Exploring young audiences’ engagement with “green” content on YouTube

A small qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, the rise of social media entirely broadened relevant information sources and platforms used for communicating about environmental issues and sustainability. Especially the video platform YouTube is worthy of study, because it offers a substantial amount of information in this regard and has proven to inspire people to maintain a sustainable lifestyle.

This study aims to explore how young audiences engage with “green” content on YouTube. Besides that, this study researches the circumstances of why young audiences develop an interest in “green” content. In order to achieve the aim of this study, a qualitative study of a small sample of eight semi-structured interviews has been conducted. All of the participants are college students between the age of 20-25 years. The analysis of the interview answers is guided by elements from the uses and gratifications theory and social cognitive theory. The results show that YouTube plays the role of a significant motivational factor for young audiences to educate themselves about certain topics and consequently to maintain a sustainable lifestyle. Another interesting finding is that all interviewees are most interested in content about sustainable food. The participants claimed to connect their personal diets directly to sustainable behaviour.

Keywords: Environmental issues, sustainability, YouTube, qualitative interviews, social cognitive theory, uses and gratifications theory, audiences' engagement
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1. Introduction

In recent years, sustainability in relation of environmental, social and economic issues has become more and more important in our daily lives. The spread of environmental issues in the media and social environment has encouraged a large majority of consumers to develop environmental concerns, pro-environmental attitudes and intentions to achieve a sustainable lifestyle (Bergin-Seers & Mair, 2009; Peattie, 2010). Sustainability, as well as environmental issues are discussed on social media with YouTube taking the lead in offering content to its audience. Through individual people (publishing content on YouTube), YouTube has become a popular social media platform in informing its audience about these relevant issues. Along with the rise of social media, YouTube is the world’s second most used online searching engine after Google (Alexa, 2019). Furthermore, the video platform developed into a well-used tool for distribution of information and marketing through YouTuber or so-called influencer. The content on YouTube is diverse and global, which offers the opportunity to disseminate topics to a very broad audience. Thus, the site serves as an attractive platform for both amateur content creators and professional content creators (Xu, Park, Kim, & Park, 2016). Media organizations, politicians, businesses, music and film artists, as well as people from all over the world use YouTube. Therefore, YouTubers are playing an ever-increasing role in reporting on the environment, with climate change in particular (Boykoff, McNatt, & Goodman, 2015). As well as sustainability topics discussed by YouTuber who aim to increase awareness, promote sustainable behaviour and increasingly help their audiences to uphold a sustainable lifestyle.

Three popular sustainable YouTube channels are led by Bonny Rebecca, Lauren Singer and Rachel Aust (Pham, 2017). Bonny Rebecca is well-known for her content of vegan inspiration and recipe ideas. Besides aesthetic pictures, Rebecca also provides information about environmental issues and the sustainable benefits from following a vegan diet. Several studies have shown that following a vegan diet has an enormous potential not only to improve personal health but also to create positive impact on the environment (Rosi, et al., 2017; Schepers & Lieven, 2018). Since people have reported to follow a vegan diet due to environmental, health and sustainable reasons, Rebecca has become one of the most popular sustainable YouTuber (Backhaus, Breukers, Mont, Paukovic, & Mourik, 2012). In contrast, Lauren Singer’s YouTube channel Trash is for Tossers deals with the topic of waste reduction. Her content features simple tips on how to make the change from a wasteful consumption lifestyle to a so-called “zero waste” lifestyle (see p.26). This content specifically attracts people who aim to participate in the sustainability movement, which is why Singer’s popularity has been increasing rapidly in the last couple of years (Backhaus, Breukers, Mont, Paukovic, & Mourik, 2012).
Lastly, I want to mention Rachel Aust, who describes herself as a “minimalist” (see p.25). From fashion to interior design, decluttering out, and tips on how to decrease consumption Rachel Aust’s videos are informative and inspirational. Her popularity has grown since she gives her audience a different approach on how to participate in the sustainability movement. And shows how small changes make a big difference.

All three YouTube channels are a great example of how YouTube has connected environmental issues, sustainability and people’s engagement with “green” content. Which is why I have chosen to present examples of such content as part of the introduction.

This study is concerned with the motives of young audiences’ engagement with the previous mentioned content or rather “green” content on YouTube. Doing this, the peculiarity is that the participants have been interested in topics such as environmental issues and sustainability for years. Therefore, it is interesting to explore which factors played or still play a role in their area of interest. In other words, how and why does YouTube motivate its participants to maintain a sustainable lifestyle? YouTube, in particular, has been chosen as the social media platform of interest. This is due to its increased popularity among the chosen participants (young audiences) and its substantial influence among them. The marked difference between YouTube and other popular social media platforms is that YouTube acts as a modern alternative to traditional television and offers opportunities that Instagram & Co does not fulfil (Strangelove, 2010). Examples are that YouTube is used on several devices (smartphone, computer, television), gives access to large videos in ultra high definition quality, on different devices (mobile phones, computers, televisions, etc.) and it allows YouTuber to directly interact with their audiences and the other way around. Therefore, the topic of sustainability and environmental issues is being connected to the video platform YouTube, offering an ideal case-study.

1.1 Outline of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis is as follows: I will start with a section that give further background information about my personal interest and motivation, which directly lead to the title of this study. Then, aim and research questions will be presented. Thereafter, a presentation of previous research within the fields of YouTube, perception of environmental issues, sustainability and social media will be depicted. The following chapter consists of the theoretical frame and concepts for this study, which will be the following theories: uses and gratifications theory and social cognitive theory. The next chapter points out the chosen method and material for the study. Lastly, the analysis of the results is presented, followed by a discussion and the conclusion of the findings.
1.2 Background

My motivation for this research was a strong personal interest of raising awareness for environmental issues and sustainability. On top of that, I highly value the social media platform YouTube. I educate myself about environmental issues and solutions mainly through social media, particularly YouTube. In the past years, I have observed a growth on YouTube in various trends within the sector of green content, such like minimalism, zero waste, fair trade products, plant-based diets, and so on (see pp.25-26). Therefore, this thesis was the ultimate chance to combine these motivating factors and write about something meaningful. Additionally, I identify myself as a little environmental activist, who believes that every person plays an important role in the transition process from a consumption society into a more sustainable living society. The audiences’ feelings and thoughts about sustainability is a fascinating sector to study because it delivers basic information on how and why people develop their interest and perhaps change their lifestyle respectively.

Additionally, I want to explain why I have chosen specific terms for the title of this research, like “engagement” and “green”. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2019), “engagement” means interest; the fact of being involved with something. First, I thought of the term’s perception and behaviour, but the explanation of “engagement” has led me to form a more open and interpretive research question. Furthermore, I have chosen the term “green”, because it is synonymous to “sustainable”. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2019), sustainability means that something is able to continue over a period of time: sustainable development and causing limited or no damage to the environment, and therefore being able to continue for a long time. “Green” is merely a modern generic term across the entire spectrum of sustainable content on YouTube.
1.3 Aim and Research Question

Raising awareness and actions against environmental issues, like climate change, is an ongoing topic in the western society. The latest news show that it better improvements and changes in several fields can be done to sustain the earth in a good condition for future generations (Weidenfeller, 2019). With this study, I aim to discover how young audiences engage with “green” content on YouTube. Furthermore, I strive to find reasons on how and why they developed an interest for it. Some people get information through social media and might be affected from them to maintain a sustainable lifestyle, while others might have been more influenced by their surroundings through social and cultural factors such as family, friends and occupation. In this regard, certainly there are other factors that could have influenced people’s social media engagement.

However, I as a researcher think that there is a current change in young peoples’ minds about environmental issues and sustainability. Additionally, YouTube represent the second most-used social network in the world as well as searching engine. Therefore, this study solely focuses on young audiences’ engagement with “green” content available on YouTube. In order to reach the aim, the following research question and sub questions will be answered in this study:

How do young audiences engage with “green” content on YouTube?

SQ1: What do young audiences feel and/or think about environmental issues and sustainability?

SQ2: What role does “green” content on YouTube play in developing young audiences’ attitudes towards environmental issues and sustainability?

SQ3: What role does “green” content on YouTube play in young audiences’ everyday lives?
2. Previous Research

This chapter will give an overview on previous research in terms of the relationship between YouTube and its audiences followed by studies about the perception of environmental issues. In the last section, studies about sustainability and social media will be presented. In this regard, it must be stated that I found very limited studies within the field of “green” content on YouTube and audiences’ engagement towards it, which was a significant indication of a research gap.

2.1 YouTube and its Audiences

In the 21st century, the ongoing trend of watching videos on YouTube can be explained by people having been watching television. This at least is one of Strangelove’s (2010) argumentations, as in his research he gives an explanation for the phenomenon of YouTube being the new television or rather information source. By arguing that videos, just as shown on television, have the power to make viewers feel like participants, Strangelove (2010) states that by watching videos, viewers’ involvement increases and with that, the audiences holds attention, especially for routinized content. He argues that videos therefore erase the boundaries between the audience and the content creator (henceforth YouTuber) because viewers feel as part of what is presented to them. This gives the medium video the power of obtaining audiences and explains its popularity. Television being the previous medium of choice and YouTube (as well as other video content platforms) taking over, at least for the younger audiences.

Leaning on the comparision of a television consumer and a YouTube consumer, a clear distinction of the kind of content presented to the consumer can be made however. Characteristics of these differences are that on television the materials shown to the consumer are being edited, are mostly scripted and simply do not display the reality of its environment (Strangelove, 2010, p. 173). The contextual reality is therefore adjusted, riveting the consumer’s attention. Another study undertaken in this regard claims that television, more often than not, requires a frame of reference within a particular context and discusses subjects within area-based content of local news (Morley, 1993, p. 174). Content displayed on YouTube, on the other hand, is claimed to represent reality and is hence considered much more reliable and credible (Strangelove, 2010, p. 173). Interesting to evaluate in this regard is that even though the information presented to the consumer is created by YouTubers, it is still perceived to be more real than content presented on television (p. 160). Another reason for that is that consumers can actively choose which content they would like to see. This is done by YouTubers giving their viewers the status of an hyperactive audiences, where they can choose the topics to be discussed by YouTuber for instance, simply voicing their prefered content within the
platform (p. 113). Consequently, most content displayed on YouTube is user generated, which explains its popularity increase and can be related back to the study undertaken by Strangelove (2010).

In addition to this authoritative line of research, Khan (2016) states that viewers have three different motives for participation on YouTube. The strongest predictor for liking and disliking videos is the entertainment motive and the first motive for participation on YouTube; commenting and uploading videos is predicted by the social interaction motive and the second motive for participation on YouTube; sharing content is predicted by the information giving motive and the third motive for participation on YouTube. There is a probability that the motives are noticeable during this study as well and are therefore important to mention at this point. In order to create relevant content, YouTuber use the statistical information tool YouTube analytics to track information about their audiences. This tool analyses viewers’ preferred content, gives an explanation of these preferences and gives YouTuber the chance to personally get to know their viewers, specifically to be able to deliver content of their liking.

The digital offers, in regard to media and specifically communication channels, are expanding at a high rate. Not only do the ways in which media communicates with us change but also new mediums arise (Bruhn, 2014). Consequently, viewers are confronted with the problem of having to choose the content of most interest to them. And with the rise of different communication channels and mediums, viewers can first of all freely decide which channel to expose themselves to and secondly actively decide which content to choose from. Therefore, the content available on communication channels and mediums gain interest among scientific studies. As well as the role user generated data and with that, the rise of YouTube, gets. Since the content that is offered by YouTuber continuously stays in correlation with what viewers seek to receive, trends are developing. Nevertheless, YouTuber still remain in the power to steer these trends because they are developing a special relationship with their viewers. This is done by YouTuber authentically communicating about real life experiences, testing products, brands and services, among many more. Hence, YouTuber in the modern media environment, communicate discourse in the digital environment because they are increasingly being considered experts in their chosen fields. Communicating about personal experiences in an authentic way makes YouTuber to opinion leaders that have the power to influence viewers’ behaviours and opinions and it can be stated that viewers continue to trust in them (Burgess & Green, 2009).

To give a reasonable explanation for viewers gaining trust in YouTuber and its exponentially rise, Grusin (2009) thematizes the cultural aspect of the content spread on the platform YouTube. By temporarily immersing into people’s lives, especially from other countries, the viewers place themself in a completely new context that is completely different to one’s own life. This makes it very attractive for viewers since content becomes more
interesting because of its difference to routinized content. On top of that, actively being able to involve yourself in the content, giving feedback, asking questions and voicing your opinion, makes us feel connected to the YouTuber and fulfills our need in deciding what information we would have liked presented to us. In comparison to television, this interaction does not exist. It is important to mention, however, that there are most certainly still viewers who have never watched content on YouTube or prefer to watch television. This is partially explained by television content made far more professionally than YouTube content. In addition to that and as stated above, YouTube is currently more often than not watched by younger audiences.

As mentioned previously, my study builds its theoretical framework on the social cognitive theory by Bandura (2008). Another theoretical perspective by Shrum (2007), making use of the social cognitive theory by Bandura (2008), gives this study another insight of the theory of social cognition being based on two intertwined characteristics. These characteristics are firstly stimulus and secondly response, who work in interaction to each other. In this regard, stimulus continues what is presented to the viewer by a media source and response is an action that a viewer unconsciously creates based on the received information. As a result, the way people’s understanding of what is presented to them automatically forms an opinion and leads to the development of an attitude of presented information. At the same time, this attitude toward the information presented additionally develops for the information source, and therefore an interesting aspect to take into account for this study.

However, Shrum (2002) highlights that it does not necessarily have to be all content presented to the viewer but rather self-selected content that viewers will remember more easily. All in all, viewers select pieces for themselves from information sources so it cannot be generalized nor quite objective. Especially for this study, the selected participants already have an attitude towards YouTube. Therefore, the focus is set on how and why they developed their attitude to YouTube and which selected pieces my participants chose to form opinions and attitudes.

Another interesting aspect of Bandura’s practical approach to the theory of social cognition is that Bandura claims that viewers certainly do not process all information presented to them but rather only the kind of information that is relevant for them, or more specifically interesting to them. Which means that this kind of information develops the special relationship between the information, the information source and their viewers. Even though it seems logic to think that these kind of relationships are hard to develop, Scheinbaum (2012) found out that attitude changes (also leading to behavioral pattern changes) occur on a regular basis. To relate this argumentation back to this study, I am claiming that YouTuber are using media platforms (information source, in this case YouTube) to spread their personal opinions (information presented, in this case sustainability-related content) to their viewers and
consequently build a relationship with them. One can further argue that the larger the audience of a YouTuber the more reach he or she has.

While this sounds quite plausible and most studies make it sound almost easy to the extent that all YouTuber have that kind of power, there are certainly instances where viewers do not feel appealing toward either the content that is presented to them, to the YouTuber themselves or other obstacles such as too many resources needed to adapt a certain behavior. In the end, every single individual consumes content differently but it is nonetheless states that video content consumption can raise awareness (Shrum L. J., 2002).

2.2 Perception of Environmental Issues

Images of environmentally destructive hurricanes, melting glaciers and starving polar bears go around the world. Accompanied by precise prognosis from researchers, serious reminders from activists and powerful statements by politicians. Climate change addressed by media offers a broad range of communicators, messages and forms of representation. What is the effect in people's minds? This complex topic deals with reception and media impact research. Reception research examines how climate change is experienced (for example, as appalling or threatening). Media effect research is particularly interested in three aspects of climate communication. Firstly, it asks whether people develop certain attitudes due to their media experience and thus a certain climate awareness. Secondly, they know more about climate change through public communication and thirdly, they are encouraged to do more for climate protection themselves (Brüggemann, Neverla, Hoppe, & Walter, 2016). These three dimensions (attitudes, knowledge and intentions of action) are central media effects that are closely relate to the research question. They are interwoven, and therefore often studied together.

The field of media effect research already shows a broad number of studies, which prove that mass media exerts an effect on the recipient. A key finding of this research field is shown in the online survey of Taddicken and Neverla (2011), which is a representative study for Germany. The results show that the use of classical media correlates most with higher climate-related knowledge, but less with climate awareness, and at least with climate-related intentions to act. In addition, these relationships are dependent on the education of the recipients and their interest in the topic, but also on the information focus of the choice of medium. At the same time, the findings point to a close connection between climate-related knowledge, attitudes and options for action with the general environmental awareness of people, which in turn stems from diverse and interactively interacting communication networks of a medial and interpersonal nature. In addition, to social media and other interactive online platforms, but
also alongside fictional media such as films, as well as school, family, social environment, own world of experience. In the process of the formation of interpretation patterns and ultimately concrete actions. The following remarks classify the current findings in the state of research with regard to the influence of the media on attitudes (or a bundle of attitudes that can be summarized as “climate awareness”), knowledge and intentions to act (Neverla, Taddicken, Lörcher, & Hoppe, 2017).
The term climate awareness has become established to summarize people's attitudes to climate change. Climate awareness is often understood as a two-dimensional attitudinal construct with an affective and a cognitive component (Arlt, Hoppe, & Wolling, 2011; Binder, 2010; Zhao, 2009) and other researchers also integrate the conative (i.e. action-related) dimension (Taddicken & Neverla, 2011). As mentioned earlier, it reflects the three dimensions of media effects.

Additionally, the study by Brulle, Carmichael and Jenkins (2012) shows the influence of the media with other factors (such as extreme weather and economic data) as part of a longitudinal design. The key finding is that climate awareness in the US is most significantly influenced by media coverage. The strongest predictor of an increase in climate awareness is the volume of statements made by the democrats in the media and in the New York Times coverage of the movie An Inconvenient Truth during the period under review. The most negative effects are statements by the republicans and a high unemployment rate in the United States. By contrast, the number of published climate science publications had no impact on public awareness, leading the authors of the study to conclude that climate science activities alone (i.e. without their media presence) have no effect on the broader public in terms of climate awareness. Likewise, weather extremes had a negligible impact on this aggregate data level. The methodological void of the study by Brulle, Carmichael and Jenkins (2012) namely the lack of the variable individual media use can be highlighted by findings from qualitative studies (Smith & Joffe, 2013), but also by quantitative studies examining this relationship between individual media use and media impact, including Zhao (2009). For Germany there is also a comparatively broad empirical database for this relationship, that had been researched in the studies of Arlt, Hoppe and Wolling (2011), Taddicken and Neverla (2011), as well as the study by Metag, Fraulein and Schäfer (2015). In addition to the mentioned studies, it should be noted that only the use of individual media is integrated as an explanatory variable, but the media content of the media used is not examined, i.e. how extensive and in what way climate change is present in the actual media. Nevertheless, these studies provide important insights into the role of public communication in climate awareness among the population.
2.3 Sustainability and Social Media

After looking into studies about YouTube and its audiences in connection with the perception of environmental issues, it is also important to combine both topics with each other. This section deals with studies about social media and sustainability. Firstly, in order to understand sustainability or rather the term “green” in relation to this study, an explanation followed by current studies is presented.

The term green can be related to the phenomenon of “green consumerism” and is subsumed within the wider category of “ethical consumerism” (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). The term green relates to environmental issues but is also intertwined with the social and economic aspects of sustainable development (Peattie, 2010). The distinction between green and ethical literature is ambiguous, as there is an apparent overlap between green and ethical issues. For instance, Elkington (1998) stated that those who practice green consumption behaviour aim to:

“Avoid products that are likely to endanger the health of the consumer or others; cause significant damage to the environment during manufacture, use or disposal; consume a disproportionate amount of energy; cause unnecessary waste; use materials derived from threatened species or environments; involve unnecessary use of or cruelty to animals; or adversely affect other countries” (pp. 90-98).

To date, there is no universally accepted definition of a “green consumer” (Kilbourne, Beckmann, & Thelen, 2002). Although the central theme running through the range of definitions and terms are of consumers who consider the environment as important, and thus evaluate purchase decisions and behaviour taking this into account (Connolly & Shaw, 2006). Shrum, McCarty and Lowrey (1995, p. 72) describe “green consumers” as people who indicate concerns with the physical environment, and hence purchase behaviour is influenced by environmental claims. In their empirical study, which sought to psycho-graphically profile the characteristics of the “green consumer”, they determined that he or she is typically an opinion leader and careful shopper who seeks information on products including information from advertising, but who is also rather sceptical of advertising (Shrum, McCarty, & Lowrey, 1995, p. 71). According to Banerjee and McKeage (1994), “green consumers” strongly believe that current environmental conditions are deteriorating and represent serious problems facing the security of the world. Conversely, consumers who do not engage in pro-environmental behaviour perceive ecological problems as not within their control or responsibilities (Banarjee & Mckeage, 1994). In light of these considerations, Autio et al. (2016) explored the identities that young consumers construct for themselves in relation to green consumption behaviour.
The “anti-hero” is a consumer who rejects green consumerism and the ability to make a difference. The “environmental hero” embraces aspects of green consumerism and the “anarchist” views green consumption as a reaction against the prevailing consumerist culture (Autio, Lähteenmaa, Holmberg, & Kujala, 2016).

Another study focusing on sustainability-related topics on social media, undertaken by Minton et al. (2012), compared three different nationalities in this regard. Focus of their study was viewers reaction to sustainability-related content on social media from the United States, Germany and South Korea. The research method ‘online survey’ was chosen and their study’s literature review focused on theories of behaviors, social marketing, “green advertisement” and sustainability. Their results clearly demonstrate that South Korea ranked highest in sustainable behaviors among all participants. According to their analysis, people from Germany and the United States are more individualistic-oriented, which argues for an explanation of their results. Which is an interesting finding and an important aspect considering, that this study will ask participants what motivates their YouTube engagement. The question arises whether the collectivistic aspect in regard to sustainability is important. Specifically, because Minton et al. (2012) concluded that their participants, regardless of their origin, were all of the same opinion when it came to the aspect of internationalization playing a role in peoples’ commitment to a more sustainable lifestyle. As a corollary of this, Minton et al. (2012) concluded that more individualistic countries need a different approach to “green advertisements” on social media platforms than more collectivistic countries, for instance. In light of these considerations, it can be concluded that where people come from influences peoples’ behavior in regard to sustainability on social media and it can be argued that the aspect of individualistic and collectivist countries play a role on this subject.

In order to examine sustainability-related content on social media and its communication within the online community, Joose and Brydges (2018) identified the representation of sustainability on personal green blogs. Concurrently, the communication processes through which these representations were constructed were researched upon. They undertook a qualitative study of Swedish-language blogs with an in-depth analysis of a living experiment blog on sustainable food practices, a lifestyle blog centred around green family life, and a blog about consuming green beauty products. Their results show that all three blogs translate the complex landscape of sustainability to individual everyday practices. More in detail, the study has shown that in particular broader lifestyle blogs invite discussion and more in-depth conversation; although also here conversation is limited because of the hierarchical design with is often anonymous or first name comments. They concluded that the information that the bloggers give is not scientific, but consists of opinions and personal experience and evaluation, thus shaping norms and ideas. Which is an important finding within the sustainability discussion since this study assesses how people engage with green
content on YouTube. However, their study additionally concluded that most of the information the researched blogs display is not the kind of material that can be checked based on reports or scientific articles. When bloggers do share falsifiable information, such as reviewing the health effects of cosmetics, checks to ensure that such information-making is correct and transparent are lacking.

The findings from the previous literature have not deeply explored an individual’s feelings and thoughts about the severity of ecological problems and the importance of their role in reducing environmental issues. And furthermore, what influence his or her willingness to engage towards green content on YouTube. Therefore, this is clearly a research gap that I would like to use for my study.
3. Theoretical Frame and Concepts

This chapter includes a description of the theoretical frame and concepts of this study in order to answer the previously mentioned research question. Within the theoretical frame, the most relevant and therefore chosen theoretical categories will be presented and form the scientific base for this study. The first section shows a theory within the field of media and communication, better known as the uses and gratifications theory. In the second section, the social cognitive theory will be presented in order to give a social psychology point of view.

3.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

It has become ever more fundamental to search for information on social media, particularly on a regular basis within a conventional life of a person.

The media and communication technologies have been developing rapidly in the past decades. Particularly the internet has blurred time and distances around the globe, making it possible for us to feel very connected at a time when spreading information has become extremely effortless. In a more implicit fashion, the internet has made it possible to view these factors almost as non-existing – to a point where one individual possesses the power to reach a worldwide audience with one single message.

Moreover, the audiences’ engagement with media and communication technologies allows them to access social support, develop their identities, and increase their well-being in a context of relative safety (Flew, 2018; McInroy, Craig, & Leung, 2018). New relationships have been created through the internet or rather social media like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat et cetera. These platforms can strongly connect people with each other, even though they live several miles apart.

The uses and gratifications theory is a solid orientation when doing studies about mass communication, in this case social media. Nonetheless, the UGT differs from other media effect theories, since it assumes that individuals have power over their media usage rather than positioning individuals as passive consumers of media. According to this approach, people seek out media to fulfill certain needs or goals such as information seeking, entertainment, relaxation, or socializing. Since the theory was developed in 1969, UGT has received more relevance than ever as a tool for understanding how individuals connect with media and communication technologies as well as how the messages are understood (McQuail, 2010). Decoding describes the phenomenon of deriving content and giving it a certain meaning and is a commonly used term within the communication and media field. Furthermore, it is a psychological process. In this regard, important for the decoding process are the cultural background and past experiences that have an impact on how the viewer will understand the
message. In addition, decoding also depends on a person’s current feeling and attitude regarding the message (Severin, 2010).

Furthermore, there are other audience related theories that focus on the power of the medium. One of them is the cultivation theory by George Gerbner. This theory postulates that frequently watching television influences an individual to develop certain ideas of reality. These ideas, beliefs and assumptions about life that mirror the most consistent or universal values that are showcased on television. The more a person watches television the more likely she or he is to be influenced by what she watches when compared to others who watch less but share other similar demographic characteristics. The theory argues that the media generally presents an image of the world that does not reflect reality. Television images are an exaggeration or fantasy of what actually exists. There is a disproportionate number of handsome gentlemen, beautiful women, crime, wealth and violence. As a result, people end up perceiving the real world in a distorted manner and viewing actuality through a “television perspective”.

Television offers a plethora of ideas and conceptions on a variety of social and cultural dynamics such as race, gender, or sexuality. Over a period of time, a fixed image of various groups of people is formed and viewers start to absorb these ideas which they then use as a map to navigate through life. This constant exposure to the media content cultivates specific values, beliefs, attitudes and desires in people (Severin, Communication theories : origins, methods, and uses in the mass media , 2010). These newly preconceived notions shape their perception of the world and they ultimately influence how others perceive them. Therefore, people end up unconsciously shaping their thought processes and behaviour based on what they consume. In today’s world, people are increasingly starting to depend on television and social media to understand the intricate web of the norms, values and mindset of the society in which they live.

In light of these considerations, virtual communities on social media are being formed. This is due to people sharing norms, values and mindset, as stated above, and additionally because they feel part of their chosen community. People share ideas, thoughts and opinions and can rely on meeting others that confirm their believes. Consequently, interaction takes place in a pleasant environment (McQuail, 2010).
3.2 Social Cognitive Theory

As described by Thompson (1995), people use media contents as part of processes of reflecting and self-reflecting. This is called “appropriation” and refers to understanding the world. Thompson explains in his book that to appropriate a message means to capture its meaningful content and construct it to one’s own content and meaning. Furthermore, he explains that an individual builds two identities: a “self-identity” and a “collective identity”. Self-identity, more specifically, explains the process of how a person defines oneself. This can be influenced by inner characteristics, like self-esteem and thoughts about themselves, but also through external factors, such as interactions with their environment. However, the collective identity refers to a person’s sense of belonging to a group of people. Doing this the identity of the group becomes a part of the person’s individual identity. Therefore, people act in certain ways because they aim to be accepted by others. Nowadays, building an identity has changed because of social media. One could say, that people have two identities, a “real life-identity” and a “online-identity”. This also contributes greatly to when you meet someone for the first time, there is already a certain expectation of how the person and the meeting might be. Values we use, are consciously or subconsciously age, gender, appearance, professional standing and class roles (Dimbleby, 2007).

The social cognitive theory has been determined one of the most useful theory when studying media effect. In regard to mass media, particularly television, the theory continues to be used most commonly (Severin, 2010). The social cognitive theory states that each individual acts in accordance to guidelines. These guidelines are being established by a person’s personal environment, their experiences and their observations. On top of that, media and the information received through media shape a person’s behavior within societal patterns. All these different factors translate into a four stage model that the social cognitive theory has established. In stage one, the theory claims that a person chooses a model to observe while in stage two the theory states that the person remembers what they have been given attention to. The theory then claims that in stage three, also called reproduction, a person actually imitates another person’s behavior, or rather their actions, to then in stage four ask yourself if that is actually the desired outcome of the anticipated behavior. The social cognitive theory is a learning theory, claiming that a person uses obversation and imitation of others to shape their personal behaviors.

When people see others like them succeed, they also believe they can be capable of succeeding. Despite of that models can also decrease the observer’s belief in their self-efficacy. Thus, models are a source of motivation and inspiration (Bandura, 2008).

In addition, perceptions of self-efficacy influence people’s choices and beliefs in themselves, including the goals they choose to pursue and the effort they put into them, how long they’re willing to persevere in the face of obstacles and setbacks, and the outcomes they
expect. Thus, self-efficacy influences one’s motivations to perform various actions and one's belief in their ability to do so (Severin, 2010). Such beliefs can impact personal growth and change, which is one part this study focuses on.
4. **Method and Materials**

This section will describe qualitative interviews, and why the method has been chosen for this study. Afterwards, the selection of participants will be presented, followed by the interview guide and the method process. Lastly, thematic content analysis as the method for the analysis of the gained data will be presented.

A qualitative research method is described to be a technique for the collection of empirical information (Bryman, 2011). Moreover, the qualitative approach means thinking about the nature of institutions like “tribes” and “families” and exploring people’s life histories or everyday behaviour. Seale (2018) explains it as a division between substance and process, or between *what* is being studied and *how* it is constructed. In his book *Researching Society and Culture*, Seale shows the example of nudity. In this case, a qualitative researcher might ask *what* are the traits that characterize nudists and/or how nudity could be made normal (p. 31). Therefore, given to the research questions, the material collection process is semi-structured interviews with audiences of “green” content on YouTube. This type of interview has been referred to “conversations with a purpose” (Mason, 1996, p. 38). Moreover, in qualitative interviews, the researcher is often regarded as a co-producer of the data which are produced as the result of an interaction between researcher and interviewee(s) (Mason, 1996, p. 36). However, they are multiple reasons why I have chosen this method. Firstly, in the course of an interview the interviewer is able to ‘get inside someone’s head’. Secondly, it particularly represents the views and opinions of an individual. A further advantage of using qualitative interviewing as a research method is its flexibility in allowing research topics to be approached in a variety of ways. Issues that might be of a sensitive nature, such as global warming and climate change. In addition, the non-standardised interview enables the researcher to become attuned to subtle differences in people’s positions and to respond accordingly, both at the time of the interviewing and in the sequent of the analysis (Byrne, 2018, pp. 220-221). In conclusion, qualitative interviews offer access to attitudes, values and feelings of the respondent as well as the ability to achieve depth and complexity.
4.1 Selection of the Participants

For this small qualitative study, the selection of the participants is based on a purposive sampling with a non-probability technique. That means I have chosen specific participants who are suitable in order to answer the research question and to report what this phenomenon of young audiences’ engagement with green content on YouTube looked like (Seale, Sampling, 2018). Therefore, I had several requirements to the sample.

Firstly, I was primarily interested in participants beyond the age of 18, because of my personal experience that I start developing an interest in environmental issues and sustainability from a certain age. Therefore, eight students between 20 and 25 years’ old have been chosen as participants in this study. Secondly, all of them are active YouTube users and have a common interest in sustainability. According to that, it was revealed that every participant is confirming some form of sustainable behaviour pattern and is also inspired or influenced by green content to maintain their current lifestyle. The choice of interviewing certain YouTube users is based on previous research, which shows that YouTube or rather YouTuber have an impact on their audience in terms of buying behavior (Nandagiri & Philip, 2018). This study led to my study and to the understanding on how the engagement with green content has been developed. Consequently, this specific group of participants was the most helpful for gathering different views and opinions on the topic.

With this in mind, five out of eight participants have been found through the student association Students for Sustainable Actions at Jönköping University. In the beginning of the interview process, only two of the members were willing to participate in the study. After the interviews both were convinced of the value of my study that they recommended me other members who might have the same characteristics and be interested to take part. This method is also described as snowball sampling in the area of social research (Seale, Sampling, 2018). However, the other three participants were found in my personal friend’s circle and were recommended by one of the previous interviewees.

In order to receive the most meaningful answers and prepare the participants for the interview at hand, all of the participants were informed about the research aim of this project. All of the participants are anonymous for this research. However, a brief overview of each participant is outlined in the analysis chapter (p. 27).
4.2 Development of the Interview Guide

As I mentioned earlier, the main benefit of a semi-structured interview is an open-ended approach that creates a natural and relaxed atmosphere during the conversation. Therefore, I kept the questions clear and simple to avoid understanding misunderstandings and also not to ask more than one question in a single sentence (Byrne, 2018, pp. 231-233).

In order to keep structure, regulate the scope of the interview and guarantee the best possible outcome of the pending interviews, the interview guide helped me to scientifically obtain the best results (Qu & Dumay, 2011, pp. 246-247). The questions are divided into three sections and are formed by following topic guide (Lofland, 1971, pp. 78-79; Kvale, Conducting An Interview, 2007):

(1) First time hearing about climate change and/or global warming
(2) Circumstances surrounding develop the interest in sustainability
(3) First contact and attitude with green content on YouTube
(4) Present situation and behavior

The first section began with the introductory questions, the purpose was to start a discussion and let the interviewee speak freely. Such opening questions led to spontaneous, rich descriptions where the subject themselves provided what they experience as main aspects of the research. In this case, the introductory questions were based on topics such as (1): When was the first time that you ever heard about climate change or global warming? How did you learn about those issues? How did you think and feel about it then? How do you feel about it today?

In the next section, following-up questions were asked. These types of questions were chosen to get additional information on the mentioned topic. In this stage of the interview, I also asked spontaneous questions depending on the answers that have been given. Nevertheless, the structured questions led to topics such as (2): What is sustainability for you? How interested are you in sustainability?

In the third section, I focused on direct questions, which delivered the most useful and significant data for the research. In order to get the best results, I combined topics (3) and (4): How/why did you start watching green content on YouTube? What is your favorite green content? How sustainable is your current life? Is there something you want to change in the short or long term? Do you think that green content on YouTube motivate you to live more sustainably?

In the end, I completed the interview guide with an open-ended question to round off the entire conversation and give the participants a chance to share her or his thoughts about the subject. My last question was: Is there anything you would like to add to our conversation?
4.3 Implementation of the Method

According to Mason (1996), ten interview questions are recommended to have prepared prior to the interviews. This ensures enough room for spontaneous questions to come up during the interview, to give participants the possibility to voice thoughts in limited time. Consequently, interview questions were prepared by brainstorming what exactly I aimed to find out about participants. Only the most fitting questions then made it into the interview guide.

In order to test the interview-guide and its suitability, the interviews were rehearsed in a so-called pilot-study, which can also be referred to as a trial run (Byrne, 2018). This exercise helps to reflect on how well the interview is conducted, and also to improve the interview guide. Therefore, I decided to add potential questions in order to not forget anything important throughout the real interviews. I decided on 13 questions and the final version of the interview guide can be found in Appendix 1 (p. 45).

In addition to the interview guide, I determined some essential interviewer qualities: an interest in and respect for people as individuals, and flexibility in response to them; an ability to show understanding and sympathy for their point of view; and a willingness to sit quietly and listen (Silverman, 2006). Thompson (1988, p. 198) claims that the most people can learn how to interview well. After this preparation the actual interviews were the next step.

I recorded five of the interviews face-to-face with the voice memo function of my smartphone. The last three interviews were conducted via Skype and recorded by QuickTime Player. After every interview, I transcribed remarkable quotes from the participants, which I thought could be useful for the analysis and safely stored them with the audio files on my computer.

Based on my literature review and research framework I chose the most useful quotes when writing the analysis and discussion chapter. Having transcribed all interviews thoroughly, the only adaptations undertaken were participants’ repetitions or unnecessary comments such as ‘uhm’ or when participants stopped their thoughts and started all over again. However, in order to ensure accuracy, none of the answers were added in any other way as editing participants’ answers threatens reliability, accuracy and the analysis of answers (Kvale, 2011).

A remarkable observation during the interviews was participants’ openness to answer questions beyond what was specifically asked of them. As a result, some follow-up questions were not necessary to ask participants. On the other side, participants additionally discussed topics not relevant to my study. I felt remarkably satisfied that my participants felt comfortable enough to let the conversation shift to another topic and followed their lead. However, I did not let the conversation drift off and always returned to more relevant topics of my research.
4.5 Thematic Analysis

In this section, the reasons why I have chosen thematic analysis, based on Mayring’s (2000) qualitative content analysis with a deductive approach, will be presented. Afterwards, the basic idea of the analysing method will be presented with the help of the step model of deductive category application.

Thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis within interview-based studies or other qualitative studies. It is easier to make sense of qualitative data if they are divided into themes, categories or patterns. In terms of interviews, thematic coding can be used for the analysis of transcripts, audio or video recordings. It reduces the volume of the original data and turns it into something meaningful as well as simple to digest. Thematic content analysis involves looking across the data set rather than within one case, which means it will often focus on what a phenomenon, social interaction or event “looks like” to an individual. Furthermore, the deductive approach is required with some themes before the researcher starts to analyse, from previous research or theory or researcher’s intuition and experiences (Rivas, 2018). The step model of deductive category application was used as base during the whole analysis process. On the one hand, to define categories in order to analyse the answers from the interviews. Therefore, I decided to divide the results in the following three main categories: attitudes towards sustainability, young people’ lifestyle choices and the power of YouTube as motivation. On the other hand, while analysing the results in order to find similarities, differences and gaps.

Figure 1: Step model of deductive category application (Mayring, 2000).
4.6 Reliability and Validity

When doing semi-structured interviews, reliability and validity are criteria used to evaluate the quality of the interview answers (Seale, 2018). As mentioned earlier, the purpose of semi-structured interviews is to gather personal information about the participants’ feelings and thoughts to a certain topic. Furthermore, the interviewing-type is usually used to create a relaxed set-up, almost like a conversation with a friend. With this in mind, the relationship between these two quality criteria is clear from a purely theoretical point of view. If a measurement is not accurate, then the construct to be measured cannot be reliably measured. Reliability is therefore a requirement for validity. However, validity is the extent to which measure covers the construct of interest (Seale, 2018). In this case, I covered the validity with the chosen participants, which were already interested in the subject. Therefore, they suited the best to get the most detailed and meaningful answers.
5. Results and Analysis

In this chapter, the results from the eight semi-structured interviews will be presented and analyzed by the theoretical findings from the literature review. Therefore, all section present the interviews’ findings in a logical structure, giving insights by displaying most relevant quotes from the participants. As mentioned earlier, thematic analysis was used as the basis to identify and categorize themes and patterns that were revealed during the analysis process. Therefore, this first section displays a table of different types of green content with my own definitions (supported by the Cambridge Dictionary), and video examples on YouTube followed by a brief overview of all the participants. The next section covers all answers on the participants’ past and present attitudes towards sustainability. The last three sections focus on green content on YouTube related to the participants’ lifestyle choices, and the motivational aspects.

Table 1: List of popular video formats on YouTube.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green content</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples (titles) on YouTube</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable food</td>
<td>... is food that is healthy for consumers and produced in a humane, ecologically benign, socially responsible and economically fair way. That’s a wide range of criteria, but sustainability extends beyond merely reducing greenhouse gas emissions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegan</td>
<td>... is a sort of diet that, as the name implies, is based on plants, i.e. on fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, etc. It is especially important to eat these foods as fully and unprocessed as possible.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... is a sort of diet, which eliminates all animal products from the nutrition. This means that not only meat is dispensed, but also milk, eggs, gelatine, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable make-up</td>
<td>... is defined as cosmetic products using natural ingredients produced from renewable raw materials.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cruelty free make-up, Plastic free make-up, Eco friendly make-up brands, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimalism</td>
<td>... is the conscious restriction to a minimum or the most necessary in all areas of life.</td>
<td>Things I stopped buying, Furniture free apartment tour, Minimalistic make-up collection, less is more, Wardrobe declutter, Minimalist habits, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero Waste</td>
<td>... is a philosophy that strives for sustainability. It aims to lead a life in which as little waste as possible and raw materials are not wasted.</td>
<td>Zero waste bathroom essentials, zero waste grocery shopping, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable travel</td>
<td>... is a way that tourism can be maintained long-term without harming natural and cultural environments. Sustainable travel should minimise the negative impacts of tourism and ideally be beneficial to the area in which it takes place.</td>
<td>Tips for sustainable travel, sustainable travel essentials, Ecotourism, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiny house</td>
<td>... is an architectural and social movement that advocates living simply in small homes. As of 2018 there is no set definition as to what constitutes a tiny house.</td>
<td>Do it yourself tiny house, tiny house tour, living in a tiny house, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capsule wardrobe</td>
<td>... is a collection of a few essential items of clothing that don’t go out of fashion, such as skirts, trousers, and coats, which can then be augmented with seasonal pieces.</td>
<td>Winter, Spring, Summer, Autumn – capsule wardrobe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrift shopping</td>
<td>... is shopping goods that are not new from thrift or second hand stores.</td>
<td>Thrift haul, Come “thifting” with me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary</td>
<td>... using pictures or interviews with people involved in real events to provide a factual report on a particular subject.</td>
<td>Earthlings, Before the flood, Cowspiracy, A Simpler Way, Real Value, Living 3 weeks vegan, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Brief overview of the interviewed participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The participants in this study</th>
<th>Green content like to watch on YouTube</th>
<th>Frequency of watching</th>
<th>Years of interest in sustainability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Zero waste, Documentary, Sustainable food, Sustainable travel, Minimalism, Tiny house</td>
<td>From 10 per day to once a week</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Documentary, Sustainable food</td>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Sustainable food</td>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Every green content</td>
<td>1-2 a week</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Sustainable food, Minimalism, Zero Waste</td>
<td>1-2 a month</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sustainable food, Minimalism, Zero Waste, Documentary, Thrift shopping</td>
<td>1-2 a week</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Sustainable food, Minimalism, Zero Waste, Thrift shopping</td>
<td>1-2 a week</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Sustainable food, Minimalism, Zero Waste, Capsule wardrobe</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2 Attitude towards Sustainability

The interviews were initiated with introducing-questions, which provided me with basic information about the participants’ attitude towards environmental issues and sustainability.

It was revealed that all participants started their interest in the subject between 2009 and 2017. On the question on how the participants felt and think when they first heard about environmental issues, four participants (A, B, C and G) described that they felt guilty and ashamed for their prior lifestyle. Participant D, F and H explained that all those issues, such as, global warming, air pollution, waste disposal, water pollution, climate change and many more, were too distant for them to have an actual effect on their everyday life. Participants described that they were not too worried about it at the first place even though these issues were discussed in mainstream media. Since it did not affect them personally and therefore none of the participants actively started to think about sustainability as such. However, participants (A, B, C and D) mentioned that there was a certain awareness of these issues in the back of their minds the described distance above inhibited sustainable action.

In conclusion, all of the participants explained in some way that they did not care about environmental issues back then. Therefore, it was one part of the interview to explore how and why the participants’ developed their interest on those issues. According to Bandura (2008), human self-development, adaption, and change are embedded in social systems, i.e. family, school and/or university. All participants fit broadly into that social system and attest Bandura’s theory, because they are students. They are undergraduate as well as graduate students majoring in communication, media design, management, entrepreneur and economy. In this regard, participant A, H and D explained that they developed their interest at school through a sustainable project:

A – “My interest mostly developed at school, in the grades 9 and 10 […] We started talking more about those kinds of issues. And also, when I studied abroad in Australia. I had sustainability in school, and I did a research project about the issue of coral bleaching.”

H – “It started through a school project where I have worked with an aid organization for orangutans in Borneo. The work with the organization really opened my eyes.”

D – “As part of the Honors Program during my Bachelor study, I was asked to participate in a Food Waste project. In the beginning I thought to myself that the topic of sustainability is too distant to really make a change. By the end of the project we had implemented a pick-up service for collected wasted food from the cafeteria, who would
bring all foods to the next homeless shelter. This inspired me and showed me how we, as a society, can really help and make a difference.”

A major component of the social cognitive theory is observational learning, which accounts for information that is selected by observing within the environment. People might select to observe real-life models or models they encounter via media (Bandura, 2008). This action could be identified among all participants, which mentioned that television and social media mainly raised their awareness about sustainability. Social media, in this regard, can be divided into the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. These platforms were all stated to affect the participants. Thusly, Participant C, E, D and G claim that the information they had received on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube mainly affected their motivations to start caring about the environment. Information can be specified by green content presented to them on social media and more specifically the active internation with others on these platforms. In this regard, participant H and D said:

H – “What I really appreciate right now, is that more and more people become aware of it through social media. So, that’s why it is so important to share information. And also, the economy adapts to that and you can buy more environmentally friendly products than ten years ago.”

D – “YouTube really helped me to uphold my plant-based diet. A week into my “plant-based diet-transition”, I got tired of only eating greens with rice and beans, so I went on YouTube to get inspired. It is amazing how much content is offered there. An entire community exchanges recipes’ idea and supports each other with helpful tips and tricks. Actually, I learned about my favorite snack of YouTube: celery sticks with peanut butter.”

Seven of the eight participants described the term sustainability as a necessity for protecting the planet as well as something we must consider for the future generation. Nevertheless, the ideas and concepts of sustainability have partially differed among the participants. For instance, participant C described it more as a trend or rather lifestyle. However, participant D and F described sustainability as something you have to take care of:

C – “For me sustainability is a lifestyle that people are follow […] it’s more about willingness from individual standpoint whether they choose to make the decision to care about the planet and to reduce their footprint.”
D – “Sustainability for me, means caring about what is coming after us [our generation]. Every time I do research about sustainability or get more informed on how I can actively participate in the movement. And every time I realize that I want the generation after me (my children for instance) to be able to experience this world how I am experiencing it.”

F – “The little things we can or rather should do to keep the planet in a good condition.”

The participants were asked how they currently feel and think about environmental issues and sustainability. The most common answer to this question was, on the one hand, that the participants feel better informed on how the whole economic, social and environmental system is connected to each other and how it works. They are more aware and willing to educate themselves about those issues. On the other hand, participants A, C, D and E described that they focus more on their individual actions rather than on the whole system:

A – “My feelings are stronger about the topic, because I know more about environmental issue and the important role of sustainability than it was back then. As well as my understanding of the whole economic system got better. So, there are only limited things I can do personally, but still... I try to tackle against exploitation in our system.”

C – “I do more focus on my own actions and sustainable living instead of feeling bad about something I can’t change.”

E – “Today, I’m looking more on myself and think of WHAT I can do about it and WHAT I can change in my current lifestyle instead of thinking ‘Oh that’s bad, people should do something’.”

D - “I feel as if you cannot really do anything right when it comes to sustainability nowadays. Literally everything needs to be banned. So, I decided for myself that I will transition to a plant-based diet and focus more on my individual lifestyle and choices within the movement.”
5.3 Young Audiences’ Lifestyle Choices

After the participants were better informed about environmental issues, they all described that they aimed to add sustainable behavior patterns into their life.

In the interview conversation the participants were asked how sustainable their current life is. An observation from the individual interviews was, that every participant showed a different level of sustainable activity or rather engagement. Participant F and G expressed the least activity in terms of behavior, and both explained that they find it quite hard to live sustainable in an economic system that is aligned on consumption and in a social system that focuses on wealth and materials. They experienced a lack of understanding from their family and friends, which notably leads to feeling rejected. According to the social cognitive theory, this negative feedback resulting in rejection toward yourself can lead to not continuing a certain behavior since this kind of rejection discourages us to continue behaving the preferred way (Bandura, 20008).

Participant A and D seem not to be influenced by possible negative feedback. They explained that they have found their own way to boycott the system and are therefore considered to behave the most sustainable among all participants. By living vegan, engaging in sustainable organizations, walking everywhere or rather taking the bike, they have found ways that fit with their individual choices and lifestyle. They additionally stop buying unnecessary products as well as start buying eco-friendly products from local manufactures, for instance. In contrast, participant B, E and H prefer to share messages and support sustainable organizations than boycott the system through individual behavior. However, the most common answer to this question was that all participants maintain a sort of plant-based diet or at least try to renounce meat. Therefore, it can be stated that following a plant-based diet is considered to be highly sustainable and an important aspect in living more environmentally-friendly.

Nevertheless, the result from the interview disagree with the findings from the study by Prättälä et al. (2007). In their study, findings have revealed that mostly women follow a plant-based diet, which is explained by meat representing masculinity within today’s society. All the three male participants are maintaining a plant-based diet, however, only one female participant completely follows a plant-based diet. On the other hand, the male participants A, B, and C explained that they follow this diet because of health, ethic and environmental reasons. Since the study by Prättälä, et al. is from 2007, the statement that meat is associated with masculinity could be outdated. Which have shown during the interviews, none of the male participants seem to feel discomfort in regard to their masculinity:

A – “Well, besides the obvious reason that livestock is bad for the environment... I also eat plant-based because I believe that meat isn’t great for our bodies; high in saturated
fat and other artery-clogging nutrients, we can get complete nutrition without meat while helping our bodies find the road to better health.”

B – “I feel bad for the animals, too! I mean animals that are raised for human consumption do not have great lives. Even if they are raised organically and free range, they have short lives with not much freedom. Choosing a plant-based diet means turning your back on animal cruelty.”

C – “I always did some kind of competitive sport in my life. So, since I also knew all the bad side effects of meat. I started with a vegetarian diet. It was easier than I thought and after couple of months I also wanted to try to eat only plant-based or rather vegan for 2 weeks. After the two weeks felt so energized that I continued my plant-based diet until today.”

On the question to if there is something they want to achieve in the short or long term related to sustainability, participant C, E and F expressed that they want to change something in the short term:

C – “Besides being vegan, I’ve been also considering reducing my consumption in general. I focus a lot on my nutrition, but there are other polluters such like clothing industry. Secondhand shopping is something I want to try soon.”

E – “After finishing an unsustainable product, such like for example tooth paste, which consists both plastic packaging and micro plastic that is bad for the environment. I want to switch that to a sustainable version like tooth paste tablets. Nowadays, I guess there is for every product a more sustainable option. So that’s my personal project I want to change in the short term.”

F – “I want to support local initiatives for animal welfare... and maybe take part in protests for animal rights and against mass meat production. It is disgusting how holier-than-thou we treat animals.”
Whereas, five out of eight participants described that they want to achieve something in the long term. Participant B and H described that they want to work for a sustainable company after their studies, such like volunteering in a project against cutting down rainforests in South America. However, participant A, D and G are thinking of living autonomous in the future:

A – “In the long term I want to produce my own food, such like a biological farmer.”

D – “I focus on the nutritional aspects and consumerism. I would love to live more away from being so depended on our economy, maybe have my own vegetable garden...”

G – “I want that the society or rather the system we live in, changes a bit more. It is not about to live like someone in the stone age, its more about change a bit your behavior patterns to change the system. For example, don’t use one-way products... And I also can see myself as an autonomous individual that lives from its own produce.”
5.4 The Power of YouTube as Motivation

All of the participants agreed that they watch YouTube videos for entertaining and educational reasons. As mentioned earlier, besides Google, YouTube is the second most-used seeking machine in the internet (Alexa, 2019). However, all participants mentioned YouTube additionally as their favourite platform for seeking information about topics they are currently interested in and furthermore to share their interest with others. This is in line with the study undertaken by Khan (2016) that explained consumers’ routinized usage of YouTube by enjoying the social interaction on this platform. Another finding from this study affirming the study done by Khan (2016) is consumers using YouTube as an information source. Specifically for educational purposes and to gain knowledge of consumers’ interests. In a similar vein, the uses and gratification theory claims people to use media in order to fulfill certain needs, which irrefutably explains the results of this study (McQuail, 2010). Moreover, participant D and H explained that it is the easiest way to learn more about a certain topic:

H – “Today YouTube is one of the naturally ways how we inform ourselves about certain topics. Social media in general, and especially YouTube deliver a lot of helpful and reliable information.”

D – “Especially for my generation, life happens online and if you have these YouTubers which give me solutions or new perspectives... how easy is that?”

Another observation of the interviews was that all participants described that YouTube influenced them to increase their awareness for environmental issues and sustainability. Participant B, C, D and H said that they also follow green blogger and sustainable organizations on Instagram and Facebook to be up to date. Furthermore, participant H mentioned that she shares “green” content on her social media channels every day. Participant C and D described that they do not know many people in their life who are interested in sustainability. Participant D even claimed that she does not know any other Vegans in her current social surroundings. Therefore, YouTube is a good place to get in touch with like-minded people. Moreover, participant C mentioned that it was not the content more the people on YouTube, which evoked him about environmental issues as well as motivated him to change his lifestyle:

C – “YouTuber are like a good friend. For me it feels like I know that person well, I know the preferences, the hobbies, maybe even how the parents are called and look like. They tell about their experiences, but also about their fears that they currently have.
YouTubers talk about current events and affecting moments. This way of sharing information is so different to classic media, but on the other hand it feels real and like something you can relate to.”

D- “When you are the only Vegan, your social lifestyle changes because you are almost like the odd one of the group. Eating is a big part of one’s social context, since our culture is all about eating. Whenever people ask me “Well, what do you eat then?”, I almost get frustrated and ask myself whether these people have never even watched all these amazing receipts there are on YouTube, for instance. When I then go on YouTube at night and get inspired, I feel as if it is a different world out there. A world I want to be part of.”

Moreover, the participants gave different answers to what type of green content is their favourite to watch, which are listed in table 1. Nevertheless, the most common content among the participants was sustainable food.

As mentioned earlier, all participants maintain a sort of plant-based diet. However, different reasoning was given to obtain and maintaining this kind of lifestyle. Participant A, C, D and H described that they seek for green content on YouTube to remind themselves of why they should uphold a sustainable-focused life.

Obtaining a sustainable lifestyle, that comes with the difficulty of maintaining it since it differs from the conventional lifestyle of society, was found out to continuously need reassurance and a reminder of why such a lifestyle is simply better. This is strongly related to the last stage of the social cognitive theory by Bandura (2008) that claims that people need to see a purpose in their choices. And this purpose, as seen by the results presented, can vary according to individual’s understanding of purpose. Contrary to Beverland’s findings (2014), where positive messages are believed to have the most power to change a person’s behaviour, the participants of this study explained that the negative content on YouTube has had the strongest effect on them. Important to mention in this regard is that half of my participants claimed the most effective way to influence a person’s lifestyle is to expose them to negative content. This was concluded since half of all participants stated that negative content presented to them influenced them to follow a plant-based diet, with pictures and videos having the most influence of all.
In addition, participant A and H described that they were in crisis areas, which are affected by environmental issues and to experience the issues personally have more power on them, than to see the issues on screen. Participant H elaborately described having seen shores filled with plastic, garbage mountains that were localized right next to small villages and baby Orangutans almost dying at rescue centres. These images changed her view on sustainability in a way that it hurt her personally. Participant A described similar experiences and also claimed that she cannot forget these images and consequently actively wants to participate in the sustainability movement.

In the end of the interview, the participants had several comments they wanted to add to the conversation. Most of the participants described that they think research in the field of sustainability is more important nowadays. And all of the participants mentioned in some way that they want to actively participate against environmental issues.

All participants’ view is a great development from denying global warming and climate change to understand that it is us that are causing these tremendous impacts on our society, our planet and on our entire system. Participant G and H felt honoured to be part of the study and want to see more studies in the future. Furthermore, participant A and B described that they feel good doing the right things and be part of something meaningful with like-minded people. In contrast, participant C added thoughts about his home country to the conversation:

C – “It’s interesting that perspectives have changed so much in so little time. In the US things are also changing, there are more activists, and influencers who speak up and convince people. It’s just a matter of time that the US will make the right infrastructure to finally make change to be in part with the rest of the world.”

Furthermore, participant E and F mentioned that social media is important, because it makes people feel less alone with their beliefs. Lastly, participant D put it straight:

D – “People stick too much to their routines and habits, it needs a really big social change in order to change something for the environment.”
6. Discussion

In this chapter, the research results will be discussed in order to answer the research questions. This is followed by a reflection of the theoretical frame and method.

6.1 Answering the Research Questions

The answers from the interviews showed that YouTube has the ability to inform young people about certain topics as well as that it motivates people to add sustainable behaviour pattern in their everyday lives. In addition to that, YouTube also could have the influence to maintain a certain lifestyle. This confirms a study undertaken by Wang, Chungling and Wei (2012). As mentioned in the previous research chapter, social media is an inherent part on people’s daily basis. This is also in line with the previous presented results showing that participants engage on social media activities on a daily basis. In this regard, it is important to mention is that every type of media has a different impact on a person’s engagement towards a certain topic (McQuail, 2010; Strangelove, 2010; Kvale, Conducting An Interview, 2007; Khan, 2016). Therefore, when I have chosen the participants, it was firstly assumed before the interviews that green content has a significant impact on a person. Secondly, it was assumed that participants arguably use different type of social media channels for different content. Therefore, it did not come across as a surprise that the participants used several social media platforms, such like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter. Even though Instagram and Snapchat are popular among young people, Facebook (2.27 billion user) and YouTube (1.9 billion user) are the most used social media platforms worldwide (Dr. Dhiraj, 2019). All participants agreed on that YouTube is their most used platform for seeking information about sustainable behavior, which is in line with my prior assumption.

The first research question (How do young audiences engage with “green” content on YouTube? p. 7) was inspired by previous research from Bandura’s social cognitive theory (2008). To my knowledge and in conjunction to previous research (Khan, 2016; Strangelove, 2010; Bandura, 2008), my study revealed that young audiences who watch green content on YouTube get motivated mainly by certain types of content that show reliable information. This reliable information, which is easy to adapt to their individual lives, is the kind of content with which audiences engage with on YouTube.
With this in mind, the participants’ favorite type of content is sustainable food, which I would like to discuss later on. Participant B and C also get motivated by the people, who spread the messages. They explained that it also depends on the persons’ personality or rather credibility. If someone acts authentic, then it is more likely that they take on the advices and information from the person. Furthermore, the participants agreed on that they watch green content on YouTube for both, educational and entertaining reasons. Participant H described that she like to watch YouTube videos about sustainable food while cooking a plant-based meal. Participant D described similar routines with her engagement with YouTube, mainly for sustainable food purposes. All of the participants mentioned that they watch videos more often than one time a week. Therefore, it can be said that YouTube plays an immense role for the participants’ engagement towards environmental issues and sustainability as well as for further interest formation. An interesting observation from the interviews was that participants’ engagement with YouTube is either for individual purposes, such as maintaining a plant-based diet. Or for collective purposes, where participants wish to get the message out there and spread sustainable news. While half of the participants described that their engagement in green content on YouTube is for their personal benefits, the other half described that it is important to engage with their community.

Answering the main research question (and sub questions) led to the next sub question; what do young audiences feel and/or think about environmental issues and sustainability? The results show that all of the participants explained in some way that they did not care about environmental issues in the past. Therefore, it was very interesting to find out the reasons for their mind change. The participants expressed several reasons on what influenced them to develop their interest in environmental issues and sustainability. The three main factors were television and social media, which continuously spread information about climate change, global warming and other issues. Another factor was a higher engagement in school or university activities/projects with the topic. Another example of the results show that the participants were higher engaged, when they had been facing the damage resulting from the environmental issues in real life. Participant H described if you see and also feel the misery, you cannot continue with your life like you did before. This is considered as an interesting finding and shows that engagement with the topic sustainability can actively lead to caring out the issue more. Moreover, all of the participants mentioned that they uphold a sort of plant-based diet. On the one hand, because of the positive effects that a plant-based diet has on the environment. On the other hand, because of personal health and animal welfare. Previous studies show that livestock and meat production could have an negative impact on the environment in terms of pollution (Lang, 2012; Hristov, et al., 2018).

Reason for participants’ strong determination to achieve a sustainable lifestyle can be explained by participants great knowledge of environmental issues and explicit values for
sustainability in general. Overall, it can be said that all participants think that the issue of sustainability is an important topic within our society nowadays and all participants described that their view on it has changed. This is mainly due to individual reasons. To conclude, all participants think that environmental issues and sustainability are more present through digitalization as the world became more transparent and that they disinterest makes them feel ashamed. All participants highly value sustainability and care for environmental issues.

6.2 Reflection on Research Topic and Method

Green related content or rather sustainability on YouTube have been chosen as two important research topics for this study. Firstly, environmental issues are currently something our society has to deal with. Modern western countries are not solely responsible for all pollution our planet is causing and consequently worsening global warming but playing an essential role in regard to those issues. Hence, it was my motivation to understand people’s motivations, what develops their interest and grabs their attention in this regard. It is of high importance to understand what exactly motivates people that follow a sustainable lifestyle in order to reveal their journey toward this decision. Furthermore, a research gap was detected during my literature review on how and why YouTube has an impact on people to choose a certain lifestyle.

YouTube is a part of a lot of people’s everyday lives, what makes it even more important to understand its potential. How does green content on YouTube motivate young audiences? How does green content on YouTube develop young audiences’ engagement into sustainability? The results of this study show that YouTube plays an essential role in terms of self-education and self-motivation of a certain lifestyle as well as being part of a community that actively tries to spread a sustainable message and actively engages with environmental issues.

Nevertheless, this research has its limitations. When doing a qualitative research with semi-structured interviews as the chosen method, the number of participants is lower than in a quantitative research. In total eight participants were interviewed, and the results are based on their opinions and thoughts about the subject. One requirement for the study was that the interviewees already are interested in the subject and regularly watch YouTube videos. A much appreciated and positive affect of this requirement were participants open-mindedness about the topic and general enthusiasm about the research. Furthermore, their engagement with green content has been developing in the last years, which gave me as a researcher new insights on how this development took place. However, the research could have gained credibility by interviewing people with less interest in sustainability-related content in order to find out whether the platform YouTube has the potential to motivate people’s behavior
toward a more environmental-friendly lifestyle. In a similar vein, to get more information about the totality, a more variety of people could have been surveyed, such like non-students or older people. By increasing demographical aspects, further studies can address different aspects of motivation on the subject of YouTube and sustainability more satisfactorily.

In regard to the research method, I would recommend calculating increase the number of participants to ten since each interview was a bit different in terms of duration and the quality of answers. As already presented previously, a qualitative research approach interviews less people and makes a study less representable. Furthermore, it could lead to interesting result and analysis when an equal number of women and men were interviewed. In addition, more participants would give broader perspectives or at least more useful information to analyze. Apart from this, I found the method useful and it helped me to answer my research questions. In other words, in terms of the validity the research successfully measured what it has to measure. In view of reliability, there could have been some improvements with the questionnaire to get more different answers. The participants answered similar on several questions and I believe that there could have been deep answers, if I added some questions or had been more precise with some of the questions. I came up with new questions spontaneously during the interview conversation, which means that the answers differed from each participant and it took a lot of time to categorize the results for the analysis.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study has been to explore how green related content on YouTube led to young audiences’ engagement in terms of environmental issues and sustainability. The result from the interviews showed that YouTube videos were used as information source as well as inspiration to uphold a sustainable lifestyle. In regard to the kind of content that participants seek out for, when actively wanted to engage in green content on YouTube are sustainable food, zero waste, minimalism and documentaries about environmental issues and sustainability. Some of the participants also described that they are more likely to trust in information and follow the lifestyle choices from people on YouTube, as they seem more credible and authentic. In addition to that, participants also described that the community-aspect of YouTube plays a big role in their motivation to uphold a sustainable lifestyle. The findings also show that the participants’ surroundings play a fundamental role in terms of developing interest in such topics like climate change or global warming. Each participant had a key moment in their life when they realized that those issues are real, and sustainability are important in order to solve environmental issues. Furthermore, participants who saw the outcome of those issues in real life were more engaged with the topic than participants who saw them on screen via some kind of media. In contrast to previous
research, which focused on peoples’ perception of environmental issues and sustainability on social media, this study has given attention to people that are already engaged in the subject. This allowed me to get insights from the participants’ journey from not being interested in the subject to being engaged and actively changing their lifestyle.

During the analysis process, it became ever more fundamental that three specific topics are recommended to focus on during future research. While my study focused on why young audiences engage with “green” content on YouTube and why they do so, it did not focus on the amount of people who engage with the subject and maintain a sustainable lifestyle.

So, there are still quantitative research gaps in terms on how many people engage towards environmental issues and sustainability. Secondly, there is a need for more studies around sustainable lifestyle choices. This research provided information that YouTube is a key motivator for young audiences to achieve them. Therefore, the finding could be tested in another qualitative research on young audiences, which do not practice a sustainable lifestyle. It would be interesting to explore if they would also be motivated to achieve sustainable behaviour pattern in their current life. Lastly, more scientific research on sustainable food or rather plant-based diets could be undertaken. Since dietary choices in regard to sustainability keeps gaining significant research popularity. Specifically in scientific studies such like consumer behavior, industry and commerce, outside of media and communication studies, sustainable food gains interests (Spendrup, Hunter, Isgren, 2016).
References


Qu, S., & Dumay, J. (2011). The qualitative research interview. Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management (Vol. 8), 238-264.


Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

Introducing questions
(First time hearing about climate change/global warming.)
Q1: When was the first time that you ever heard about climate change or global warming? [If the interviewee doesn’t remember, ask] When did you first realize that climate change or global warming really exists?
Q2: How did you learn about those issues? (for example: at home, at school or university, at work, through friends, via social media, on TV or the radio...).
Q3: How did you think and feel about it then?
Q4: How do you feel about it today?

Following-up questions
(Circumstances surrounding develop the interest in sustainability.)
Q5: What is sustainability for you?
Q6: How interested are you in sustainability? Why?
[if the interviewee answered ‘quite/a lot’, then ask] How did you developed your interest in sustainability?

Direct questions
(First contact with green content on YouTube.)
Q7: How/why did you start watching green content on YouTube?
Q8: What is your favorite green content on YouTube? What is it about?
Q9: How often do you watch this kind of content? Why?

(Topic: Present situation and behavior.)
Q10: How sustainable is your current life?
Q11: Is there something you want to change in the short or long term?
Q12: Do you think that green content/YouTubers motivate you to live more sustainably? [If yes] How? [If no] Why not?

Open-ended question
Q13: That was my last question. Is there anything that you would like to add to our conversation?
Appendix 2 – Facebook Post

The majority of the participants were found in the Facebook group “Students for Sustainable Actions” with the following post:

Hey guys! My name is Nadja and I’m from Germany. Currently I’m doing my master’s at JU in International Communication and I need some interviewees for my thesis study. Below you’ll find some information. As thank you for your participation, I would like to invite you to free fika 😊 If you’re interested please send me a message and we can make an appointment for next week! 😊

PS. HAPPY EASTER TO YOU ALL 🎉🎊🐰