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Additional Information

## **“It is the voice of the environment that speaks”, digital activism as an emergent form of environmental communication**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims to contribute to exploring environmental communication in social media. Drawing from an ethnographic study of environmental activists on Instagram, we point to an emergent form of activism that departs from canonical social movements centred on protest actions in the public space, to embrace day-to-day, domestic, small-scale activism. This activism is undertaken mainly by individuals —most of them adopting the influencers’ narrative and who have amassed large numbers of followers— who aspire to educate and inspire people to change their lifestyles to become more sustainable. They believe that if sustained and massive, small individual actions can make a real change. We argue that this kind of social media activism is articulated through communication based on visual and personal narratives rooted in sharing experiences, proactive actions and aesthetically curated images for engaging the public in sustainability and affordable solutions to the environmental crisis. Based on a set of interviews conducted with these activists and analysing their personal and visual narratives, we delve into activists’ motivations and self-definitions, how this activism is performed and how their communication practices can be characterized as networked collective action to bring about social change.

### **HIGHLIGHTS:**

- There is an emergent form of digital environmental activism that departs from canonical social movements centred on protest actions in the public space, to embrace day-to-day, domestic, small-scale activism.
- They use communication strategies similar to the influencers based on visual and personal narratives, but their aim is to educate and raise awareness.
- In contrast to images of disasters, they suggest proactive actions, aesthetically curated images and affordable solutions for engaging the public in sustainability.
- Taking care of the community the domestic space and the environment becomes a personal project that aims to have an influence in the environmental crisis.

**Keywords:** day-to-day activism, small-scale activism, social media activism, environmental crisis, sustainability, environmental communication, eco-influencers.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore environmental communication carried out by social media activists with the aim of contributing to the debate about how the environmental crisis is communicated and offering other theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Drawing from an ethnographic study of environmental activists on Instagram, we point to an emergent form of activism whose communicative practices and strategies are closely linked to those of social media influencers but used for taking action to tackle the environmental crisis.

The presence of celebrities devoted to environmental cause in social media has a long history, considering, for example, Al Gore or Leonardo di Caprio. Greta Thunberg's impact on youth remark her notable social media influence and also Helena Gualinga in Ecuador's Amazonia and Vanessa Nakate in Uganda also use Instagram to amplify their voices in the fight against climate change. These examples illustrate the convergence of digital media, activism, and social movements, showcasing how social media effectively spreads environmental messages and coordinates collective actions.

However, less attention has been given to the role of new actors within the social media ecosystem, who, far from being such well-known celebrities or embracing political protest, engage in digital activism to promote environmental awareness and take action. These people can also be considered environmental influencers who promote a sustainable lifestyle using their own experiences and personal narratives to educate and engage with their community of followers in affordable environmental crisis solutions. Instagram is one of the digital platforms that these eco-activists use, among other social media, to disseminate their ideas about sustainability, share their experiences to foster a better relationship with nature and give practical advice on living in a more sustainable way (reducing waste, plastic use, recycling, etc.). Their aim is to be followed by as many people as their profiles can engage, to turn sustainability into a mainstream commitment.

The goal of this paper is to analyze the personal and visual narratives of the environmental influencers on Instagram in order to elicit how their communication practices can be characterized as networked collective action to bring about social change. More specifically, our questions revolve into activists' motivations and self-definitions and how this activism is performed.

In the next section, we present the debate around the way that the environmental crisis has been communicated and studied in the mass media and NGOs' main communicative strategies, pointing to social media as an alternative way to foster citizenship participation. We then briefly introduce the debate about social media, influencer culture, and digital activism. These theoretical frameworks are key to contextualizing and understanding the nuances of our fieldwork and the experiences of our research participants. In the second section, we present our methodological approach, materials and the research participants. Later, in the results section, by relaying the participants' statements about the relationship between activism and communication, we assess their communicative strategies and draw the main characteristics of their 'modest' form of day-to-day activism. Finally, in the third section, the discussion and conclusions consider how communication and activism are intermingled with the practice of care.

### 1.1. Media communication and the environmental crisis

The debate around the role of the media in the field of environmental awareness has been key for some decades, although for some authors the messages spread are not always accepted, especially when they involve an abrupt change in lifestyle and giving up certain comforts (Arlt et al., 2011). Nevertheless, now is generally accepted that social media have the potential to activate participation in grassroots environmental movements (Huang, 2016) and some recent works that address this issue agree on the positive effect of social media on the activation of specific groups such as young people. More specifically, they focus on accounts that are led by people defined as 'greenfluencers' (Knupfer, Neureiter and Matthes, 2023), 'eco-influencers' (Ardèvol, Martorell and San Cornelio, 2021) or just 'influencers' (Shabir, 2020) that disseminate contents related to the climate crisis and raise awareness in environmental issues.

However, the role of such new actors within the social media ecosystem is still understudied, since they are halfway between the influencer culture and environmental communication. Research on influencers in social media is developed mainly in marketing studies (Cuenca-Piqueras, 2021). From a digital culture perspective, influencer studies are closer to the study of micro-celebrities, which were anonymous users who gained visibility by publishing content on blogs or YouTube (Senft, 2013, Abidin 2016). Their fame is 'native to the Internet' (as opposed to established celebrities) and they can be identified by having an important number of followers. They adopt techniques of relatability coherently in the textual and visual narrations related to their lifestyle (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 106). Then, the success of these media figures is based on their direct, intimate and sincere communicative style with their audience (Ardèvol and Márquez, 2017, p. 75)

Environmental activism promoted by organizations such as Greenpeace has also encouraged citizen participation in protest actions through media outlets. As in the mass media, NGOs' communicative strategies have mostly prioritized the use of negative images of environmental degradation to convey their calls to action. However, a study by Leviston et al. (2014) demonstrates that images of natural disasters, extreme climate events and pollution used to raise environmental awareness usually elicit negative emotional responses among audiences, while images representing environmental solutions generate more positive reactions.

The previous are only some examples of academic research in the field of communication that has widely discussed the most effective ways to disseminate information about the environmental crisis. Theoretically, it is thought that the media's potential to address the environmental crisis lies in its ability to promote a constant awareness of environmental issues to bring about a change in the public's attitude. This argument poses the doubtful idea that, in the long term, the media has an educational role and that exposure to images of dramatic environmental crisis impacts will mobilize the population in the desired direction.

Twitter and other social media foster new forms of communication that are used for environmental aims. Memes are an example of this. According to Ross and Rivers (2019), Internet memes possess an ability to impact the opinion or position of consumers within the broader participatory digital culture in which they appear and are shared. Their impact in the political arena has also been demonstrated, as they are carriers of a particular ideology and

are intended to participate in a social or political debate (Piñeiro-Otero et al, 2016). Moreover, memes can be used as a form of activism in environmental communication (Ardèvol et al., 2021). For Matalon (2019), they categorically have a communicative public function; regardless of their basic manufacture, they convey information effectively.

Nevertheless, other digital narratives like those of the influencers, based on a direct communicative style and in first person, experiential narratives are also relevant to depict the climate crisis. For example, Wong-Parodi and Feygina (2021) argue that given the importance of emotion in information processing, it is critical to explore the extent to which emotion can be elicited through narratives in the context of climate change.

## **1.2. Digital media and new activism**

Besides media communication, in the last four decades, the environmental movement have helped to generate widespread public concern for the natural environment at different levels, both corporate (Carberry et al., 2017) and citizen and the role of the Internet in the emergence of this public concern cannot be underestimated.

The term 'digital activism' is broad and ambiguous (Yang, 2016), since it includes activism that engages both fixed and mobile devices with access to the Internet. This may include different forms of hacktivism, denial of service attacks, hashtag activism and open-source advocacy (Joyce, 2010) or definitions that include all digital media used for political purposes (Gerbaudo, 2017), including environmental sensitization. More specifically Yu, Treré and Bonini (2023) talk about algorithmic activism to highlight the tactics in using algorithms in favour of social causes.

According to Treré (2018), although some authors still doubt the efficacy of digital activism, it is fully recognized that digital platforms play a role in enhancing communication and proselytism and have been fruitfully used for the internal coordination and articulation of contemporary social movements (Treré, 2018). However, this author also states that this instrumental perspective has tended to ignore the role of digital media as spaces of creativity and for the dissemination of symbolic and emotional aspects that contribute to social movements' organization, strength, and identity.

Social movements are usually defined as collective and coordinated actions that seek political or social change through protest and vindication in front of institutions and public authorities. However, Tilly questions the presumption that a social movement is a group rather than a cluster of actions. This author points out that 'old' social movements such as organized labour or welfare rights tend to be viewed as based on representative democracy, hierarchical and well-organized against state power, while the 'new' social movements around peace, the environment and sexual preferences are seen as more porous and based on autonomy, identity and self-directed democracy (Tilly, 1993, p.2).

In addition, Haenfler et al. (2012) point out that while social movement scholars have typically conceptualized movement participation in terms of public protest directed towards the state or other power structures, more recently some have begun to focus on collective actions that are aimed more directly at value expressions (Haenfler, Johnson & Jones, 2012:2). These authors

conceptualize lifestyle movements as those movements that consciously and actively promote a lifestyle, or a way of life, as their primary means to foster social change.

In this regard, a specific feature of the environmental activism we have found on Instagram is the consideration of the individual as an engine for social change. This way of practising activism has derivatives that can be expressed as 'day-to-day' and 'small-scale activism'. 'Day-to-day' activism refers to the necessary continuity of actions, in contrast to social movements understood as connected to specific moments or 'big' actions such as demonstrations, etc. 'Small-scale' activism refers to aiming to achieve small goals that do not involve big lifestyle changes, but, if constantly produced, may produce changes in the system.

The concept of 'implicit activism,' as discussed by Horton and Kraftl (2009), refers to low-key, personal activism often overlooked in the social-scientific study of activism. Similarly, Bakardjieva (2012a) introduces the idea of 'subactivism,' encompassing small, individual, and private decisions or actions with political or ethical significance that remain hidden in everyday life, rather than in public discourse or social design.

We agree with Pottinger (2016) that we need to take into account other forms of activism that depart from the established notions that emphasize vocal, antagonistic and demonstrative forms of protest, to expand the category of activism to include modest, quotidian acts of kindness, connection and creativity based on daily life. Moreover, these new forms of activism converge with digital activism, which is characterized by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) as the 'personalization of politics'. People address common contemporary concerns such as climate change through connective action on the Internet. Following Rovira (2016), this new form of networked collective action resonates with the digital culture of do-it-yourself, and informal learning of hackers and makers movements, eluding leadership and hierarchical organizations and focusing on the personal experience. Thus, as Rovira and Morales-i-Gras (2022) argue, social media can facilitate collective action and social change by connecting individuals who express their ideas and concerns, creating online communities and spreading their voices out of these communities reaching diverse audiences in different locations and areas.

Thus, this paper aims to contribute to current research in environmental communication in social media, in two ways: on the one hand, by filling a gap in the study of influencers beyond the marketing perspective, on the other hand, by exploring the intersection of the influencer culture and the forms of activism complementing the research into digital activism.

## **2. Methodological grounds**

In terms of research methods, our study is based on an ethnographic perspective that allows us to understand people's actions from their own points of view. This study is part of a broader research project on digital narratives and storytelling practices, and this paper delves into the notion of personal narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2016; San Cornelio & Roig, 2018) which are characteristic of so-called 'influencers' (Abidin, 2017) also spreading as a form of environmental activism in social media.

In particular, our methodological approach is qualitative and relies on a digital ethnography (Kozinets, 2010; Ardèvol & Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Pink et al., 2016) carried out from June 2020 to December 2021. Our fieldwork is based on online participant observation by creating a

research account on Instagram to follow and interact with our research participants. We ended up following around 120 accounts -through snowballing and algorithmic recommendation of related profiles in the Instagram platform- and selecting a theoretical sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) of 60 accounts to explore in depth on the basis that: the topic was related to sustainability and ecologically responsible consumption, and preferably with an identifiable profile with a significant number of followers (micro influencers –10k to 100k– and mid-tier influencers –100k to 500k– in Launchmetrics terms). We also sought to cover a variety of profiles, taking into account genre, language (mainly English and Spanish) and type of activity. It is worth highlighting that most of the accounts were personal (82%) and largely managed by a woman in her 30s or 40s, while the rest of our selected accounts belonged to couples or families (4.2%), small groups or organizations (8.4%) and eco-entrepreneurs that manage online shops producing, selling or promoting eco-sustainable commodities (5.4%). Although our sample includes some indigenous accounts from Latin America, the bulk of the sample corresponds to young people with university backgrounds from Europe, Canada and Latin America.

Regarding the socio-demographic features of the sample, a first-glance observation regarding gender may suggest a normative performance in gender roles, as women have a predominant role in lifestyle content creation in digital networks. Nevertheless, as we argue later, a more nuanced interpretation of this phenomenon can be undertaken through the conceptual lens of digital activism and eco-feminisms. Eco-feminism addresses several overlapping, interlocking problems: patriarchal power relations, the vital albeit unpaid role of women in social reproduction (including mutual aid during climate crises), inter-generational ecological stewardship, and the search for more harmonious society–nature relations.

Our research questions aim to unveil the kind of narratives that these committed citizens employ, both in their digital content and in their personal communicative strategies, and their identity and positions regarding their online activity. Thus, we conducted 14 in-depth online interviews (3 women, 3 men, 2 couples, 1 group and 5 eco-entrepreneurs). The interviews were recorded, with consent provided to quote them using the account's actual identifier. Subsequently, the interviews were examined based on specific themes, which included the project's origin and motivation, their understanding of the influencer concept, their relationship with activism, their creative process, their connections with online communities, and future projects. While the sample of 60 accounts served to analyse the published narratives in terms of visual and textual contents (see Ardèvol et al., 2021), the interviews aimed to delve into personal perspectives and motivations.

We must highlight that digital ethnography is not about the digital, but about living with the digital. This methodological scope allows us to approach online activity through participant observation and in-depth online interviews, paying attention to experiences (how people feel and explain what they do); practices (what people do); things (the objects they share, the objects that are part of their lives); and relationships (interactions and the intimate social environments they perform in and inhabit) (Pink et al., 2016, p.14). By listening to the interviewees, we seek to understand the different ways in which commitment to sustainability is articulated with communicative strategies to find some ethnographic answers to the urgent problem of how we communicate the environmental crisis and how citizens may engage with new forms of activism to foster social change through social media and, particularly, Instagram.

### 3. Eco-influencers and Eco-activists

In this section, we present the results of our fieldwork regarding how research participants understand their communicative practices and strategies, their position on the environmental movement and the figure of the social media influencer. Our primary interest was in depicting eco-influencers' narratives related to the environmental crisis. It was during fieldwork that we realized that some of our participants defined themselves as activists, so the figure of the influencer was blurred with that of the activist and the committed citizen sharing their experiences of trying to live more sustainably. This finding prompted us to delve into the friction between the notions of influencer and activist as well as between "classical" social movements and these new forms of activism linked to emergent issues and the role of social media.

The interviews showed us the diversity of ways of understanding activism in social media, the tensions or agreements between individuals' ideological positioning, wanting to reach as "many people" as possible, and the emerging market for sustainable products that come to them as influencers to promote their products. So, the term 'influencer' was a locus of controversy that emerged during the interviews, because most of the interviewees considered it was not the best way to define them, due to the connection between this concept and marketing and consumerism. In their words:

*"I think that being an influencer on Instagram overall has got a bad reputation and I can partially understand why. I know some influencers only care about numbers (likes and followers) and what they can gain by this, whether it is free products or experiences that they then promote to their audience. I don't like this aspect of influencers"* (@planetpreserver).

While some participants such as @marianamatija are coincident with this appreciation, other interviewees expressed some reluctance and hesitation regarding the concept but accept it with nuances, highlighting the idea of influencing in a good way. In their words:

*"There are also some good influencers who use their platforms to educate and help people or support causes that are important and I think this is a great way to be an influencer because they use it for something positive and unselfish"* (@planetpreserver); *"the content we share has a positive influence"* (@vivirsinplastico); *"positively influencing people"* (@publiclandshateyou); *"the word is something I kind of struggled with for a while in the beginning but then I came to terms with it because yes (...) I guess I'll consider myself an influencer"* (@laurainwaterland).

Finally, some participants totally accept this tag: *"Yes, I am a menstrual influencer. I feel I am in a referential position"* (@ilovecyclo); *"I don't consider myself as an influencer (...) but a micro-influencer"* (@noeona); *"Yes... I suppose I have to say I am an influencer"* (@esturirafi).

It is also worth noting that, despite their appreciation of themselves as 'influencers' or not, if we analyse their accounts from a communicative style perspective, we see that all their profiles would fit the notion of influencer in a conventional way. Firstly, most of them have an activity focused on personal narratives. Secondly, because these profiles develop similar strategies to them, characterized by: 1) applying positive self-branding strategies, 2) managing their



visibility, and 3) cultivating their community of followers by adopting storytelling techniques consistent with their lifestyles (Leaver et al., 2020, p.106). Then, despite not fitting into the influencer identity, their communicational strategies are closer to our interviewees.

Nevertheless, the same can not be said regarding influencers' relationship with the market, sponsorship and brand advertising. This was, no doubt, a critical point: we found diverse positions regarding that issue; as some of our interviewees did not observe contradictions between being eco-entrepreneurs and activists, or sporadically accepting collaborations with eco-brands while others found totally incompatible with being an influencer -in the former terms- and an activist.

Another point that generated discussion was whether they considered themselves activists or not, a debate also encouraged by the conventional idea we have of an activist, i.e. associated with social protests in the street, that is, with social movements, as we have discussed before. As one of our participants said: *"I do not consider myself an activist as I simply use Instagram in my spare time. I consider a person like Greta Thunberg an activist. But I can see how the content I post could be viewed as climate activism as I advocate for the environment through my posts"* (@planetpreserver).

They consider the efforts of 'classical' activism as somehow superior to the action they undertake in digital media. *"I don't think that activism is something that I do, drawing safely at home (...) even if the result is an expression of activism"* (@marianamatija). Consequently, they separate their accounts and the content they disseminate from the person they are, being very modest in their activity. *"I just think of myself as a person trying to help other people help the environment. I guess I could consider myself an activist. I see @reducedwastenow as something that people look at, not so at myself"* (@reducewastenow).

Finally, other interviewees consider themselves activists (with no doubts): *"I totally consider myself an activist. If there are people who follow you, it's a good way to do activism"* (@noeona); *"totally: online and offline. In everyday life"* (@easyecotips).

Despite their self-concept and their appreciation that their practice departs from regular social movements, all of them consider online activism as a legitimate form of activism. Put into their words: *"I think you can be an activist even if you're just online (...) social media gives that new level to the definition of activism (...) gives a platform to a lot more people than before, who wouldn't have had any, or minorities that didn't have a voice as much"* (@laurainwaterland).

As we have seen, there is a blurring zone between 'influencers' and 'activists'. Despite that their communicative style and strategies resemble those of social media influencers, some of them do not want to be characterized as such and prefer the label of 'activism', while others say that they are just committed citizens. Thus, we find a continuum of identity positions regarding both terms, that are not mutually exclusive. In this sense, we may consider these practices as part of the framework of the logic of 'connective action', defined by Bennett & Segerberg (2013, p. 756-774) that stresses that even some people may still join 'classical' protest actions, the identity reference of these form of activism is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression rather than through common group or ideological identification as we may understand in classical social movements theory. Bennett

& Segerberg conceptualise this type of action in contrast to the 'collective action' frame and offer diverse hybridizations that emphasise the notion of connection through digital media.

### 3.1. Day-to-day, domestic and small-scale activism

What our participants undertake in terms of activism recalls the idea of 'mundane citizenship' posed by Bakardjieva (2012b). According to her, the two defining characteristics of mundane citizenship are: first, that it is intertwined with the routine activities and concerns of everyday living; and second, that it is crucially enabled by new media of communication.

In this regard, in the interviews, most of our participants consider they act by their scale, possibilities and preferences. As they express: *"I am fonder of day-to-day, my way of communication in front of the screen"* (@noeona). *"Our activism is not related to demonstrations but comes from the domestic space, it is our way to help foster a change that starts in our personal lives, sharing with others on social media"* (@vivirsinplastico).

With that in mind, we argue that this kind of activism for the planet also matches the concept of *Lifestyle Movements* proposed by Haenfler et al., as mentioned before. Lifestyle activism is based on three characteristics: a) lifestyle choices as a tactic for social change; b) the centrality of personal identity as the engine of change; and c) a diffuse organizational structure (Haenfler et al., 2012, p. 2). All the initiatives included in our research fit into this conceptualization, especially focusing on the first point.

These lifestyle actions may not be large milestones, but they feel that they are equally valid and they contribute, even on a small scale, to promoting sustainability and to taking care of the environment. As one of our participants says: *"I think the best way to help the environment is to inspire people to take small actions. And they will continue to help the environment when they see that they're actually making a difference. But every little helps"* (@reducewastenow). And according to them, their actions have some positive responses among their followers, as @laurainwaterland says: *"well, oh, I've cleaned up the beach on my holiday because you clean beaches and I realized that I could do it as well"* (@laurainwaterland). And @noeona: *"Sometimes people write to you who you don't expect, who don't interact much, but who tell you that they've made a difference because of you. It's nice when you encourage someone to do something"*.

Another key issue addressed by our participants is that, according to them, people most often do not act in favour of the environment because they believe that it implies a great change and a financial effort: *"People don't want to just uproot their lives and completely change them. So, I want to provide them with sustainable alternatives to how they're already living. And so, I believe that that's going to appeal to the public"* (@reducewastenow). In this sense, the activism they propose is also about making things easier for people in order to mobilize them in favour of the planet. Therefore, they talk about *"making it simple"* (@easyecotips) to produce a small change, because *"a lot of little things are better than a few very big things"* (@easyecotips).

The next sentence expresses what small-scale activism is in terms of thinking that many small actions can result in big changes: *"As long as you're taking the steps towards trying to help"*

*the environment, and you're doing the best that you can, then if a whole bunch of people can do that, that's just going to make a massive difference*" (@reducewastenow). In that sense, lifestyle or individual changes are not a simple expression of the aggregation but a way to highlight that "even individuals have a part to play" (Lorenzen, 2012).

Something similar is raised by @PetitaPetjada (which means 'little footprint' in Catalan). This is a family account whose aim is to reduce the environmental footprint with children. In the very name of the account, there is the idea of taking small safe footsteps, with no way back. Small steps and grains of sand are some of the metaphors also used by other participants: "*It is not necessary to go to the extreme to make a change, but step by step, little by little, this change of habit can also be more lasting*" (@ilovecyclo); "*we are putting our grain of sand in how we want to build our future and sustainability*" (@unpackedshop).

All in all, in the ideas expressed by the participants we can perceive this change of perspective in activism in terms of doing small things every day, with what they have at hand and with the means they can afford, with the hope that their actions will be emulated by their followers and that the sum of many small actions will produce a lasting change: "*Whatever the size of your wave, keep it and never stop looking for bigger and bigger waves*" @Laurainwaterland.

However, this type of environmental activism focused on individual day-to-day action has been considered a neo-liberal approach to the problem that hides the responsibilities of governments and corporations in the climate change crisis and blames the individuals for their consumption -such the recent corporate strategy of Exxon (Supran and Oreskes, 2021). In fact, the tension between individual and system change is also present in the climate movement as Stuart (2022) analyzes in Extinction Rebellion. This movement aims for a systemic transformation of society. According to her, "a focus on personal choices about lightbulbs, plastic straws, and even air travel continue to detract attention away from proposals to reign in the overproduction causing climate change and ecological overshoot" (Stuart, 2022:12).

It is commonly considered that aggregated freely-made individual decisions are detrimental to collective efforts to improve society and consequently, advocating individual behavior can obscure the need for systemic changes. Some authors argue that only degrowth and ecosocialist ideas integrate lifestyle and structural changes, but these ideas should play a more central role in addressing climate change by ending economic growth in affluent nations, as suggested by Hickel (2020).

As we have seen, this small activism distances itself from organized social movements and its position may be considered a utopic individualism. Nevertheless, research participants acknowledge that we are in the midst of a planetary emergency that needs effective worldwide policy changes and that their activism is modest in comparison with more organized fights, but they sustain that for a real change to happen, people also need hope, to realize by themselves that another way of living is possible, and to take positive action instead to fall in despair, involved in guilty feelings and outrage. Their "call to action" summarized in "you can do it too" is a gentle pedagogy aiming to generate a community of care.

As some studies pose, changing lifestyles and demanding that corporations take responsibility for environmental harms are not mutually exclusive (Lorenzen, 2012), although citizens need

to be made even more aware of what the direct and indirect impacts of implementing a more low-impact lifestyle are (Dimitrova et al 2021).

### 3.2. Communicative strategies in Instagram activism

The day-to-day and small-scale activism proposed by the participants in this research is carried out through the digital environment: *"We are digital activists: we don't have time to collaborate with more associations, but we try to communicate through social media and the blog"* (@esturirafi). Digital media, then, is considered a way to spread the message beyond the physical space: *"I thought that it would be easier to reach more people through Instagram from across the world, than if I had to reach the same amount of people through physical interactions"* (@planetpreserver).

But what makes this kind of activism specific is not only its digital environment and the small-scale activism it addresses but also its communication strategies: these involve both visuals and narratives, offering an alternative vision to the environmental narratives present in the media depicting negative actions of destruction and planet exploitation. Digital environmental activists on Instagram take a more positive approach that includes more amicable and attractive images to transmit hope and connect with and sensitize the public.

For example, @usaryreusar, who were activists before starting their activity on Instagram, say that classic activism is more about protest, stressing the 'negative' and that they aspire to 'positive communication', showing alternatives, positive actions, etcetera. A similar conclusion was reached by @reducewastenow, after posting viral videos depicting a natural disaster: *"so I noticed in the comment section how sad people were to see this. It wasn't pleasant to read the comments, because everybody just seemed like they were giving up hope. So, I decided to change that. And I posted more optimistic content"*.

These Instagrammers change their messages in light of their followers' reactions, comments and suggestions. It is very clear from this point of view that positive emotions engage people and communities with these accounts.

But positive messages or emotions are not only related to beautiful images. Sometimes an image of an unpleasant place that includes a positive human action is also very engaging. As @noeona says: *"I like the photos of landfills, because they are shocking and because I am present, in this horrible context. When the audience sees a landfill, they are shocked but when they recognize my face, they stop and here you can engage them"*.

Humour is also used as a strategy by some of our study participants: *"I also post fun content now like eco-memes as I hope to make people smile and be happy. When creating environmental awareness, the topics are often very sad and can be depressing and I don't just want to post that all of the time. I therefore also try to post the funnier content in hopes of making people feel happy"* (@planetpreserver); *"that's just to kind of lighten the content up and make it less heavy, and it just kind of breaks it up into something that you can laugh about, or just something light-hearted"* (@reducewastenow).

Humour can be useful to raise awareness about a problem or topic (Kaltenbacher & Drews, 2020) and function as an icebreaker or a tool to catch someone's attention.

### 3.3. Proactive and inspirational narratives

All the previous strategies seek to offer proactive narratives that try to inspire others by offering solutions and encouraging them to do pro-environmental acts. This engages followers and forms communities around the topic of sustainability, helping to accept environmental crises and embrace personal commitment and make people contribute on their scale for good. This is related to the idea expressed by the participants in our study of not trying to depress or blame people for what they have done, but rather, make people feel happy by proposing that they do positive things for the environment. This is an important point since blaming, accusations and guilt for not keeping a sustainable way of life are very common and widely expressed in social media, even within the environmentalist movement, as Stuart (2022) points out.

@vivirsinplastico decided that they would speak positively, and not blame anyone: *“It doesn't matter how fast you walk the path, but the steps you take to make it last forever”*. @reducewastenow also says: *“It's not this judgmental zone, I just want to offer a very judgment-free, optimistic approach”*. @esturirafi put it this way: *“You have to try not to feel bad. Some people get depressed trying to be ecologically friendly and not being able to, and they get overwhelmed. We will have to do things as best we can in our circumstances without punishing ourselves. We do not accuse anyone”*.

This proactive narrative is also related to personal narratives that are expressed in the first person. This narrative depicts authenticity, personal involvement and speaking from one's perspective. For instance, @marianamatija draws pictures and her posts are part of her personal life: *“Sharing is a therapeutic process. Share frustrations, etc. I share it and invite reflections with me around something”*. In a very similar way, @laurainwaterland speaks from her own experience, as she goes out on her travels and takes little actions according to her way of understanding and helping nature. Also, @petitapetjada narrate from their family intimacy.

The underlying idea is that through their own experience, they are promoting a way to engage in possible actions that not only raise environmental awareness, but are also feasible, and make people feel that they are doing 'something' that will ultimately help. As @reducewastenow says: *“I spend all of my time inspiring people to do simple actions to help the environment, I think that's going to make a bigger difference in reducing waste in general”*.

However, not all of our participants are willing to expose themselves and spread their message in the first person. There are two anonymous accounts we contacted in our study, @publiclandshateyou and @easyecotips. In these cases, anonymity is a very important issue. @publiclandshateyou says that anonymity is a way to give a voice to nature: *“It's not a person's voice, it's the voice of the environment that speaks”*. For @easyecotips it is also relevant: there is a clear separation between individuals and the account. Maintaining anonymity is important so as not to contribute to gender stereotypes or people who are eco-responsible. The key thing for them is content. A very similar approach to that of @reducewastenow.

It is interesting to highlight that both choices of personalization vs. anonymity are made in a very conscious way, pursuing objectives of inclusion and reaching as many people as possible, following the idea of @noeona being mainstream. She wants to *“be the bridge between people who want to do things and organizations that need people. And if it can be on a large scale, even better”*.

### **3.4. The development of a community: Caring for nature and the community**

Borrowing from Puig de la Bellacasa (2012), we can say that care articulates, connects and signifies the lived worlds of our eco-activists, and it is the political capacity to re-arrange what becomes visible and relevant here. Thus, on the one hand, the activist practices we have analysed are situated in the everyday and the domestic realm, in the practices of cleaning, cooking, clothing, repairing and mending, which the participants extend to their activist activity. By doing that, they also extend this domestic care to the planet. A paradigmatic example of this is cleaning beaches up; it is an act of reparation for the damage caused by human agency, a way of acting responsibly on a harmed planet. On the other hand, by communicating these caring practices within their communities of followers, and taking care of them too, they seek to inspire, mobilize and actively engage, fostering solidarity and extending ethical and affective bonds from the household to the community.

In this sense, our interviewees are aware of the importance of engaging with their communities with respect, care and kindness. According to Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt (2017, p.92): “self-care and mutual support as a way to articulate a common experience to endure as ethical subjects; (...) these caring practices also indicate potential avenues for thinking about the relationship between care and policy”. This is part of what we define as gentle activism, that is, a kind of activism without guilt, often even aesthetic, that seeks engagement through visual and discursive kindness, and cooperation among community members. Articulating a community of care can be related to eco-feminism, too. As Vandana Shiva writes, ‘women are most directly involved with subsistence work and are the safeguards of the natural resources needed to sustain the family and community’ (Shiva 2014: 165).

Following this idea, all the participants in this research show an interest in growing their communities, where their followers (all with similar interests) collaborate and interact with one another (Barrett et al., 2016;). According to @laurainwaterland: *“My goal is really more to build this community and to inspire people to make changes in their lives and to also start to think about the bigger picture and also add their suggestions. For me, it's more about really creating a small community. I do try to engage as much as possible, reply to every single comment”*.

Another important point regarding the community is that they learn from each other: *“We learn a lot from our followers and clients, we are always listening. The comments, reviews”* (@ilovecyclo); *“I am also approached by my followers sometimes to post certain things that they care about. This could be videos about helping animal rights or a petition on environmental topics. I have many times experienced instances where followers have taught me something about the content I have posted, which I think is amazing. If I can help in the preservation of our planet through my Instagram account, I am more than happy with that”* (@planetpreserver). In the case of @publiclandshathey, he receives several images from his followers; they want him to use his account to report bad environmental practices they have

seen on public lands. He replies to each private message and generates conversations in every post.

In the case of @reducewatenow, their followers help each other: *“Even in the comments about the post two people are helping each other out; somebody will ask in the comments if anybody knows how to do something specific, like recycle this or do that, and then other people will reply to them and help them out. (...) It’s really cool”*.

In other cases, the community has been built more spontaneously (@vivirsinplastico), and even though they are heterogeneous, they try to strengthen ties with the community (@usaryreusar). *“In the end, you create a community where a lot of synergies are generated”* (@noeona).

#### **4. Communication and commitment (Discussion and conclusions)**

In this section, we delve into our research findings and conclude our primary research inquiries. These inquiries revolve around the narratives employed by dedicated individuals, both within their digital content and personal communication strategies, as well as their identity and stances concerning their online engagement. Following the same structure as in Section 3, we will examine: 1) The tensions arising from their dual identity as eco-influencers and eco-activists, 2) The nature of their advocacy for day-to-day, domestic, and small-scale activism, 3) Their communication approaches within Instagram activism, and 4) The significance of fostering a community dedicated to environmental care.

Regarding the first question on their identities, the interviewees expressed their discomfort at being tagged as ‘influencers’, and they acknowledge their modest activism when faced with figures such as Greta Thunberg. However, they expressed their determination and commitment to raise awareness about the environmental crisis, and, albeit hesitantly, admitted that their accounts’ activity is closer to activism than a means to obtain commercial benefits. Nonetheless, we have seen a great deal of diversity and different grades of hybridization between the activist and the influencer. For instance, one of the participants leads two NGOs devoted to creating awareness on oceans and fishing around the world. But most importantly, their positions are not static: and may change over time.

Secondly, according to our findings, these social media environmental activist practices promote the idea of a sustainable lifestyle, based on the fact that small daily actions contribute to achieving global changes. The practices distance themselves both from traditional forms of environmental communication in mass media and from social movements orientated towards protest and collective action in the public space. Conversely, they focus on summing up individual agencies and envisioning the domestic space as a setting for change. In this regard, our research is filling the gap between the research both an individualistic approach to environmental activism versus the collective or activist approach, by situating the community and the domestic space as a place for action. This aligns with research on lifestyle activism and consumption (Mak and Poon, 2023; Backardjieva, 2012).

Regarding the third question, communication practices are the core of their involvement with the environmental cause, and this is produced in the context of digital networks. Personalization leads actions and content to be distributed widely across social media and this is a principle that allows this form of activism that centre on personal, individual narratives (Rovira, 2016) which are, undoubtedly connected to the influencer culture in the context of Instagram (Leaver et al 2020), but also with the notion previously discussed of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Finally, this highlights the relationship between communication, community and care in the practices of these digital eco-activists. In this sense, to build a community and take care of it, it is necessary to develop a solid and real influence, which is important to fulfil its purpose of getting its environmental message across. Furthermore, these practices of community caring, far from boosting their egos, entail an affective involvement with nature, a way to build the future in the present and steadfastly create the conditions for a new world to emerge. In this regard, the prominence of women in our sample points to a future line of research in the framework of eco-feminism (Shiva and Mies, 2014). As Skosana and Cock (2023) point out, eco-feminism originated as a grassroots movement among women focused on environmental problems. This involves protecting nature, consuming natural resources minimally and revaluing nature as something more than a store of natural resources (p. 91). In this regard, not only can this be a lens through which to observe our further participants, but also to focus more on the study of communities in the global south.

In a nutshell, we can conclude that this form of digital activism borrows many features from the influencers' style and strategies of communication alongside new forms of collective action developed on the internet as horizontal, diffuse and connected. Even though most of our participants reject being considered 'influencers' or even 'activists', it can be stated that these two kinds of strategies and resources resonate in their committed activity, and this allows them to introduce environmental issues as a mainstream topic in the public sphere.

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## APPENDIXES

**Accounts analysed:**

@carlotabr una	@gerardodel villar	@trashisfort ossers	@leonardodica prio	@luisaneubaue r	@gretathunberg
@vivirsinpl astico	@sustainabl e_duo	@margreen _s	@laurainwaterla nd	@greentips cari uma	@the_plastic_fr ee_people
@mariana matija	@petitapetja da	@kortajaren ajon	@Happy_Plane t_Lifestyle	@ecogodess	@nubiaehijos
@goodkar mamart	@julicarvajal 33	@nancy_rys ol	@ecoquotes	@zerowastesto reecuador	@zerowastesto re
@verdealal ma	@publiclands hateyou	@fridaysforf uture.de	@reducewasten ow	@about_enviro nment	@kristenannieb ell
@get.wast e.ed	@futureearth	@elcambiol ogico	@planteaenver de	@ilovecyclo	@ecologistas
@easyecot ips_es	@unpackedsh op	@ceroresidu o	@esturirafi	@usaryreusar	@sinplastico
@ecoinven tos	@mindbodyg reen	@zerowaste home	@chicksforclima te	@zeroxplastic	@goingzerowas te
@unep	@the.eco.wa rrior	@greenpeac e	@thezerowaste guide	@wastefreepla net	@amenityofnatu re
@noe_ona	@honeycom _living	@mujer.sem illa	@packagefrees hop	@planet_preser ver	@need.eco.frien dly

## List of interviews:

1	@Vivirsinplastico	24/11/2020
2	@Laurainwaterland	22/12/2020
3	@Public_lands_hateyou	28/12/2020
4	@Reducewastenow	04/01/2021

5	@EasyEcoTips	15/01/2021
6	@petita_petjada	20/01/2021
7	@marianamatija	01/03/2021
8	@Usaryreusar	07/04/2021
9	@esturirafi	13/04/2021
10	@unpackedshop	19/04/2021
11	@planet_preserver	20/04/2021
12	@noe_ona	28/04/2021
13	@ilovecyclo	11/05/2021

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