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Conference Paper — Published Version

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Suggested Citation: Szecsei, Blanka (2025) : Parasocial Relationships and Heuristics in Sustainability Communication, In: Gadžo, Amra Klapić, Hidajet (Ed.): Regenerative and Digital Economy: Southeastern Europe's Path to Sustainable Competitiveness, University of Tuzla Faculty of Economics, Tuzla, pp. 189-202, <http://icei.ba/zbornik-radova/>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/343415>

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PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND HEURISTICS IN SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the potential applications of parasocial relationships and heuristics in promoting sustainability. Parasocial relationships refer to one-sided emotional bonds formed with media figures or fictional characters. Through these relationships, consumers perceive issues that their favorites consider important as more relevant and closer to themselves. Heuristics, which play a key role in behavioral economics, simplify and speed up decision-making. By connecting these two phenomena, sustainability messages can be communicated more effectively, and the encouragement of sustainable behavior can become more successful. In this study, the author reviews practices that have aimed at social change. Based on the literature review and its analysis, recommendations are formulated that may contribute to more effective communication of sustainability messages in the future through the appropriate design of communication and campaigns.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, heuristics, sustainability, marketing, communication.

JEL: M31, D91

1. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In the context of increasing environmental awareness, sustainability has become a central theme in contemporary marketing communication. However, while more brands attempt to position themselves as environmentally responsible, consumer trust in green advertising has steadily declined. Also, sustainable behavior is hard to follow for consumers (Vereckei-Póór, 2023). This erosion of trust can be largely attributed to the widespread use of greenwashing practices, when companies exaggerate or falsify their environmental claims to appear more sustainable than they truly are (Breves & Liebers, 2022). As a result, even though a growing number of sustainable products are available on the market, many consumers continue to choose items packaged in plastic or made through environmentally harmful processes (Heidbreder et al., 2019). This discrepancy between pro-environmental attitudes and actual purchasing behavior highlights the complexity of sustainable consumption and the limitations of traditional persuasive strategies.

At the same time, social media has become one of the most influential communication platforms, where consumers increasingly rely on digital personalities for product information and lifestyle inspiration (Guld, 2022). Influencers – individuals who cultivate audiences through consistent, personal, and often relatable content – have emerged as powerful mediators between brands and consumers. Their ability to form parasocial relationships, which are one-sided yet emotionally meaningful connections with followers, allows them to exert substantial influence on attitudes and behavior. However, this influence is not unconditional. When audiences perceive an influencer's sustainability-related message as inauthentic or deceptive, for instance in cases of greenwashing, trust diminishes, and persuasive power declines (Le et al., 2025).

Understanding the psychological mechanisms that underlie such trust dynamics is crucial for improving sustainability communication. One relevant framework for this is heuristics—mental shortcuts that simplify decision-making processes and enable individuals to make judgments quickly and efficiently. Heuristics such as representativeness, availability, and anchoring (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) are often used in everyday decision-making and play an important role in shaping consumer choices. When combined with affective processing, heuristics can influence behavior in subtle yet powerful ways, particularly when individuals are exposed to repetitive and emotionally charged content. These psychological mechanisms are closely related to influencer marketing, where repeated exposure and emotional connection often enhance persuasion and loyalty.

This study therefore aims to examine how heuristics, parasocial relationships, and trust interact within the context of influencer marketing and sustainability communication. It explores how influencers can use

heuristics-based and emotionally engaging strategies to promote environmentally friendly behavior, while also addressing the challenges posed by declining trust due to greenwashing. By analyzing the underlying psychological and relational factors that shape consumer perceptions, this study seeks to identify strategies that could strengthen the credibility of sustainability messages and foster genuine behavioral change towards more sustainable consumption.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Heuristics

Heuristics are widely used as part of quick decision making, as they use less resources, compared to slow and rational decision making. Some examples of heuristics are representativeness, availability and anchoring. These are used to make simplified decisions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Kahneman et al., 1982; Tversky, 1972). For this reason if heuristics can be an effective tool to reinforce and encourage desired behavior, such as sustainable and environmentally friendly actions. Heuristics are used to solve problems by relying on personal experience, they are mental shortcuts, used to save time, and they help us in quick decision making without needing to deeply research and analyze the information (Dale, 2015). This means, that they can also make purchase decisions easier, and quicker (Rosillo-Díaz et al., 2024). When making decisions, according to Kahneman, we can use two different processing systems, System 1 is an automatic, associative and therefore fast and effortless information processing system, that is also emotionally charged. While System 2 is an effortful and more controlled system, and so it is much slower, but also more flexible. Therefore, System 1 is intuitive while System 2 is analytical (Kahneman, 2003). When we process information, affect is also applied in most cases, this means that we automatically add the affecting information to our perception, and these later will influence our decisions that we believed were solely rational (Zajonc, 1980). For example, when we buy a product without too much thinking, or when we turn off the lights to save energy. Affect heuristics can be used as manipulation tools. For example, repetitive exposure results in positive attitude towards the object, which can turn into preference too (Zajonc, 1968).

This is well aligned with the repetitive content consumption of influencers. In that case as followers spend more time watching the influencer's content, the parasocial relationship develops and as the relationship deepens the engagement increases and the follower will watch the contents even more.

This effect could also be used to achieve sustainability goals. For example, as we see more sustainable options, we get more used to them and they will be more familiar and not as distant, therefore we are more inclined to buy them.

2.2. Parasocial Relationships

The popularity of social media platforms and the increasing screen time makes parasocial relationships more prominent in the case of young people (Guld, 2022; Ong et al., 2022; Törőcsik & Szűcs, 2021). Furthermore, parasocial relationships help us cope with hard situations and they can provide a sense of security (Derrick et al., 2009). The relevance of parasocial relationships increases in times of change and uncertainty. Faster, modern lifestyles and as a result weakening interpersonal relationships also make parasocial relationships more prevalent in today's age (Törőcsik, 2017). One recent example is the Covid-19 pandemic. With the lockdowns and social distancing of Covid-19 people turned to media as entertainment, as a result, the number of parasocial relationships increased (Farber et al., 2020). Media personalities, including actors, musicians and influencers were more frequently seen compared to one's real-life connections (Bond, 2021). The higher frequency of contact resulted in the formation of parasocial relationships (Schiappa et al., 2007). The pandemic also brought a mixture of emotions, fear, uncertainty, isolation, loss, anxiety and so on. Parasocial relationships are coping mechanisms, and so they helped to relieve the stress brought on by the concerning situation (Jarzyna, 2021). Similarly to the Covid-19, current events such as wars and economic recession, also bring out negative emotions and so they make parasocial relationships even more important. Influencers can offer soothing in times of difficulty, and they can make people feel heard and understood when they miss real emotional connections (Sen, 2023).

However, following an influencer or celebrity on social media doesn't necessarily mean having a parasocial relationship with them. Having a parasocial relationship with an influencer increases their credibility in the eyes of their followers. It makes the followers' attitude towards the advertised brands more positive, and it

leads to increased purchase intention, and followers also tend to share the influencer's content on social media (Balaban et al., 2022). While young people often form parasocial relationships out of information motive, for example to get travel suggestions, in case of older people, loneliness and lack of social relationships is more prevalent (Bi et al., 2021).

2.3. Influencers

When it comes to follower's trust in influencers, the main contributing factors are authenticity, the expertise of the influencer and the homophily. Attitude homophily is positively related to forming parasocial relationships with influencers, however attractiveness has no effect (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The attractiveness of an influencer only plays a role in the initial following phase, and as time passes, physical attractiveness becomes less important (Kim & Kim, 2021). Instead, the followers pay more attention to the content and overall behavior of the influencer. The more creative and well designed the posts, the more attractive they become. This highlights the importance of the social media content. Apart from the content, homophily also plays major role in engagement. When followers find an influencer similar to themselves, they can connect more easily, and as a result the engagement increases (Sardar et al., 2024). If the content is entertaining, it has a positive effect on the customers rebuying intention (Chen et al., 2020).

Similarly to the attractiveness, the importance of authenticity is more prominent when the follower has a weak relationship with the influencer, as time passes, authenticity also becomes less important. However, as the relationship grows, and becomes stronger, trust in the influencer has a greater impact on follower loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2021). Authenticity of the influencer and sharing numerous personal details can help build stronger parasocial relationships with the followers (Ferchaud et al., 2018). This strong parasocial relationship and the need to know the personal insights of a famous person's life can even result in media addiction (de Bérail et al., 2019). Forming a vicious cycle where consuming more and more content leads to an even stronger parasocial relationship which again results in longer screen time. This strong parasocial relationship increases the buying intention of the followers (Ashraf et al., 2023). Social media influencers try to develop their follower base and communities, which increases social influence. In the case of micro influencers, the content must be aligned with the followers' interest (Balaban et al., 2022). The relationship can be even stronger in the case of micro influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023). The stronger relationship in case of micro influencers can be due to the heuristics of spending more time with people who have fewer connections (Tenev, 2024). This way the connection between the micro influencer and their community feels more intimate and realistic.

The previous factors became less important with time, although in the case of expertise, an increased number of interactions, and more time is needed so that the followers notice the influencer's expertise (Kim & Kim, 2021). The expertise of the influencer does not affect the engagement with the content. Customer engagement is greater when the followers find the influencers trustworthy and similar to themselves (Sardar et al., 2024). Trust in the influencer results in higher purchasing intentions in regards of the endorsed product, as followers view those products more positively. As previously described, trust can indeed affect the behavior and opinions of the followers (Kim & Kim, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Yun et al., 2023). Having a strong parasocial relationship with an influencer makes the endorsed product more attractive and so increasing the purchasing intentions (Ashraf et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021). Strong parasocial relationships and credibility increase the purchase intentions of followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). On the other hand, having weak parasocial connection with the influencer results in the decrease of buying probability in case of a strong initial decision (Penttinen et al., 2022).

2.4. Trust

We view smiling people more positively, we see their smiles as a sign of trustworthiness, goodness, honesty and sincerity. A smiling person would also appear more obedient and admirable compared to someone who is not smiling (La France & Hecht, 1995). This also applies to media personalities, in most cases they are photographed as smiling, happy people, most of them try hard to always show only their positive emotions. They mostly start their posts by smiling and waving at the camera, showing their good intentions and friendliness. As trustworthiness is a main factor in content engagement, most influencers want to appear trustworthy and sincere. However, it is really important that true sincerity includes showing the reality, which can sometimes even be negative. Many influencers started to show their real selves, including no makeup photos, pre-editing shots and many more. This results in higher perceived sincerity (Wize, 2023). When

followers view the source trustworthy, they tend to perceive the content as higher quality. So, when the influencer is honest, viewers feel that their content is also honest and accurate and therefore highly informative (Filieri et al., 2023). This means that to help people believe in sustainable content, the influencers creating them should be trustworthy.

Apart from parasocial relationships, the influencer's self-presentation is also important, when building connections with followers. Influencers who are perceived as altruistic and genuine and not self-interested are more likely to build connections and acceptance among followers, and therefore they are more effective in transferring messages (Zheng et al., 2024). However, people tend to trust experts more than their peers (Zhang, Yu, & Yao, 2024). So apart from influencers it is important to have experts backing up what the influencers say. This could be a collaboration too, where the influencer invites an expert and they discuss a topic together. When followers feel they are aligned with the influencer's values and attitudes, they form stronger parasocial relationships with them and so they support, promote and even defend the influencer when needed, as well as they are more likely to support their values (Wong & Wei, 2023). Consumers prefer to purchase and use products that align with their self-concept (Sirgy, 1985). So when a person values sustainability they are more likely to purchase environmentally friendly products. When choosing celebrities for brand endorsement, it is most beneficial to choose a celebrity, who represents a rare or unique value, that also matches the brand's identity. This can boost the impact and the profitability of the partnership (Zamudio, 2016). This could also mean choosing an influencer who also leads a sustainable lifestyle. Emotional connection with the influencer leads to positive response towards the influencer advertising. In case of short video ads, the sensory experience leads to increased purchase intentions, while the positive feelings contribute to engagement with the ad (Li et al., 2023). In case of short videos, there are several important factors that affect customer engagement. For example, when the video is entertaining, or when the relationship between the content creator and the consumer is close, it has a positive impact on customer engagement (Xiao et al., 2023). Celebrity posts on social media encourage consume engagement (Bazi et al., 2020).

Followers have especially strong parasocial relationship with nano-, micro- and macro influencers, as they seem closer to them. Smaller influencers benefit from this strong relationship with their followers, while mega influencers benefit from this likeability and expertise when increasing purchase intention (Zhang, Tang, & Krallman, 2024). The highest return on investment can be obtained while cooperating with nano influencers (Beichert et al., 2024). Higher follower count means the influencer reaches a broader audience, but the relationship with the followers is weaker, and so engagement is less likely (Wies et al., 2023). So for effectively transferring sustainability related messages, it is best to collaborate with influencers, who have less followers, but their values align with sustainable development. Strong parasocial relationships has a direct effect on the intention to adopt the influencer's recommendations. Influencers with less followers have a higher persuasive power, as they can form stronger bonds with the audience (Conde & Casais, 2023). Based on this combining smaller and bigger influencers seem like a good strategy, however, when promoting the same product in livestreams, they weaken each other's sales performance. It is caused by the decreased trust in big influencers, when followers find out that multiple influencers promote the same product (Gu et al., 2024). This can also be translated to sustainability messages. It is important to work with a few influencers, and to make sure they are all a good fit for the content. Parasocial relationship with the correctly chosen influencer can further enhance environmentally friendly actions (Breves & Liebers, 2022). However, information value could be even more important in creating environmental communication strategies (She et al., 2025). This could be due to recent trust issues with influencers.

2.5. Marketing Tools

Several advertisements feature animals to positively influence the viewers' attitude. Most people love animals, and most people view their pets as family members (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Animal companions can also be considered as an extension of the consumer's self (Belk, 1988). Furthermore, animals can transfer both cultural symbols and meaning to a brand, making them useful in brand messaging (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Animals also give space to include nature-related and playful experiences in the advertisements (Holbrook et al., 2001). For this reason, using animals in sustainability messaging could also be effective. Many times, consumers are more aware of the link between an animal and the brand compared to a person and the brand (Hoggan, 1989). However, when used in advertisements they encourage heuristic processing, opposed to systematic processing. Therefore, using animals in advertisements is useful if we want consumers to process information heuristically, however, if the goal is for them to use the systematic processing, using animals is

counterproductive (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Based on the Heuristic Systematic Model, individuals can process information with both systematic and heuristic processing, usually depending on their motivation and involvement. Highly motivated consumers tend to make more effort and analyze the available information, while less motivated consumers apply heuristics in their decision making, making the decision faster and simpler. The two information processing styles can even occur at the same time (Todorov et al., 2002; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). In conclusion, featuring animals in advertisements can have positive effects when used correctly and in accordance with our goals.

When an influencer posts informative content, the trust increases and therefore they affect people's decision making, however when the content is entertaining. Being attractive, trustworthy and similar to the followers also boosts trust in the branded posts (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Followers tend to form parasocial relationships with influencers, who are attractive and similar to themselves, however being trustworthy alone doesn't help forming parasocial relationships (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Furthermore, parasocial relationships can also improve attitude towards values mentioned in posts (Du et al., 2023). In case of a global health crisis, such as Covid-19, parasocial relationships can be important in message delivery. Public health institutions can utilize the audience of celebrities and influencers (Chang et al., 2023). They can also be used to reinforce sustainability communication.

3. RESULTS – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

Drawing upon the psychological principles discussed – particularly heuristics, parasocial relationships, and trust – it becomes evident that effective sustainability communication must combine emotional resonance, ethical integrity, and cognitive simplicity. Understanding how consumers process information and form relationships with influencers provides an opportunity to design strategies that not only capture attention but also inspire genuine, long-term behavioral change. The following recommendations summarize key practices that can enhance the credibility and impact of sustainability communication.

Firstly, it is important to prioritize authenticity and transparency. Authenticity is the foundation of trust in environmental communication. Influencers and brands should ensure that sustainability claims are accurate, verifiable, and consistent with observable actions. Sharing personal challenges, partial progress, or even failed attempts at sustainable living can make messages more relatable and credible. This openness reduces perceptions of manipulation and helps rebuild trust damaged by greenwashing practices.

Secondly, combining emotional engagement with informational value can be effective for sustainability communication. Since most individuals rely on affective and heuristic processing, sustainability messages should evoke emotion while maintaining factual integrity. Storytelling, relatable imagery, and emotional framing can make abstract environmental issues more tangible. However, this emotional component must be complemented by clear, evidence-based information. The combination of emotion and knowledge enables audiences to connect with sustainability both intuitively and rationally, reinforcing trust and understanding.

It is also important, to utilize parasocial relationships ethically. Influencers' parasocial bonds with their followers present powerful opportunities for shaping sustainable attitudes, yet they must be handled with responsibility. Genuine self-disclosure, consistent behavior, and alignment between personal and promoted values help sustain long-term credibility. Instead of exploiting emotional closeness for profit, influencers should act as authentic advocates for sustainable living, emphasizing education, empathy, and shared purpose.

Encouraging heuristic cues that support sustainable behavior is another way to make sustainability communication more effective. Many sustainability-related decisions occur quickly and automatically, so communicators should design cues that simplify these decisions in favor of environmentally friendly options. Repetition, familiar symbols (such as eco-labels), and positive emotional associations—like nature imagery or animal representations—can strengthen the mental availability of sustainable choices. When used ethically, such cues make sustainability feel both familiar and achievable, supporting intuitive pro-environmental behavior.

Fostering collaborations between influencers and experts can further help in making communication more powerful. Partnerships between influencers and credible experts, such as environmental scientists, NGOs, or

policy advocates, can bridge the gap between emotional appeal and factual authority. These collaborations reinforce informational reliability and demonstrate a shared commitment to truth and impact. The presence of expert voices also mitigates the risk of misinformation, particularly in complex sustainability topics where emotional narratives alone may be insufficient.

Lastly, maintaining consistency and long-term engagement is also important. Sustainability should not be treated as a transient marketing trend. Long-term consistency across campaigns, platforms, and personal behavior demonstrates sincerity and strengthens message credibility. Over time, repetition and alignment between values and actions reinforce positive heuristics, deepen parasocial trust, and encourage enduring pro-environmental habits.

By implementing these practices, sustainability communicators and influencers can move beyond superficial messaging toward meaningful engagement. Ethical persuasion grounded in authenticity, trust, and emotional intelligence has the potential to bridge the gap between awareness and action, transforming sustainability from an abstract concept into a shared, lived commitment.

4. DISCUSSION

In conclusion, the effectiveness of sustainability communication in today's media landscape depends not only on the accuracy of information but also on the psychological and emotional mechanisms that guide consumer perception and behavior. As greenwashing practices have weakened consumer trust in environmental claims, it has become essential to understand how trust can be rebuilt and maintained through authentic and transparent communication. Influencers, who occupy a unique position between brands and audiences, play a crucial role in this process. Through parasocial relationships, they can form meaningful emotional bonds with followers, fostering identification, empathy, and a sense of shared values. When these relationships are supported by perceived authenticity, expertise, and moral integrity, they can significantly enhance the persuasiveness of sustainability messages.

Heuristics also play a pivotal role in shaping how sustainability information is processed. Because most consumers rely on intuitive, affect-driven decision-making rather than deliberate analysis, sustainability campaigns must consider the role of these mental shortcuts in influencing choices. Repetition, familiarity, and emotional cues can all reinforce sustainable attitudes and behaviors when applied ethically and strategically. At the same time, affect heuristics and parasocial bonds must be used responsibly, as manipulation or exaggeration can easily lead to the erosion of credibility and trust.

Ultimately, building effective sustainability communication requires a balance between emotional engagement and informational value. Collaborating with trustworthy influencers who authentically embody sustainable values, combined with transparent and evidence-based messaging, can help bridge the gap between environmental concern and consumer action. By understanding the interplay of heuristics, parasocial relationships, and trust, marketers and communicators can design campaigns that not only promote sustainability but also cultivate long-term attitudinal and behavioral change. In a time when audiences are increasingly skeptical of corporate intentions, sincerity and consistency remain the most powerful tools for restoring confidence and inspiring genuine commitment to environmental responsibility.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study highlights key connections between heuristics, parasocial relationships, and trust in sustainability communication, several limitations must be acknowledged. Much of the current research in these areas remains conceptual, making it difficult to establish causal relationships between influencer credibility, emotional processing, and sustainable behavior. Additionally, the rapid evolution of social media platforms creates challenges for maintaining relevance, as algorithms, formats, and influencer practices change quickly over time. Finally, while heuristics and parasocial dynamics offer valuable psychological insights, their potential ethical risks, such as manipulation or exploitation of emotional attachment require more critical examination.

Future research should therefore aim to address these gaps through more diverse and methodologically rigorous approaches. Longitudinal and experimental studies could clarify how parasocial relationships and

heuristic processing develop and influence sustainable choices over time. Cross-cultural research is particularly important to understand how values, trust, and authenticity are interpreted in different societies, as cultural norms strongly affect both environmental attitudes and influencer credibility. Moreover, comparative studies between influencer-led and expert-led sustainability communication could help determine the optimal balance between emotional engagement and informational depth. Finally, as digital media continues to evolve, future work should investigate how emerging forms of online communication – such as AI-generated or virtual influencers – reshape perceptions of trust, authenticity, and sustainability.

By addressing these limitations and exploring these future directions, research can contribute to a deeper and more ethically grounded understanding of how digital influence and psychological mechanisms can support genuine, long-term environmental engagement.

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