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# THE ZERO-WASTE LIFESTYLE MOVEMENT: A GRASSROOTS RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE (Paper)

## **Abstract or Résumé:**

This paper explores the zero waste (ZW) activities and strategies that members of 5 ZW Instagram communities employ in their daily lives. A Thematic Analysis of 2,000 posts revealed that members engage in a total of 39 individual ZW activities, which speaks to a level of commitment that far exceeds any trends or fads. The comments from the ZW members suggest that the ZW lifestyle encompasses people's everyday practices and consumption, and that members engage in private and ongoing actions that interweave into their daily lives.

## **1. Introduction**

In 2016, the world generated 242 million tonnes of plastic waste, and global consumption of plastics continues to increase (World Bank, 2018). Zero waste (ZW) as an overarching principle is defined as “the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of all products, packaging, and materials, without burning them, and without discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health” (Zero Waste International Alliance, n.d.). While large-scale ZW initiatives are crucial in global efforts to manage waste, the World Bank report emphasized the importance of citizen engagement in tackling waste production: “Waste managers rely on citizens to consciously reduce the amount of waste they generate, separate or manage” (World Bank, 2018, 126).

The number of individuals who are consciously living ZW lifestyles in response to the global climate emergency is growing significantly. Social media has provided opportunities for individuals who pursue a ZW lifestyle to form online communities. Instagram, in particular, has become a very popular communication platform for the ZW lifestyle; a search for the hashtag #zerowaste retrieved 5, 6,11,879 posts on July 8, 2020. In spite of the growing popularity of the personal ZW lifestyle, there has been little study on this community-driven response to climate change. Many ZW practitioners face several questions or comments such as “but you're only one person; it's a drop in the bucket; one person can't make a difference.” This paper is a first step in the examination of the structure, function, and practice of online ZW communities. What motivates people to follow a ZW lifestyle? What are the information needs and behaviours of ZW practitioners? How are ZW resources discovered, accessed, and disseminated? How do ZW practitioners determine the trustworthiness and reliability of the information resources they use? The goal of this study is to explore one aspect of the Lifestyle Movement Framework with regard to the ZW lifestyle, namely, *action at the individual level*, that is to explore how ZW practitioners engage in private ZW activities. More specifically, this study will conduct a thematic analysis of 2000 member comments (or discussions) in 5 ZW Instagram communities over a two-year period to determine how members incorporate ZW activities into their daily lives.

## **2. Literature review**

Are online ZW communities examples of social movements or lifestyles? Social movements have traditionally been described as organized collective actions aimed at authority structures, such as governments, while lifestyle movements as more internally-focused groupings driven by consumption and popular culture (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012; Snow, 2004). Social movements focus on collective action, have some degree of organization, and operate largely outside of conventional institutions (McAdam & Snow, 1997). Snow (2004) expressed his concern with the increasingly restrictive conceptualization of collective action and social movements and suggested that we need to explore the space between lifestyle and social movement and bridge the gap in between them. Lifestyles encompass people's "individuality, self-expression, and stylistic self-consciousness" (Featherstone, 1987, p. 55). As such, lifestyles have not been perceived as serious contributors to social change. Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones (2012) argued that alternative lifestyles - such as veganism or ZW living - challenge predominant cultural norms and practices. ZW could be viewed as a lifestyle aspect (or wing) of the established climate change social movement that engages individualized collective action.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argued that there is increasing coordination of action by organizations and individuals using digital media to create networks, structure activities, and communicate their views directly to the world. Individual proponents of ZW lifestyles share internalized or personalized ideas, strategies, and resources via social network sites such as Facebook or Instagram. These sites "not only create online meeting places and coordinate offline activities, but they also help calibrate relationships by establishing levels of transparency, privacy, security, and interpersonal trust" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 753).

Nekmat, Gower, Gonzenbach & Flanagan (2015) investigated the relationship between different interpersonal influencers and their potential to spur individual participation across online collective activities via social media. In reference to Instagram, influencers are users who have an established audience and who can persuade others by virtue of their trustworthiness and authenticity. The authors found that personal networks can trigger collective action via social media and can mobilize new participants.

The Lifestyle Movements Framework (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012) posits that lifestyle movements have the following characteristics:

- Promote individual action. Participation occurs primarily at the individual level with the subjective understanding that others are taking similar action, collectively adding up to social change;
- Engage in private and ongoing action. Adherents interview action into their daily lives;
- Foster an understanding amongst adherents that their individual actions are efforts towards social change; and
- Foster identity work amongst adherents, in which they cultivate a coherent and meaningful identity in the context of a collective identity.

## **3. Method**

Posts were extracted from five popular ZW Instagram accounts over the years 2018 and 2019:

Going Zero Waste, Wasteland Rebel; Zero Waste Chef; Zero Waste Home; and Zero Waste Nerd. For each year all the available posts were extracted and assigned each a numerical code (e.g., GZW 001). The number of comments per post fluctuated significantly across the five Instagram accounts; on average, the number of comments per post across the two years was 20, and an average of 10 posts per year that contained 20 comments. For each account, and for each year, a random sequence generator (<https://www.random.org/lists/>) was used to create a randomized list of the extracted posts, based on the numerical codes assigned to each post (e.g., GZW 001). The first 10 posts from each account, for each year, that contained at least 20 comments, were selected for analysis. Since thematic analysis was conducted manually, it was important to have a dataset that was both manageable in size and yet sufficiently rich and varied to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning, referred to as themes, from the 2,000 posts. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for exploring people’s daily activities and experiences, behaviours, and practices. An inductive approach was used in the coding; in other words, no pre-determined codes were used before the analysis. The posts were analyzed semantically, that is, focus was placed on what people say, rather than any subtext. This analysis provides valuable insight to common goals, activities, activities, and identities of the community members.

#### 4. Results

Table 1 shows the seven themes and sub-themes that emerged from the 2,000 posts

Theme	Sub-themes
Avoiding environmental hazards	Eco-anxiety; Environmental effects; Packaging; Plastic; Trash; Travel
Buying behaviour	Fast fashion; Local goods; Marketing; Savings; Sustainable goods; Thrifting; Waiting; ZW consumerism
Dealing with social context	Diversity; Donating; Family & friends; Motivating others; Societal expectations
Dealing with ZW misconceptions	Greenwashing; Recycling fallacy
Household & personal care	Bulk shopping; Cleaning; Farmers’ markets; Food preparation; Food waste; Health; Personal hygiene; Pets
Waste hierarchy	Compost; Recycle; Reduce; Refuse; Repair; Repurpose; Reuse
Zero waste swaps	Reusable cutlery; Reusable food containers; Reusable shopping bags

*Table 1: Extracted ZW themes and sub-themes*

The themes and sub-themes suggest that ZW activities permeate a wide spectrum of members’ lives. The comments indicate that the members understand that a ZW lifestyle does not hinge on any one single activity: it is not enough to say you follow a ZW lifestyle if you do only one thing, e.g., use a stainless steel straw, but pay little attention to the waste you generate in other aspects of your life. The fact that so many of the members discussed the various ways in which they engage in ZW activities speaks to a level of commitment that far exceeds any trends or fads (e.g., the use of a stainless-steel straw). The comments from the 5 ZW Instagram communities suggest that the ZW lifestyle encompasses people’s everyday practices and consumption, which are

important aspects of a lifestyle movement (Featherstone 1987), and that members engage in private and ongoing actions that interweave into their daily lives, in keeping with Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones (2012).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper presents the first step in examining the role of grassroots, ZW communities in the fight against climate change. The analysis of 2000 comments from 5 ZW Instagram communities revealed a taxonomy of activities, consisting of seven themes, or broad categories, of ZW activities, as well as a total of thirty-nine sub-themes, or more specific types of activities that members incorporate into their daily lives. Further examination of other components of the Lifestyle Movement Framework, namely, an understanding of how ZW practitioners identify themselves in relation to the ZW lifestyle, and how they perceive their ZW activities as efforts towards social change will be conducted.

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