that SFIs do (identity, community, and practice work) in trying to pursue change. SFIs share their sustainable fashion journeys while balancing their commercial interests and fashion consumption habits (Kaivonen et al., 2024). Bly et al. (2015) found that bloggers' implementation of sustainable fashion behaviors was filled with practical inconveniences, contradictions, and tensions. For example, sustainable fashion processes and best practices can be confusing, so the bloggers adopt sustainable fashion practices in a way that makes sense to them (Bly et al., 2015). Jacobson & Harrison (2022) investigate the tensions of sustainable influencing and commerciality by categorizing SFIs into a typology based on their funding model and the type of content the influencer creates. They found that SFIs struggled to design funding models that are in line with their sustainable values.

Although these studies are insightful in elucidating the tensions that influencers face, little is known about the emotions underpinning such tensions and the strategies influencers use to communicate these dilemmas to their audiences (Audrezet et al., 2020; Kaivonen et al., 2024; Leban et al., 2021; Mardon et al., 2018). Further research is needed to unpack how moral dilemmas are negotiated, resolved, and made transparent, as well as the implications for sustainable fashion and influencing.

2.2. Transparency management

Influencer transparency management has become of increasing concern in media studies (Dekavalla, 2020; Lee et al., 2023) and is related to the concept of self-disclosure in marketing (AlRabiah et al., 2022; Klostermann et al., 2023). Lee et al. (2023, p.267) define transparency management as "how online content creators reveal and disclose the process of editorial content creation to build trust among their followers." Dekavalla (2020) found that beauty YouTubers discursively perform transparency through routines consisting of authenticity, transparency, and independence. Authenticity refers to speaking in a way that it is relatable and "real." Transparency refers to how detailed influencers are in describing their process of working with brands. Independence refers to how influencers emphasize their agency relative to the brands they work with (Dekavalla, 2020). Taken together, the aim of transparency is to build credibility and trust with both brands and audiences (Wellman et al., 2020). Audrezet et al. (2020) suggest that influencers may use transparency to maintain their integrity, and when combined with passion, to convey authenticity.

Transparency and authenticity are clearly related concepts, yet they are distinct processes. Influencer transparency usually refers to disclosing commercial interests, such as brand partnerships and sponsored content (Audrezet et al., 2020; Dekavalla, 2020; García-Rapp, 2017; Wellman et al., 2020). While influencer authenticity is concerned with being true to oneself and being perceived as an influencer with the "right" motivations (Audrezet et al., 2020). Transparency is thus a means to demonstrate authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). As our focus is on how influencers communicate the moral dilemmas they face, transparency management is therefore the more suitable lens. Yet how influencers engage in transparency management beyond commercial interests is under-explored in the literature (Dekavalla, 2020; Lee et al, 2023; Wellman et al., 2020). This is an important gap to address, because how influencers manage their transparency impacts: (1) the content that the audience experiences and (2) the influencers' feelings of

authenticity.

Despite limited exploration on how influencers navigate transparency when trying to balance their environmental, social, and economic selves in the public sphere (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Kaivonen et al., 2024); there is an increasing focus on the concept of self-disclosure in the influencer literature (AlRabiah et al., 2022; Klostermann et al., 2023). This cluster of research asks what and how much of influencers' private lives should they share and how their audiences perceive such disclosures. Although this research stream tackles similar issues to that of transparency management, these literatures are rarely combined. However, Wellman et al. (2020) consider self-disclosure to be a form of transparency, illustrating that these concepts are interrelated. Transparency is concerned with openness about commercial interests, while self-disclosure is concerned with openness about private lives. As aforementioned, sustainable influencers navigate a variety of tensions in private in the running of their public platforms, yet how they manage transparency and self-disclosure in this complex environment is less understood. Some initial insights have revealed that sustainable influencers might alter the type of content they create according to their values (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022) or share their sustainable fashion journeys to connect with their audiences (Kaivonen et al., 2024), but research exploring the extent to which they share, and why, is nascent. This guides us to question how influencers manage their transparency to remain authentic and credible (Audrezet et al., 2020). The concept of moral hypocrisy helps us to elucidate the navigation of such a dilemma.

2.3. Moral dilemmas and hypocrisy

A moral dilemma is a situation where there is a quandary between what one ought to do and what one ought not to do, stemming from a conflict between moral principles, duties or obligations, and other moral guidelines (Lemmon, 1962; Marcus, 1980; McConnell, 2024). For example, Cocker et al.'s (2021) exploration of moral responsibility finds that audiences of YouTube beauty influencers feel that influencers are obligated not to let their commercial interests overshadow the needs of the audience. While in Mardon et al. (2018), YouTubers and their audience members feel moral emotions, such as contempt, guilt, and shame, towards influencers and their commercial activities. Influencers' commercial activities may result in a moral dilemma between obligations to audiences, brands, or family.

Investigations of moral dilemmas tend to deal with complex philosophical questions, yet moral dilemmas are also present in everyday life (Lemmon, 1962). Marcus (1980, p.126) argues, "all dilemmas are real, even where the reasons for doing x outweigh, and in whatever degree, the reasons for doing y." Example transparency-based dilemmas for influencers include whether to discuss social issues, how to disclose sponsorships, and how to present products they dislike (Borchers & Enke, 2022; Čop et al., 2024).

The capacity to "finalize" moral dilemmas successfully has been called into question. Marcus (1980, p. 121) says that "…dilemmas are not settled without residue." Moral residue is what is left behind after resolving dilemmas, it is the internal consequence of the path taken, or not taken (Marcus, 1980). Batavia et al. (2020, p.1116) describe moral residue as "the moral requirements that are left unfulfilled in morally dilemmatic situations." Put differently, moral residue reflects the inability, or impossibility, of being able to make the perfect choice. Moral residue manifests as emotions or feelings of uncertainty, regret, guilt, shame, and crucially, hypocrisy (Batavia et al., 2020; Marcus, 1980).

As such, the resolution of moral dilemmas is messy (Lemmon, 1962), both internally and externally. In the digital age, influencer dilemmas may enter the public sphere where they are publicized and judged by society. With the increasing exposure of behaviors, accusations of hypocrisy are more likely to arise (Wagner et al., 2020). We know that influencers are confronted with hypocrisy in varying ways and degrees (Boerman et al. 2022; Gerrath et al., 2024). However, these issues are more pronounced in the context of sustainability influencers as they provide a rhetoric of sustainability values and encourage others to enact sustainable behaviors, while using these private lives as the basis for their credibility. Graham et al. (2015) describes three types of moral hypocrisy: moral duplicity, moral double standards, and moral weakness.

Moral duplicity (often used synonymously with moral hypocrisy, but hereafter simply *duplicity*) describes where: "One can reap the material rewards of acting selfishly and also garner social and self-rewards of being seen and seeing oneself as upstanding and moral" (Batson et al., 1999, p. 526). Duplicity is concerned with *appearing* moral. For example, influencers are often accused of duplicity when their words about sustainability do not align with their actions (Boerman et al., 2022). In such cases, if seen not to be living up to the values they espouse, this could create perceptions of inauthenticity and untrustworthiness (ibid). Monin & Merritt (2012) argue that the issue with hypocrisy is not that someone occasionally does not live up to the standards they hold, but that they create the impression that they keep them. For instance, Leban et al. (2021) demonstrate how high net-worth individuals may try to appear to be good people who are worthy of their riches, even if they are not.

Secondly, we turn to the concept of moral double standards (hereafter *double standards),* or the judgement of others more harshly for doing the same behaviors as oneself (Graham et al. 2015). For instance, SFIs could critique others for having too large a wardrobe, when they themselves receive high volumes of branded merchandise. With double standards, people do not tend to apply the same reasoning and grace they have for themselves, to others (Tappin & McKay, 2017). As such, it is suggested that double standards largely consist of irrational reasoning (ibid). Dong et al. (2023) found that people who have a strong motivation to manage their reputation are likely to engage in double standards. The nature of influencing requires SFIs to manage their reputation (Audrezet et al., 2020), thus influencers may find themselves inadvertently being harsher on others than they are on themselves.

Finally, we must consider moral weakness or failing to live up to one's personal values. These instances are primarily private in nature as they do not require a witness for someone to feel they have fallen short of their values (Graham et al., 2015). Lönnqvist, Irlenbusch, and Walkowitz (2014, p.53) argue that "failure to behave morally may also carry costs; the awareness that one is acting immorally threatens one's self-concept." Suggesting that not being able to uphold one's values impacts how people see themselves. Moral hypocrisy is not limited to perceptions by others, with Graham et al. (2015) introducing the term "intrapersonal moral hypocrisy" to describe the internal struggles to balance values and actions. These inconsistencies can create guilt and pressure to behave ethically (Peloza et al., 2013). Despite this, Merritt et al. (2010), illustrate that people accumulate *moral credits*, where they save their good deeds for a "rainy day," or a time of moral weakness, to offset feelings of hypocrisy.

In sum, unpacking transparency management and moral hypocrisy in the context of SFIs is important as we do not know (1) what situations may present a moral dilemma, (2) if, and how, influencers communicate such dilemmas, and (3) the consequences of these decisions in terms of moral hypocrisy and residue felt by influencers (see Leban et al., 2021). This study therefore aims to uncover what moral dilemmas SFIs face and how they navigate these dilemmas through communication.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative interviews and media articles to explore the moral dilemmas faced by SFIs.

3.1. Data collection

The first author conducted interviews with 25 SFIs. As recommended in Kozinets (2015), the first author set up a research focused Instagram profile as well as a blog post to introduce herself and the project. Table 1

Table 1
Profile of Interviewees.

Pseudonym	Age Group	Based	Occupation	Followers	Interview Length
Ginny	20–29	UK	Freelance Digital Marketer and Writer	5–10 k	30 mins
Riley	20–29	USA	Communications Specialist	5–10 K	54 mins
Gwen	20–29	UK	Full-time blogger	11–15 k	60 mins
Ines	20–29	UK	Speech writer	1–5 K	70 mins
Nancy	30–39	UK	Writer	100–250,000 K	60 mins
Imani	20–29	USA	Employed	11–15 K	45 mins
Kadie	20–29	Australia	Employed	1–5 k	50 mins
Bernice	20–29	USA	Entrepreneur	1–5 K	70 mins
Maizie	20–29	USA	Designer	11–15 K	60 mins
Cindy	20–29	USA	Government Worker	Account deleted	105 mins
Francesca	20–29	USA	Full-time blogger, photographer, and journalist	45–50 k	55 mins
Anisha	20–29	S. Africa	Student/ Founder	5–10 k	240 mins
Polly	20–29	USA	Student/ Freelancing	30–35 k	65 mins
Annabelle	30–39	USA	Employed	15–20 k	70 mins
Isobel	20–29	India	Account Exec	5–10 k	50 mins
Halima	20–29	UK	Senior Exec	20–25 k	65 mins
Toni	20–29	UK	Entrepreneur	1–5 k	55 mins
Darius	30–39	India	Writer	1–5 k	45 mins
Miriam	20–29	UK	Employed	15–20 k	45 mins
Hiba	30–39	USA	Employed	Account Deleted	40 mins
Keke	20–29	UK	Student	5–10 k	20 mins
Tahlia	30–39	Dubai	Employed	25–30 k	40 mins
Sanaa	30–39	Canada	Freelance writer/ Full-time blogger	20–25 k	45 mins
Georgiana	30–39	Canada	Entrepreneur/ Full-time blogger	15–20 k	40 mins
Juliet	30–39	Canada	Full-time blogger	15–20 k	Email

provides an overview of participants with pseudonyms for anonymity purposes. Table 2 provides an overview of the other data sources used to inform the research and provide triangulatory evidence.

The sample was purposefully chosen to ensure that it captured a range of SFI experiences. Influencers were identified through three processes. First, through conducting online searches for SFIs and accessing established lists of SFIs on Google News. Secondly, additional lists were found serendipitously by the first author through X (Twitter). For example, the first author follows a lot of fashion commentators and came across an article from fashion web magazine, Who What Wear (2021), on SFIs. Influencers were also found in a dedicated Facebook group for sustainable influencers. Finally, as the first author was active in the sustainable fashion social media space, additional influencers who were prominent voices on sustainable fashion were added from the author's own knowledge. We did not limit inclusion of influencers based on any demographic or geographic criteria to develop a diverse sample. Influencers were included in this study based on their personal brand as a sustainable influencer: the person is the subject of the brand, and their content revolves around their personality, life, and image (Ki et al., 2020). While we are unable to provide the date when each interviewee became an SFI (due to many engaging in this line of work prior to social media or starting out in this line of work as a hobby), we are able to document the extent to which influencing is their primary source of income, or a secondary line of work (see "occupation" column in Table 1).

Interviews were primarily conducted via phone and video calls for the convenience of participants. One interview was conducted through email, as a prominent SFI had a new-born child, and this was the most suitable way to reach her. On average, the interviews lasted 60 min, with the longest being 240 min and the shortest being 20 min. Influencers had Instagram followings ranging from 1,000–250,000, with most being in the range of 5,000–20,000. The semi-structured interviews focused on their journey to becoming SFIs, experiences in their role, and their business model. We also collected articles from Google News with the search term "Sustainable Fashion Influencers" to provide semiology of context (Chandler, 2022). 117 articles were collected for analysis. We focussed on identifying instances where SFIs have discussed moral dilemmas and media commentary regarding SFIs' role and responsibilities. Social media images posted by SFIs in general were "screenshotted" and included on an ad-hoc basis (n = 31) and we only accessed publicly available data. These images were used to understand the moral dilemmas that SFIs face. For example, an interviewed influencer suggested we look at a post from another influencer who did not participate in the study because they were talking about a common SFI challenge.

Table 2
Summary of Data Sources.

Source	*Description*
Interviews	25 interviews with the influencers
Notes and mind-maps	Notes made throughout the research process
Social media screenshots	31 screenshots taken throughout the research process of influencers' Instagram posts
Articles about sustainable fashion	117 media articles about sustainable fashion influencers encountered in the field

3.2. Data analysis

Data were discussed regularly within the author team, moving iteratively between data and theory. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. The data were analyzed utilizing Saldaña's (2021) guide for coding which involves viewing coding as data analysis, using holistic and broad codes for preliminary categorization, and being aware of the role of the researcher in deciding what is coded. These data were coded around the themes of moral dilemmas, denoting specific challenges that influencers faced when balancing sustainability with commercial value. More detailed codes such as, "concealing/how much to share" and "having the wrong motives", were developed around transparency and hypocrisy using Spiggle's (1994) tools for analyzing qualitative data. These tools included: categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration, and refutation. This process was also applied to the media articles while the visuals were analyzed using Rose's (2001, p.16) process of examining "the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences" and through semiology to identify props, costumes, technology, setting, and more (Rose, 2001).

4. Findings

We unpack our findings in relation to moral dilemmas and transparency management by, firstly, identifying three commonly experienced moral dilemmas articulated by the respondents: *(anti) consumption, (non)promotion* and *(non)commercialization*. Within each section we identify why these dilemmas lead to perceptions of moral hypocrisy and moral residue for the SFI in the form of feelings and emotional consequences of trying to resolve moral dilemmas (Marcus, 1980). Secondly, we address the three transparency management strategies (*confess*, *conceal,* and *con*) SFIs can engage to resolve these feelings of moral residue and attempt to avert further perceptions of moral hypocrisy (either from themselves or others). Fig. 1 presents an exploratory conceptual framework of these findings. The framework is not intended to be definitive; rather it is representative of the potential relationships between moral dilemmas, transparency management strategies, and moral residue.

4.1. Moral dilemmas

We outline three moral dilemmas that SFIs commonly experience: (anti)consumption, (non)promotion and (non)commercialization.

4.1.1. (Anti)consumption

(Anti)consumption can be understood as a continuum between anti-consumption and consumption. It refers to the degree to which SFIs favor anti, or alternative consumption practices (i.e., shopping second hand, mending, swapping, reduced consumption and supporting independent and local brands) (Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Vesterinen & Syrjälä, 2022) versus traditional fashion systems including buying fast fashion, overconsuming clothing, and participating in throwaway culture (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2016). By definition, SFIs err towards anti-consumption and aim to showcase sustainability in their life to be an exemplar of how one can integrate sustainability principles into their fashion consumption.

> *"Sustainable living and a conscious closet look different for everyone, so I think having as many different people and examples as possible is the best way to connect and inspire change." – Juliet*

Media articles echo this sentiment as they champion SFIs as change makers in the fashion industry (Fashionista, 2019b; Grazia, 2019):

> *"From the rise of vintage sellers on Instagram to fashion bloggers dramatically reducing their own levels of consumption in order to help educate others, it seems social media is playing a crucial role in the fight against a disposable culture." (*Grazia, 2019*)*

Such narratives create a normative expectation of an SFI; they should be inspiring, educating, and most importantly practicing what they preach. However, how well an SFI's *actual* fashion consumption behaviors align with what they promote on social media is an area of considerable stress. The (anti)consumption moral dilemma is encapsulated in the reality that it is impossible to be a "perfect" consumer as the dominant social paradigm politicizes how far one can truly be sustainable (Kilbourne et al., 2018). However, this does not negate the pressure that SFIs feel to be perfect.

> *"But with the vlog and with the YouTube channel too, my best* videos *were thrift haul* videos*, so I felt like I had to keep buying all of these things to show new clothes, it was very unhealthy. It was giving in to the consumeristic mindset where you have to keep buying, I was like 'oh I have to do a* video *I need to go shopping' and then not really wear the clothes I bought, I was like 'I don't wanna be doing this anymore.'" – Imani*

When SFIs find themselves engaging too much with traditional fashion systems, whether it be in the form of the brands they patronize or the frequency of their consumption, SFIs start to feel like they are being unhealthy and hypocritical. By surrounding themselves with brands or constantly receiving products, SFIs are not practicing what they believe in. For some, these negative feelings, or moral residue, lead them to reduce their consumption and change how they approach content creation (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). In Imani's case, she realized her behavior was unsustainable and it made her feel like she is "giving in," thus she adjusted her consumption behavior and content. SFIs constantly question their (un)sustainable choices and try to come to terms with why they cannot consume according to their values.

> *"I want to be honest about what my journey to low waste is, but how much can I share? How much of it is me not having a choice and how much of it is actually me having a choice but not being able to exercise that choice due to time, due to money, due to any other factors" – Isobel*

Unsustainable consumption creates feelings of conflict where the influencer struggles to balance their beliefs in sustainability with other factors such as cost, time, and desire. This can manifest as moral weakness, one of the three types of moral hypocrisy, where SFIs are unable to consume in accordance with their values, despite their best

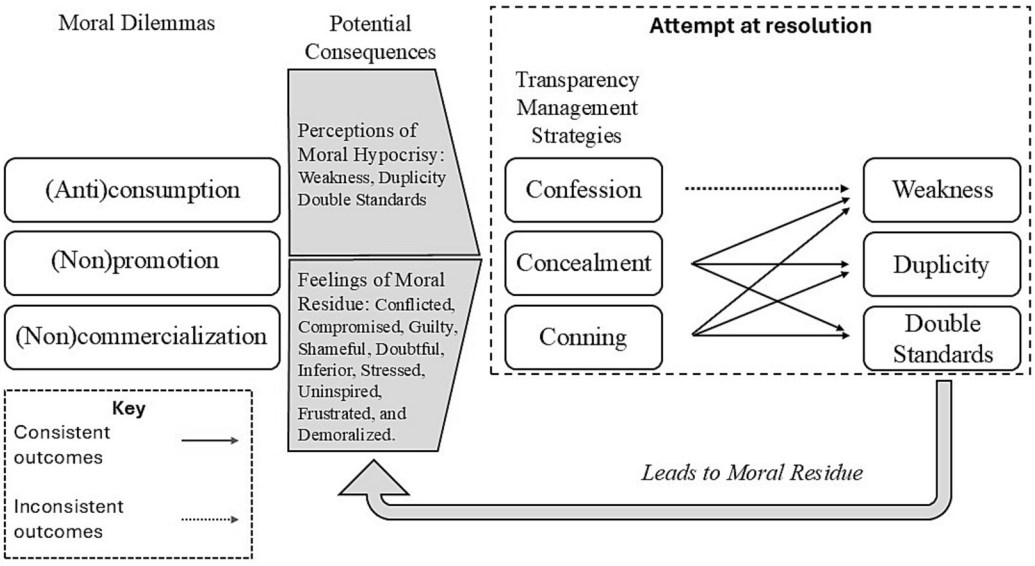

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework illustrating possible relationships between moral dilemmas, moral residue, transparency management strategies, and moral hypocrisy.

intentions, due to a lack of resources, ability, or motivation (Monin & Merritt, 2012). As a result, influencers may feel as though they have compromised their morals, accompanied by a need to justify their choices both to themselves and to their audiences. Further, duplicity (a second form of moral hypocrisy) may be present as no one really knows if these influencers are as sustainable as they say they are.

> *"Sometimes I even feel bad because, like, people are showing their bamboo straws and their bamboo everything, green shirts, you name it. It looks like this person's life is 100 % sustainable but it's not, you know. When they show stuff in glass jars, we don't know if they were really buying in zero waste stores or if they were only storing them this way. All of my things are in glass jars too but not all of them I bought from like zero waste stores and if I only showed this, my beautiful closet of glass jars, people would think 'woo she's so sustainable!' But this is not the case, no one is."– Maizie*

These "picture-perfect" presentations of sustainable lifestyles create moral residue in the form of feeling inferior as SFIs draw comparisons with their own lives. Despite knowing that these are curated images, SFIs like the one above and below, still feel "bad" that their reality does not match what is presented online. Moral weakness and duplicity arise as influencers struggle with consumption decisions behind the scenes yet still desire to portray a more positive version of their sustainable fashion journey online. Moreover, SFIs may justify consumption "mistakes" through double standards. SFIs know they do not consume "perfectly" but because SFIs rationalize their consumption, they may judge others harshly for the same behaviors.

> *"You have to blame the general public at some point too. We all had to know at some point that if a shirt cost £5 then there's no way for it to have been made in an ethical way. In the back of our head if we have a tiny pinch of empathy, we know that." – Nancy*

Our data uncover moral residue in the angst influencers feel when weighing up different consumption decisions. They may feel enlightened and, in some ways, superior that they are on a sustainable journey while also feeling guilty and burdened by their consumption choices and inferior when comparing their consumption and presence online to other SFIs. Our analysis illustrates that despite their best efforts; it is not always possible to make "good" choices, leaving influencers feeling like hypocrites as they broach (anti)consumption decisions. SFIs, alongside their audiences and brand contacts, want to be "perfect examples" – an unrealistic ideal – meaning that they will always fall short, experiencing moral residue through feelings of guilt, doubt, and inferiority.

4.1.2. (Non)promotion

The (non)promotion dilemma represents how SFIs balance spreading the message of sustainability, which may not be as popular on social media, with the desire to grow their platforms and achieve social media success (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Schöps et al., 2022). To reach as many people as possible, SFIs need to understand the nuances of social media algorithms to increase their visibility on the platforms (Schöps et al., 2022). To increase visibility, SFIs must constantly create new and engaging content that their audience wants (Duffy et al., 2021). However, this can feel like a form of moral weakness for SFIs and lead to moral residue through feelings of entrapment and unhealthy cycles of content creation.

> *"The way that Instagram is designed, it's almost like an amazing selling tool, it is not really a photo platform. It's a selling tool because it's addictive with everything changing and it's always trying to show something new to keep things interesting. So, I think even people with the best of intentions, and I include myself, get caught in the same traps that we were in before … probably the impact is less and it is done with the right intentions, but it is still ultimately the same behavior…" – Ines*

SFIs want to promote sustainability; however, the perceived requirement to post content often can lead to misalignment between their values and behaviors, resulting in feelings of stress, and making SFIs feel like no matter what, they need to be posting. For example, in the case of Miriam, she describes feeling like *"…there's such a pressure to be posting all the time."* She describes having to remind herself that she can read and think about environmental issues without feeling like "… *you need to share, share, share."* While Toni reporting feeling:

> *"…the kind of pressure to produce consistent content is actually quite a big pressure, I actually, in January I almost didn't post anything just because I was kind of a creative block space and was uninspired. So, I just kind of left it, and now I'm coming back to it." – Toni*

The ephemeral nature of social media and the changing algorithms mean that SFIs have to balance creating rich sustainability content and developing information while keeping up with audience demands and platform changes. This may stifle creativity and demotivate the influencer to continue posting. Hiba describes spending a lot of time to research and create content but feeling that it just "*sort of disappears and no one ever finds it or sees it again…*" SFIs find they must constantly invest into their content but for little return.

> *"…it's been really good but from Instagram changing the algorithm, it's been, it's a slog because you're putting content out there and it's just not being seen by the numbers that it used to be seen by and it's really frustrating, it's actually quite demoralizing because you're, you are, obviously, like posting but there's constant tweaking to be done." – Toni*

SFIs thus feel pressured, uninspired, frustrated, and demoralized as forms of moral residue. The negative emotions arising from balancing their aims with those of the platform leads to SFIs posting for the sake of posting, seeking alternative ways to share their message, or leaving the social media scene altogether, as in the case of Cindy. Throughout Cindy's interview she emphasized her struggles with navigating social media despite being able to amass thousands of followers. She described feeling as though: *"I'm in this weird limbo of trying to kind of figure out what's the best use of that space right now, it's really…it's kind of at a stall right now."*.

Cindy felt uncomfortable with social media culture, being seen as the voice of the people, and having influence over others in the form of consumption choices. Cindy described feeling like she could not talk about topics that she truly wanted to. She emphasized that at that time, she was questioning how she can navigate this public social media space and still be herself. Within 12 months, Cindy deleted that social media account. It is unclear if this was the only factor, but throughout the interview, her discomfort with being an SFI was evident. This has obvious societal implications; if the people who are trying to create change become burned out, who will lead these conversations?

Further, SFIs not only have to create new content, but it also must be engaging. To retain visibility, SFIs must create what their audience wants.

> *"I did an IGTV with an eco-friendly dry cleaner… I really should do more; it's just a less sexy topic that people don't really want to learn about so much. I did another IGTV that I just haven't published about caring for clothes, it's something that would get less engagement. To be honest, people don't really care about it so much, but it is an important topic" – Toni*

SFIs recognize that sustainable fashion incorporates a variety of practices beyond purchase, however content that is not related to consumption tends to be less popular. Audiences often favor fashion inspiration and styling in lieu of topics such as laundering practices, which itself has a high environmental footprint (WRAP, 2017). Despite this, some SFIs create mundane fashion content knowing that it may not be well received. The issue arises whereby the platform, and therefore the audience, puts their focus on the more superficial aspects of the content, such as the appearance of the influencer, rather than the message.

"I would like people to pay more attention to what I'm saying. I wanted people to look more to the subject than to myself. When I was talking about something serious, people were talking about my makeup or my hair. I was here talking about the burning forest, 'oh your hair looks good.' This is not on my mind" – Maizie

Rather than listening to what influencers have to say about ecological issues, audiences focus on the SFI's appearance. This creates frustration for SFIs as they navigate how they present themselves and their sustainability message in a way that is engaging with the priorities of their audience.

Ultimately, adhering to the conventions of social media platforms can be a source of growth for SFIs (Schöps et al., 2022). However, in doing so, they may find their message diluted by the constant production of content and audience expectations. Hypocrisy may arise when influencers lean too far into optimizing for the algorithms. Appeasing the algorithms may cause the influencer to engage in moral weakness where they focus on content that will do well on the platform, rather than content that focuses more on sustainability. This leads to moral residue, manifesting as feelings of being trapped in a cycle of creating content, rather than staying true to their mission. SFIs may engage in duplicity as they say they are supporting sustainable fashion, yet they prioritize narratives of consumption. This is also a double standard as even though SFIs want to grow their platforms just like traditional fashion influencers, when SFIs engage with these platforms they view it as necessary, while typifying traditional fashion influencers as wasteful. For instance, in a Vogue (2022) article, an SFI writes:

"I have seen firsthand—and participated in—the rise of passive-aggressive videos *on ethical-influencer pages. Think TikTok text quoting fictitious remarks from supporters of fast fashion, designed to dismiss commonly made arguments for fast fashion as ignorant and vapid. They are wonderfully polarizing and easy-to-produce clips. Besides, we think to ourselves, what's the harm? Don't influencers constantly pushing fast fashion know what they're doing with every haul, LTK-shoppable outfit, and Amazon partnership?"*

Fast fashion influencers are seen as vain for pushing their content, while SFIs get to be on the "moral high ground" while creating content that will improve their visibility on the platforms due to the shareable nature of polarizing content (Beheshti et al., 2023). Upon reflection, SFIs may feel that they are two sides of the same coin.

Overall, this moral dilemma creates pressure as SFIs must rapidly consume and create content to maintain their visibility on social media platforms. This creates a moral dilemma related to (non)promotion; do SFIs make rich content around sustainable fashion, or do they focus on optimising for the algorithm to see success, albeit maybe not in the ways they intended? As time goes by, the experience of moral residue may increase, illustrated by SFIs feeling trapped or burdened by the need to constantly create ephemeral content. Depending on the influencer, they may feel complacent, that this is how things are, or this may lead to influencers feeling they need to do things differently, such as taking breaks from social media or adapting their approach.

4.1.3. (Non)commercialization

The final moral dilemma is (non)commercialization. Non-commercialization may include self-funding or gaining funding through alternative mechanisms, like subscription-based platforms like Patreon (Kaivonen et al., 2024). Commercialization refers to engaging with traditional funding practices, such as sponsored posts and affiliate links (Abidin, 2016). The role of a SFI is to guide people toward sustainable consumption; therefore, working with brands, through sponsored posts and affiliate links, may appear counterintuitive to their sustainability message, as it involves actively promote consumption. This dilemma can create feelings of uneasiness and requires careful navigation for the influencer, so they do not feel as though they have betrayed their values and mission. SFIs espouse that some degree of working with brands can be done but propose that it must be done *well.*

"I think I had seen influencers as, kind of like, promoting over-consumption and promoting… [trails off], I hadn't seen them promoting ethical brands at all. As I started to get more into the ethical fashion realm and connected with more people and accounts that were communicating that alternative message of what consumption could look like I was like: 'oh so it's not that this can't be done well, it's just that it has to be very thoughtfully and carefully done.'" – Riley

Being led by their values and upholding personal standards are seen as ways to ensure that their platform stays true to its mission and avoids accusations of moral hypocrisy against the SFI by others. But at what cost? The overwhelming feeling of this dilemma is one of uncertainty. SFIs must always be careful and thoughtful to avoid moral weakness in compromising their values while working with brands. Yet, working with brands is a core component of influencing, and requires SFIs to become commercially savvy, which can be time and resource intensive (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). A SFI explains in a Daily Hive (2020) interview that: "*In the world of sustainable fashion, the reality of making any sort of livable income is unlikely and requires years of labor for no pay to get to that place.*" SFIs often do a lot of unpaid or underpaid labor, because sustainable fashion brands tend to have smaller marketing budgets, which makes working with traditional fashion brands that pay more enticing.

"I think that this is, like, this really hard thing, and it's been interesting because we teach our audience to ask questions but then those same influencers get questioned for who they partner with and are frustrated with that. Because for them it's like 'I'll take this partnership that I don't feel 100 % great about because it pays X amount of dollars which means I can then talk about or promote brands that I do believe more in that don't have the budget to support me.' And so, it's like this weird trade-off people are making" – Georgiana

This quote illustrates the unique implications of commercialization for SFIs as they reconcile profit and principles. The question is not always *should* they work with brands, but *which* brands they should work with, *how* they should work them, and *what* implications these choices have on their platforms. Financial pressures may override strongly held values, leading to moral weakness, where people put aside their values to support their platforms, and at other times even moral duplicity, as they might say you should consume sustainable fashion but also promote brands that might not be "up to scratch," as evidenced by Halima below. Moreover, others in the sustainable fashion space scrutinize what brands SFIs are promoting. When people work with unsustainable brands or engage with fast fashion brands with sustainable fashion lines, they are seen as duplicitous.

"I think you know there's also a lot of fashion influencers who are getting onto the greenwashing thing so they will work for brands who we all know could do so much more when it comes to ethical and sustainable fashion. I don't want to judge anyone but I'm like 'c'mon guys we can do better, let's actually do it for the brands that are doing things correctly', but I get that it's a journey" –Halima

Working with the "wrong brand" is attributed to not being mature in their sustainable fashion journey or not being true to the values SFIs claim to endorse. Influencers are constantly questioning their position in the sustainable fashion movement, as they often find themselves considering if they can move beyond promoting brands to addressing more complex issues and educating consumers.

"It's weird because I feel like that puts you in a realm of being paid to do it. If I was promoting things or something on Instagram… it's another difficulty because I don't, I wouldn't, like can you ever really be a sustainable influencer…… Because at the end of the day you're still encouraging people to buy more stuff and our whole…you know like, especially books I read, like with Extinction Rebellion and things like that,

it's about literally just cutting down everything, like we shouldn't be buying more stuff," – Miriam

SFIs feel conflicted because showcasing fashion is such a large part of what they do but it is the antithesis of consumption reduction. This leads influencers to feel unsure about the efficacy of their roles. Some are even bringing this conversation to social media to call for more transparency and reflection in SFIs operations (Fashionista, 2019a; Fashionista, 2019b). Typically, SFIs like to be positive, and these public callouts deviate from the SFI influencer norm (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022), illustrating the contentious nature of commercialization in the community.

"Every creator is different. But again, when I first started there were all these really beautiful "quote-unquote" ethical or sustainable fashion bloggers and they were showcasing these amazing brands that should be showcased, but I was like: 'man their closets must be huge, how much of that do they actually wear?' You might want to look into [another Instagrammer] who actually posted a really great conversation about sustainable bloggers and what's happening. 'How can we call ourselves sustainable….'" – Sanaa

Working with brands can lead to moral weakness and duplicity as shown above, but also double standards. SFIs encourage people to have limited wardrobes and be more conscious of their consumption while having large wardrobes, as evidenced by Sanaa, by virtue of their role as SFIs. Further, SFIs criticize traditional fashion influencers for working with brands that are not considered sustainable in the community, as in the case of Halima above and in a Vogue article (2022). Yet, SFIs consider it acceptable when they work with brands because they have a purpose for it, as explained by Georgiana (see 4.1.3). The tension between sustainability and commercialization can build increasing discomfort around their dependency on brands (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022).

"Yeah, not anymore. I used to do that [paid partnerships with brands], and I found that it just made me feel … I felt really uncomfortable promoting consumption on that level. I used to think that was the solution and as I learned more and grew more, I realized it's not. We really just have to cut down on consumption." – Annabelle

Here we see that the buildup of moral residue in terms of "feel[ing] bad" and "really uncomfortable" drove Annabelle to reconsider her commercial model. SFIs want to do impactful work but they also want to be paid and recognized for their contributions. Our data show that SFIs aim to uphold their platforms and increase the appeal of sustainable fashion brands, but this becomes morally problematic when working with too many, or the "wrong" brands (Cocker et al., 2021). When SFIs find themselves being too commercial, they experience moral residue through feeling uncomfortable and uncertain about whether they are doing the right thing.

We now discuss the transparency management strategies SFIs adopt as they reconcile and respond to these moral dilemmas and subsequent moral hypocrisy via their communication strategies and reconcile associated feelings of moral hypocrisy.

4.2. Strategies for transparency management

Transparency management is how online content creators decide how much of themselves to share with their audience to build credibility and maintain trust (Dekavalla, 2020). In resolving moral dilemmas, and the associated moral residue, or negative feelings, that ensue, SFIs must decide when to *confess* (i.e., own up to moral dilemmas), *conceal* (i.e. avoid sharing moral dilemmas) and *con* (i.e., lie about moral dilemmas).

4.2.1. Strategy 1: Confess

The first transparency management strategy (and usually the preferred option within our sample) is to confess. Here influencers "own up" to their unsustainable consumption ((anti)consumption dilemma) and monetization practices ((non)commercialization dilemma) publicly to their audiences. In this way, SFIs hope to alleviate accusations of moral weakness and duplicity by tackling moral dilemmas head-on and aligning their private practices with their public personas. Our analysis shows that when these aspects do not align, they are often honest about it, especially in cases of consumption choices:

"There are some choices that I've made that I try to be honest about it, but I try not to make those mistakes in the first place, so I guess making sure I apply my values fully and not to opt for personal convenience is like a personal challenge." – Isobel

Public confession of consumption mistakes is a vehicle for reflection and relating to others (Kaivonen et al., 2024). Our data show that it is also a way to resolve moral weakness and cope with moral residue, such as feelings of not living up to one's values, however it does not completely mitigate the residue as SFIs always want to do better, meaning they want to have fewer things they need to confess. Unsustainable behaviors can be seen as poor decision-making or even selfishness, as the quote above touches on.

"At the moment I'm too conscious of what people might say and criticize but actually one of my most engaging posts on Instagram was about the fact that I still use a plastic toothbrush because I had a whole pack… I think that actually worked really well, being honest and transparent with my audience and everyone responded really well saying like they still use plastic stuff as well and that they feel guilty, but they don't have to feel guilty because you're using it…" – Kadie

Kadie chose to confess about her plastic toothbrush because she wanted to be open about her sustainability journey despite her fear of being criticized and judged. Due to the imperfections in her consumption, she was "too conscious," or nervous, to share this aspect of her journey. In doing so, the audience affirmed her stance and made her feel better about her plastic use. This confession is part of the resolution of the moral dilemma as the negative feelings are replaced by encouraging audience feedback.

"I think for sustainable fashion influencers…transparency is about also saying that you're on a journey and it's not perfect because I think at the end of the day, we're all kind of hypocrites because when it comes to that… we're all living. There's always an area of your life where you're not living sustainably or doing ethical practices properly" – Halima

SFIs believe that it is impossible to be a perfect sustainable consumer but by talking about their imperfections and being transparent, they do not have to feel like hypocrites. SFIs see disclosing less sustainable consumption as intrinsic to their role because it shows something *real*, as illustrated here:

"I think that's kind of the way I've gone about it, kind of going about my real life and showing people what that looks like,…We can say that it's important to only shop from here, but I had to go to Target to get socks the other day and I bought jeans from Madewell last month because that's what fits me best, I think it's just that transparency, that honesty, and how that fits into my life." – Polly

Polly and Halima's quotes illustrate a narrative that unsustainable consumption is an inevitable part of life, but it is how you communicate it, that matters. Our analysis suggests that SFIs often adopt an "honesty is best" policy. The purpose is twofold, to one, reflect what sustainable fashion looks like in real life as found in Kaivonen et al. (2024) and two, by confessing consumption mistakes, SFIs are (potentially) exonerated by followers. However, confession may also lead to moral residue as people harass the influencer for their admissions of moral weakness. Georgiana recounted how one of the hardest things about being an SFI is the "expectation of perfection" that comes with being "publicly held to high standards." She felt that she could not "make a mistake" and shared how emotionally exhausting this was, particularly given a palpable fear

of being "yelled at" and "abuse[d]" by people on social media.

The expectations of perfection and the harsh critiques of the audience can create a stressful and emotionally exhausting environment for SFIs; SFIs take a risk when they decide to share their mistakes. Overall, confession unburdens the influencer but may also open them up to further critique. This makes transparency and confessing potentially quite costly and emotionally damaging for the influencer, leading to further moral residue.

4.2.2. Strategy 2: Conceal

The second strategy is to conceal. Although SFIs may utilize confession to absolve themselves of the burden of being imperfect sustainable consumers, many of the influencers believe that an element of concealment is required to maintain the trust between the audience and the influencer. There are two broad categories that influencers conceal: areas that challenge their credibility (i.e., making too many consumption mistakes, going against audience expectations of their platform, and questionable brand deals), which links with the (anti)consumption and (anti)commercialization dilemmas; and areas that do not appeal to social media (i.e. having an inconsistent aesthetic, talking about "boring" topics), which links with the (non)promotion dilemma. SFIs want to be transparent about their lifestyles but also feel it is sometimes necessary to withhold information regarding their activities. This results in SFIs not sharing the whole picture to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy.

> *"I never want to be a hypocrite. It does sometimes get hard. I've never said I shop 100 % from charity shops, but obviously it's hard if I do on occasion buy something brand new and, it's hard trying to justify it or posting it on Instagram when my whole page is meant to be about sustainable fashion. So, sometimes on the odd occasion that I buy something new that I really like and it's like – I can't talk about it, but should I be talking about it?" – Keke*

Keke highlights that she never intended to portray the image that she only shops from charity shops, nevertheless she conceals information about new purchases because it goes against audience expectations and may open her up to criticism. Many of our SFIs discuss the idea of perfection and the stress of trying to attain it, as identified in the moral dilemma of (anti)consumption (4.2.1). The problem is, if they are too open about their mistakes, they may be accused of double standards and duplicity as mentioned by Georgiana in 4.2.1. SFIs are unique because they are trying to encourage people to adopt a particular lifestyle and adopt behavior changes that are difficult to uphold.

> *"Sometimes the pressure of having to be right or making the right choices, you're like: 'okay how honest can I be about the mistakes I made,' without people disregarding my credibility as a voice in this space. If they see me breaking my own rules they would say 'oh you're doing it, why can't we do it?'" – Isobel*

The pressure of appearing perfect can drive influencers to feel they must conceal even more to maintain their credibility as SFIs. Thus, concealing is seen by respondents as a tactic to avoid accusations of moral hypocrisy, but paradoxically, may result in feelings of moral weakness for the individual, and greater potential for accusations of duplicity or double standards if exposed. In Merritt et al.'s (2010) discussion of moral credits, they argue that there are only so many mistakes you can make before you are seen as a hypocrite, thus there is a need for many of our sample to hide some imperfections. Plus, as Ginny says, "*nobody wants to be shouted at on the internet*." It is evident that some degree of concealment is therefore important to being seen as a SFI, despite the emphasis on sustainable fashion being a journey. Moreover, SFIs avoid talking about things that they do not feel they know enough about, further elucidating the nuance of transparency management. Just because they know about sustainable fashion does not mean that they know about other aspects of sustainability.

> *"I sometimes still have to run to Sephora for an eyeliner just because I haven't totally figured this part out yet and my eyes are sensitive, blah, blah, blah. So, I don't post about it, I don't talk about that. So that's part of it too, 'cause I don't want anyone to see like a snippet of me and see me quote "perfecting this" but I also don't want to encourage a habit that I haven't gotten to a place where I'm happy with how I deal with it myself." – Cindy*

Considering that influencers say they strive for honesty and transparency in terms of their consumption, they do not want to put themselves in a situation where they feel that they would be misrepresenting their expertise and behavior. Moreover, because SFIs aim to show that sustainable fashion consumption is possible, it feels duplicitous for them to promote something where they do not yet know what the best course of action is. Overall, concealing is a transparency management strategy whereby SFIs want to appear as knowledgeable guides to sustainable fashion, so they selectively disclose actions. They conceal to reduce accusations of hypocrisy; although this can result in moral residue through negative emotions such as feelings of inferiority due to not being the "perfect" SFI, and inner conflict about what and how much to share.

4.2.3. Strategy 3: Con

Con comes from the phrase "confidence game" where "a person defrauds a victim of their money, property, or information through tricks" (Cornell University, 2021). This strategy is primarily concerned with the (non)commercialization dilemma. Here a SFI would be considered a "fraud" by intentionally misrepresenting themselves to gain, and take advantage of, the trust of the audience. To con is active; it portrays an image of sustainability, without being sustainable, to deceive brands and audiences. This is different from concealing, whereby SFIs simply do not tell the whole truth for the purposes of maintaining their credibility and protecting their privacy. It is difficult to quantify the occurrence of conning as none of the respondents outright admitted to conning their audience, however, there is evidence of conning through broader industry reflections.

> *"I had a debate with myself and the blogger I did the challenge with, we were not talking bad, but, gossiping a little about, you know, those bloggers where they're always trying to sell you something, sometimes there's like a really thin line when you're trying to promote values. But if you really don't live those values you're not like a true person. I think that there's some people that try and say they're sustainable but sometimes they're just greenwashing, and they have a huge wardrobe, and they have, I don't know, they don't really stick 100 % to the values that they try to promote." – Bernice*

Such contradictory behaviors do not go unnoticed by other SFIs as they deride these SFIs as "fake" (Mardon et al., 2018). Duplicity in the form of greenwashing, a term associated with having poor environmental/social performance but presenting positive communication about such performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), is thus levied against SFIs.

Conning also involves SFIs "lending" unsustainable brands their moral credits to give the impression that these brands are a sustainable consumption choice (Monin & Merritt, 2012). While SFIs would usually critique others for shopping from such brands, some are actively promoting them, illustrating the double standards at play. Conning also encompasses selective communications, revealing only part of the story for monetary gain.

> *"it's not meant to be like a mean thing but if you're not paid to have certain conversations of course they take a back seat, and I think that there needs to be some accountability from these influencers of what that looks like. What percent of their content that they're creating about ethical and sustainable fashion is truly just about the movement versus buying into the movement" – Georgiana*

Overall, conning intentionally lacks transparency as the aim is to "sell" a sustainable lifestyle to an audience. This duplicity gets to the heart of moral hypocrisy (Graham et al. 2015) as this transparency strategy is all smoke and mirrors.

Having unpacked the three moral dilemmas SFIs encounter, and associated transparency management strategies which pertain to confessing, concealing, and actively conning audiences about moral dilemmas, we now consider the theoretical implications of these findings for moral hypocrisy and transparency management.

5. Discussion: Unpacking experiences of moral residue

Our research set out to answer: what moral dilemmas do SFIs face and how do they navigate these dilemmas through communication? Through the lens of moral hypocrisy and transparency management, our findings reveal a process of SFI transparency management whereby SFIs reconcile moral dilemmas faced in their roles publicly and privately, while aiming to avert accusations of hypocrisy. This results in moral residue, or leftover feelings (Marcus, 1980). Fig. 1, provided at the start of the Findings section, provides a conceptual framework to illustrate our findings and explore the integration of moral dilemmas, moral hypocrisy, moral residue, and transparency management strategies. Fig. 1 is not a definitive model. Rather it demonstrates possible relationships of how moral dilemmas of *(anti)consumption, (non)promotion,* and *(non) commercialization* have the potential to expose SFIs to internal perceptions and external accusations of Graham et al.'s (2015) three types of moral hypocrisy. We find that in trying to resolve these dilemmas, SFIs experience a build-up of moral residue, or the leftover emotional consequences of trying to resolve moral dilemmas (Marcus, 1980). We propose that moral residue may exacerbate moral hypocrisy and moral dilemmas. As a result, moral dilemmas become amplified and persistent in the sustainable influencers psyche through feelings like guilt and moral inferiority (Marcus, 1980; McConnell, 2024). The buildup of moral residue over time motivates individuals to engage in transparency management to attempt to resolve potential perceptions of moral hypocrisy and alleviate the buildup of moral residue. This leads SFIs to navigate various transparency management strategies: to *confess, conceal*, or *con.*

The arrows in Fig. 1 show how transparency management strategies may reinforce perceptions of moral hypocrisy and create feelings of moral residue. This can lock SFIs into a persistent cycle between moral dilemmas, moral residue, and feelings of moral hypocrisy. *Confessing* is perceived as the best strategy to reduce moral residue and accusations of moral hypocrisy. Despite this, confessing may lead to further feelings of moral weakness. Internally, SFIs feel moral weakness from repeated failures to live up to their values. Externally, their confessions can provoke negative responses from audiences, such as trolling or abuse, which may lead to further moral residue. This inconsistency in the outcome of *confessing* is thus represented as a dotted arrow in Fig. 1. Alternatively, *concealing* and *conning* have consistent outcomes, appearing to perpetuate hypocrisy and moral residue, as shown by the solid arrows in Fig. 1. The process we identify contributes to the literature on moral hypocrisy (Čop et al., 2024; Kaivonen et al., 2024), by identifying how SFIs navigate moral dilemmas and the implications for moral hypocrisy relative to transparency management strategies. We also contribute to the transparency management literature (Dekavalla, 2020), by identifying what influencers are *not* transparent about. These include topics that challenge their credibility and do not fit their stance, values, personal brand or aesthetic. From these findings we now expand on our main theoretical contributions.

5.1. Reconciling moral dilemmas and hypocrisy

Research on influencers and moral hypocrisy is still nascent, although it has shown that influencers may use narrative strategies, such as positioning themselves as "good" people, to appear moral to others (Leban et al., 2021). Čop et al. (2024) find that influencers face moral dilemmas due to the multifaceted nature of their role and varying stakeholder expectations. Prior research has identified a range of moral dilemmas including disclosing commercial partnerships, working with brands, giving honest product reviews, promoting products that are harmful (i.e. alcohol), promoting overconsumption, and more (Borchers and Enke, 2022; Čop et al., 2024; Jacobson and Harrison, 2022; Kaivonen et al., 2024; Mardon et al., 2018). Although many of the dilemmas experienced by mainstream influencers are also experienced by SFIs, moral dilemmas are heightened in the context of sustainability because SFIs aim to drive social change, therefore, they face higher social expectations. We categorize the dilemmas into three primary areas which appear to encompass those previously identified in the literature: (anti) consumption, or the degree to which SFIs are able to consume sustainably; (non)promotion, or the degree to which SFIs prioritize visibility relative to necessary (but less popular) content; and (non)commercialization, or the degree to which SFIs allow their platforms to be monetized. We build on Čop et al.'s (2024) findings through the lens of moral hypocrisy, presenting these moral dilemmas as internal conflicts that create the circumstances for moral hypocrisy.

Fig. 1 maps these moral dilemmas onto Graham et al.'s (2015) three types of moral hypocrisy – duplicity, double standards, and moral weakness – building on nascent insights of influencer moral hypocrisy (Leban et al., 2021). Our findings show that portraying oneself as the "perfect" example of sustainable fashion can create unreconcilable duplicity should others identify their inconsistent behaviors and narrative. In terms of double standards, SFIs frequently judge other influencers for undertaking the very same activities that they themselves do, such as working with certain brands or engaging in "unsustainable" consumption practices. Finally, not being able to (always) consume sustainably results in moral weakness where SFIs are not fully able to live up to their values.

In solving these moral dilemmas, we find that individuals may choose to act in accordance with their beliefs, compromise their beliefs, or to go against them (Čop et al., 2024; Lemmon, 1962; Marcus, 1980). However, SFIs do not emerge unscathed and continually experience moral residue about the choices made. We find that influencers may experience different emotions as they navigate moral dilemmas. They may feel guilty and inferior in (anti)consumption, stressed and trapped in non(promotion), and uncomfortable and uncertain in (non)commercialization. These negative feelings may ultimately encourage SFIs to change their practices to reduce moral residue, such as Annabelle's story in section 4.1.3, or leave influencing altogether to avert it, as with Cindy in section 4.1.2. Most are, however, locked into a continuous moral residue cycle where they continue behaviors that give rise to negative feelings given the complexity of the context within which they work (Marcus, 1980). We hereby extend the conversation around influencer dilemmas to consider the emotional outcomes through moral residue, which has implications for SFIs' personal brands. This also creates useful insights around the professionalization and commercialization of influencer work; the more SFIs are locked into this cycle, the more likely accusations of moral hypocrisy are to surface, potentially tarnishing future relations with their audience and sponsors (Čop et al., 2024; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024).

5.2. Transparency management strategies

In navigating moral dilemmas, SFIs must decide how transparent they wish to be about the tensions they experience. While research on how influencers resolve these conflicts internally is growing (Čop et al., 2024), there is limited insight into how these decisions are communicated to the public (Audrezet et al., 2020; Kaivonen et al., 2024). Prior research on moral dilemmas, transparency, and disclosure tends to focus on brand deals and sponsored posts (Lee et al., 2023; Wellman et al., 2020). We join and extend the conversation around influencer self-presentation (Kaivonen et al., 2024; Leban et al., 2021) to identify

what influencers are, and are not, transparent about, providing an inter- as well as intrapersonal account of moral hypocrisy (Graham et al., 2015).

We identify three main transparency management strategies SFIs may adopt: *confess* or *conceal* which we evidence directly in our data, and *con,* which our respondents only identified in other SFIs, but did not directly admit to it themselves. Prior research has found that influencers, like organizations, narrate and reflect on their sustainable fashion journeys on their public platforms to be "relatable" (Kaivonen et al., 2024; McDonagh, 1998). This purpose resonates with narrative transparency where communicators share information to resonate with audiences (Press and Arnould, 2014). We identify an additional motivation which is to reduce guilt and feelings of hypocrisy. Through confession, sustainable influencers seek absolution from their consumption mistakes by sharing the ups and downs of their journeys. This is akin to the emotional labor of beauty YouTubers, where influencers may express varying emotions such as guilt and gratitude to their audiences, to lessen the negative impact of their commercial activities (Mardon et al., 2018). SFIs view this as being honest and therefore they absolve their moral weakness from their consumption mistake. They hold themselves accountable and try to reduce double standards and duplicity by being open about their shortcomings. Many influencers choose to adopt this strategy. However, this strategy could result in others perceiving them as having moral weakness or even self-perceptions of moral weakness, which we identify through the dotted arrow between confess and moral weakness in Fig. 1.

An alternative strategy to confession is to conceal, or to hide perceived imperfections. It is important to note that the distinction between confess and conceal can be blurry as most influencers employ both options where they confess, *up to a point*, and then they conceal areas that are less polished or are more private, such as family matters. Through the lenses of authenticity and identity work, prior research has found that influencers may choose to: be transparent in the case of brand partnerships (Audrezet et al., 2020); tailor their content around their values (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Leban et al., 2021); and share their consumption shortcomings (Kaivonen et al., 2024). These indicate topics and approaches that influencers are happy to talk about but a key gap in this conversation is what aren't SFIs happy to talk about? We contribute to the literature by identifying boundaries to confession that lead to concealing. Influencers conceal things that may challenge their credibility and/or do not fit their public stance, values, personal brand, or aesthetic. However, as well as demonstrating moral weakness, this strategy may lead to increased moral duplicity, where SFIs create a picture of sustainable living that they themselves struggle to attain, and in double standards, where SFIs judge others more harshly for practices they themselves engage in, therefore increasing moral residue (see arrows in Fig. 1).

While concealing is largely passive in terms of not discussing certain topics, influencers may adopt the more active strategy of conning their audience. To con is the active choice to deceive the audience for financial gain. However, our insight into this strategy is limited as it is difficult to discern an influencer's true nature and our participants certainly did not actively disclose such behavior (Leban et al., 2021). However, it is still important to report this theme as through the eyes of our SFIs we can understand others who operate in this space (McIntyre, 2004). Throughout the findings, participants have questioned SFI practices and acknowledged its growing market opportunity. Although SFIs in this study may be using the idea of SFIs who con as a literary foil to make their own behavior seem less bad, it is important to recognize that those undertaking this practice may exist. The conning strategy results in duplicity (see arrows in Fig. 1), as the SFI is not actually living up to or supporting the cause that they claim to promote, rather they are taking advantage of its popularity. We suggest that this strategy is most likely to occur in the commercialization and promotion dilemmas as influencers focus on growing their platforms to enrich themselves. As part of this practice, they may at times engage in harsh double standards and potentially moral weakness, depending on the values they hold (Graham et al., 2015). Studies have considered how SFIs shape their messaging (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Kaivonen et al., 2024) but acknowledging the presence of deceptive practices contributes a critical finding to understanding the nuances of sustainable fashion influencing.

We contribute to the literature on what and how influencers share (Audrezet et al., 2020; Kaivonen et al., 2024; Leban et al., 2021) by identifying where SFIs may be intentionally deceptive. Overall, these strategies may increase feelings of moral residue, but not all influencers will respond in the same way. Some influencers may be motivated to change, while others are more comfortable with living with moral hypocrisy (Marcus, 1980). Nevertheless, the effects of moral residue can accumulate (Batavia et al., 2020). The strategies become a self-reinforcing cycle where influencers must maintain the image they created, consequently, they can never be completely free. The concept of digital personhood illustrates that online people's pasts and presents are all concurrently available, meaning that people can have fluid or multiple identities online (Kerrigan & Hart, 2016). The conceptualization of this process is important. As moral residue builds up, whether knowingly or unknowingly, it may increase one's feelings of moral weakness (Marcus, 1980; Peloza et al., 2013). This means that moral residue and hypocrisy are a threat to authenticity in social relations as people struggle with the politics of *doing* what they believe is right and *appearing* to do what they say they believe is right. This once again underscores the problematization of the individual in engendering systemic change and the resulting contradictions and challenges inherent in championing more sustainable consumption and production (Kilbourne et al., 2018).

5.3. Implications

Our findings have several implications for influencers and brands that work with influencers, in the context of sustainability and society. Our findings suggest that moral hypocrisy is an intrinsic part of communicating about sustainability because of its practical impossibility. Andonopoulos et al. (2023) found that influencers do not have to be authentic to be inspirational when it comes to hedonic products like fashion. Thus, we suggest that moral hypocrisy is not always a bad thing; it can be *performative* and productive by providing influencers and their audiences with a vital opportunity to ponder what is, and isn't, possible (Andonopoulos et al., 2023; Kaivonen et al., 2024). Thus, the more open the industry is about the tensions that surround communication and action in sustainable influencing, the more chances we find to create opportunities for education in and around sustainability.

Secondly, influencers are increasingly being hired to promote sustainability by brands and governments (Li et al., 2024). Our findings provide insight for marketers to better understand how what happens behind the scenes shapes what is seen online. Our results may help with campaign messaging; instead of looking to SFIs as "perfect examples," messages can be created that highlight the lived reality of sustainable fashion. Education on sustainable issues may also help influencers to feel more comfortable and confident discussing complex topics in a way that allows them to be transparent. Being transparent with influencers about the brands' processes of selection may also empower influencers to be more transparent when considering brand partnerships (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). Brands should also discourage influencers from concealing information or conning their audiences as this may have a negative effect on influencers' wellbeing.

Finally, influencing provides a rich context in which to consider society's understanding of sustainability. At first glance, sustainable fashion is an attractive sector to work in, but day-to-day life may be rife with moral dilemmas and mundane tasks such as laundry or sewing on buttons. The sustainability conversation cannot stop at social media because a lot gets left on the cutting room floor. Social media platforms are shaped by algorithms, which require high quantities of content, engagement, and consistency with platform norms, thus limiting the

types of content people create (Schöps et al., 2022). Although, there are thriving sustainable fashion communities on social media (Schöps et al., 2022), perhaps subscription-based platforms such as Patreon or Substack, where influencers can be paid by their audiences rather than by brands for their work, or community-based platforms such as Discord, might be avenues where more radical discussions can take place. Thus, social media influencers should be seen as a starting point, or a place for inspiration, but relying on them to show a universal portrayal of sustainable fashion is problematic.

5.4. Limitations and future research

While we investigate moral hypocrisy and transparency management in the context of SFIs, we appreciate that our dataset focuses on just one type of influencer. We advocate for further research into the multitude of moral dilemmas faced by (sustainable) influencers, particularly those actively working against consumption and advocating "radical" (Mukendi et al., 2020) change (i.e., Aw & Agnihotri, 2023; Thomas & Fowler, 2023; Vladimirova et al., 2023). Future research could apply a temporal lens to explore when and how moral dilemmas and transparency management strategies intersect and how they change over time. This is particularly pertinent given that influencing is still a "new" profession and demands for increasing professionalization escalate (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). Moreover, delving deeper into the lived experience of influencers could address questions such as: how do influencers cope with an accumulation of moral residue? Is there a tipping point when moral residue simply becomes "too much"? Such insight may add further empirical color into the precarities of influencing (Duffy et al., 2021).

Finally, our study has focused squarely on influencers' perspectives. How audiences respond to influencers' transparency strategies alongside their own (anti)consumption practices would be a fruitful line of further enquiry given the dynamism of the sustainable influencer space. For instance, as the durability of luxury is now positioned as a sustainability benefit (Sun et al., 2021), it raises the question: do audience members experience moral dilemmas to varying or similar degrees as influencers? What does this mean for their conceptions of moral residue (Marcus, 1980)? And finally, the intersection between artificial intelligence and social media influencing is an area in which we foresee some important avenues for further research (see Looi & Kahlor, 2024). As AI-generated influencers are increasingly partnering with social causes including BlackLivesMatter and gaining credibility in the sustainability space (i.e., Lil Miquela, a 19-year-old computer generated robot), new questions are being created around authenticity and transparency in the digital age. What may be the implications of post-human interactions in the (sustainable) influencer space and what may this mean for moral hypocrisy? Extended netnographic insight (Kozinets, 2015) into how such interactions play out between audiences and bots may shed new light onto moral dilemmas in the digital age.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Amira Mukendi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Iain Davies:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Sarah Glozer:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Pierre McDonagh:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Anne Marie Doherty:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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