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“I Do What I Do to Drive Change”: The Social- Symbolic Work of Sustainable Fashion Influencers

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Abstract

This paper aims to study how sustainable fashion influencers (SFIs) conduct social-symbolic work in their efforts to purposefully transform their followers' fashion consumption patterns. We conducted a netnographic study of the Finnish SFI scene, including observations of the SFIs' social media content and complementary in-depth interviews with a subset of SFIs. We identified three types of social-symbolic work conducted by the SFIs: identity work (narrating, reflecting and balancing), community

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work (tightening, expanding and magnetizing) and practice work (shaping meanings, competences, and materials). Most of the SFIs studied were micro-influencers in Finland. The paper contributes to research on sustainable fashion by highlighting the role of SFIs as drivers of institutional and cultural change, the role of social media in this pursuit, and the way sustainable fashion consumption is interlinked with digital life.

KEYWORDS: sustainable fashion, social media influencers, institutional theory

Introduction

The change toward a more sustainable fashion system requires efforts from multiple actors across the fashion market, from fashion designers, brands and retailers to consumers, but also policymakers or fashion associations (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2020; Karpova, Reddy-Best, and Bayat 2022). Mukendi et al. (2020, 284) defined sustainable fashion (SF) as “the variety of means by which a fashion item or behavior could be perceived to be more sustainable, including (but not limited to) environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free and anti-consumption, and production practices.” Therefore, sustainability in the context of fashion implies both environmental and social dimensions, including more sustainable use of virgin resources and/or fair and equal labor conditions.

Previous research on SF has focused on both the production side, such as supply chains and sustainable business models, and the consumption side, including individual-level perceptions of SF, as well as drivers and barriers of SF consumption (Mukendi et al. 2020). Consumers need to adopt new, more sustainable practices in clothing acquisition, use, and disposal. For example, they need to buy more consciously, prioritize secondhand purchases, use items for longer, repair and care for their clothes, and finally, recycle the clothes appropriately. Some studies have highlighted the role of SF pioneers and trendsetters in educating, advising and teaching other consumers (Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch 2015; Cervellon and Wernerfelt 2012; Mesiranta et al. 2021; Shen 2014). However, more research is still needed into how consumers’ SF practices can be shaped in society through institutional and cultural support (Karpova, Reddy-Best, and Bayat 2022; Mukendi et al. 2020).

One prominent mechanism through which this kind of institutional and cultural support manifests in today’s fashion world is social media (Chu and Seock 2020). The role assigned to influencers usually involves monetization through endorsements and advertising content. In Abidin’s (2015, 1) definition, influencers are “everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts.” According to a recent review by Pedroni (2023),

social media practitioners have gradually evolved from bloggers into influencers – a legitimate occupation holding significant social and cultural power that also goes beyond monetization. Previous research has identified various types of labor conducted by influencers in the area of fashion, including emotional labor (Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore 2018), esthetic labor (Brydges and Sjöholm 2019; McFarlane and Samsioe 2020), and passionate labor (McFarlane, Hamilton, and Hewer 2022).

In this study, we take a broader perspective to influencers and use the concept of sustainable fashion influencers (SFIs) as “influential content creators who discuss SF on social media” (Jacobson and Harrison 2022). Recently, the issue of SF has gained more traction in social media (Orminski, Tandoc, and Detenber 2021; Schöps, Reinhardt, and Hemetsberger 2022). However, studies on SF in social media have remained few (Leban et al. 2021; McKeown and Shearer 2019; Orminski, Tandoc, and Detenber 2021; Schöps, Reinhardt, and Hemetsberger 2022), and none have addressed it from the perspective of institutional and cultural change.

In this research, we build on the concept of “social-symbolic work” recently introduced by Lawrence and Phillips (2019). Social-symbolic work refers to intentional efforts of actors to influence social-symbolic objects, which are combinations of discursive, relational and material elements that constitute meaningful patterns in social systems (Lawrence and Phillips 2019, 31). In this study, the social-symbolic object is fashion consumption, where discursive elements include the text and talk related to fashion; relational elements, including social relations between consumers; and material elements, including material objects, such as clothing items. We study SFIs in Finland who purposefully aim to transform their followers’ fashion consumption patterns more sustainable. Finland is a theoretically fruitful context to study the phenomenon, as there has been increasing interest toward sustainable fashion and discussing societal issues is already prominent among Finnish social media users (Ping Helsinki 2023). The purpose of our study is to examine how these SFIs conduct social-symbolic work. We argue that social media and SFIs can help researchers study the forms of social-symbolic work in the realm of fashion, as social media is a public arena in which all three elements of social-symbolic work are present: discourses on fashion are created, relations between consumers are formed, and material objects are portrayed visually. Our study contributes to research on SF by demonstrating that SFIs are important drivers of institutional and cultural change, expanding the role of social media in promoting SF and explicating the role of digital life in SF consumption.

Theoretical background

Sustainable fashion consumption and online collectives

Most previous research on SF consumption has focused on individual consumers, such as their perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions

related to SF (e.g., Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch 2015; Gupta, Gwozdz, and Gentry 2019; Lundblad and Davies 2016; McNeill and Moore 2015; McNeill and Venter 2019; McNeill et al. 2020; Paço et al. 2021; Ritch 2020; see also Mukendi et al. 2020). However, as fashion is a highly social phenomenon, even a “collective activity” (Kawamura 2018, 2), SF consumption has a more social aspect to it. By looking beyond individuals, the role of collectives becomes apparent. In the age of digitalization, online collectives on social media have become sites where SF is discussed, negotiated, and promoted. Previous research has examined how knowledge on green fashion is shared on online green fashion forums (Cervellon and Wernerfelt 2012), how discussion on SF has changed on fashion forums (Shen 2014), what kinds of perceptions of SF opinion leaders on Twitter have (Orminski, Tandoc, and Detenber 2021), and how market actors – both human and non-human – portray the topic of “sustainable fashion” on social media (Schöps, Reinhardt, and Hemetsberger 2022).

Rather than focusing on the general discussions on social media, we approach online collectives related to SF from the viewpoint of influencers and acknowledge the role of these key individuals in promoting SF. Previous research has highlighted the new roles and positions that influencers, such as fashion bloggers or Instagram celebrities, can take within the mainstream fashion system. Influencers in fashion have taken roles previously assigned to fashion journalists or editors, such as being invited to fashion events or creating contemporary fashion photography (Dolbec and Fischer 2015; McQuarrie, Phillips, and Miller 2013). As Rocamora (2018) highlights, the labor of fashion influencers involves practices that vary between being a hobbyist and a pro-influencer, often involving mixing work with leisure. Influencers within fashion possess cultural, social, and economic capital, leading to symbolic capital that legitimizes their position in the fashion field (Pedroni 2015). These various forms of capital have been recently referred to also as celebrity capital (Brooks, Drenten, and Piskorski 2021). Their accumulation of capital is often based on self-learning and inborn “taste” which is why they might end up in a conflicting position in the field vis-a-vis journalists or other experts (Pedroni 2015).

Social influence has been identified as one of the most effective mechanisms for rendering consumer behavior more sustainable, as consumers are often impacted by what others think and do (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). A nascent literature has examined how celebrity influencers on social media can raise awareness of SF (McKeown and Shearer 2019), how SFIs educate others, and share information on SF (Mesiranta et al. 2021; Orminski, Tandoc, and Detenber 2021), how minimalist fashion consumption can be encouraged through participation in challenges on social media (Vladimirova 2021), and how influencers can be utilized as an advertising tactic in SF (Jacobson and Harrison 2022). It is crucial to underscore the distinctive capacity of

SFIs in influencing the consumption patterns of their followers in a way that deviates from mainstream practices. This unique aspect highlights the importance of SFIs in catalyzing social change within the broader context of the fashion industry. In conclusion, SFIs can have a significant role in supporting social change (Pedroni 2023). The current paper expands this discussion by taking the institutional perspective explicated in the next chapter.

Institutional perspective on sustainable fashion influencers

The institutional perspective is usually adopted to understand how social life is organized around deeply rooted, shared practices and understandings (Lawrence and Phillips 2019). One benefit of the institutional perspective is that it integrates the interplay of agents, such as consumers, with institutions, such as norms, rules, meanings, symbols, and practices (Baron et al. 2018; Karpova, Reddy-Best, and Bayat 2022). In the context of fashion, Dolbec and Fischer (2015) highlight the institutional work that regular fashion consumers do in the fashion system through their micro-level practices online, such as blogging and curating. This work results in new institutional logics, such as the logic of accessibility. Furthermore, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) identify plus-sized consumers as inspiring institutional entrepreneurs in the field of fashion, pressuring the mainstream fashion industry to better integrate previously marginalized fashion consumers. These institutional entrepreneurs are perceived by other consumers as not only changing the fashion market, but they are also inspiring others to change the market themselves. We argue that SFIs could also be seen as driving the change toward a more sustainable fashion system and consumption practices. By focusing on SFIs, our study complements the work of Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik (2020), who studied from a macro-perspective the various institutional constituents driving the change toward a more sustainable fashion system, including designers, manufacturers, retailers, fashion media, associations and consumers. This paper adds SFIs to the list, highlighting their potential to boost institutional change.

Social media affords SFIs a unique institutional context in which to influence others. According to many studies on influencers, this has the potential to increase their authenticity (e.g., Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson 2020; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). On the other hand, by becoming more popular, the influencers can also act as taste leaders and impact the habits and preferences of their audience (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; McQuarrie, Phillips, and Miller 2013). While consumers also make decisions and enact fashion consumption practices offline, the institutions of fashion – such as the norms, practices, and rules – are increasingly being shaped and negotiated online. Thus, technology – such as the different social media applications and the algorithms of digital marketing – mediates the interactions of SFIs (Schöps, Reinhardt, and Hemetsberger 2022). Furthermore, on social media, SFIs can

support the “new culture of fashion” that combines the institutional logics of art, commerce, and sustainability (Ozdamar Ertekin, Atik, and Murray 2020) into a culture that is relevant for consumers and able to solve some of the paradoxes in the current fashion system.

Within institutional theory, we draw inspiration from a novel framework of “social-symbolic work” developed by Lawrence and Phillips (2019). This framework extends and complements previous theory on institutional work by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). For our study, we use social-symbolic work as a method theory (Jaakkola 2020), as it offers a conceptual framework for contributing to the domain of SF research.

Although the concept of social-symbolic work has mainly been used in organizational and management literature and research (Barberá-Tomás et al. 2019; Pradies et al. 2021), it provides insight into the actions of SFIs on social media, as their actions can be understood as purposeful, reflexive efforts to change fashion consumption (the social-symbolic object), including its discursive, relational, and material elements. In our context, the social-symbolic work related to the discursive elements may manifest as creating texts and images (Lawrence and Phillips 2019, 32) about SF. The relational dimension includes establishing, maintaining, and negotiating interpersonal relationships (Lawrence and Phillips 2019, 33) between SFIs and their followers. Finally, the material dimension refers to how SFIs work with material objects (Lawrence and Phillips 2019, 35), such as clothes and their materials, as well as digital objects and artifacts. As Lawrence and Phillips (2019) emphasize, these dimensions are interlinked and always co-occurring within social-symbolic work. In conducting such work, SFIs address all these dimensions simultaneously.

Methods

Finland as a context for sustainable fashion

Finland, with its strong emphasis on sustainability, provides an ideal context for studying SF and SFIs. The secondhand fashion market has surged by 144% since 2015, becoming the largest category in the consumer-to-consumer (C2C) market (Finnish Commerce Federation, 2023). Young Finnish consumers aged 16–21, as identified by the VISU research project (Village for Sustainable Clothing), actively engage with fashion sustainability, showing interest in brand reports and clothing labels (Vassinen 2023). Social media, especially Instagram, significantly influences Finnish consumer behavior. According to Ping Helsinki's (2023) study, Instagram is the top platform for following influencers, though users focus on diverse topics rather than specific influencers (Ping Helsinki 2023). Roughly one-third of Finnish youth pay increased attention to political or societal issues in the media, spurred by social

media influencers, leading to heightened interest and discussions among peers.

Data generation

The data were generated using a netnographic (Kozinets 2020) approach between August 2020 and January 2023. Netnography is often referred to as online ethnography, but according to Kozinets (2020, 5), the emphasis on netnography today involves a qualitative research approach to social media data.

First, we planned the study so that the data generated would correspond to our aims. Thus, we immersed ourselves in the Finnish SF scene online and familiarized ourselves with the phenomenon and its advocates on social media. During the first phases of this immersive engagement, we observed the online expressions (images, posts, texts) shared about SF to achieve an initial cultural understanding of the phenomenon (Kozinets 2020). This phase was conducted for about three months. Next, we initiated a more systematic data collection by investigating, searching and listing all the potential SFIs in an Excel sheet. We used mainly snowball sampling to search for suitable SFIs, i.e., we examined who the initial identified SFIs were following or being followed by whom. In the interviews, we also requested the SFIs to mention any other SFIs they would see relevant for our study. We also searched for hashtags on Instagram (e.g., #sustainablefashionfinland and #circularfashion (in Finnish)) that were used by some of the SFIs to search for other SFIs who used the same hashtags. We set two criteria for including SFIs in our dataset. First, the SFIs must have been active on at least one social media channel, which, in our sample, was usually Instagram. Some of them had published SF related content for longer (2+ years), some were newer to the subject but showed clear intention to be perceived as influencers. Second, they had to regularly and frequently post about themes related to SF, such as secondhand fashion, SF consumption practices and, for example, upcycling. The content of their postings also had to be mainly focusing on SF rather than other sustainability issues, such as veganism. Many of the SFIs also mentioned SF in their Instagram biography although this was not a requirement for inclusion. The content of the selected SFIs was then examined across various social media platforms (including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok) to ensure that they fit our criteria. Even though most of the informants were influencers with less than 5,000 followers, the number of followers was not a criterion for inclusion. Observations of the SFI scene in Finland continued until January 2023. Thus, immersion was an ongoing process during the data collection phase in netnography (Kozinets 2020), during which the first author wrote an immersion journal about her notions and observations.

During the examination of content created by several SFIs, we selected 11 SFIs to contact and interact with in person. According to

Kozinets (2020, 141) interaction with the study's online participants is a significant part of netnographic research, especially if the phenomenon studied includes themes or topics not discussed online. Indeed, topics such as the SFIs' motivations and aims regarding their social media profiles, actions taken on them, and general online presence are hardly discussed publicly by SFIs. Hence, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected SFIs to dive deeper into their thoughts, ideas, and experiences related to being an SFI. This resulted in over 1,000 min of interview data.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via Teams or Zoom. Most of the interviewees were micro-influencers with fewer than 5,000 followers. Number of followers, however, does not correlate with the relevance of an influencer, as micro-influencers are perceived to be more credible sources of information, meaning that they have greater potential to affect their followers' behavior (Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson 2020).

The interviewees were at different stages of their careers as social media influencers, as numbers of followers, lengths of histories as SFIs, and degrees of professionalism (i.e., whether they considered influencing as a hobby vs as a livelihood) varied. Topics discussed during the interviews included their personal experiences and knowledge related to secondhand fashion and fashion consumption in general, their social media careers and the motivations and aims regarding them, possible networks created, and relationships established with other SFIs. Furthermore, during the interviews, the researchers highlighted selected content from the SFIs' own social media platforms to discuss it in more detail with the interviewees. This allowed us to make connections between what was presented on social media and the underlying reasons for creating that kind of content. The social media data of the interviewees are also used in this article to illustrate the analysis. All participants gave their consent to use this data for research purposes. Table 1 presents the information of each interviewee. The Instagram biographies of each informant are included to authenticate their devotion to SF.

Simultaneously with the interviews, we extended our data collection by examining the interviewees' social media profiles, mining relevant posts for a more comprehensive research data set. The curation of these posts adhered to the conceptual framework of social-symbolic work, with a specific focus on content related to sustainable fashion. However, the observation of SFIs' social media channels was not limited solely to SF related posts. As suggested by Kozinets (2020), during immersion phase researchers look up for deep data, referring to identifying resonating, interesting data as well as recognizing regarding lead users, and reflecting researchers' notes (e.g., from immersion journal) with theory, as well as attempting to detect what is meaningful, and what is going on. These data included screenshots of photos with text attached and video clips. We transcribed the most relevant video clips, such as

Table 1. Information on interviewees' social media pages and the interviews.

SFI (pseudonym)	Number of followers/ subscribers	Description/Biography	Length of interview
Abigail	21.7k (Instagram)	Expert on circular economy, textile recycling and textile maintenance. Sustainability influencer. Speaker.	1 h 47 min
Bianca	13.4k (Instagram), 43.2k (TikTok)	Sustainable fashion's plus-sized chick! Come along with me!	1 h 27 min
Christine	3,990 (Instagram), 7,680 (YouTube)	Creative kook who loves to dress up in secondhand and vintage. I also do make-up! #thriftshoptours #fittingstories	1 h 35 min
Danielle	2,900 (Instagram), 9,100 (TikTok)	About sustainable style and beyond. Sustainable, DIY, and thrift stores.	1 h 43 min
Evelyn	2,880 (Instagram)	Not available	1 h 29 min
Fiona	2,270 (Instagram)	Daily secondhand outfits. Messing around, secondhand, and skin care.	1 h 53 min
Gabrielle	2,230 (Instagram), 13.1k (TikTok)	Inspiration for outfits. More sustainable and workable wardrobe. Thrift finds and DIY stuff.	1 h 34 min
Isabella	1,650	A lifestyle hippie dives into the fascinating world of thrift stores and refashion.	1 h 29 min
Janet	1,130	Thrifty fashionista. Welcome to my style files. Secondhand and thrifted fashion. Vintage mixed with modern.	1 h 32 min
Kayla	<1,000	Branded and unbranded fashion. Try to say NO to new fast fashion.	1 h 32 min
Lucy	<1,000	A group of volunteers on behalf of more sustainable consumption.	1 h 37 min

Instagram stories, TikTok videos, and YouTube videos, to better and easier analyze their content.

Data analysis

The first author performed the first round of analysis, during which the collected data, including relevant social media posts and transcribed interview data, were analyzed. The relevance of the posts that were included in analysis were evaluated based on the criteria explained above. In the first phase of analysis, the number of social media posts was higher, but as analysis proceeded, the focus moved to those that were highly relevant from the chosen theoretical point-of-view. The first author used Atlas.ti to code any content related to social-symbolic work and its varieties. Specifically, she noted whether the content described any form of self work (identity work, emotion work or career work), organization work (strategy work, boundary work, or technology work) or institutional work (practice work or category work) (Lawrence and Phillips 2019). Next, the authors jointly discussed the initial codings. During the analysis, the types of social-symbolic work and their

subcategories were reclassified as identity work, community work, and practice work, as the original division of social-symbolic by Lawrence and Phillips (2019) did not fit these data well.

During the second round of analysis, the netnographic and interview data were analyzed with the intention of identifying new dimensions of the renamed forms of social-symbolic work. This was done jointly by the authors, resulting in identifying three subcategories of each form of social-symbolic work. Namely, identity work comprises narrating, reflecting, and balancing; community work comprises tightening, expanding, and magnetizing; and practice work comprises shaping meanings, competences, and materials.

Identity work: narrating, reflecting, and balancing

The first type of social-symbolic work identified in our data was identity work. By identity work, we refer to efforts to shape an individual's self (see also Lawrence and Phillips 2019, 56). Identity work has three forms: *narrating*, *reflecting*, and *balancing*.

When narrating, SFIs share their recovery stories about their journeys from being “fast fashion junkies” to rethinking the sustainability of and changing such consumption behavior. Through narration, SFIs seek to become figures their followers can identify with. Many share the stories behind their interest in secondhand fashion and the motivations behind consuming fashion more sustainably. Some of the SFIs have shared videos in which they thoroughly discuss their values and enlightenment regarding the unsustainability of fast fashion consumption. In one video, an SFI openly shares her past consumption behavior, her past habits concerning fast fashion purchases, and how she has stopped visiting fast fashion stores altogether, where she feels like she is in the wrong place.

I started to get tired of the poor quality [of the fast fashion clothes], and also, the media did its part in reporting negatively about, for example, [a fast fashion firm] and its negative effects on working conditions, etc., which made me consider that I would stop shopping there. Finally, after several months of consideration, I decided that I would stop buying clothes from [the fast fashion store], like, ‘that’s it’. At the time, I didn’t think I would give up buying fast fashion entirely, but I thought that I would give up [buying clothes from] this one, problematic brand. [...] Where am I now? I have now stopped buying any new fast fashion, but I still buy quite a lot of fast fashion clothes from thrift stores... I’m not perfect. (Danielle, Instagram video)

In another example, an SFI explains to her followers why she changed her Instagram nickname, which earlier referred to secondhand shopping. She describes how she has shaped herself and her identity into

a person who is more conscious of her consumption habits and buying frequency.

Hello! Hope you recognized me. So, I have a new Instagram (IG) handle. The reason why I wanted to switch up my handle is that [her previous IG handle] feels to me kind of like a different persona from my past. That girl was kind of lost with her style, got caught up with keeping up with the latest trends and was shopping way too much. Present me is still thrifty and still loves fashion – or should I say clothes and personal style – but is a bit more ... content with what she already has. (Janet, Instagram post)

By sharing their stories and experiences, they negotiate and discuss their identities as SF consumers who were formerly fast fashion consumers or who bought too much. By sharing “weaknesses” from their past and some “soft spots” in their present, they are being authentic and can thus encourage their followers to reflect on, and further transform, their identities as fashion consumers.

The second form of identity work is *reflecting*, which concerns one’s consumption habits or attitudes toward fashion. SFIs critically evaluate their own fashion consumption and “think out loud” about what is right and wrong. This work is about contemplating one’s own emotions and values, positioning them within the past, present, and the future. They bring forth the faults in their current consumer habits, and thus in their identities as consumers, such as buying too many secondhand clothes or clothes that pile up in their closets unused.

Now there’s a challenge for my future shopping: to recognize those truly perfect pieces in the thrift store and leave the ‘just oks’ there. At this point, my prefrontal cortex is clearly not at the point of development where I can turn down a cheap item that’s ‘pretty cute’. But hey, acknowledgement is the first step, right?! [...] Tell me: do you only thrift for the VERY special, perfect pieces? Or are you like me and still make purchases that end up not loved passionately? (Janet, Instagram post)

In addition to unveiling their less sustainable consumption patterns, some SFIs also discuss their feelings regarding buying secondhand, and bring up the emotions of guilt from overbuying too many clothes from secondhand stores. An SFI even announced that she would stop purchasing clothes for a time to relieve her guilt.

I have noticed that an excessive amount of clothes has started to accumulate in my closet lately. I haven’t restricted my thrift shopping and have just thought that this is ‘responsible’ anyways. But that’s not the case. Today I got excited about all the trendy

plus-size garments they had at UFF [second-hand store]. Afterwards, I was terrified and thought about how many of the same clothes that are sold at the fast fashion stores are simultaneously sold in thrift stores. Remorse hit me. So here is where I start my thrifting strike. (Bianca, Instagram post)

Finally, identity work implies *balancing* between identities of being a sustainable consumer and a fashion influencer. It has two aspects. First, it refers to the dilemma between the two contradictory roles of a social media influencer: doing commercial collaborations with brands and being a sustainability influencer. As previous researchers have suggested (Abidin 2015; Ouvrein et al. 2021), influencers are often thought of as people who collaborate with brands to earn money, and in this way, influence followers' consumption behaviors. However, as SFIs, our informants aim to encourage their followers to buy *less* and consume clothes, and fashion in general, in a sustainable and responsible way (i.e., to buy secondhand and to maintain and take care of clothes) rather than buying *more*. Thus, they tend to struggle to find a balance between accepting chances to earn money by promoting products and services to their followers to buy, and on the other hand, acting as conscious and sustainable influencers. This is manifested through carefully selecting the brands with whom they collaborate and whose products they are willing to promote. Sometimes this means even declining firms' collaboration requests.

I had just gotten a collaboration request from a [brand name], and luckily, we actually talked about it with another influencer, and the firm is quite questionable [in terms of sustainability], so I just don't jump into those [collaborations] [...] And on the other hand, one just needs to do paid collaborations, because I also dream about creating my own [social media] content even as a part-time job. Even though I already kind of do, for now, I don't earn that much money from it, so there should be some collaborations to make a living out of this. Again, it's quite controversial. (Bianca, Interview)

If something [a paid collaboration] was offered to me, I would seize it if it would be in line with my values. I can't come up with that many companies that I would be willing to promote. (Janet, Interview)

Among SFIs, perhaps, an identity as an influencer is not based on commercial collaborations but on contributing to charity and the common good. As one participant expressed, she is gradually finding a balance between identifying herself as an influencer or a person who just creates content for the common good and educating people about sustainability issues when it comes to fashion.

Perhaps I would say that I'm some sort of sustainability inspirer, but probably not an influencer. In my opinion, being an influencer is a profession. Like really, a job that they make a livelihood with, and that is not something that I do. This is fully a pro-bono job that I do [on Instagram] and that I create interesting content for others. (Fiona, Interview)

Second, in addition to balancing between the two influencer identities, some SFIs must balance between the roles they play as consumers. On the one hand, they strive to rarely buy any garments or buy selectively, but on the other hand, they also aim to constantly create new content for social media channels, and hence feel the urge to buy new secondhand pieces from thrift stores to style and photograph new outfits.

In the beginning, the Instagram account was about me sharing my [second-hand] finds, and that's it. But, dangerously, the situation has turned in a way that if I have found a garment, I might be like, 'Wow, this is nice, this would serve as great Instagram content. But I'm not sure if I will ever use this, but I still have to buy it'. [...] Most probably, I currently buy more clothes than I did before establishing the Instagram account, so somehow, it is like adding fuel to the fire. (Janet, Interview)

When I see that a video works well, I want to create similar content, and thus I end up making purchases that I wouldn't otherwise make. (Bianca, Interview)

What defines identity work is that some of the work is done publicly, for the eyes of followers, while other work is conducted privately, behind the scenes. For example, narrating and reflecting are mostly done publicly, in the SFIs' posts, whereas balancing is mostly visible in the interview data shared privately with the researchers. By narrating, telling stories about and shedding light on their past fashion consumption habits, the SFIs create and tell a survival story that can be compared to a spiritual enlightenment concerning (fast) fashion consumption. By doing so, they give their followers something to identify with – a storyline they can follow and pursue to do the same. In addition, by reflecting on their present identity, which is “a work in progress,” SFIs can build their charismatic influence on the perception of realness, as described by Pedroni (2023, 250).

Community work: tightening, expanding, and magnetizing

The second form of social-symbolic work is community work, by which we mean practices that shape the SF community (see also Lawrence and

Phillips 2019, 116). Here, a community is formed by SFIs and their followers. By “community members” we hereafter refer to (1) SFIs and fellow SFIs, and/or (2) SFIs and their followers. For a community to exist, it must have members in the community as well as actors who are not. A sense of community is created through shared values, practices, and a shared social identity (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). Thus, a community must have boundaries, and they need to be managed and maintained (Närvänen, Koivisto, and Kuusela 2019). Community work consists of *tightening* and *expanding* its boundaries, and *magnetizing* forces and movements around key influencers.

First, community work includes purposeful attempts and actions to *tighten* community boundaries and strengthen relationships between community members. Here, the community members constantly discuss which actors and members are part of the community and which are not. This discussion is driven by SFIs, and mostly by key influencers, who often have the role of leading the community and writing the community rules. One of the key influencers interviewed had created lists of sustainable brands (i.e., “the good guys”) and actively raised concerns about fast fashion brands. In her Instagram, she explains the existence and creation of such a list of SF brands.

Why did I make a list of sustainable/responsible brands? [...] I get a lot of questions about responsible actors [in the fashion industry], so there was a suitable momentum already to compose them together into a list. [...] This list is not an inclusive list, but rather directional. I have composed it based on my personal values. In other words, based on which brands I buy myself, and on which services I’m willing to use and promote to others. (Abigail, Instagram story)

Tightening the boundaries of the community – or, here, the sustainability bubble on social media – also gives a sense of belonging to those in the SF community. This strengthens the consumer attitudes and behaviors accepted within the community (Moraes, Carrigan, and Szmigin 2012). Additionally, relationships between SFIs are strengthened. Our informants feel a sense of community with other SFIs and feel like they do not compete for the number of followers. SFIs also occasionally take part in SF-related challenges (Vladimirova 2021) in which they publish photos, for example, of outfits that are fully second-hand (e.g., OOOTDs, “old-outfits-of-the-day”) or something they already have (e.g., “shop your closet”). SFIs often initiate or “host” such challenges, and by taking part in them, other SFIs and their followers can extend a sense of belonging to a wider SF community.

She is this one friend who I think I found on Instagram, and together we have thought about hosting our own clothing

challenge, and this ‘twinning’ [a challenge in which users post photos wearing clothes in a certain color, for example] was an emerging idea, and we thought we could host such challenges even more at some point. They create this buzz and interaction on Instagram. (Janet, Interview)

Another important tool for tightening the “sustainability bubble” is the algorithms of social media, and more specifically, actively working with them. An SFI describes how the algorithms work and how she has sought a new manner of talking about a firm she dislikes:

I realized that every single time I write something about [a fast fashion firm] on Instagram [...] all my followers start to get advertisements from that brand. And I surely don’t want that. [...] However, I don’t want to prevent myself from talking about those things. I just have to find a way to do it [talk about those firms] so that that advertising won’t happen. (Abigail, Interview)

In her Instagram stories, she actively educates her followers on how to work with social media algorithms in line with the values she preaches. She shares several strategies to cope with the algorithms – specifically, how to modify them to work against unsustainable/unethical brands and act on behalf of sustainable/ethical brands. According to the interviewee, these strategies include (1) tagging sustainable but not unsustainable firms in posts and (2) actively searching for and following sustainable brands on social media to redirect the algorithms in a more favorable direction. In other words, algorithms are manipulated deliberately to display content showing sustainable brands and fashion consumption behaviors.

If you talk about Shein and other fast fashion brands, do not tag them! [...] Because if you do, the algorithm of Instagram recognizes your postings as recommendations [of the mentioned brands] and thus starts to advertise the mentioned firm and similar ones to all of your friends and followers. Only tag the ‘good guys’ in your postings. (Abigail, Instagram Story)

Start following the “good brands”. This tells Instagram's algorithm that you are interested in sustainability [...] and that you are not into fast fashion. (Abigail, Instagram Story)

As mentioned above, she also encourages and reminds her followers to actively harness algorithms by searching for the kind of content that they want to see instead of just receiving passively to what the algorithms show them. This is in line with previous research (Cotter 2019) suggesting that influencers often see algorithms as a game whose rules

one should learn to gain visibility. Thus, they consciously interact with them.

Along with tightening relationships among community members, it is also important to expand the borders of communities and to “proselytize” and draw new members into the communities (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). Consumers not yet interested in SF are seen as potential recruits to help communities spread awareness about the unsustainability of fast fashion to a wider audience, adopt SF consumption practices and attitudes, and question the whole fashion system as it is. One of the key concerns of the interviewed SFIs is how to spread the word and increase awareness regarding SF consumption among mainstream fashion consumers. This also means targeting new followers from among those who have not previously been interested in SF. To work on this, SFIs purposefully discuss other topics beyond SF, such as beauty, health, fitness and family:

They don't even have to be interested in sustainability-related things. They can still follow me, and maybe because of that, I have created all types of content and brought up topics related to, like, mental health, body positivity, diabetes, and what not. Partly just because I can then slip in the sustainability-related things for those who follow me due to body-positivity-related content. (Bianca, Interview)

Many SFIs open up about other aspects of life rather than just creating content related to SF. This approach is reasonable, as this way, consumers who do not identify themselves as SF consumers or show much awareness about consumption in general are likelier to follow SFIs. SF-related content might not be interesting to a large audience; thus, talking solely about the pros of secondhand fashion and the cons of the fast-fashion industry could be perceived as alienating.

Another way to expand the SF community is to unite with fellow SFIs, create content together to increase each other's visibility, and in this way, gain new followers. They also purposefully promote and tag each other in social media posts and Instagram stories – for example, by listing their “favorite SFIs” for others to follow. Three of the interviewed SFIs had also made Instagram Live recordings together in which they discussed SF (e.g., their best recent secondhand finds). One SFI published a YouTube video in which she went thrift shopping with fellow SFIs. This way, each of the SFIs could introduce new SFIs to their own audience to follow on social media, thereby increasing the number of followers for each of them.

If we think of it that way, that we share each others' stuff [on social media], and that there are a lot of good things that my followers could find. And again, for example, Gabrielle has

gained a lot of followers through my profile, and I have gained a lot [of followers] through Gabrielle's profile. Isn't it only a good thing if we can support each other? [...] Now, with Gabrielle and Bianca, [since] we have gotten to know each other on social media, we can brainstorm social media stuff together, we have similar content, we can co-create content, so that it brings more good to everyone. (Danielle, Interview)

The third form of community work is *magnetizing*. This refers to the community centralizing around a few key SFIs. In this context, these actors have greater audiences than other SFIs, and therefore more power within the community, as well as visibility on social media platforms and, sometimes, on other media too. It is characteristic for them to write the rules of the community, define what is right and wrong, and share and raise awareness around different topics within the SF consumption community. Such topics include, for example, the (un)sustainability of certain fashion brands, and maintaining and recycling garments correctly. Because a key influencer has a lot of followers and a relatively large audience on her posts, the content attracts broad attention among other SFIs and followers who are interested in similar topics.

Magnetizing often manifests as sharing and re-sharing materials created by other SFIs, especially by the key influencers within a community. Other SFIs often pay special attention to key influencers' words and deeds and reshare the content shared by these opinion leaders. Here, sociomaterial elements play an important role, as magnetization occurs when the opinion-leader-produced materials are re-shared. During our interviews, the SFIs also reported following certain key influencers in the field and being inspired by them.

Well, my latest inspiration has been Abigail. I view her content every day, and I'm amazed by the amount of knowledge and experience she has gained in the clothing industry in general. She is my number one inspo at the moment. (Christine, Interview)

Practice work: shaping meanings, competences, and materials

The third form of social-symbolic work, practice work, refers to creating, maintaining, and disrupting practices, or rather, elements of practices within the context of fashion consumption. These elements, drawn from our data, are *meanings*, *materials*, and *competences*.

Whereas Lawrence and Phillips (2019, 189) discuss creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions as the third form of social-symbolic work, our data suggested that much of the shaping of the elements of

Figure 1

A collage of SFIs' Instagram posts about secondhand outfits, shows that secondhand fashion can be fashionable, too.



fashion systems is related to practices around fashion. To transform the fashion system and make it more sustainable, consumers' consumption practices in each consumption phase (purchasing, using, disposing) must be redirected and transformed as well. Even practices are difficult to change as such; thus, SFIs tend to change practices gradually by shaping and transforming the elements of practices – namely, meanings, competences and materials (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012).

Our data showed that much practice work is directed toward changing *meanings* related to SF, particularly secondhand fashion. As pointed out in previous literature (Hur 2020), many consumers consider secondhand fashion undesirable and even risky due to the potentially poor quality and cleanliness of already-owned garments. SFIs aim to shape these beliefs and assumptions by esthetic means, such as photos in which they turn their secondhand finds into fashionable, trendy outfits (Figure 1).

The SFIs often put considerable effort into these posts to show that one does not need to give up on being fashionable. In this way, they aim to inspire and encourage their followers to visit thrift stores to find fashionable pieces for their outfits. As Bianca describes in her TikTok video,

"I want to be here [on TikTok] to provide inspiration about clothing, and to prove that you can dress uniquely and wonderfully, even if you were responsible at the same time." In our interview data, other SFIs also explain how they create content to change followers' assumptions about secondhand fashion and counteract negative stigma around it.

I'm extremely thankful that quite many [of my followers] contact me and explain that "Wow, because of you, I went to a thrift store today and found all this and that wonderful", and the best thing is when people really send me photos of those thrifted finds. That gives me a feeling that I'm doing something right. (Christine, Interview)

For my part, I feel like I'm normalizing it [thrift shopping], that it's normal and usual and even desirable to go to thrift stores, that it's not gross or unhygienic or something only poor people do. That it's not something one should be ashamed of. Rather I think it's the fuzzi and Instagram culture that could contaminate this kind of perception of thrifted fashion for those people who are not in this world [of sustainable fashion]. Like "Oh, this really is nice and inspiring, even cheap, and [laughs] normal" (Janet, Interview)

To encourage followers to adopt SF consumption practices – such as buying clothes in secondhand stores, maintaining and making the best of already-owned pieces, and recycling garments correctly, SFIs promote (Mesiranta et al. 2021) competences that are relevant when enacting sustainable ways of consuming fashion. For example, in a video clip, an SFI demonstrates how she turned two white, thrifted men's shirts into a trendy dress by using scissors and simply sewing pieces together. In this way, she shows how one can dress according to contemporary trends without visiting a fast fashion store but just by using imagination and purchasing recycled, secondhand garments.

Another much discussed topic among SFIs is the maintenance of clothes and accessories. The SFIs tend to intervene in and shape everyday practices and ways of doing things that might be often taken for granted, such as doing laundry in a certain way. For example, one of the interviewees dedicated a whole series of Instagram posts and stories to cloth maintenance and instructions on how to machine wash clothes in a correct, sustainable way. The series contains instructions related to machine-washing everyday clothes, removing stains, and making laundry vinegar to freshen textiles and keep them tidy and without tuft for longer. Many SFIs also demonstrate step by step how to maintain garments and accessories and keep them in good shape for longer. In a video clip, one of the interviewed SFIs demonstrates how she maintains a knitwear she bought in a thrift store.

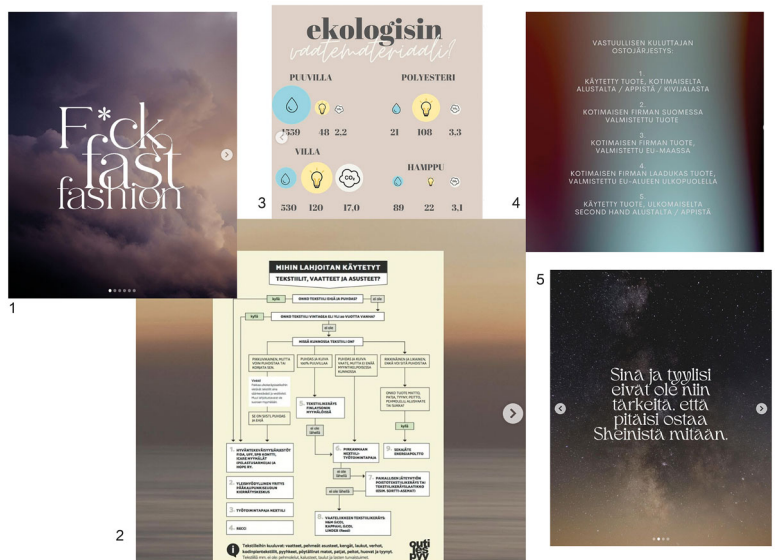
Here I have one of my latest second-hand finds, namely, a knit dress that's 100% woolen, but it's full of animal hair and also a bit tufted as well, so today, we are going to maintain and overhaul it. To maintain such a sleek knit garment, you need only two things. First, a clothes brush, and second, a lint remover [...] First of all, set your knit on a pillow, so that the underlay bends a bit. Then, just start brushing with strong strokes in both directions. With only brushing, we removed this much lint! Secondly, get on with the lint remover, don't press too hard, but gently move it around on the fabric. [...] And wow, the dress seems brand new! Let's remember to take care of our clothes. (Christine, Instagram reel)

Another SFI also shares tips on how to make tights last longer in the form of a reel video on Instagram in which she demonstrates each step needed to make the tights more elastic and durable, together with descriptive subtitles:

1. Make sure you take one size bigger than it says in the package-sizing chart.
2. Stretch the tights carefully but entirely. Use water thoroughly! That is also why it is so important to buy these a day before, not minutes before use.
3. If and when you don't want them to rip from the toes, use socks underneath. Also, remember to make sure your nails are short and soft.
4. Watch out for the zippers! Enjoy your tights longer! (Fiona, Instagram reel)

Social media is an excellent platform on which to shape practices, as it provides a route for distributing materials that are useful in adopting new practices or shaping existing ones. Specifically, SFIs share materials that are useful for learning and becoming familiar with certain types of textiles and the right practices for maintaining them and recycling clothes correctly. [Figure 2](#) presents materials shared by SFIs in which they discuss topics related to SF and fashion consumption. One SFI shared several posts in which she visually demonstrated, for example, which materials require the most resources, such as water and energy, or have the largest carbon footprint ([Figure 2](#), [Picture 3](#)). Another SFI posts information about a hierarchical order for buying clothes in the most sustainable way ([Figure 2](#), [Picture 4](#)). The heading translates as, "A buying order for a responsible consumer", shady fast fashion companies ([Figure 2](#), [Picture 5](#)). The heading translates as, "You and your style are not important enough for you to buy anything from Shein", and flowcharts on how to recycle textiles correctly ([Figure 2](#), [Picture 2](#)). These posts are often created in an esthetically pleasing manner to tempt followers to share them on their own profiles. In addition, some SFIs actively encourage their followers to share materials: "Could you kindly share the post [on textile recycling] from my feed? In this way we could share it with as many people as possible. Thank you!"

Figure 2
SFI-originated materials, created and shared to shape the elements of fashion practices.



Discussion

Theoretical contributions

This study has answered the call to understand the institutional and cultural support required to make the fashion system more sustainable (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015, 2020; Ozdamar Ertekin, Atik, and Murray 2020; Karpova, Reddy-Best, and Bayat 2022; McKeown and Shearer 2019; Mukendi et al. 2020). We complement the work by Jacobson and Harrison (2022) who focused on the role of SFIs in promoting SF. Our findings envision a much broader role by illuminating the daily work of SFIs in striving for institutional change through their followers. In particular, by focusing on the social-symbolic work conducted by SFIs, we identified three types of work: identity work, community work, and practice work.

First, our findings on identity work reveal how the work conducted by SFIs is both public and private in nature, characterized by relatability and constant contradictions. By narrating, telling stories about their past, and shedding light on their former fashion consumption habits, the SFIs create and tell a survival story that can be compared to a spiritual enlightenment concerning (fast) fashion consumption. By doing so, they provide their followers a figure to identify with – a storyline they can follow and pursue to do the same. This emphasizes the role of micro-influencers in particular, as they provide more authentic and relatable content for their followers. Previous research has focused on celebrities (Leban et al. 2021; McKeown and Shearer 2019) and opinion leaders (Orminski, Tandoc, and Detenber 2021).

Our findings also highlight the paradoxes SFIs face in their identity work. These findings support Jacobson and Harrison's (2022) emphasis on the contradiction between sustainability and business profitability. Similarly, Carollo and Guerci (2018) discuss how sustainability managers in organizations construct their identities based on the paradoxical nature of corporate sustainability (Hahn et al. 2015). Like sustainability managers, SFIs in our interview data discursively construct their identities atop paradoxical identity tensions (Carollo and Guerci 2018, 254). In our study, the paradoxical identity tensions are related to consumerism/consumer identity (sustainable consumer vs fashionista/fashionable consumer) and identifying as a social media influencer (business/money vs sustainability values). We identified balancing as a concrete form of social-symbolic work that facilitates the negotiation of these identity tensions.

Second, our findings on community work highlight how important it is to understand behavioral change of consumers in the context of fashion as a social and collective phenomenon rather than merely at the individual consumer level (cf. Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch 2015; Gupta, Gwozdz, and Gentry 2019; Ritch 2020). Creating, maintaining and shaping an online community around SF is essential. Social media provides a platform on which it is possible for SFIs to exist in the first place and to influence consumers' attitudes, values, perceptions, and behaviors related to fashion consumption – and most importantly, to scale this influence. By tightening the community, the relationships between SFIs and their followers are strengthened, and by expanding the community, the shared information can reach ever-larger numbers of consumers, encouraging more people to scrutinize their fashion consumption habits and even to question the fashion system as a whole. The key influencers, around whom the whole community tends to magnetize and on whom other SFIs focus and rely, usually have an essential role in managing and writing the rules of the community. Furthermore, community work is not just about human inputs and resources. Consumption communities consist of people, things, and ideas (Diaz Ruiz, Penalosa, and Holmqvist 2020). Similarly, the SFI community can be seen as an assemblage of people, algorithms, platforms, hashtags, visual images, texts, and activities enabled by technology (Schöps, Reinhardt, and Hemetsberger 2022). Keeping the SFI community together and thriving requires collaboration between human and non-human elements. For instance, social media algorithms may either help or hinder the community. In this way, they have meaningful agency, and thus are something the community members need to be aware of.

Finally, our findings on practice work extend research on SF consumption by emphasizing how SFIs influence all phases of the consumption cycle, from purchase to use and disposition. While others have focused mainly on changing purchasing behavior (Lundblad and Davies 2016) or on alternative forms of consumption, such as swapping and

renting (McNeill and Venter 2019) or upcycling (Bhatt, Silverman, and Dickson 2019), our findings reveal attempts to change everyday materials, meanings, and competencies related to fashion consumption. These may include washing and repairing clothes as well as avoiding new purchases. Furthermore, social media provides an especially pragmatic platform for concretely translating sustainability knowledge into practical tips, showing how to do things step-by-step, and to curate content that is attractive, interesting, and easily consumable by the followers (see also Joosse and Brydges 2018). In contrast to traditional fashion influencers, SFIs not only share their styles and tastes (Pedroni 2015; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) but demonstrate a variety of practical skills needed throughout the (sustainable) consumption cycle.

In conclusion, our study contributes to research on SF in three ways. First, we identify SFIs as important drivers of institutional and cultural change in everyday life. While others have identified various other stakeholders in the fashion system (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015, 2020), the role of SFIs is to be relatable role models for consumers, to facilitate the creation of a community and to provide concrete means through which consumption practices can be changed. Second, this study enhances our understanding of the role of social media in advancing a more sustainable fashion system. While previous research has highlighted institutional changes taking place in the fashion system due to online consumer interactions (Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), our study shows how this may also influence the system's sustainability. Third, our study contributes to understanding SF consumption as a phenomenon that is not only direct at individual consumption choices or practices but interconnected with life in the digital world, together with its technologies and devices. Furthermore, it is linked to institutional and cultural dimensions, such as what is seen as fashionable or as waste. In addition, we contribute to the theoretical landscape of social-symbolic work by extending its scope from organizational context into the context of sustainability in fashion, and more specifically, illuminate how social-symbolic work manifests in the contemporary work of SFIs.

Practical implications

Our study offers practical implications for both fashion industry practitioners as well as social media influencers advocating a more sustainable future. SFIs are useful partners for the fashion industry. First, SFIs aim to reach their entrepreneurial goals by reaping monetary benefits without needing to compromise their values related to sustainable consumerism. Therefore, they are often willing to promote genuinely sustainable brands through their channels to build and shape their identities. Thus, companies who present such values should seek to promote their brands through SFIs and use their social media presence as a valuable

opportunity to transparently communicate brands' backgrounds and aims. Second, as SFIs must constantly manage their communities of followers, the communities become quite strong. Expanding and strengthening community boundaries also includes discussion of acceptable brands. This means that the values of a brand that the community approves must pass a serious screening by the SFIs, who investigate whether the company is worth promoting to their followers. Therefore, access to the community lends the brand authentic validation concerning its values and compatibility relative to those of the community (Närvänen, Koivisto, and Kuusela 2019).

The practical implications for SFIs relate to the three dimensions (discursive, relational and material) that form a social-symbolic object (Lawrence and Phillips 2019, p. 24), i.e. the concept of fashion consumption. Our identified categories of identity work, community work and practice work are useful for SFIs to reflect and develop their own activities when operating on social media. They help especially aspiring SFIs as well as other sustainability advocates to pay attention to the various kinds of social-symbolic work required to drive change in people's ideas, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. The study also offers reinforcement for SFIs' self-esteem concerning their roles as influencers. Despite their self-claimed insecurities, SFIs play an important role in the transition of the fashion field toward sustainability by offering relatable role models, practical guidance and genuine stories.

Conclusion

In this research we studied SFIs in Finland who purposefully aim to transform their followers' fashion consumption patterns more sustainable. The purpose of our study was to examine how SFIs in Finland conduct social-symbolic work, referring to the intentional ways in which actors influence social-symbolic objects, which constitute meaningful patterns in social systems (Lawrence and Phillips 2019, 31). Through depth interviews and netnographic study we illuminated the daily work of SFIs in striving for institutional change through their followers, and by focusing on the social-symbolic work conducted by SFIs, we identified three types of work: identity work, community work, and practice work. For each, we also identified three subcategories: identity work comprising narrating, reflecting and balancing; community work comprising tightening, expanding and magnetizing; and practice work comprising shaping meanings, competences, and materials. Concerning the SFIs' self work in this study, the way SFIs balance between operating according to capitalist, profit-driven and sustainable aspirations have relevance also for the discussion on whether consumption-related activism (e.g., Repo (2020) on feminist commodity activism) has potential to change the foundations of the fashion market. This aspect should be studied further. Also, the differences and similarities of SFIs

social-symbolic work compared to other actors, such as sustainable fashion brands or industry organizations that are advocating for a more sustainable fashion system warrants more research attention in the future.

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Data availability statement

A lot of the data acquired for this study include transcriptions of in-depth interviews, and thus cannot be shared due to privacy issues. In addition, due to the study's qualitative nature and due to using netnography as a research method, the data consist also of researchers' immersion diaries (not written in English) and are thus irrelevant to share.

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