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Followers' Perspectives: Motivations and Implications of Parasocial Relationships with Sustainability Micro-influencers on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability influencers have emerged as important communicators in promoting environmentally responsible lifestyles through social media. However, limited attention has been given to understanding why audiences develop parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers and how these relationships are experienced from followers' perspectives. This study explores followers' motivations for developing parasocial relationships with Indonesian sustainability micro-influencers on Instagram and examines the implications of these relationships in the sustainability context. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 followers of three sustainability micro-influencers and analysed the data using thematic analysis. The findings reveal three main motivations underlying parasocial relationship development: value congruence, accessible communication, and relatable and practical sustainability practices. Furthermore, parasocial relationships are associated with several implications, including supportive and defensive engagement, reinforcement of sustainability values and practices, positive emotional and attitudinal changes, sustainability-related behavioural adjustments, and a sense of companionship and belonging. The study contributes to parasocial relationship literature by highlighting that, in the sustainability context, parasocial relationships involve not only influencer attributes but also shared values and everyday sustainability practices. Practically, the findings suggest that sustainability micro-influencers can foster meaningful audience engagement by communicating sustainability messages in accessible, relatable, and non-judgmental ways while creating a sense of shared community.

Keywords: Follower, Instagram, micro-influencer, parasocial relationship, sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation has become an increasingly urgent global concern, driven by climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and unsustainable patterns of resource consumption. Human activities have significantly changed natural ecosystems worldwide, threatening environmental sustainability and human well-being (United Nations Environment Programme, 2025). Similar challenges are evident in Indonesia, where deforestation, environmental pollution, and waste management problems continue to pose serious environmental concerns (Pristiandaru, 2024; Walhi, 2021; Zubaidi, 2025). These issues underscore the need for transformative actions that encourage more sustainable ways of living and consumption (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024).

Promoting sustainable lifestyles has become an important strategy for addressing environmental challenges. Sustainable lifestyles emphasise environmentally responsible behaviours in everyday life, including sustainable consumption practices, waste reduction, and recycling (Graham-Rowe et al., 2019; Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2021). Such behaviour was found to be a successful way to promote sustainable development and lessen the harmful impacts of consumption on ecosystems and the environment (Lin & Chen, 2022). Encouraging such behavioural changes requires not only policy interventions but also effective communication that can make sustainability more accessible and meaningful to the public. The growing use of digital platforms has created new opportunities to communicate sustainability values and engage individuals in adopting more sustainable ways of living.

As sustainability issues continue to gain attention, sustainability influencers have emerged as important communicators on social media. These influencers consistently create content that promotes environmental awareness, sustainable practices, and environmentally friendly behaviours (Monga & Gupta, 2024). Through their content, they encourage audiences to adopt green, low-carbon, simple, and moderate lifestyles by demonstrating practical sustainability practices, such as using environmentally friendly products and engaging in product reduction, reuse, and recycling (Liang et al., 2024).

Influencers' consistent interactions with their audiences can foster a sense of closeness that gives rise to parasocial relationships, defined as the illusory intimacy developed through repeated interactions with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Previous studies have shown that factors such as influencers' attractiveness, direct interactions with audiences, shared values, self-disclosure, expertise, and authenticity positively strengthen parasocial relationships (Chen et al., 2023; Chung & Cho, 2017; Lacap et al., 2024; Mai et al., 2023; McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021; Ong et al., 2022; Rungruangjit, 2022; Yousaf, 2022). In turn, parasocial relationships have been found to shape various audience behaviours, including trust in influencers, purchase intentions toward

recommended products, participation in fan communities, intentions to visit recommended destinations, and repeated engagement with influencer-generated content (Chung & Cho, 2017; Lacap et al., 2024; Lawrence & Meivitawanli, 2023; J. Liu, 2023; Mai et al., 2023; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021).

In the context of sustainability influencers, parasocial relationships have also been shown to encourage positive environmental attitudes and behaviours. Previous studies suggest that trust in and the perceived influence of sustainability influencers can shape audiences' intentions and behaviours toward adopting sustainable lifestyles and practices (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Dekoninck et al., 2023; Horng et al., 2024). Parasocial relationships have also been found to foster pro-environmental identities and motivate environmentally responsible actions among audiences (Cui et al., 2024; Knupfer et al., 2023).

Despite the growing body of research on sustainability influencers, existing studies have primarily examined the behavioural outcomes of parasocial relationships, such as sustainable intentions and pro-environmental behaviours. Less is known about why audiences develop parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers and how these relationships are reflected in the ways audiences engage with sustainability values and influencer-generated content. Addressing this gap, the present study explores audiences' motivations for developing parasocial relationships with a sustainability influencer and examines the implications of parasocial relationships in the sustainability context.

The sustainability context is particularly important because sustainability influencers communicate values and everyday sustainability practices that audiences may incorporate into their daily lives. Unlike many other types of influencers that primarily promote products, experiences, or entertainment, sustainability influencers encourage environmentally responsible ways of living and invite audiences to reflect on their everyday choices. This nature suggests that parasocial relationships in the sustainability context may involve different audience motivations and forms of engagement. Understanding these relationships from the audience's perspective therefore remains an important area for research.

The present study specifically focuses on parasocial relationships with Indonesian sustainability micro-influencers on Instagram. In the Indonesian context, sustainability influencers have increasingly contributed to raising public awareness of sustainability issues and are regarded as one of the trusted sources of information on sustainable products and practices (Mirnaaf, 2024; Snapcart, 2024). Previous studies have also highlighted the role of influencers in encouraging sustainable attitudes, behaviours, and community engagement (Eldon et al., 2025; Pertiwi et al., 2025; Suryaputra et al., 2024). Indonesia also provides a particularly relevant setting for this study, given the widespread use of Instagram (Asosiasi Penyelenggara

Jasa Internet Indonesia, 2026; The Global Statistics, 2026). While previous studies have primarily focused on influencers in general, the present study examines sustainability of micro-influencers, defined as individuals with 10,000 to 100,000 followers. Micro-influencers are often perceived as more persuasive and generate higher audience engagement than larger influencers (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Their closer and more interactive relationships with followers make them particularly relevant.

Accordingly, this study explores why audiences develop parasocial relationships with an Indonesian sustainability micro-influencer on Instagram and examines the implications of these relationships. By focusing on the audience's perspective, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of parasocial relationships in the sustainability context and highlights their role in shaping audiences' connections with sustainability values and influencer-generated content. The findings also provide practical insights for sustainability influencers and communicators in fostering meaningful engagement and communicating sustainability-related messages on social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships are closely related but conceptually distinct constructs that describe audiences' responses to media figures (Forster et al., 2021). Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced parasocial interaction as a "simulacrum of conversational give and take" experienced by media users during exposure to media figures. It refers to a situational experience in which audiences perceive a mediated interaction as if they are participating in a reciprocal conversation with a media figure, although the interaction is not genuinely reciprocal. For example, audiences may feel that a television presenter is directly addressing them through eye contact, conversational style, or verbal cues (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

In contrast, parasocial relationships refer to a more enduring social and emotional bond developed through repeated exposure to media figures beyond a specific media encounter (Forster, 2011; Hartmann et al., 2008). It involves feelings of familiarity, intimacy, and connection, where audiences perceive media figures as personally meaningful figures despite the absence of a genuine interpersonal relationship (Labrecque, 2014). Although Horton and Wohl (1956) initially used the term parasocial relationship to describe both momentary interaction and long-term attachment, later studies have emphasised the distinction between parasocial interaction as a temporary experience and parasocial relationship as a stable relational outcome (Forster et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2008). Therefore, this study uses the term parasocial relationships to refer to the ongoing emotional connection followers developing with sustainability influencers, rather than the momentary interaction occurring during media exposure.

The development of social media has transformed parasocial relationships by enabling greater opportunities for interaction between influencers and audiences. Unlike traditional media, platforms such as Instagram allow users to engage through likes, comments, shares, and direct messages, while influencers can respond through content creation, replies, or other forms of interaction (Grau, 2022). Nevertheless, these interactions do not necessarily eliminate the relationship's parasocial nature, as communication between influencers and followers remains largely asymmetrical. Followers may perceive closeness and interpersonal connection, but they generally do not experience an equivalent reciprocal relationship with influencers (Lee & Watkins, 2016).

Parasocial relationships are distinct from related concepts such as identification, homophily, trust, admiration, and social media engagement. Identification refers to seeing oneself as similar to or like a media figure, while homophily reflects perceived similarity between audiences and influencers (Santateresa-Bernat et al., 2023; Z. Xu et al., 2021). Trust refers to confidence in an influencer's credibility, while admiration reflects positive appreciation of the influencer (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). Social media engagement refers to observable actions such as liking, commenting, and sharing. In contrast, parasocial relationships involve a broader sense of closeness, familiarity, emotional attachment, and ongoing connection with media figures. Although these concepts may be related, they represent different aspects of audience responses.

Previous research has identified various antecedents that contribute to the development of parasocial relationships. These antecedents can be categorised into influencer-related factors, audience-related factors, content characteristics, and media-use characteristics. Influencer characteristics such as attractiveness, direct interaction, self-disclosure, expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness have been associated with stronger parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017; Lacap et al., 2024; McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021; Rungruangjit, 2022; Yousaf, 2022). Self-disclosure can make influencers appear more open and accessible, while expertise and trustworthiness can strengthen perceptions of credibility and reliability (Chung & Cho, 2017; Cozby, 1973; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Johne, 2023). Recent sustainability research also suggests that these characteristics matter. Balaskas and Yfantidou (2026) found that influencer authenticity and parasocial relationships were positively associated with sustainable purchase intention, although green trust and prior exposure to greenwashing affected these relationships. This suggests that parasocial relationships may depend not only on perceived closeness but also on the credibility and context of sustainability communication.

Audience characteristics also contribute to parasocial relationships. Loneliness, personality traits, motivations, and perceived similarity have been identified as relevant factors (G. Liu, 2023; Mai et al., 2023;

McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021). Perceived similarity and value congruence may strengthen connections with influencers who share similar values, beliefs, and lifestyles (Chen et al., 2023; Ong et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). However, similarity may work in both directions: it may initially encourage people to follow an influencer, while repeated engagement may further strengthen the sense of similarity and contribute to parasocial relationships.

Content characteristics also play an important role in shaping parasocial relationships. Informative, entertaining, useful, and relatable content can strengthen engagement and parasocial relationships (Mai et al., 2023). In sustainability contexts, however, information and relational connection may not have the same influence. She et al. (2025) found that engagement with green influencers was positively associated with online and offline pro-environmental behaviours, with perceived information value acting as a significant mediator, whereas parasocial relationships were not a significant mediator. This suggests that informational value may sometimes play a stronger role than emotional connection in shaping sustainability-related behaviour.

Parasocial relationships have also been linked to outcomes such as trust, engagement, behavioural intentions, and willingness to support influencers or their recommendations (Chung & Cho, 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). Recent sustainability research, however, provides mixed evidence. Balaskas and Yfantidou (2026) found a positive relationship between parasocial relationships and sustainable purchase intention, whereas She et al. (2025) found no significant mediating effect of parasocial relationships on pro-environmental behaviours. These differences suggest that the effects of parasocial relationships may depend on the type of outcome and communication context rather than being commonly positive.

In general, existing research has provided important insights into the factors associated with parasocial relationships and their potential outcomes, but much of the literature remains focused on predetermined variables and behavioural outcomes. Less is known about how audiences themselves experience and interpret these relationships, particularly in sustainability contexts.

Parasocial Relationships Within the Sustainability Context

The emergence of sustainability influencers has expanded parasocial relationships of research into the field of sustainability communication. Unlike influencers who primarily focus on entertainment, lifestyle, or commercial promotion, sustainability influencers communicate environmental values, sustainable consumption practices, and everyday actions aimed at encouraging more responsible lifestyles. Therefore, parasocial relationships in this context may involve not only emotional connections with influencers but also shared commitments toward sustainability values and practices.

Previous studies have examined how parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers influence environmental

attitudes and behaviours. Cui et al. (2024) found that parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers contribute to the development of environmental identity, which subsequently supports sustainable consumption behaviours. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2024) demonstrated that the interaction between influencer-product congruence and parasocial relationships can enhance perceptions of product safety and support toward environmentally friendly products.

Other studies have highlighted the role of influencer characteristics in sustainability-related outcomes. Z. Xu et al. (2021) found that health-related homophily between sustainability influencers and audiences was associated with higher audience participation and parasocial relationships, which subsequently influenced sustainable food purchase intentions. However, when audiences perceived influencer content as purely advertising, purchase intentions decreased. In contrast, when promoted products were perceived as aligned with influencer characteristics, audience responses became more favourable. Luo et al. (2023) further demonstrated that sustainability influencers' expertise and task attractiveness contribute to parasocial relationships, which are associated with intentions to purchase energy-efficient products. Similarly, Horng et al. (2024) found that parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers were associated with intentions to support environmentally responsible hospitality practices and share related information. Beyond consumption-related outcomes, parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers may also encourage broader environmental engagement. Heleen Dekoninck and Schmuck (2024) showed that moderate levels of parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers may encourage youth environmental participation, although extremely strong parasocial relationships may shift attention away from collective environmental actions toward personal attachment to influencers.

Taken together, existing evidence indicates that parasocial relationships may play an important role in translating sustainability influencers' communication into audience responses, including environmental identity, sustainable consumption, purchase intentions, and environmental participation. However, the existing evidence remains fragmented, with studies addressing different antecedents, relational processes, and outcomes separately. Much of the research focuses on specific behavioural outcomes, particularly sustainable consumption and purchase intentions, while less attention has been given to how audiences interpret and experience these relationships, including the motivations underlying their formation and their broader implications.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) explains media use as a goal-directed activity in which audiences actively select media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs (Katz et al., 1973). Within social media environments, users engage with content for various reasons, including

information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, community participation, and self-expression (Whiting & Williams, 2013). UGT has frequently been applied to understand audiences' motivations for engaging with media figures and developing parasocial relationships.

Previous studies suggest that audiences' motivations for engaging with media figures and developing parasocial relationships are associated with cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative needs (Rubin & Step, 2000; Ruggiero, 2000). For example, fans form parasocial relationships with celebrities and influencers to obtain information, seek entertainment, experience companionship, and interact with like-minded communities (Yang & Ha, 2021; Zafina & Sinha, 2024). These findings indicate that engagement with media figures may fulfil a range of informational, emotional, identity-related, and social needs, which can in turn facilitate the development of parasocial relationships.

Recent empirical research further demonstrates that social media gratifications are multidimensional and context-dependent. Falgoust et al. (2022), using qualitative interviews with young adults, identified entertainment, communication utility, social interaction, social support, information seeking and sharing, and escape as motivations for participating in TikTok challenges. Similarly, Keelson et al. (2024) found that happiness, destination image, behavioural goals, and access to tourism information were important factors underlying social media use in tourism decision-making. In sustainability-related contexts, Hornoiu et al. (2024) demonstrated that informativeness, playfulness, and social interactivity enhanced users' gratifications and behavioural involvement in virtual reality-based ecotourism. More recently, Li et al. (2026) found that Generation Z's engagement with eco-smart beauty products reflected gratifications related to green priorities, technological functionality, and adaptability to different usage situations. Taken together, these studies suggest that social media gratifications extend beyond conventional information and entertainment needs to include social, emotional, functional, and value-oriented needs, and that the relative importance of these gratifications may vary across platforms, content types, and social contexts.

The literature also suggests that gratifications may contribute to behavioural and relational outcomes rather than merely explaining media use. Wang and Oh (2023), for example, found that different forms of gratification significantly influenced consumers' continuous purchase intentions in TikTok livestreaming, with the effects varying according to education level. Hornoiu et al. (2024) further showed that uses and gratifications and behavioural involvement sequentially mediated the relationship between assigned responsibility and visit intentions in an ecotourism context. Meanwhile, Sun et al. (2025), examining Chinese edu-influencers on Xiaohongshu, identified information gaps, self-expression, social recognition, and personal fulfilment as important gratifications associated

with influencers' social media activities. Although these studies demonstrate the applicability of UGT across diverse digital contexts, they have largely focused on media use and consumer behaviour.

Consequently, less is known about how audience gratifications are related to the relational processes through which audiences develop ongoing connections with specific media figures. In particular, limited research has examined how audiences experience and interpret these motivations and how such motivations may contribute to the development of parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers. This gap is particularly important because, unlike entertainment celebrities or commercial influencers, sustainability influencers communicate not only information but also environmental values and sustainable lifestyles.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach and used thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across the qualitative data. Thematic analysis enables researchers to systematically explore shared and divergent perspectives among informants while generating rich insights into a particular phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the present study, this approach was used to examine audiences' motivations for developing parasocial relationships with a sustainability micro-influencer and their implications in the sustainability context.

The data for this study consist of statements made by followers of preselected sustainability micro-influencers on Instagram. The influencers were selected based on three criteria: (1) having between 10,000 and 100,000 followers, (2) maintaining an engagement rate above 3%, indicating strong audience interaction, and (3) consistently posting sustainability-related content for at least six months. Sustainability content was assessed by reviewing both the influencers' Instagram biographies and their posted content during the observation period. Influencers were included when they consistently communicated sustainability-related topics, such as environmentally responsible lifestyles, sustainable consumption practices, waste reduction, reuse, recycling, and environmental awareness.

Three sustainability micro-influencers met these criteria and were selected for the study: Cempaka Asriani (@casriani) (96,300 followers; 4.93% engagement rate), Cynthia Lestari (@cslestari) (47,700 followers; 5.99% engagement rate), and Novi (@ceritanupi) (86,100 followers; 6.54% engagement rate). The engagement rate was calculated using the formula provided by Socialinsider: engagement rate = [(total likes + total comments) / total posts] / total followers × 100. An engagement rate above 3% is generally considered indicative of strong audience interaction among Instagram creators. The selected influencers maintain publicly accessible Instagram accounts, and all data analysed in this study were obtained exclusively from publicly available materials posted on their accounts.

Informant and Data Collection

Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit followers who could provide rich and relevant insights into their parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers. Informants were required to be Indonesian citizens aged 20-50 years, active Instagram users, have followed at least one of the selected micro-influencers for a minimum of six months, and demonstrate active engagement with the influencer's content through likes, comments, or reshares. The present study intentionally focused on highly engaged followers, as they were expected to provide richer accounts of their experiences and interactions with sustainability-related content.

Potential informants were identified based on their repeated interactions with the influencers' posts, particularly through comments posted on multiple occasions. Ten followers from each influencer account were invited via Instagram direct messages to participate in the study. Of the 30 invited followers, 15 agreed to participate in the interviews, comprising five followers from each influencer account. All informants had followed the selected sustainability micro-influencers for at least six months, and several had been following them long before the influencers gained wider recognition. Informants had also interacted with the influencers' content through likes, comments, or reshares, providing sufficient experience to reflect on their relationships with the influencers.

The interviews were conducted between March and April 2025 using semi-structured questions and were carried out through Zoom, telephone calls, Instagram direct messages (DM), and email, depending on informants' preferences and availability. Regardless of the interview mode, all informants were asked the same interview questions to ensure consistency throughout the data collection process. Synchronous interviews conducted via Zoom and telephone ranged from 11 to 29 minutes, whereas asynchronous interviews conducted through direct messages and email were completed within two days of correspondence. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. Quotations presented in this manuscript were translated into English and collaboratively reviewed by the authors to preserve their original meanings and contextual nuances. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Saturation was determined when no substantially new codes or themes emerged from the final interviews, and recurring patterns were consistently observed across informants' accounts.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach: familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The analysis adopted a hybrid approach that combines deductive and inductive coding. The concepts of parasocial relationships and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) informed the initial analytical lens for understanding

audiences' motivations for engaging with sustainability micro-influencers, while an inductive approach allowed novel themes to emerge from the data beyond the existing theoretical framework. Initial codes and themes were collaboratively reviewed by the authors, and any differences in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by combining Instagram comments and semi-structured interviews. Researcher triangulation was also undertaken through collaborative discussions among the authors during the coding and theme development processes. Informants' identities have been anonymized using pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted under a research permit issued by the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Hasanuddin (Letter No. 02260/UN4.8/PT.01.06/2025). Ethical approval was not required under the institutional procedures applicable to this minimal-risk social science research involving adult informants. Before participation, all informants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent was obtained from all informants before the interviews were conducted and documented. All identifying information was removed from the dataset, and pseudonyms were used throughout the study to protect informants' identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The informants are between 23 and 45 years old. Most of them are women, and primarily housewives, some of whom also work as freelance designers and live-streaming hosts. Others work as private employees, are self-employed, or are students. Four informants use Instagram for 1-2 hours daily, while most others use it for at least 30 minutes a day (Table 1).

The findings reveal 3 motivations to develop parasocial relationships dan several implications of the parasocial relationships in a sustainable context.

Followers' Motivations to Develop Parasocial Relationships with Sustainability Micro-influencers

Value Congruence

This study found that value congruence promotes parasocial relationships by fostering a sense of similarity and personal connection between followers and sustainability micro-influencers. When followers perceive that influencers share similar values, beliefs, and lifestyle aspirations, they are more likely to view them as relatable and personally relevant. Such perceived similarity reduces psychological distance and creates a sense of mutual understanding, making followers feel emotionally closer to the influencer.

One follower, for example, felt that a micro-influencer was particularly relevant

Table 1
The list of informants

Informants	Interview mode	Duration of Instagram use daily	Age	Profession
Follower 1	DM	1 hour	42	housewife
Follower 2	DM	1-2 hour(s)	28	host live-streaming & brand content creator
Follower 3	Phone call	45 minutes	45	entrepreneur
Follower 4	DM	5 hours	31	employee
Follower 5	Zoom (28 minutes 53 seconds)	1-2 hour(s)	23	student
Follower 6	E-mail	> 30 minutes	30	freelance designer
Follower 7	DM	10 hours	40	employee
Follower 8	DM	> 30 minutes	37	employee
Follower 9	DM	> 30 minutes	35	housewife
Follower 10	DM	1 hour	42	housewife
Follower 11	Phone call (11 minutes 38 seconds)	1-2 hour(s)	30	housewife
Follower 12	Phone call (18 minutes 23 seconds)	>2 hours	40	digital marketer
Follower 13	E-mail	1-2 hour(s)	25	freelancer
Follower 14	Phone call (17 minutes 14 seconds)	> 30 minutes	27	employee
Follower 15	E-mail	> 30 minutes	40	educator

Source: Authors' own work

because the content aligned with her ongoing journey from excessive consumption toward more conscious consumption.

> She also explains about sustainable living, which I happen to be trying to implement, that's why I follow her... I tend to follow people on Instagram who post about sustainable living, a minimalism lifestyle, and also health issues.
>
> (Follower 11)

Similarly, Follower 3 explained that she had already been practicing aspects of sustainable living before encountering the influencer and felt connected because the influencer's content reflected her own experiences and values.

> For the past roughly 7–10 years, I've been experiencing a life change, you know, to be less over-consumptive with things, so I think she is relatable to my life, that's why I ended up following her...
>
> (Follower 3)

These statements suggest that followers are not merely attracted to sustainability content itself but are drawn to influencers who reflect their existing values, aspirations, and life experiences. Consistent with the similarity-attraction perspective, individuals

are naturally inclined to develop closer relationships with others whom they perceive as sharing similar attitudes and values (Himelboim et al., 2013). In the context of sustainability communication, value congruence allows followers to see influencers as people who understand their concerns, struggles, and aspirations regarding sustainable living. This perceived similarity can generate feelings of resonance, identification, and emotional attachment toward the influencer, all of which are central to the development of parasocial relationships (Lou & Kim, 2019; Rojek, 2015).

In addition, this study found that value congruence extends beyond the influencer-follower relationship. Some followers were also motivated by the opportunity to connect with other individuals who shared similar sustainability values.

> Because the values are the same... maybe I can meet friends who have the same lifestyle. Because with small accounts, sometimes other followers like to comment.
>
> (Follower 12)

This suggests that parasocial relationships may be grounded within a broader sense of community, where followers not only identify with the influencer but also feel connected to other like-minded individuals. Such shared values can reinforce followers' sense of belonging and further strengthen their engagement with the micro-influencers and the sustainability community.

Current findings are consistent with previous studies showing that value congruence between audiences and influencers enhances perceived credibility, positive attitudes, behavioural intentions, and parasocial relationships (Ayeh et al., 2013; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Turner, 1993; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). Previous research has also found that greater perceived self-similarity with a media figure increases audiences' interest in learning more about that figure (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Therefore, value congruence contributes to parasocial relationships not only by fostering perceived similarity between followers and influencers but also by creating a sense of shared identity and belonging around sustainability values.

Accessible Communication

This finding suggests that accessible communication contributes to parasocial relationships because sustainability messages are communicated in ways that are easy to understand, relatable, and conversational, thereby reducing the perceived distance between influencers and their followers. Several followers noted that micro-influencers use simple language and avoid technical jargon.

> The way they deliver is quite understandable. From the language to current terms, and they usually explain things again.
>
> (Follower 8)

According to Abbati (2019), using clear, simple, and unambiguous language while

avoiding difficult terms can help ensure that messages are well received. In the context of sustainability communication, such an approach may also make sustainability issues feel less complex and more relevant to followers' everyday lives, enabling audiences to engage with the content more comfortably.

Beyond facilitating understanding, accessible communication appears to foster a sense of personal connection between micro-influencers and followers. Several followers expressed that, rather than positioning themselves as authoritative experts, sustainability micro-influencers communicate in a friendly, conversational, and non-judgmental manner that reduces the perceived distance between themselves and their audiences. For example, Follower 1 stated,

> Their way of delivering content is fun for me, it's not preachy or forceful, but more inviting... "Come on, let's start living economically... you don't have to own everything, you know!"
>
> (Follower 1)

Similarly, Followers 9 and 10 explained that they felt connected to the influencers because they communicated casually, as if speaking with a friend. This conversational style may encourage followers to perceive micro-influencers as approachable and relatable figures rather than distant experts. As Horton and Wohl (1956) argue, feelings of familiarity and perceived interpersonal connection are central characteristics of parasocial relationships.

Furthermore, when sustainability messages are framed as friendly invitations rather than instructions, followers may feel that influencers understand the challenges they face in adopting sustainable lifestyles. This perception can strengthen feelings of intimacy, companionship, and mutual understanding, which are important elements of parasocial relationships. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that conversational interactions, perceived intimacy, and feelings of closeness positively contribute to the development of parasocial relationships (Shan et al., 2020; Y. Xu et al., 2023). Likewise, Rojek (2015) emphasises that perceived closeness and intimacy toward media figures are fundamental to the formation of parasocial relationships. Therefore, accessible communication not only enhances followers' understanding of sustainability issues but also helps cultivate the sense of familiarity and psychological closeness that underpins parasocial relationships.

Relatable and Practical Sustainability Practices

This finding suggests that followers develop parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers because the sustainability practices they demonstrate are perceived as relatable, practical, and achievable in everyday life. Rather than presenting sustainability as a complex or idealised lifestyle, micro-influencers integrate sustainable practices into ordinary daily activities, making it easier for followers to understand and adopt. As a result,

followers are able to see reflections of their own lives and experiences in influencers' content, fostering a sense of familiarity and personal relevance. Follower 14, for example, described how sustainability content became relatable because it was ingrained in everyday routines rather than highly produced or unrealistic scenarios.

> It's part of everyday life, you know. So, we can relate to it... Going to the market is something everyone experiences... It's not heavily edited content, just a daily vlog about sustainable living... She simply shows herself going to the market and bringing her own container instead of using plastic bags. It's simple.
>
> (Follower 14)

Similarly, Follower 5 perceived sustainability practices as accessible because the influencer demonstrated how ordinary household items could be reused, recycled, or utilised more mindfully.

> In every piece of content, she shows that the things we see around us can be reconsidered, recycled, reused, or used more wisely.
>
> (Follower 5)

These findings indicate that followers are more likely to connect with sustainability micro-influencers when sustainability is presented as something achievable within their existing circumstances and resources. Rather than portraying sustainability as expensive, complicated, or unachievable, influencers demonstrate practical actions that followers can realistically incorporate into their daily lives.

Such representations may strengthen parasocial relationships because followers perceive influencers as relatable individuals facing similar everyday situations rather than distant experts promoting idealised lifestyles. Previous studies similarly suggest that presenting personal and everyday experiences can foster trust, engagement, and emotional closeness with audiences, thereby facilitating the development of parasocial relationships (Närvänen et al., 2021). Likewise, portraying ordinary and relatable aspects of life has been shown to encourage emotional connection with media figures (Ilicic & Wesbter, 2016). Moreover, creating and delivering content aligned with everyday reality can foster empathy and minimize rejection (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). By setting sustainability in everyday realities, micro-influencers make sustainable living appear more achievable while concurrently fostering a sense of familiarity and psychological closeness among followers.

Implications of Parasocial Relationships with Sustainability Micro-influencers

Supportive and Defensive Engagement

This study suggests that parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers may encourage supportive and defensive forms of audience engagement. Several followers described engaging with micro-influencers' content by liking, commenting on, sharing posts, and following their accounts. While these behaviours may

represent routine forms of engagement on social media, some followers also reported stronger actions that reflected emotional investment in the micro-influencer and the sustainability messages they promoted.

Follower 4, for example, explained that they had followed a particular micro-influencer since the early stages of their content creation journey, when the account had relatively few followers. The informant described intentionally supporting the micro-influencer's content as a way of expressing appreciation and encouraging the micro-influencer to continue promoting sustainability issues.

> To appreciate her and hopefully it boosts her spirit to consistently create content, so more people might be positively influenced by her content.
>
> (Follower 4)

Similarly, Follower 6 reported downloading and sharing the influencer's content within their own social networks. These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that parasocial relationships can encourage audiences to share influencer content and engage in word-of-mouth behaviours (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Makmor et al., 2024; Wahab et al., 2025).

Beyond routine engagement, some followers described actively defending sustainability of micro-influencers when they encountered criticism or negative comments. Follower 13 explained that they intentionally left supportive comments in response to negative reactions directed at the influencer.

> I tend to be selective when liking and commenting on other people's posts. The reason I liked and commented on that post was that there were many negative comments, and for some reason, I wanted to leave a positive comment. A positive comment can help keep their spirits up in creating content.
>
> (Follower 13)

These findings suggest that some followers move beyond passive content consumption and become active supporters of both the micro-influencer and the sustainability messages. Such behaviour may reflect the emotional closeness associated with parasocial relationships, which can foster feelings of care, solidarity, and a desire to support media figures who are perceived positively (Claessens & Van Den Bulck, 2015; Nadzira & Annapurna, 2024). At the same time, this supportive and defensive engagement may also be influenced by followers' shared sustainability values and their commitment to the environmental causes advocated by the influencer. Therefore, the findings suggest that parasocial relationships and value alignment may jointly encourage audiences to support and defend sustainability micro-influencers.

Positive Emotional and Attitude Changes

This study found that parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers were associated with positive emotional and attitudinal changes among followers. Several followers described becoming more confident, satisfied, and

appreciative of what they already owned, while also developing a greater awareness of sustainable consumption practices. These changes reflected a shift away from excessive consumption toward more mindful and sustainable lifestyles.

> I also feel more confident and love what I currently have. I don't want to have the same standards as others, because what I have is enough.
>
> (Follower 2)

> I'm happier because my savings, thank God... Before, it was hard for me to save; every payday was spent on clothes, shoes.
>
> (Follower 4)

These findings suggest that parasocial relationships may extend beyond fostering emotional attachment to influencers and contribute to how followers perceive themselves and evaluate their consumption behaviours. Through repeated exposure to sustainability-related content and the emotional connection established with influencers, followers may internalize sustainability values and become more accepting of lifestyles that prioritise sufficiency rather than constant acquisition. Such changes are reflected not only in followers' behaviours but also in their feelings of self-confidence, satisfaction, and happiness. This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that sustainability influencers can encourage audiences to adopt more positive attitudes toward sustainable living and reshape consumption-related values and behaviours (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Dekoninck et al., 2023; Horng et al., 2024).

Behavioural Changes and Implementation Challenges

This study found that followers perceived sustainability micro-influencers as contributing to changes in their consumption practices and sustainability-related behaviours. Several followers described modifying their behaviours after regularly engaging with influencers' content, including reducing excessive consumption, adopting reusable products, and purchasing environmentally friendly alternatives. These findings suggest that parasocial relationships may provide inspiration and motivation for behavioural change, although such changes are likely shaped by multiple personal and contextual factors, such as financial situation, environmental awareness, or other media resources.

Follower 4, for example, described a shift from frequent and trend-driven purchasing toward more mindful consumption. Reflecting on this change, she explained:

> The pattern I've followed is definitely reducing shopping... For example, no longer buying new lipstick, new clothes, unless the lipstick runs out...
>
> (Follower 4)

Similarly, other followers reported adopting practical sustainability behaviours such as bringing reusable shopping bags, tumblers, and food containers. They also described changing their purchasing

decisions by choosing products perceived as more environmentally friendly.

> Because they also tell some people and show some products that might be more environmentally friendly in terms of ingredients, so I started switching to some green detergents...
>
> (Follower 13)

These findings suggest that followers perceived sustainability micro-influencers as important sources of information, inspiration, and practical guidance for adopting more sustainable lifestyles. Consistent with a previous study, the findings suggest that sustainability micro-influencers may serve as important sources of information and inspiration, while parasocial relationships may increase followers' receptiveness to sustainability messages and environmentally responsible practices (Knupfer et al., 2023).

However, an interesting finding is that behavioural change was not always experienced as a straightforward process. Several followers acknowledged difficulties when attempting to translate sustainability ideals into everyday practices.

> Yes, it (bringing a reusable bag to the market) is complicated... there has to be certain criteria. You can't change 100% immediately, at least reduce.
>
> (Follower 14)

This finding suggests that while sustainability micro-influencers may inspire followers to adopt more environmentally responsible lifestyles, the implementation of these practices is often constrained by everyday realities and personal circumstances. Followers recognised the value of sustainable living, but they also experienced practical challenges, inconvenience, and the need for gradual adaptation. Rather than indicating rejection of sustainability values, these difficulties highlight that behavioural change is often a complex and ongoing process. Thus, although followers perceived sustainability micro-influencers as contributing to their behavioural changes, the adoption of sustainable practices appeared to occur gradually rather than through immediate transformation.

Reinforcement of Sustainability Values and Practices

This study found that parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers help reinforce followers' commitment to sustainability values and practices. Rather than introducing entirely new behaviours, the emotional connection developed with micro-influencers often strengthened existing sustainability values and encouraged followers to remain consistent in practicing sustainable lifestyles. Several followers indicated that they had already adopted sustainable behaviours before following the influencers. However, observing sustainability micro-influencers consistently promote similar values helped validate and reinforce these practices. For example, Follower 6 explained that,

> I already brought my own tumbler. If I forget to bring it and I am not really

> thirsty, I usually choose not to buy bottled drinks. I also recycle plastic waste and rarely buy new clothes. Actually, I did not start buying fewer clothes because of Nupi (name of the micro-influencer-added by the author), as I had already been practicing that before. But when many influencers also adopt this lifestyle, it feels good because you do not feel alone.
>
> (Follower 6)

A similar statement came from two different followers. Follower 13 explained that,

> Actually, I already had that habit, but sometimes I get lazy. Because there is someone, I call a 'trigger' or this influencer, I feel that I can reduce waste by bringing my own food containers.
>
> (Followe 13)

These statements suggest that sustainability micro-influencers did not necessarily initiate these behaviours but reinforce practices that followers had already adopted. The presence of sustainability micro-influencers who consistently communicate similar practices appears to validate followers' lifestyle choices and provide encouragement to maintain them. Followers may feel reassured that their sustainability efforts are meaningful and shared by others, reducing feelings of isolation that can arise when practicing less common lifestyle choices. Therefore, parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers may contribute to the reinforcement and maintenance of existing sustainability values and behaviours over time.

Sense of Companionship and Belonging

This study also found that parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers foster a sense of companionship and belonging among followers. Several followers described feeling accompanied, understood, and socially supported in their sustainability journeys, particularly when sustainable lifestyles were not widely practiced within their immediate social environments. For example, Follower 12 explained that few people in their social circle shared an interest in sustainability practices such as composting. As a result, sustainability micro-influencers' presence helped reduce feelings of isolation:

> If many influencers practice this kind of lifestyle, it's actually nice, you don't feel alone because sometimes we feel like we're the only one who is doing this practice. Because if I sometimes ask my friends in a group chat, I always ask, 'Is anyone here into composting?' The answer must be no one, right? So, I'm doing it alone.
>
> (Follower 12)

Current findings suggest that sustainability micro-influencers serve not only as information providers but also as symbolic companions who validate followers' experiences and lifestyle choices. Through repeated exposure to sustainability micro-influencers who share similar concerns and values, followers may develop a sense

that they are part of a broader community of individuals committed to sustainability. Such feelings can be particularly important when sustainable practices are perceived as uncommon or difficult to maintain within one's immediate social environment.

In the context of parasocial relationships, this experience reflects a sense of companionship, whereby media figures provide emotional support and a feeling of social connection despite the absence of direct reciprocal interaction (Lee & Lee, 2017). Previous studies have similarly shown that individuals use media to satisfy companionship needs (Rubin, 1984; Song et al., 2004) and that feelings of companionship contribute to positive emotional experiences and psychological well-being (Baldassare et al., 1984; Feng et al., 2025). Extending this literature, the present study suggests that parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers may foster not only emotional connection with the influencer but also a sense of belonging to a community that shares similar sustainability values and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore followers' motivations for developing parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers on Instagram and to examine the implications of the relationships in the sustainability context. The findings reveal that parasocial relationships are fostered through accessible communication, value congruence, and the perceived relevance and practicality of sustainability practices demonstrated by micro-influencers. These characteristics make sustainability messages more relatable and personally meaningful, encouraging followers to perceive influencers as approachable and familiar figures.

The study also demonstrates that parasocial relationships have several important implications in the sustainability context. Beyond fostering emotional closeness, these relationships encourage followers to support and defend sustainability micro-influencers, reinforce existing sustainability values and practices, provide a sense of companionship in pursuing sustainable lifestyles, and contribute to positive emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural changes. However, the findings also indicate that adopting sustainable practices is often a gradual and challenging process shaped by everyday constraints and personal circumstances.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Theoretically, this study extends the parasocial relationship literature by demonstrating that the development of parasocial relationships in the sustainability context is influenced not only by characteristics or attribute of micro-influencers but also by the sustainability values and practices presented. The findings show that accessible communication, value congruence, and the perceived relevance and practicality of sustainability practices contribute to the formation of parasocial

relationships with sustainability micro-influencers. Furthermore, this study expands existing research by highlighting that the implications of parasocial relationships in the sustainability context extend beyond behavioural outcomes to include emotional support, companionship, and the reinforcement of sustainability values and practices. By focusing on audiences' perspectives, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how parasocial relationships operate within a sustainability context.

Practically, the findings suggest that sustainability micro-influencers can strengthen audience engagement by communicating sustainability issues in accessible, relatable, and non-judgmental ways. Rather than relying solely on educational or persuasive appeals, influencers may foster stronger connections with audiences by demonstrating sustainability practices through everyday experiences that followers perceive as realistic and achievable. The findings also indicate the importance of emphasising shared values and creating a sense of community among followers, as these factors help audiences feel supported in their sustainability journeys. For organizations, environmental campaigns, and sustainability advocates seeking to promote sustainable lifestyles through social media, collaborating with sustainability micro-influencers may therefore represent an effective strategy for fostering long-term engagement with sustainability values and practices.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study has several limitations that need consideration. First, the informants were not drawn from a specific age group, which may have limited the exploration of potential differences in how individuals from different generations experience parasocial relationships and engage with sustainability practices. In addition, the gender composition of the informants was not evenly distributed, which may have influenced the range of perspectives represented in the findings.

This study may also be subject to self-selection bias, as it primarily involved highly engaged followers who were willing to participate and actively interact with the sustainability influencer. As a result, the experiences of passive followers, critical followers, and former followers were not captured. Their perspectives may offer valuable insights into different forms of audience engagement and disengagement in parasocial relationships. Additionally, information regarding whether followers followed more than one sustainability influencer and whether influencers had replied to their comments or direct messages was not systematically collected, as these factors were beyond the scope of the present study. These factors may influence the development and strength of parasocial relationships and therefore warrant further investigation. Furthermore, because the study employed a cross-sectional design,

it provides only a snapshot of followers' experiences and cannot capture how parasocial relationships and sustainability-related practices develop or change over time. The behavioural changes reported by followers were also based on self-reported accounts and were not independently verified.

Future studies could address these limitations by focusing on specific age groups and ensuring a more balanced gender composition among informants. Including followers with different levels of engagement, ranging from highly engaged to passive or former followers, would provide a more nuanced understanding of parasocial relationships with sustainability influencers. Future research should also examine how following multiple sustainability influencers and receiving direct responses from influencers may shape the formation, intensity, and outcomes of parasocial relationships. Longitudinal research may also help explain how these relationships evolve and whether they contribute to sustained sustainability practices over time. Finally, comparative studies across different social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, could further explain how platform characteristics shape parasocial relationships and audience engagement with sustainability influencers.

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APPENDIX. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this interview. This study aims to explore followers' motivation to develop parasocial relationships with sustainability micro-influencers and the implications of the relationships on sustainability context.

A. Following the Influencer

How did you first discover this sustainability influencer?

What made you decide to follow them?

B. Motivations for Developing Parasocial Relationships

What makes you continue following this influencer?

What do you like most about this influencer?

How do you feel about the way the influencer communicates sustainability issues?

Do you feel that the influencer shares values or perspectives similar to your own?

How relevant or relatable are the influencer's sustainability practices to your everyday life?

Have there been any particular posts, stories, or experiences that made you feel closer to the influencer? Please describe.

Why do you think you feel connected to this influencer?

C. Implications of the Relationships

Has following this influencer influenced the way you think about sustainability? How?

Has the influencer affected any of your attitudes, habits, or daily practices? Can you give examples?

Do you feel emotionally supported, inspired, or encouraged by the influencer? Why?

Do you feel part of a community of followers around this influencer? Please explain.

D. Closing

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience following this influencer?