

The Importance of Social Networks in the Process of Supporting Sustainable Development

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Abstract: The problems and ideas we classify today under the concept of sustainability have their origins thousands of years ago. The search for a balance between the demand for raw materials for food, clothing, shelter, energy and other goods, as well as awareness of the environmental limits of ecosystems have been a constant concern throughout human history. The emergence of social networks has created huge opportunities for communication and direct interaction with the public, which has proven to be a great advantage in spreading sustainability as a lifestyle among some of the social media users.. Resilience as the ability of a system to annihilate disturbances and to reorganize itself in an attempt to preserve its functions and structure represents, when we talk about sustainability, the relationship between different types of urban hazards, implicitly ecological resilience, resilience of urban and regional economies or of institutions. But people are obliged to help nature in its efforts to reorganize in the face of environmental, social or economic problems. In this sense, in this paper we analyze the role of social networks in the process of supporting sustainable development by presenting a case study for which we used the qualitative research method, and as a technique we used the semi-directional interview.

Key-Words: sustainable development, social media, environmental protection, social protection, #InfluencerPentruRomânia

1 Introduction

The major involvement in the concept of sustainability was developed in 1987, at the initiative of the United States of America, by convening the Brundtland Commission. The environment showed strong signs of degradation, which led to the need to develop a sustainability plan. At the same time, the definition of sustainability was offered for the first time, as "development that seeks to meet the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly, UN Secretary-General, 1987). The Commission has successfully combined environmental, social and economic needs on the global development agenda.

First, the term "sustainable" is often used in conjunction with the term "development." Thus, both terms constitute a whole - "sustainable development / sustainable development" - which should be considered a unitary term and represent a certain concept that is based on specialized definitions and defining principles" (Zaccai, 2002).

Second, the term "sustainable" can also be used separately from the term "development", for example "sustainable agriculture", "sustainable education", "sustainable forestry", "sustainable fishing", "sustainable business". and so on. In this case, the adjective usually refers to "sustainable development" and offers the possibility to integrate the fundamental principles of the concept in a series of fields of application (Zaccai, 2002)

And third, we are talking about the term "sustainability", which is used as a synonym for "sustainable development". However, a distinction is sometimes made between "sustainable development" and "sustainability". Some researchers say that "sustainable development" refers primarily to economic development / growth, while "sustainability" gives priority to the environment. The common denominator is that both terms consider environmental issues. The difference is that the first refers to the "improvement" of economic growth,

considering the environment, while the second is about the "challenge" of economic growth, focusing on the ability of humanity to live within the environmental limits of the planet. (Zaccai, 2002).¹

Resilience is "the ability of a system to absorb disturbances and reorganize itself so as to retain its functions, structure, and identity." (Elmqvist, et al., Benefits of restoring ecosystem services in urban areas, 2015) In the case of sustainability, resilience is the relationship between different types of urban hazards, including ecological resilience, the resilience of urban and regional economies or institutions.

2 The role of social networks in supporting sustainable development

Today, the evolution of social media platforms plays an important role in all areas of life, finding them deeply involved in sustainability issues. Information circulates very quickly through Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, vlogs, and events that affect any of the three pillars of sustainability reach consumers in real time. In addition, the social media user generation is modern and open to everything new, with a high tolerance and an increased interest in making a better world.

Integrated communication uses all marketing channels and strategies, interconnects them, and then merges them into a single message. These strategies include everything from direct mail and public relations to social media and digital. Social media marketing complements the integrated marketing strategies of many organizations. The involvement of social networks is particularly oriented towards social and environmental issues. From a social perspective, it is known that the phenomenon of Black Lives Matter, an anti-racism campaign, spread extremely quickly on all platforms listed above, influencers posted in colossal numbers on the subject and the echo of the campaign was unprecedented. Gender equality has strong voices supporting it, and the subject enjoyed immense popularity a few years ago and launched the #MeToo movement, a campaign that wanted to draw attention to the abuses some women are subjected to.

LGBTQ acceptance is increasingly promoted online, both by influential people who advocate for social equality, but especially by LGBTQ members, who are confident that in the 21st century they will publicly expose themselves and advocate for equality.

I believe that social sustainability is the main channel for popularizing social networks and, although social sustainability is often the most disadvantaged branch, receiving considerably less attention than economic and environmental sustainability, I believe that the present and the future come with strong change and a contribution of attention to social welfare, given the fact that it has so many strong voices behind it through Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and I believe that influencers are gaining more and more importance and attention, being in the near future the more heard voices.

Also, environmental sustainability is a topic strongly debated and promoted by the biggest influencers. *Conscious shopping* is intensely promoted in the online environment, there are many strong voices on social networks urging us to recycle, pollute less and have a more balanced life from a sustainable point of view.

More and more influences promote environmental protection, the use of biodegradable products, all through their own example and through campaigns in this regard.

We meet in social networks initiatives that could be integrated into the economic pillar of sustainability, mainly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, a commendable example in Romania is that of the actor Cosmin Seleși who developed the campaign #InfluencerPentruRomânia, through which he aimed to help and support the Romanian economy during a pandemic. The hashtag of the campaign gathered over 500 posts, meant to bring to the attention of social network users Romanian brands and their products.

3 The functions of social networks

The emergence of social networks has created huge opportunities for communication and direct interaction with the public. People feel much more comfortable watching an influencer² because they consider him closer than a public figure, a TV star. The interaction on social media is in direct time, and the information circulates live. As noted (Porter, et al., 2007) since 2007, "people who use social media consider themselves to have more power in making changes than those who do not use these platforms." Let's remember the #rezist campaign,

¹ The paper quotes from Robinson, J. Squaring the circle. Some thoughts on the idea of sustainable development. Ecol. Econ. 2004, 48, 369–384; Dresner, S. The Principles of Sustainability, 2nd ed.; Earthscan: London, UK, 2008.

² A definition of what an Influencer can be: opinion leader with skills, charisma, authority, responsibility, involvement and persuasion that aims to spread and amplify promotional messages on behalf of companies and brands, in exchange for a reward. (<https://www.jurnaldedigitalmarketing.com/digital-marketing/social-media/ce-este-un-influencer-si-cum-poti-deveni-unul/> accessed on 16.02.2021, 2 pm)

launched on Facebook and of a colossal scale. Voices online are indeed heard quickly and have the potential to go viral if the topic is of interest.

There are many organizations, including higher education institutions that use social media to communicate. Also, embassies, state institutions, companies that choose to distribute information through social networks. As a result, some researchers seek to understand the means of use and the effects of using social platforms.

One of the few conceptual frameworks about the use of social media by communicators within organizations is a theoretical lens, as presented (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Following an analysis, they identified three functions: the information function, the action function and the Community function. The information function involves one-way communication in which information is published on social media for the purpose of sharing. The action function refers to the use of social media to encourage donation, volunteering and participation in events. Finally, the community function involves using the social environment and stimulating engagement in conversations with other social media users.

Many researchers have adopted this framework to see if communicators within organizations make full use of social media as a communication tool. Next, we will analyze in detail the three functions proposed by Lovejoy and Saxton.

3.1 Information function

“The social media information function involves a one-way messaging strategy, in which organizations simply share information with the sole intention of informing the public” (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Similar to more traditional content, such as newspapers, television and press releases, the social media platform allows the organization's leaders to disseminate information such as the organization's activities, news, reports. For example, those in charge of communication could inform students, employees, members of the institute, as well as ordinary users of these platforms, depending on the context, about sustainability policies and progress.

The desire to increase the awareness about sustainability is one of the goals that bring the greatest challenges to sustainability communicators. Effective communication of information is a first step in raising awareness and changing behaviors.

3.2 Action function

The second main function of social media strategies is action. Leaders advocating for sustainability can use social media to inspire behavioral changes, such as obtaining donations online or offline demonstrations. An impressive example is that of Chiara Ferragni, who raised donations of over four million euros through her Instagram account to make a new ATI section for patients with Corona virus. With an online community of more than 22 million followers, the famous Italian influencer used her power of influence to support a humanitarian cause.

The social media action function involves the development of messages designed to encourage followers to engage in specific action to help the organization fulfill its overall mission. This perspective reflects the organizational perception that social media followers should be seen as a source that can be mobilized to help the organization achieve the sustainable changes it proposes. (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) found that "people who communicate for non-profit organizations, however, rarely use the action function in their socialization efforts." I tend to deny the statement of the two and I consider that many sustainability measures are taken due to opinion leaders, influencers. They changed people's perception of pollution, of reducing waste that is difficult to decompose, they influenced people to be willing to recycle, but also to consume sustainable products. Social media also plays a key role in social sustainability, which is why I do not agree with the statement that this branch of sustainability is the one that receives the least attention.

3.3 Community function

The community function is unique for social platforms. This involves applying social media to build and support member participation around points of interest, which include dialogue to facilitate community building around the same cause.

Organizational leaders traditionally broadcast news about their latest event on television, distribute the annual progress newspaper, send messages to subscribers to encourage them to donate. However, the interactivity characteristic of social networks differentiates them from traditional media, offering the increased potential to build relationships between organizations / public figures and stakeholders. Through social networks, followers feel closer to influencers, they have the impression that they are bonding because they apparently have access to

100% of their lives. Organizations also get closer to their followers and give them access to their daily activities. This also plays an important role in the issue of sustainability.

An eloquent example for the community function of social networks is Andreea Balaban, who films daily vlogs through which she gives her followers access to her daily life, but also to her areas of interest. Recently, Dove chose to promote its new range of sustainable products through it, precisely because of the close relationship that Andreea has with her community, a facility that only through social media would have managed to acquire, as I mentioned already above.

The dynamic and interactive functions of social networks make them an ideal channel for followers to engage in dialogical communication with opinion formers. Communicators can post messages designed to initiate conversational responses and receive responses to messages from stakeholders on the topic and thus encourage close links with followers. For example, on Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Tik Tok you can start conversations in the comments section of each post. Also, by using @, the person whose username is denied can be evoked.

4 Qualitative research on the importance of social networks in the process of supporting sustainable development

Investigating people's lifestyles and how they live their life experiences offers the opportunity to analyze and describe different subjective realities. Qualitative research seeks, by contrast, to render a unique reality in the variety of personal and individual experiences.

4.1 Advantages, disadvantages and limitations of research

Qualitative research is based on "the assumption that people attribute certain meanings to the world in which they live, and these meanings are to some extent different from one person to another." (Myers, 2000)

The difference between a "quantitative and a qualitative research begins with the formulation of the research problem." (Kumar, 2011) The quantitative approach is based on a specific formulation, in which both the variables and the relationships between them are mentioned precisely (hypothesis). Often, the research is confirmatory, seeking to verify one or more hypotheses. In the qualitative approach, the research problem is often formulated in general terms, thus leaving room for a flexible, exploratory investigation process.

Relying in particular on the analysis of the meaning of words to the detriment of the meaning of numbers, the qualitative method offers the advantage of a broad understanding of the research topic, implicitly leads to a more complex explanation of it. The qualitative approach proposes the analysis of the whole and the fluid dynamics of the relations between phenomena, as opposed to the quantitative method, which studies by decomposition into constructs and transversal relations. After all, this is also the objective of the quantitative method, it only tries to reach it in an indirect way, mediated by measurement and statistical analysis of data.

A simplified approach to the specifics of the approach, both quantitative and qualitative, can be highlighted by the difference between the answers to the question: "How satisfied are you with your job?". In a quantitative research, the answer options to this question could range from 1 = "very dissatisfied" to 7 = "very satisfied", and the answer provided by one of the participants could be 5 = "somewhat satisfied". The answers obtained to this question to a sample of participants can be translated into an average value (eg 3.48). In a qualitative research, however, the same person might answer: "It's not bad where I work, the boss is quite understanding, with most colleagues I get along well, but the work I do is rather boring, and the hopes that in the future I will be able to promote are quite low".

The difference between the two approaches is that between a one-dimensional answer, precise and easy to process statistically, in the first case, and a complex, multidimensional answer (relationship with the boss, relationship with colleagues, work appreciation, development possibilities) and difficult to process, in the second case. In other words, the qualitative data capture the lived experience, in all its richness and dynamics.

In his opinion (Miles, 1994) "one of the strengths of the qualitative approach is precisely that they capture real events, which occur in natural conditions, and the context, whose influence is usually isolated in the quantitative approach, here is taken into consideration. But this advantage is in the shadow of a disadvantage that cannot be neglected: the exploitation of qualitative data depends on the skills, competence and analytical depth of the researcher, to a much greater extent than in the case of the quantitative method."

Quantitative data are generally easy to process, but have a limited depth, and qualitative data are more complex, implicitly more difficult to process due to their depth. A possible source of confusion between the two approaches may arise due to the fact that "there are qualitative data even in quantitative research, when we have variables measured at nominal or ordinal level, as opposed to variables measured at interval or ratio level. On the

other hand, qualitative research, as we will see later, is not completely devoid of quantitative analyzes.” (Popa, 2016)

Qualitative research is a procedure for collecting empirical data that addresses a relatively small number of cases (sometimes only one case), given the close interaction between the researcher and those cases.

Above we have addressed the challenge of qualitative research, and we want to show what is not qualitative research, because in some situations you can find research that is declared qualitative, but does not meet the necessary characteristics.

The most common mistake is to consider that a research is qualitative when “it does not contain any data and statistical analyzes. The qualitative approach of research is not defined by what is missing, but by what it has specifically. As we will see below, qualitative research requires a certain specific methodological rigor, as well as specific data collection techniques and interpretations, which support the attribute of scientific knowledge, based on empirical data.” (Popa, 2016)

Another error from the point of view of the qualitative approach is to declare as qualitative a research in which, “although quantitative data were collected, they are not subject to statistical procedures for analysis and testing of hypotheses. Usually, in such situations questionnaires are applied whose answers are analyzed simplistically, question by question. Sometimes the data are even analyzed and presented in the form of descriptive statistical indicators (average, standard deviations, percentages), or in graphical form (histograms, pie charts, etc.), which are described verbally.” (Popa, 2016) Situațiile de acest gen nu evidențiază lipsa capacității de analiză statistică și așa zisa analiză calitativă capătă un caracter simplist, fără profunzime.

4.2 Establishing research objectives

In order to qualitatively research on the importance of social networks in the process of supporting sustainable development, we used the interview as a research method. In designing the research we established the research objectives, based on them we identified the researched population and we proceeded to its sampling according to sex, age groups, passive or active users of social networks.

Considering the purpose of the research, the proposed objectives, on the basis of which the interview will be performed, refer to:

- Preferences for social networks;
- Identifying the attitude towards social networks;
- The way in which the information transmitted through social networks is perceived;
- Identify the degree to which social networks influence the sustainable behavior of the interviewed population.

4.3 Identification of the researched population

The researched population is represented by people who passively or actively use social media networks, aged between 18 and 35, in Romania.

By people who actively use social networks, we have defined those people who, as a rule, have a large number of followers, regularly publish on at least two social networks and who are called content creators.

By people who use social networks passively we have defined people who are not interested in the number of their own followers, who rarely publish, but who are interested in following those in the first category.

The interview was attended by 80 people, classified as follows:

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants
By age	18 – 24 years	30
	25 – 34 years	50
According to the way of involvement in social networks	Actively users	20
	Passively users	60
By sex	Actively users	5 M
		15 F
	Passively users	10 M
		50 F

4.4 Modal, spatial and temporal coordinates of the research

To carry out the case study we used the qualitative research method, and as a technique we used the semi-directed interview.

In preparing the interview, I outlined a set of questions that will be asked to the interviewed subjects in the form of a conversation. These will have an indicative role, and can be completed when the situation requires it. No questions will be asked about age and gender, as they are in the description of the user of social networks. The meetings will take place online.

4.5 The proposed questions.

The set of basic questions will be preceded by a preliminary conversation in which the purpose of the conversation is presented and will include at least the following directions:

- a) What are your favorite social networks?
- b) What kind of influencers are you looking for: beauty, travel, cooking, fashion, gossip, music / music criticism, comedy?
- c) To what extent do they find the information provided by social networks useful? (Suggested answers: large; medium; little useful, useless)
- d) To what extent were they influenced by social networks in sustainable behavior, in the choices they make in everyday life but also as customers? (Suggested answers: large measure; medium; small measure, no influence)
- e) Have they been influenced by social networks to behave in support of environmental protection?
- f) How often do they use tutorials offered by social networks? (Suggested answers: Very often; medium; sometimes; never)
- g) For those who use tutorials: What types of tutorials do they use?

4.6 Research results

The result of the survey is presented below in the form of tables.

- a) What are your favorite social networks?

The first option of the respondents was considered, even if some of them use multiple platforms. Among the favorite social media networks of Romanians are Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok and Youtube.

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants	Favorite social networks
By age	18 - 24	30	15 Tik Tok 15 Instagram
	25– 34	50	35 Instagram 15 Facebook
According to the way of involvement in social networks	Actively users	20	15 Instagram, 5 Tik Tok
	Passively users	60	35 Instagram 25 Tik Tok
By sex	Actively users	5 M	5 Tik Tok
		15 F	15 Instagram
	Passively users	10 M	5 Instagram 5 Tik Tok
		50 F	15 Tik Tok 35 Instagram

- b) What kind of influences are you looking for: beauty & fashion, travel, cooking, music / music criticism?

The interests of the respondents are varied, for many of them it is difficult to decide on a single interest.

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants	Content types
By age	18 - 24	30	5 music / music criticism 20 beauty & fashion 5 cooking
	25– 34	50	5 music / music criticism 15 beauty & fashion 15 travel 15 cooking
	Actively users	20	5 music / music criticism

According to the way of involvement in social networks			10 beauty & fashion 5 travel
	Passively users	60	10 travel 5 music / music criticism 25 beauty & fashion 20 cooking
By sex	Actively users	5 M	5 music / music criticism
		15 F	10 beauty & fashion 5 travel
	Passively users	10 M	5 travel 5 music / music criticism
		50 F	25 beauty & fashion 5 travel 20 cooking

c) To what extent do they find the information provided by social networks useful? (Suggested answers: large; medium; little useful, useless).

The people I interviewed said that they initially followed several content creators, but stopped at those with whom they resonated in their areas of interest and from whom they believe they find information that helps them in their daily lives and not only.

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants	Large	Medium	Little useful	Useless
By age	18 - 24	30	15	5	0	0
	25 – 34	50	20	20	10	0
According to the way of involvement in social networks	Actively users	20	20	0	0	0
	Passively users	60	25	25	10	0
By sex	Actively users	5 M	5	0	0	0
		15 F	15	0	0	0
	Passively users	10 M	5	0	5	0
		50 F	20	25	5	0

d) To what extent were they influenced by social networks in sustainable behavior, in the choices they make in everyday life but also as customers? (Suggested answers: large measure; medium; small measure, no influence)

Online opinion formers play an important role in the decisions that followers make in their daily lives. From the discussions with the interviewees, it is observed that they are influenced in their areas of interest, some of the interviewees acknowledging that they have changed their behavior towards the environment in particular. They also participate in influencers' social campaigns when they seek help for people with social problems. Often, when choosing products, they take into account the advice of content creators on smart, sustainable shopping.

From the free discussions with the people participating in the study we can mention the main areas of sustainability in which they are influenced by social media:

- in choosing cosmetics, they prefer those for which no animals were used for tests,
- they don't do impulsive shopping,
- they recycle,
- buy second hand merch,
- reuse what can be reused,
- participate in social camps developed by influencers.

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants	Large	Medium	Little useful	Useless
By age	18 - 24	30	30	0	0	0
	25 – 34	50	25	15	0	10
	Actively users	20	15	5	0	0

According to the way of involvement in social networks	Passively users	60	40	10	0	10
By sex	Actively users	5 M	0	5	0	0
		15 F	15	0	0	0
	Passively users	10 M	0	5	0	5
		50 F	40	5	1	4

e) Have they been influenced by social networks to behave in support of environmental protection?

Interest in sustainability has grown considerably due to the involvement of content creators in this field. Also, social sustainability campaigns have seen an impressive increase in recent years, given the discriminatory events. Some respondents said that they in turn get involved in these campaigns and help with sharing or even financially.

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants	Yes	No
By age	18 - 24	30	20	10
	25 - 34	50	37	12
According to the way of involvement in social networks	Actively users	20	19	1
	Passively users	60	35	25
By sex	Actively users	5 M	5	0
		15 F	13	2
	Passively users	10 M	2	8
		50 F	36	14

f) How often do I use tutorials offered by social networks? (Suggested answers: Very often; medium; sometimes never)

On social networks you can find makeup, cooking and other tutorials. Through the interview we aimed to find out what is the interest of the followers to receive advice from the content creators they follow.

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants	Very often	Medium	Sometimes	Never
By age	18 - 24	30	27	3	0	0
	25 - 34	50	40	7	3	0
According to the way of involvement in social networks	Actively users	20	20	0	0	0
	Passively users	60	45	12	3	0
By sex	Actively users	5 M	5	0	0	0
		15 F	15	0	0	0
	Passively users	10 M	7	2	1	0
		50 F	40	8	2	0

g) For those who use tutorials: What types of tutorials do they use?

Classification criteria	Categories of participants	Number of participants	Beauty % fashion	Cooking	Life Hacks	IT
By age	18 - 24	30	10	5	6	9
	25 - 34	50	25	10	10	5
According to the way of involvement in social networks	Actively users	20	12	2	6	0
	Passively users	60	25	15	10	10
By sex	Actively users	5 M	0	0	4	1
		15 F	11	2	2	0

	Passively users	10 M	0	3	0	7
		50 F	25	10	10	5

5 Conclusions

Qualitative research is an inductive process, and in this case was conducted to identify the views and interests of social network users.

We interviewed 80 young people, from two age categories, namely 18-24 and 25-34 years old, both active users of social networks - content creators and passive, ie followers of opinion formers. Of the 80 participants interviewed, 15 respondents are male and 65 female.

The conclusions of the study are limited by the fact that in the qualitative research the questioned group consists of a small number of people without claiming to be a representative sample.

Following the interview, it was concluded that young people prefer to use Instagram and Tik Tok as their first choice when it comes to social networks, these being their first interests, followed by Facebook and YouTube. Respondents aged 18-24 prefer Tik Tok, and those in the second age group participating in the interview choose Instagram.

In terms of interests towards content creators, a larger number of female followers prefer to follow influencers in the field of beauty & fashion, and male ones have shown interest in music, but also travel. Respondenții găsesc, în mare parte, folositoare informațiile oferite de rețelele sociale și sunt influențați de sfaturile pe care le primesc de la content creatorii pe care îi consideră relevanți. Se observă că persoanele din categoria de vârstă 18-24 sunt, majoritar, puternic influențați în deciziile de cumpărare de recomandările găsite în mediul online, iar cei din categoria 25-34 se arată mai reticenți, dar majoritar sunt și ei puternic impactați de informațiile oferite de către influenceri.

Social media tutorials are a strong source of inspiration, with 65 of the 80 respondents responding to follow them constantly, while only 15 claiming to follow them occasionally and absolutely no respondents denied the level of interest in them. The tutorials that arouse the most interest among male respondents are the IT ones, and for male interviewees, beauty & fashion tutorials are important. 15 of the 80 respondents say they are interested in cooking tutorials.

Following the qualitative research, it is observed that social media plays a strong role in daily life and is an important factor in everyday decision making. Content Creators have the power to influence the sustainable behavior of followers, but also play an educational role through the tutorials.

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