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Organic and Sustainable: Content Analysis of Food Marketing Strategies on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how sustainable foods are marketed on Instagram by conducting a content analysis focusing on six factors: 1) category-level broad benefits and attributes, 2) concrete benefits and attributes, 3) social media marketing strategies, 4) earth imagery, 5) frame type, and 6) engagement. A total of 181 posts from five major organic food brands were analyzed. The findings reveal that eco-friendly, biodiversity, and environment/climate themes are most frequently emphasized in sustainable food marketing. Notably, the term "organic" appeared in over 75% of posts, leading to the introduction of the concept "sustainable food washing" a term describing how the excessive use of certain buzzwords and topics in posts can result in misleading practices similar to greenwashing. These results broaden the scope of sustainable food marketing research and significantly enhance existing knowledge in the field.

Keywords: food brands, social media marketing, corporate social responsibility, organic, sustainable food, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

Interest in sustainable foods on social media has surged in recent years (Simeone & Scarpato, 2020). As these platforms increasingly shape consumer purchasing decisions (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Pütter, 2017), companies are leveraging social media to promote products marketed as sustainable (Garner & Mady, 2023). In 2021, food and beverage companies invested $3.5 billion in social media marketing, with the global food marketing industry projected to surpass $2 trillion by 2023 (Amra & Elma, 2022).

Over the past decade, producing, selling, and marketing organic products have experienced exponential growth, emphasizing their importance to the global economy (Willer & Lernoud, 2017). In the United States, the organic food industry is one of the most rapidly expanding segments of the overall food market (Organic Trade Association, 2023). Though less prominent, the sustainable food movement has gained some traction in recent years. From 2015 to 2021, sustainable products experienced a growth rate 2.7 times higher than conventionally marketed products. (Berrebi et al, 2023).

Given the growth of these markets, it is crucial to distinguish between organic and sustainable practices. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines organic practices as crops being free of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, bioengineering, or ionizing radiation; meat, dairy, and eggs must be free of growth hormones and antibiotics; packaged goods must be free from GMOs and artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives (McEvoy, 2012). In contrast, the USDA defines sustainable agriculture as a system of practices tailored to ensure long-term sustainability to a) satisfy human food and fiber needs, b) enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends, c) make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls, d) sustain the economic viability of farm operations, and e) enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). For the USDA, positioning foods as organic or sustainable is based on the agricultural practice's companies use. However, there is a great deal of complexity involved in the classification of food products as sustainable (Sackett et al., 2016).

Although organic food could be sustainable, it is not necessarily sustainable. Organic farming avoids synthetic inputs, while sustainable farming focuses on broader environmental impacts (Wu & Sardo, 2010). For example, locally sourced non-organic produce may have a lower carbon footprint than organic produce imported from far away. Conversely, organic farming practices can sometimes lead to sustainable outcomes such as improved soil health and biodiversity. Consumers are willing to pay for organic and sustainable food products due to various reasons such as human health, food safety or better quality (Eyinade, 2021; Li & Kallas, 2021). Yet, many lack a clear understanding of their definitions (Eyinade, 2021; Laureati, 2013; von Meyer-Höfer et al., 2015).

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Research has evaluated determinants in the use of sustainable food marketing and sustainable food consumption (Laureati et al., 2024; Phookan et al., 2020; Su et al., 2019; Vassallo et al., 2016). Belz and Schmidt-Riediger (2010) identified how consumers, legislators, corporate stakeholders, and public exposure impact the use of an "active sustainability marketing strategy" by companies in the food industry. Phookan et al. (2020) created a framework to determine if a restaurant will employ a green marketing strategy, including factors such as policies, owner and consumer attitudes, the use of green advertising by competitors, and restaurant size. While focused more on green marketing and the foodservice industry, this framework could provide a comparable framework regarding sustainable food marketing.

However, numerous unsubstantiated claims have been made by food brands, often claiming their products are 'climate-friendly' (Hirji, 2023). Dutch advocacy groups have identified 53 instances where misleading claims were made regarding food product labeling and marketing (ET Brand Equity, 2023). For example, Vital Farms, a company that specializes in pasteurized eggs, takes pride in its ethical and environmentally friendly pasture-raised products. However, the company is currently involved in a class action lawsuit filed by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) alleging potential instances of humane washing and greenwashing, which relates to false advertising practices (Janke et al., 2023). According to Vital Farms, it uses the terms "certified humane" and "pasture-raised" to reflect its compliance with the Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC) standards (K&L Gates LLP & Huff, 2022). This argument was, however, rejected by the court, which asserted that the terms could still be misleading since HFAC's definitions differed from those commonly understood by consumers (K&L Gates LLP & Huff, 2022). This example illustrates how contemporary corporate marketers may leverage media and advertising to make public commitments to enhance sustainability practices, even though these pledges may result in only marginal changes.

Despite limited improvements, advertisements for "environmentally friendly" products and increased health benefits are becoming prevalent (Northen, 2011). Kühl et al.2023) found that the gap between individual expectations and the actual conditions on farms can lead to consumer distrust and a sense of deception. Therefore, transparency is essential in advertising sustainable products. Considering the increased concern about environmental sustainability and the growing popularity of green food products among consumers, it is critical to examine the attributes emphasized in sustainability marketing on social media. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how food companies that positioned their products as sustainable use social media to promote their products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Use of Social Media to Promote Food Products as Sustainable

The definition of a sustainable diet is "those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations" (Burlingame & Dernini, 2012, p.7). Such diets must be culturally appropriate, accessible, economically fair, affordable, and nutritiously adequate while optimizing natural and human resources (Burlingame & Dernini, 2012). The *EAT-Lancet Commission* stresses the need for a "great food transformation" to provide nutritious, sustainable food for a growing global population within safe planetary boundaries (Willett et al., 2019). Attributes of sustainable diets vary by context and are shaped by environmental and socio-economic factors (Milner & Green, 2018).

Key components of sustainable diets include: (1) well-being and health, (2) biodiversity, environment, and climate, (3) equity and fair trade, (4) eco-friendly, local, and seasonal foods, (5) cultural heritage and skills, and (6) food/nutrient needs, food security, and accessibility (Lairon, 2012). Well-being and health involve maintaining a healthy lifestyle and eating pattern that can reduce the strain on healthcare budgets and improve the structure of the healthcare system nationally by preventing the prevalence of certain diseases so that environmental sustainability can be maintained (Johnston et al., 2014). Biodiversity, environment, and climate require production systems that prevent degradation, preserve biodiversity, and avoid dietary simplification (Johnston et al., 2014). Fair trade and equity demand affordable food and policies that secure access for all income levels (Burlingame & Dernini, 2012). Eco-friendly, local, and seasonal foods emphasize crop diversity and reduced irrigation through locally sourced, seasonal production (Johnston et al., 2014). Cultural heritage and skills highlight the importance of diverse diets and respect for traditions, values, and religion (Lairon, 2012). For food/nutrient needs, food security, and accessibility factors, consuming enough food, receiving sufficient nutrients and vitamins, and avoiding foods that are high in energy but low in nutrients, are crucial (Burlingame & Dernini, 2012). These components are interconnected, reinforcing one another in shaping sustainable diets (Johnston et al., 2014).

Social media is now central to food marketing. Existing research into the effects of social media on the food industry often uses content analysis to explore strategies (Bragg et al., 2019; Vassallo et al., 2018) or surveys to test consumer attitudes and behaviors resulting from strategies (Melović et al., 2020). (Klassen et al. 2018) found that different social media strategies were more effective on different platforms by comparing Facebook and Instagram. When evaluating consumer purchasing decisions regarding clean food, a previous study found that consumers were more likely to purchase clean foods from well-known companies and when discounts on the food were available (Hongpisuttikul & Sookcharoen, 2021). Most research on the intersection of social media and sustainable food marketing investigates the impact social media marketing has on consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward sustainable food (Segovia-Villarreal & Rosa-Diaz, 2022; Simeone & Scarpato, 2020; Wu et al., 2023). The following section will discuss how social media is a key tool in sustainable food marketing.

The Food Industry's Use of Sustainable Brand Positioning and Other Marketing Communication Strategies via Social Media

The introduction of social media was a game-changer for the marketing strategies of companies and brands, including the food industry. Brands have found success in building long-term relationships through social media and have developed their own identities across their social media platforms in both expected and unexpected ways (Castronovo & Huang, 2012; Vinerean, 2017). Klassen et al. (2018) found that marketing was most successful for food companies when users were exposed to posts that did not feel like advertisements and when links to products were accessible. However, a limited amount of research has been conducted on social media marketing for sustainable diets and products. Haff (2017) analyzed the organic food industry's social media marketing strategies to determine what social media channels and strategies are being used. Also, a study revealed that social media influencers' healthy and athletic lifestyles can have a positive influence on children's healthy snack choices (De Jans et al., 2021).

Research has been conducted regarding the impact of social media on consumers' behavior toward organic food products. Gayathri and Poongodi (2021) conducted a study to determine the impact of

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social media on the consumer purchasing behavior of organic food products in India using the theory of planned behavior. Research has been conducted regarding the general pro-environmental behavior of individuals. For example, Shah et al. (2021) examined the impact of climate change-related information on social networking sites on individual pro-environmental behavior. There is, however, substantial uncertainty regarding the impact of social media marketing on sustainable food choices, those promoting environmentally conscious options, and the mechanisms through which these messages are interpreted.

Lepkowska-White and Kotright (2017) found that women food bloggers promoted the services they provide to add credibility to their expertise, created aesthetically pleasing sites to increase interest, and discussed the senses delighted by the food they write about to increase readers' desires to use the recipe or visit the restaurant. Several studies have explored the strategies companies use to market to children (Van der Bend et al., 2022; Potvin Kent et al., 2018); however, few studies focus on the use of social media strategies by sustainable food brands (Samoggia et al., 2019; Minton et al., 2012), and even fewer have analyzed strategies used to promote sustainable diets. Because the use of attributes related to sustainable diet and marketing a brand as sustainable can influence consumer attitudes and purchase behaviors (Bragg et al., 2019; Klassen et al., 2018; Vassallo et al., 2018), more research needs to be conducted to evaluate the way brands position themselves as sustainable. Thus, this analysis posits the following questions:

RQ1: What are the marketing strategies used by the food industry to promote sustainable diets on social media?

Framing Theory, Green Advertising, & Greenwashing

Most notably posited by Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993), framing theory argues that the way messages are constructed or framed influences the interpretation and understanding of information for the public. By highlighting or omitting certain information, framing theory posits that the encoder exerts a level of power over message perception (Entman, 1993). This study codes for four frames for coding: gain-framing, loss-framing, health-framing, and environment-framing. Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) prospect theory posits that framing based on outcomes (gain versus loss) will impact people's responses to certain messaging. According to this theory, people who are more risk-averse will respond better to messages that highlight the potential gains from making a certain choice, while those who are risk-seeking will respond better to what can be lost if one makes that choice. Previous research has found that highlighting nutritional benefits elicited more positive responses from consumers (Alcantrara et al., 2020; Shimul et al., 2021; Vant'Riet et al., 2014). (Vidal et al. 2019) found that participants presented with neither a gain nor a loss-framed message were more likely to pick snacks with nutritional warnings on the package compared to participants presented with either a gain or loss-framed message prior to snack choice. Coding for gain- and loss-framing in sustainable advertisements gives insight into the messages that these companies perceive as most effective with their consumers.

The last two frames are of particular interest within health communication research: health message framing and environmental framing. While health message framing highlights the benefits and costs for the consumer adopting the practice (Gantz et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2008), environmental message framing focuses on the impact on nature and the world around them (Gephart et al., 2011; Sio et al., 2022). When looking at health message framing, some studies have found that using sayings like "low-fat", "high in calcium", or "organically grown" have led to an increased assumption that a product was healthier for consumers than others, an effect called the health halo effect (Amos et al., 2019; Fernan et. al., 2018; Jeong & Jang, 2020; Kust, 2019), despite little research to back these claims. One study even found that words like "organic" or "sustainable" led to consumers believing those products were superior to conventional food options (Vega-Zamora et al., 2014).

Advertisements using environmental message framing are often referred to as green advertising (Agarwal & Kumar, 2021; Chang et al., 2015). For this analysis, this frame focuses on the benefits of the agricultural techniques used in the cultivation of the product (or the product's ingredients) to the environment or on the little to no harm the techniques caused to the environment (Chang et al., 2015; Kao & Du, 2020; Tu et al., 2013). Previous research has found that the effectiveness of this frame is often reliant on the consumers' prior environmental knowledge and pro-environmental behaviors (Fu & Gao, 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2017).

Because there is growing evidence that the production and consumption of food contribute to the degradation of the environment on a global scale (Lappé et al., 2002), food businesses have recognized the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) over the past several years (Maloni & Brown, 2006). An organization is expected to address all stakeholders' concerns related to societal responsibility as part of CSR, with particular attention paid to the marketing strategies used to communicate with consumers and influence the perceptions of the company's commitment to environmental and social responsibility (Carroll, 1991; Freeman & Velamuri, 2021; Mohr et al., 2001). With attention paid to this concern, many have criticized companies using green advertising strategies for greenwashing. Greenwashing refers to misleading stakeholders regarding the environmental practices of an organization through positive communications about that organization's environmental performance (Tateishi, 2018). Greenwashing practices involve the deception of allocating excessive resources, including financial investments, time, and effort, towards marketing products as environmentally friendly instead of reducing the severity of negative environmental impacts from corporate practices (Aggarwal & Kadyan, 2014).

Unfortunately, greenwashing plays a role in the sustainable food industry. The sustainable food industry often employs similar practices to greenwashing; however, no term has been created for the use of deceptive marketing in that industry. The similarity between greenwashing and sustainable food washing is that both concern marketing a product as environmentally friendly without meaningful action toward reducing environmental impact. However, unlike greenwashing, sustainable food washing concerns focus on the sustainability, organic, biodiversity conservation, and/or eco-friendly claims food companies make regarding not just their corporate practices, but also their farming and sourcing practices.

While various certifications exist in the food industry to prove sustainability, a significant portion of the general public is unaware of their existence. The following are examples: Animal Welfare Approved, Bird Friendly, Humane Farm Animal Care, Marine Stewardship Council, Salmon-Safe, and USDA Organic (Nguyen et al., 2019). It has been demonstrated that companies with competing eco-labels or diverse environmental practices may confuse consumers, creating an opportunity for unscrupulous practices such as greenwashing (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999; Northen, 2011). The use of external standards for authorization is considered a solution to combating greenwashing by replacing the firm's self-assessment with that of a third party (Nguyen et al., 2019). However, there is a possibility that ecolabels at the product level are susceptible to fraud, which may lead to consumer

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skepticism regarding the environmental claims made by green foods (Zaharia et al., 2011). To better understand the current use of sustainable diet claims, benefits, and social media marketing strategies, the following method has been utilized. Therefore, the following questions are posed in this analysis:

RQ2: What are the effects of different message framing strategies on social media engagement in the context of sustainable food promotion?

METHOD

Sampling Procedure and Data Collection

In this study, a quantitative content analysis was conducted on the sustainable food industry's food advertisements on Instagram. CSR advertising practices have been examined in several content analyses (Kwon & Lee, 2021; Lee & Rim, 2018; Mögele & Tropp, 2010). This study uses a sampling approach to analyze an entire year's worth of data, providing a comprehensive assessment of the post patterns and their chronological order. Therefore, five sustainable food companies' Instagram posts were analyzed from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, to examine the proposed research questions. Since Instagram has become a popular marketing tool in many industries, it was selected as a representative of social media. In a recent study, it was found that 1.3 billion people use Instagram daily, and it is the most downloaded app in the world, followed by TikTok (Hootsuite, 2023). Instagram's advertisement revenue is expected to reach 50.58 billion dollars in 2023, and 35% of its users will make a purchase on the platform (Hootsuite, 2023).

The brands selected were based on the results provided by the websites "Sustainable Jungle," "Eating Made Easy," and "Environment," which composed lists of the food companies positioned as sustainable. According to Bilbo et al. (2000), a company making over 50 million dollars in revenue is considered large. Therefore, we first selected companies with over 50 million dollars in revenue in 2022 to provide a representative sample of large sustainable food companies. Then, we selected companies based on their Instagram followers' number. Macro-influencers are defined as accounts with more than 1 million followers, while meso-influencers are defined as accounts with more than 50,000 followers (Janssen et al., 2022). As the sustainable food industry is relatively new, we selected companies that had more than 50,000 followers to ensure sufficient representation. The following five companies were selected based on these three criteria: Earthbound Farm, Nature's Path Organic, Organic Valley, Patagonia Provisions, and Vital Farms.

The unit of analysis for this study includes Instagram posts with advertising messages related to sustainable diets. The sample consisted of Instagram posts that directly promoted their sustainable diet practices. We coded for both the post image and caption. Moreover, since Instagram allows users to upload multiple images and videos in a single post, our study focused on the first photo or video in each post, as these are the elements users view initially when scrolling through the platform.

Measurements

Several variables were developed based on previous research in relation to the organic food industry and CSR advertising (Haff, 2017; Kwon & Lee, 2021; Seelig et al., 2021). Considering the limited number of previous studies and conditions on sustainable diets in marketing communications, the current study introduces a novel approach to capture the determinants, components, and claims associated with sustainable diets based on the understanding of the existing literature. Several variables were developed based on a literature review of food studies in which definitions and descriptions of sustainable diets were found and six variables were coded: (1) category-level benefits/attributes, related to a sustainable diet, (2) more concrete benefits/attributes, that are said to characterize the specific brand, (3) social media marketing strategies, (4) earth imagery, (5) frame type, and (6) engagement. Considering the variations in communication channels and platforms across prior studies, it became necessary to adapt certain variables to facilitate a rigorous and accurate coding procedure.

First, category-level broad benefits/attributes related to a sustainable diet were categorized into six groups: well-being/health for human, well-being/health for animal, biodiversity/environment/climate, equity/fair trade, eco-friendly/local/seasonal foods, cultural heritage/skills, and food and nutrient needs/food security/accessibility (Johnston et al., 2014). See Table 1 for examples of how each benefit/attribute was coded and intercoder reliability.

Table 1; Category-Level, Broad Benefits/Attributes of a Sustainable Diet: Coding Examples and Inter-Coder Reliabilities

Coding Category	Examples	Entire Sample Reliability (I_r)*
Well-being, health for human	Concerns/discussions regarding disease burden of population, lifestyle, consumption/ eating patterns (excludes animals and the environment)	1
Well-being, health for animals	Concerns/discussions regarding disease burden of population, lifestyle, consumption/eating patterns (excludes humans and the environment)	1
Biodiversity, environment, climate	GHGE emissions, use of fossil fuels for cultivation, processing & transport, regenerative/restorative farming	1
Equity, fair trade	Food affordability, globalization & trade, government food policies, trade between companies, fair prices are paid to producers.	1
Eco-friendly, local, seasonal foods	Water use for irrigation, land use, soil, crop diversity, materials for packaging, removal of toxins	0.83
Cultural heritage, skills	Consumption/ eating patterns, diet diversity, gender, class/status, knowledge/education, religion, food/menu traditions	1
Food and nutrient needs, food security, accessibility	Amount of nutrients/vitamins consumed, quantities of food produced and consumed, quantities of calories, sugars, saturated fats consumed, consumer access to food (e.g. concerns of food deserts), food costs	0.88

Second, more concrete benefits/attributes that are said to characterize the specific brand were then categorized into twelve groups: environmental certification/labels, organic or natural, locally sourced, reduced packaging/sustainable packaging, plant-based or vegan, sustainable farming practices, waste reduction/upcycling, renewable energy, fair trade or ethical sourcing, biodiversity conservation, carbon footprint reduction, and water conservation (Willett et al., 2019). See Table 2 for examples of how each concrete benefit/attribute was coded and intercoder reliability.

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Table 2: Concrete Benefits/Attributes of a Sustainable Diet: Coding Examples and Inter-Coder Reliabilities

Coding Category	Examples	Reliability (I_r)*
Environmental certification/ labels	Non-GMO Project Verified, Fairtrade Certified by IMO	0.86
Organic or natural	Organic, Natural, No GMOs	1
Locally sourced	"Made with locally grown fruit"	1
Reduced packaging/ sustainable packaging	"Created with recycled materials", "Eco-friendly packaging"	1
Plant-based or vegan	"Made only with plants", "Vegan production"	1
Sustainable farming practices/ sustainable production	Regenerative agriculture, permaculture, non-polluting	0.77
Waste reduction/ upcycling	"Reducing waste one pack at a time"	1
Renewable energy	"Made using solar power"	1
Fair trade or ethical sourcing	"Workers/farmers are not exposed to dangerous materials, etc…", upholding rights, decent working conditions	0.83
Biodiversity conservation	"We are committed to ensuring continued variation of plant life", regenerative and restorative agricultural practice	0.73
Carbon footprint reduction	Energy-efficient operations, carbon offsetting initiatives, use of solar or wind power	1
Water conservation	Efficient irrigation systems, water reuse	1

For social media marketing strategies, image and text were coded separately and categorized into eleven groups: experiential, improving personal image, emotional, social cause, unique selling proposition, call for action, spokesperson, comparative, exclusivity, and animation (Haff, 2017). Animation was excluded from the text component. A few of Haff's variables were removed from the codebook or adapted to fit this study. Due to the need to examine a company's core value separately, we excluded the "resonate" variable from our study. To broaden the scope of the study, "calls for action" were used rather than "user-generated content." The study changed "user-image" to "improving personal image" for better understanding by the coders. See Table 3 for examples of how each of the strategies was coded and their intercoder reliabilities.

Table 3: Social Media Marketing Strategies, Examples, and Inter-Coder Reliabilities

Coding Category	Examples	Reliability (I_r)*
Experiential	How it feels, how it tastes, smell, texture	a. 1 b. 0.87
Improving personal image	"This will help you feel and look better"	a. 1 b. 0.92
Emotional	Uses cute animals to evoke happiness	a. 1 b. 1
Social cause	Supporting climate change causes	a. 0.83 b. 0.73
Unique selling proposition	"We source all products locally", Promoting zero carbon footprint	a. 1 b. 1
Call for action	"Tag us", "Comment on our post", "Like us", "Check out link in bio"	a. 1 b. 1
Spokesperson/ Spokespeople	A dairy farmer partner discusses the benefits of their sustainable production process	a. 0.73 b. 1
Comparative	List of ways they are better than the leading competitor	a. 1 b. 1
Exclusivity	For a limited time, quantity or by invitation only	a. 1 b. 1
Animation	Video of a cow in a field, Bright moving arrow added to a video to emphasize something	b. 0.77

Note: Coding for Social Media Marketing Strategies was split into two units of analysis: Post caption and post image. The only exception is for "Animation" which was only coded for post image. #a: Reliability for the coding of the post caption; #b: Reliability for the coding of the post image

Earth imagery was categorized into five groups: tree (α=0.68), plant (α=1), flower (α=0.88), animal (α=1), and natural landscape (α=1) (Kwon & Lee, 2021). Frame type was categorized into 5 groups: gain (α=0.81), loss (α=1), health (α=0.90), environment (α=0.72), and sustainable washing (α=0.76). The posts for each item were coded as either present (1) or absent (0). Lastly, the number of likes and comments was collected for the engagement variable.

Intercoder Reliability

Several coding sessions were conducted in order to achieve high intercoder reliability. The software, Python, was used to crawl Instagram for the content used for this analysis. This crawl yielded 915 total posts during the time frame indicated earlier. Our analysis focused on posts that explicitly promoted sustainability attributes or claims by establishing clear criteria for excluding certain types of posts. The excluded posts are as follows: 1) posts that solely provide recipes using the brand's products without specifically mentioning sustainability, 2)

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holiday celebration posts that do not refer to sustainability, such as Easter or Halloween posts, and 3) posts promoting sales, discounts, or special offers without highlighting sustainability. Following the exclusion of posts unrelated to the topic, 181 posts promoting sustainable foods were selected for further analysis.

Three coders conducted a brief coding exercise, focusing their efforts on coding sustainable food-related Instagram posts that did not contribute to the final sample. Several disagreements were discussed, and certain modifications were made to the codebook to eliminate potential sources of ambiguity. These modifications include adding examples of variables based on the practice and further explicating definitions when necessary to help alleviate bias in coding. A second round of practice was conducted, which was not included in the final sample. The codebook was adjusted to eliminate confusion after disagreements were discussed. Two coders coded a random sample of 9.9% (n=18) of the posts from the five companies in the second round of coding. A test of Krippendorff's alpha was conducted for every coding category; the intercoder reliability ranged from 0.68 to 1.0, which is an acceptable outcome. Variables with alpha values between .65 and .70 should be viewed with caution since these variables meet minimal standards for reliability. Each coder then examined a randomly selected sample of the remaining Instagram posts.

RESULTS

RQ1 sought to identify the marketing strategies used by the food industry to promote sustainable foods on social media. First, the frequency analysis revealed that the two most common category-level, broad benefits/attributes featured were eco-friendly/ local/ seasonal foods and biodiversity/ environment/climate, while the least common component was cultural heritage/skills. See Table 4 for a full outline of the frequencies of category-level benefits/attributes related to a sustainable diet. The most concrete benefits/attributes that are said to characterize the specific branding of these companies' Instagram posts were organic or natural, sustainable farming practices, and biodiversity conservation, while the least common attributes featured were renewable energy, locally sourced, and plant-based or vegan. See Table 5 for the frequencies of all benefits/attributes.

Table 4: Frequencies of Category-level Benefits/Attributes

Key Components	*n*	%
Well-being, health for human	51	28.2
Well-being, health for animals	33	18.2
Biodiversity, environment, climate	119	65.7
Equity, fair trade	13	7.2
Eco-friendly, local, seasonal foods	134	74.0
Cultural heritage, skills	3	1.7
Food and nutrient needs, food security, accessibility	28	15.5

Table 5: Frequencies of More Concrete Benefits/Attributes

Sustainability claims	*n*	%
Environmental certification/ labels	39	21.5
Organic or natural	139	76.8
Locally sourced	9	5.0
Reduced packaging/ sustainable packaging	22	12.2
Plant-based or vegan	10	5.5
Sustainable farming practices	112	61.9
Waste reduction/ upcycling	18	9.9
Renewable energy	5	2.8
Fairtrade or Ethical sourcing	39	21.5
Biodiversity conservation	98	54.1
Carbon footprint reduction	18	9.9
Water conservation	11	6.1

The social media strategies were split into three categories: (1) use in the post image, (2) use in the post caption, and (3) imagery used in the post image. The marketing strategies used most often in the post image were a spokesperson, an emotional appeal, and a social cause. The strategies used least often were experiential, improving personal image, and comparative. See Table 6 for the frequency of all strategies in post images. The marketing strategies used most often in the post captions were the social cause, unique selling propositions, and call to action. The marketing strategies used least often were comparative and exclusivity. See Table 7 for the frequency of all strategies. The earth imagery used most often was plants and trees, while the imagery used least often was flowers. See Table 8 for the frequency of all imagery.

Table 6: Frequencies of Social Media Marketing Strategies in Images

Social media marketing strategies image	*n*	%
Experiential	1	0.6
Improving personal image	1	0.6
Emotional	22	12.2
Social cause	21	11.6
Unique selling proposition	10	5.5
Call for action	4	2.2
Spokesperson	36	19.9
Comparative	2	1.1
Animation	9	5.0

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Table 7: Frequencies of Social Media Marketing Strategies in Text

Social media marketing strategies text	*n*	%
Experiential	37	20.4
Improving personal image	19	10.5
Emotional	29	16.0
Social cause	128	70.7
Unique selling proposition	111	61.3
Call for action	91	50.2
Spokesperson	5	2.8
Comparative	1	0.6
Exclusivity	1	0.6

Table 8: Frequencies of Earth Imagery

Earth imagery	*n*	%
Tree	60	33.1
Plant	127	70.2
Flowers	27	14.9
Animals	42	23.2
Natural landscape	58	32.0

Five groups of framing types were coded: gain, loss, health, environment, and sustainable washing. There was more gain framing used (n = 98, 54.7%) than loss framing (n = 4, 2.2%). Additionally, posts focused more on environmental framing (n = 90, 50.3%) than health framing (n = 18, 10.1%). There were some posts that used both environmental and health framing (n = 27, 15.1%). Lastly, there were a few posts that are considered sustainable washing (n = 23, 12.8%).

RQ2 was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA to see if there were statistically significant differences between framing types and engagement. Groups were divided into no frame, health, environmental, and both health and environmental framing. Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was not statistically significant for either number of likes (p =.08) or comments (p =.12), indicating equal variances held. ANOVA revealed no significant difference in likes between groups, F (3, 175) = 0.66, p = .58. ANOVA revealed no significant difference in numbers of comments, F (3, 175) = 0.71, p = .55. These findings suggest that framing types do not appear to influence either the number of likes or the number of comments in this sample.

DISCUSSION

Major Findings and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of marketing strategies used to promote food products as sustainable in Instagram advertisements intended to endorse sustainable food products. This allows the study to obtain a deeper understanding of how food companies positioned as sustainable promote their food products on social media. However, it is important to understand that sustainable food marketing is complex and social media is often a constraining platform with limited word counts, space on images, and user attention. With these constraints, evaluating what corporations choose to highlight in their posts, specifically on Instagram, is integral to the analysis of this study's results.

The purpose of RQ1 is to explore marketing strategies that are used by the food industry to promote sustainable foods on social media. Researchers in the field of food studies state that in order for a diet to be considered sustainable, it should contain all six components listed in the literature review (Johnston et al., 2014; Lairon, 2012). Sustainability is a complex concept with varying interpretations across different fields. The criteria proposed by Johnston et al. (2014) and Lairon (2012) reflect specific academic perspectives that may not fully align with industry practices or consumer perceptions. In this study, we acknowledge these differences and seek to gain insight into how food companies frame sustainability as a component of their marketing strategies. 74% of the posts mentioned topics related to eco-friendly, local, and seasonal foods and 65.7% of the posts mentioned topics related to biodiversity, the environment, and climate. However, topics such as cultural heritage, skills, equity, fair trade, food and nutrient needs, food security, and accessibility are rarely mentioned on Instagram posts. The food industry may simplify the concept of food sustainability for consumers by focusing primarily on terms such as eco-friendly and biodiversity. Although it is not necessary to use all six components of a sustainable diet, this limited focus may dilute the broader message that food scholars are attempting to convey. Thus, while eco-friendly practices and biodiversity are crucial, they are only a part of a more complex approach to sustainability. In light of these findings, there may be a disconnect between the marketing strategies of food companies and the multidimensional concept of sustainability as outlined by researchers. To better reflect the complexity of sustainability in food products, future research should consider a wider range of sustainability attributes, and food companies should endeavor to adopt a more holistic marketing approach.

The concept of framing is widely used in marketing, whereby marketers strive to sway target audiences through the integrated use of specific content, stylistic elements, and distinctive attributes (Powell et al., 2015). Previous studies have shown that framing the message in such a way that it emphasizes the benefits of buying organic foods can positively impact attitudes and purchase intentions (Jaeger & Weber, 2020; Shan et al., 2020). There was at least one sustainability claim in all analyzed posts. The results show that the majority of posts used the word organic, which is, perhaps, not surprising. 61.9% of the posts frame their posts using sustainable farming practices. It was common to see terms such as restorative farming, organic farming, and regenerative farming being used. Also, more than half of the posts used messages regarding biodiversity conservation (54.1%), and a fifth of the posts talked about their environmental certifications (21.5%). Environmental friendliness was the central theme of most claims. However, companies use these terms to promote their products without explaining what they mean, which often leads to similar practices as greenwashing.

Like greenwashing, sustainable food washing can be nuanced in nature and may be difficult to discern as a consumer. While the use of terms (like "organic") may not always equate to those terms being misused, it could be a sign that companies perceive these terms to be favorable to consumers. For example, there were several posts in our sample mentioning how organic food is healthy for the environment, so

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it is also healthy for the individual. Previous studies have found that organic food purchase intentions are strongly influenced by consumer motivation for health (Hjelmar, 2011; Liang & Lim, 2021). The strong desire for health may lead consumers to readily accept these claims, potentially misleading them when making informed purchasing decisions regarding sustainable diets.

In terms of use in the post image, food companies commonly showed spokesperson or spokespeople (19.9%), discussed social causes (11.6%), and used emotional images (12.2%). Additionally, social cause (70.7%), unique selling propositions (61.3%), and calls for action (50.2%) were commonly used in the post caption. These results reveal that food companies predominantly utilize socially responsible practices to promote their organizations on social media. It is achieved through referencing social causes and the strategies employed to address these issues. Most posts emphasize their adoption of ethical business practices and sustainable farming techniques as demonstrations of their social responsibility towards the environment. Also, most of the posts had unique selling propositions about how their products are better and healthier than other products since they are “sustainable” or “organic”. These claims are intended to enhance the appeal of products, but they may lead to idealistic perceptions of sustainable food among Instagram users who believe eating sustainable food is significantly healthier than eating conventional food. In a similar vein, this study found that nearly 20% of the posts analyzed featured spokespeople, reflecting the belief that using a spokesperson has a considerably positive influence on advertising attitudes (Lin, 2011).

It appears that a substantial portion of messages emphasize positive outcomes, as indicated by the substantial proportion of messages that focus on achieving gains. This pattern may indicate that brands prefer to focus on the benefits and rewards of their products to encourage consumer interest. In the message framing, environmental considerations take precedence over health considerations. There may be a correlation between this pattern and an increased public awareness of ecological concerns and the decision by marketers to emphasize themes related to biodiversity and environmental protection. Although health framing was still used in the content, it appeared less frequently than in the post. It appears that some posts combine references to health and the environment to satisfy consumers who value multiple aspects of sustainability. Based on the results of this study, within this particular sample, the choice of framing (no frame, health, environmental, or both health and environmental) does not appear to affect the number of likes or comments on Instagram posts. According to this finding, other factors may play a greater role in influencing audience reactions. A future study should explore different variables in order to better understand how sustainability messages resonate with audiences.

On another note, while ‘sustainable washing’ refers to brands using the term ‘organic’ as a proxy for broader sustainability claims without detailed evidence of environmental or social practices, only 12.8% of posts in this study were categorized as sustainable washing. Despite this limited occurrence, existing literature underscores significant concerns regarding deceptive practices in green advertising, particularly in sustainable food marketing context. Organic farming indeed represents an essential component of responsible agriculture; however, there is a potential mismatch between marketing language and verifiable operational commitments when reliance is placed on one term without further support. The results of this study indicate that there may be a potential downside in claiming sustainability-related themes in an exaggerated or repetitive manner, without necessarily providing actual evidence of environmental responsibility. The limited availability of verifiable data in some posts indicates a possible disconnect between messaging and operational commitments, even when referencing sustainability and organic production. Even though instances of sustainable washing were relatively uncommon in our dataset, the broader literature indicates this remains a relevant concern. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of evaluating brand communications for genuine content, suggesting that companies that provide detailed, credible evidence of sustainability are more likely to gain and maintain consumer trust over time.

Finally, this study investigated whether the food companies' CSR efforts in marketing strategies are also applied to the images since Instagram is a visual-centric social media platform. An environmental framework incorporating earth imagery was used to analyze the data. Plants (70.2%), trees (33.1%), and natural landscapes (32%) are commonly used in the posts. These results show how companies are visually framing consumer perceptions and advertising how environmentally friendly they are. There are greater effects of framing on behavioral intentions exhibited by images, potentially influencing consumption behaviors (Powell et al., 2015). These marketing strategies may lead consumers to believe in food companies' CSR efforts and believe that they will have a positive impact when purchasing their products.

The challenge with marketing foods that are positioned as sustainable is that it can sometimes create an idealized perception, leading consumers to believe that the foods are inherently better and healthier without providing appropriate context. The use of this approach may also inadvertently devalue conventional foods. There appears to be minimal substantial nutritional advantage or disadvantage associated with the consumption of organic foods versus conventionally grown foods based on current empirical evidence (Smith-Spangler et al., 2012). It is unclear whether organic foods are significantly more nutrient-denser than conventional foods based on the published literature (Benbrook et al., 2021).

Additionally, some food companies may argue that they are environmentally responsible by using sustainable farming practices. It is true that sustainable farming practices use procedures and processes to restore environmental harm. It is not our intention to insinuate that all food companies attempting to market themselves as sustainable do not follow sustainable practices. It is important to note, however, that companies should strive to use marketing strategies that are less confusing and clearer for consumers when dealing with such a wide range of sustainable practices. Vital Farm, one of our datasets, is an example of its marketing strategy, emphasizing sustainable farming practices as well as ethical animal care. However, Vital Farm is currently involved in a class action lawsuit for their organic washing and inhumane treatment of their animals. Moreover, consumers lack key knowledge on food-related sustainability topics (Van Bussel et al., 2022). This confusion can challenge consumers to discern the authenticity of food companies' marketing claims. Sustainable farming practices are continually gaining new terminology, and there are currently 65 ecolabels in the United States on food (Eco Label Index, 2023). Consumers may find it difficult to determine which labels are trustworthy and reflect sustainable practices with such a wide variety of labels, each potentially conveying different aspects of sustainability.

Choosing sustainable food products whenever feasible and within one's financial means should always be encouraged and revered. However, it's crucial that individuals don't feel ashamed or inadequate for purchasing conventional food. Everyone possesses the freedom to select the dietary options that best align with their preferences and circumstances. Also, this study still supports CSR efforts among food companies for health, environmental and ethical issues. It is important to obtain accurate and trustworthy information about how food

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companies implement sustainable farming practices, despite some of these marketing approaches being beneficial for learning sustainable diets. As of 2022, 68% of consumers have made purchases directly through social media (Sprout Social, 2022). There are no provisions within the existing legal framework for private action against companies for making false or deceptive claims on social media platforms (Klein & Schweikart, 2022). Social media posts generally highlight a few features of a product due to space and attention limitations. It is understandable that companies may focus on certain aspects in their posts, such as promoting biodiversity. The presence of specific attributes does not imply the absence of other components of sustainability. The study findings emphasize the need for a more rigorous analysis of social media marketing. The implementation of regulations and guidelines is essential to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information posted by corporations on social media platforms and to prevent deceptive or misleading practices. Taking such measures serves a dual purpose by safeguarding consumer interests and maintaining the credibility and integrity of social media platforms as trusted sources of information.

Focused on how food companies promote sustainable food products on social media, the above study evaluated how marketers' use of social media allowed for a broader audience reach and effective promotion of their products and services to specific segments of the population. There are some studies on sustainable food marketing (Bhaskaran et al., 2006; Su et al., 2019). The subject of social media has, however, received little research. Due to this, this study endeavor plays a pivotal role in bridging this informational void regarding marketing claims related to sustainable food, a development of critical importance to both researchers and corporations. The organic food industry has been studied for a long time, while food positioned as sustainable is one of the newest topics among scholars, which is becoming popular, as stated in the literature review. The topic of organic food marketing has been the subject of previous research (Hemmerling et al., 2015; Prentice et al., 2019). However, there has been little research conducted on the subject of food positioned as sustainable. Thus, this study contributes to filling a research gap regarding social media marketing of sustainable foods in particular. Consequently, these findings can be useful to consumers seeking to make informed purchase decisions as well as marketers seeking to devise effective strategies for promoting sustainable food through social media.

LIMITATIONS

While the results of this study offer valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focused on five brands, which do not capture the full diversity of food companies. Future research should include a broader range of categories to improve generalizability. Second, the study examined only Instagram posts. Expanding to other platforms would provide a more complete picture of sustainability promotion across social media. Additionally, this study focuses exclusively on the content of sustainability promotion in the food industry. The absence of consumer feedback limits deeper insights into public perceptions and potential accusations of greenwashing. Consumers' skepticism and acceptance of brands that advertise sustainability based on limited attributes (e.g., organic or fair trade) would be better understood by analyzing their responses. In future studies, it would be beneficial to assess the criteria necessary for consumers to perceive a brand as being genuinely sustainable rather than engaging in greenwashing. In order to gain a better understanding of consumer perceptions and reactions to attributes related to sustainability, it may be helpful to analyze the content of comments on Instagram and other platforms. Lastly, while this study does not specifically pinpoint if claims on social media posts are unsubstantiated, evaluating the use of eco-friendly claims may assist in identifying claims that are common or, potentially, overused. Future research would benefit from a deeper analysis of the validity of claims made in these advertisements.

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