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Komunikasi Naratif dan Konstruksi Persepsi Keberlanjutan: Pemaknaan Illipe Butter oleh Konsumen Eropa yang Peduli Akan Lingkungan

Narrative Communication and Sustainability Perception: How Eco-Conscious European Consumers interpret Illipe Butter

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menempatkan komunikasi naratif sebagai praktik komunikasi strategis dalam membentuk makna, kepercayaan, dan nilai keberlanjutan di pasar pada *illipe butter* dari Pulau Kalimantan, Indonesia. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan perilaku konsumen hijau, persuasi naratif, dan ekonomi komunikasi keberlanjutan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan 12 konsumen dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik reflektif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kredibilitas dan ketersediaan bukti menjadi faktor utama yang menentukan penerimaan atau penolakan narasi keberlanjutan. Tanpa kredibilitas, daya tarik emosional saja tidak cukup meyakinkan konsumen. Responden menilai bahwa pembingkai manfaat dari *illipe butter* dapat membantu klaim keberlanjutan dengan kinerja produk yang nyata, sehingga meningkatkan nilai yang dirasakan oleh konsumen. Penelitian ini memperkuat hubungan antara narasi risiko–nilai dan praktik komunikasi berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: komunikasi keberlanjutan, persuasi naratif, perilaku konsumen hijau

Abstract

This study analyzes how eco-oriented European consumers evaluate sustainability narratives about illipe butter, a natural product marketed as a sustainable ingredient from Borneo, Indonesia. This study draws on green consumer behaviour, narrative persuasion, and the economics of communication sustainability to develop a risk-signalling framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 eco-conscious consumers in Europe, and the data were analysed reflexively using thematic analysis. It was found that credibility and the availability of verifiable evidence emerged as threshold conditions shaping whether sustainability narratives were accepted or rejected. Furthermore, without credibility, emotional appeal alone is insufficient. Respondents perceived functional benefit framing to anchor sustainability claims in tangible product performance, thereby enhancing perceived value. Thus, the counterbalanced emotional appeal resulted in the most favourable responses when

sustainability claims were framed in a functionally beneficial manner. This research connects the risk-value narrative with mechanisms within sustainable communication.

Key words: *sustainability communication; narrative persuasion; green consumer behaviour*

INTRODUCTION

In Europe, the importance of sustainability to consumers, especially in the food, cosmetics, and natural ingredients markets, has surged over the past few years. Sustainability is also viewed from an economic perspective, as it influences value, risk, and trust in the market over time, and serves as an eco-regulation (Lee et al., 2022; Signori et al., 2021). For these consumers, willingness to pay is no longer determined by cost and utility, as their purchasing decisions are driven by higher-order values, including ethics, the environment, and perceived corporate responsibility and accountability (Silvola & Landau, 2021). On the other hand, the increased use of sustainability narratives has led to skepticism about the so-called ‘sustainability’ of these products, especially in information-saturated markets. Studies suggest that a strong rhetorical or promotional narrative may backfire, undermining the credibility of intended trust and triggering suspicion of ‘green washing’ (Siano et al., 2017; Bo et al., 2025). This is especially true for Europe, where consumers’ demand for transparent and evidence-based ‘sustainability’ is higher (Signori et al., 2021).

Sustainability communication addresses the asymmetric information problem present in every market and is vital to the economy and the industry at large. Ethical and environmentally friendly products present credence attributes, and consumers may find themselves in complex situations in which they must consume to evaluate them (Ogachi & Zéman, 2020; Landier & Lovo, 2020). In these situations, narrative communication may signal and reduce uncertainty surrounding products by providing information on provenance, ethical sourcing, and potentially superior environmental performance (Lee et al., 2022). In green markets, credibility extends beyond the attributes of communication to serve as a risk-mitigation mechanism. Trust-based relationships in the market can be fostered by reducing perceived transactional risk through credible narratives about sustainability (Hübel & Scholz, 2020). The other end of the spectrum is disengagement and a limited trust, stemming from contested credibility and green claims, which foster market cynicism (Siano et al., 2017). Credibility, in these contexts, serves as a gatekeeper of emotional narratives and ethical storytelling, determining whether they are perceived as adding value or as potential greenwashing.

The study by Blicher-Mathiesen (1994) examines illipe butter, an emerging natural ingredient purported to be a sustainable substitute for well-known vegetable butters, sourced from *Shorea stenoptera* trees in Borneo, Indonesia. Although this ingredient is biofunctional and has ecological benefits, it is relatively unknown among European consumers. This insufficient familiarity with the target market creates an even greater dependence on the proposed narrative devices, focusing on storytelling, credibility cues, and framing the functional benefits. (Lee et al., 2022). Enhanced Narrative Communication (ENC) is critical in niche markets, where sustainable storytelling encapsulates value by embedding an ethical and functional narrative. Conceiving sustainable storytelling as more than marketing narratives helps elevate perceived value by embedding environmental narratives and aligning sustainability with operational value, ultimately enhancing consumer engagement in the marketing exchange. (Signori et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024). This is consistent with institutional domain business research, which focuses on the role of trust, alongside price and jurisdictional authority, in regulating market complexity. (Mandják, 2020).

This article draws on green consumer behavior and narrative persuasion to argue that the communication of sustainability does not operate through siloed mechanisms. Instead, how

credibility, emotion, and functionally beneficial framing work together in the communication of sustainability influences consumer perception and judgment. This work contributes to the body of literature on narrative persuasion by demonstrating how credibility, emotion, and functionally beneficial framing work together, and not in isolation, within green niche markets. This work also contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the three elements have too often been treated as three distinct explanatory variables.

However, there is limited research on how consumers actively interpret sustainability narratives as signals of risk and value, particularly for relatively new and lesser-known sustainable products. Therefore, this study aims to enhance understanding of the complexity of sustainability communication as a form of both persuasion and communication by integrating principles of marketing communication with economics, including information asymmetry, uncertainty, risk, and value creation. While previous literature advances the debate on the authenticity of sustainability narratives and reports (i.e., marketing disinformation) (Tömöri, Lakatos, 2024), the present study explores the meanings and evaluations of such narratives, centered on illipe butter, among eco-minded consumers in Europe. The study illustrates how the value of communication narratives affects marketing trust and perceived value in the ultra-green niche market.

Green Consumer Behaviour, Sustainability Narratives, and Market Skepticism

In the literature on green consumer behaviour, sustainability has shifted from an abstract ethical concern to a central determinant of consumer decision-making, particularly in advanced European markets. Consumers increasingly embed environmental, social, and ethical considerations into their purchasing decisions, often evaluating corporate responsibility alongside, or even above, functional product attributes. This reflects a more profound transformation in consumption logic, in which willingness to pay is influenced by reputation, long-term value, trust, ethical consistency, and moral alignment rather than by price and utility alone (Silvola & Landau, 2021; Signori et al., 2021). From an economic perspective, the consumption of sustainable products is closely associated with risk and uncertainty. Ethical and environmentally sustainable products frequently exhibit credence attributes, qualities that cannot be fully assessed even after consumption, forcing consumers to rely on external signals when evaluating sustainability claims (Ogachi & Zéman, 2020). This reliance creates conditions that increase the risk of misleading or overstated sustainability claims, particularly in information-saturated markets (Landier & Lovo, 2020).

As sustainability narratives become more prevalent, consumer skepticism toward such claims has intensified. The literature on greenwashing demonstrates that overly promotional or rhetorical sustainability messaging may backfire, reducing trust and increasing suspicion rather than reinforcing credibility (Siano et al., 2017). This skepticism is especially pronounced in European markets, where consumers exhibit heightened sensitivity to transparency, evidence-based claims, and verifiability (Signori et al., 2021). Recent studies further suggest that skepticism emerges when sustainability narratives lack functional grounding, third-party validation, or internal consistency, ultimately undermining market trust and perceived value (Bo et al., 2025).

Narrative Communication, Credibility, and Risk Mitigation under Information Asymmetry

In markets characterised by uncertainty and complex product attributes, narrative communication plays a critical role in addressing information asymmetry between producers and consumers. Narratives function as informational signals that help mitigate uncertainty by conveying product provenance, ethical sourcing, and environmental performance (Lee et al., 2022). In sustainability-oriented markets, such narratives provide contextual meaning that enables consumers to interpret abstract and unverifiable claims. From a business and economic

standpoint, sustainability narratives function as strategic signals that influence perceptions of risk and value. When perceived as credible, narratives reduce transaction uncertainty and facilitate trust-based exchange relationships, which are essential for market functioning (Hübel & Scholz, 2020). Conversely, when credibility is contested, the signalling value of sustainability narratives diminishes, reinforcing consumer cynicism and disengagement (Siano et al., 2017).

Source credibility, therefore, acts as a gatekeeper in sustainability communication, determining whether emotional and ethical appeals are accepted or dismissed. While emotional narratives can foster moral engagement, their effectiveness depends on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the source. At the same time, framing sustainability claims in terms of functional product benefits has been shown to stabilise credibility, enhance perceived value, and reduce skepticism by aligning ethical narratives with utilitarian outcomes (Lee et al., 2022). This integration is particularly critical in niche markets, where limited consumer familiarity heightens uncertainty and reliance on communication cues.

Sustainability Communication, Value Creation, and Integrated Narrative Persuasion

Beyond persuasion, sustainability communication contributes to value creation by embedding ethical meaning into functional exchange relationships. Rather than operating solely as marketing discourse, sustainability narratives can elevate perceived value by aligning environmental responsibility with operational and consumer-relevant benefits, thereby supporting sustained market engagement (Signori et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024). Institutional perspectives in business research also reinforce this view by emphasising that trust functions alongside price and authority as a coordinating mechanism in complex markets (Mandják, 2020). Within this framework, credible sustainability communication operates as an informal governance mechanism that reduces uncertainty, stabilises exchange relationships, and supports long-term value creation. This positioning situates sustainability communication firmly within the domain of economics and business rather than solely within marketing communication.

While much of the narrative persuasion literature treats credibility, emotional appeal, and functional benefit framing as independent explanatory variables, emerging research suggests that these elements interact dynamically to shape consumer perceptions and judgments (Lee et al., 2022). This interaction is especially salient in green niche markets, where sustainability communication operates synergistically rather than through isolated mechanisms. By integrating green consumer behaviour with narrative persuasion, this study advances a more holistic theoretical perspective, moving beyond the simplified dichotomy of authenticity versus greenwashing (Tömöri & Lakatos, 2024).

METHOD OF RESEARCH

Metode This study employs a qualitative research design to assess how European consumers who care for the environment make sense of sustainability narratives about illipe butter. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making, interpretation, and sense-making, particularly in highly uncertain and information-asymmetric contexts. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2021). The study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect data and document the research process. The research design used purposive sampling to select the most relevant research participants for the research objectives. Participants were expected to be eco-conscious consumers, interested in and/or familiar with natural, sustainable, or cosmetic goods, and to reside in Europe.

The study also recruited a sample of 12 participants, which is consistent with qualitative research that emphasizes depth of insight and thematic saturation rather than statistical representativeness. To examine the diverse characteristics of eco-conscious consumers, the study examined age, gender, and sustainability focus. The participants were screened using questions to ensure that they engaged in consumption and that their ethical values aligned with sustainability. The participants were also informed of the voluntary nature of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and the informed consent process. Participant anonymity was guaranteed by storing data in a secure location and by removing names from the transcripts. The study was conducted in accordance with the institution's ethical requirements and globally accepted research ethics. Data validity was maintained through researcher reflexivity, repeated re-reading of transcripts, and discussions between researchers to minimize interpretive bias.

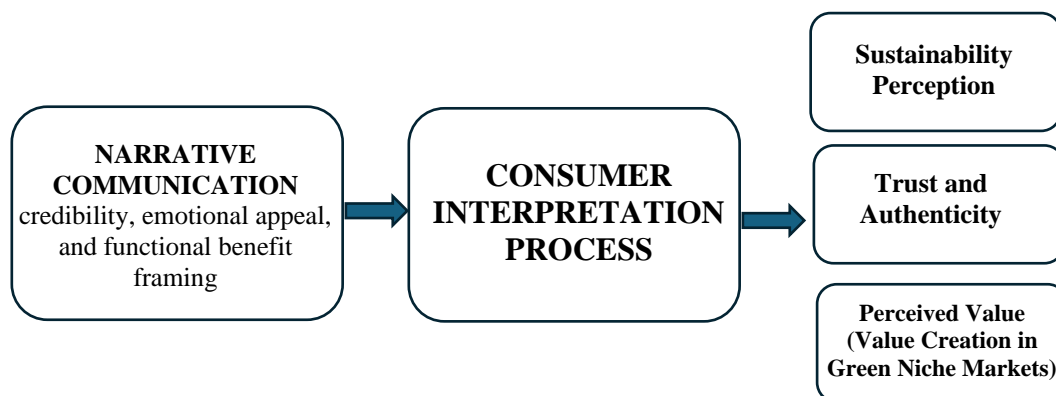


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of narrative communication and sustainability perception in green niche markets

Drawing on the literature on green consumer behaviour and narrative persuasion, this study, as shown in Figure 1, positions narrative communication as a mechanism to close the information gap in green markets, particularly in niche segments characterized by high uncertainty. Illipe butter and other sustainable products display credence attributes that consumers cannot verify directly, making their consumption decisions reliant on external communication signals (Ogachi & Zéman, 2020; Landier & Lovo, 2020). Within these frameworks, sustainability narratives serve as indicators of economic risk, trust, and perceptions of value. The intertwining of emotional appeal, credibility, and functional benefit framing in narrative persuasion draws the model's focus to the interaction among these elements in interpreting sustainability claims.

Significant trust acts as a primary gatekeeping mechanism. It determines whether emotional and ethical narratives are perceived as value-creating or dismissed as instances of greenwashing (Siano et al, 2017; Hübel & Scholz, 2020). The emotional appeal strengthens moral engagement and value identification, whereas framing functional benefits anchors sustainability claims to tangible utility, thereby reducing skepticism and strengthening the rational ethical consumption (Signori et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024). The combination of these narrative elements stimulates consumers' interpretation of the value proposition offered, thereby reducing information asymmetries and risk. The result of these processes is the formation of a sustainability perception, manifested in trust, authenticity, and perceived value. From economics and business, these contribute to risk mitigation, value creation, and the stabilization of the market relations within the ultra-green niche market (Mandják, 2020; Tömöri & Lakatos, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reflexive thematic analysis identified four key themes explaining how eco-conscious European consumers perceive sustainability narratives related to illipe butter. Rather than acting as passive recipients, participants engaged in an interpretive process in which sustainability narratives were evaluated as market signals amid uncertainty. These narratives were assessed for credibility, emotional legitimacy, and functional relevance before being translated into perceptions of trust, authenticity, and value. In the European context, illipe butter was commonly perceived as a “new” and “unfamiliar” product, thereby heightening uncertainty and increasing reliance on communicative cues. Its value proposition, which combines rainforest conservation, Indigenous livelihoods, and premium functional attributes such as heat resistance and shelf life, made it a suitable case for examining how sustainability narratives reduce information asymmetry and influence consumer decision-making (Ogachi & Zéman, 2020; Landier & Lovo, 2020). While participants shared a general moral acceptance of sustainability, their evaluations varied depending on prior experience, skepticism toward green marketing, and practical rationality.

Credibility as a Gatekeeping Condition

A consistent finding was that credibility functioned as a prerequisite for narrative acceptance. Before engaging with narrative content, participants evaluated the source's credibility. Endorsements from recognized certification bodies or reputable environmental NGOs were viewed as critical in determining whether sustainability claims were considered “believable” or dismissed as marketing rhetoric. As one participant noted, “Without a credible source, the sustainability claim is questioned immediately. It is perceived as promotional rather than a substantive commitment” (P3). This aligns with previous research highlighting the role of credible signals in reducing perceived risk and legitimizing sustainability claims (Hübel & Scholz, 2020; Siano et al., 2017). However, credibility was found to be contextual rather than automatic. NGO endorsements carried weight only when the organization was familiar and perceived as legitimate. “The endorsement of NGOs helps, but only if it is one, I recognize” (P12). This finding reinforces the notion of credibility as a gatekeeping mechanism: when credibility is present, emotional and ethical narratives are interpreted as value-enhancing; when absent, they trigger skepticism and undermine trust. In green markets characterized by high information asymmetry, credibility thus represents a threshold condition for narrative effectiveness (Ogachi & Zéman, 2020; Landier & Lovo, 2020).

Emotional Appeal as a Conditional Amplifier

Participants acknowledged that emotional narratives emphasizing rainforest protection and Indigenous empowerment fostered empathy, moral engagement, and a sense of meaningful consumption. Emotional appeal helped create a perceived connection between individual consumption choices and broader social or environmental outcomes. “I like the idea that my purchase could protect the rainforest. It makes it feel like the product has a purpose” (P8). Nevertheless, emotional appeal was not sufficient on its own. When emotional narratives were not supported by credible evidence, they amplified skepticism rather than persuasion. Participants described unsupported emotional storytelling as manipulative or guilt-inducing. “Limited evidence makes the rainforest protection story feel like manipulation” (P7), while another noted that emotional appeals without evidence “feel exaggerated rather than informative” (P2). These findings confirm that emotional appeal functions as a conditional amplifier, effective only after credibility has been established (Hübel & Scholz, 2020).

Functional Benefit Framing as a Rational Anchor

A recurring theme was the importance of functional benefit framing in grounding sustainability narratives. Participants consistently emphasized that sustainability should enhance, rather than replace, product performance. Attributes such as durability, heat resistance, and shelf life were perceived as rational anchors, making sustainability claims more tangible and credible. “If the product is premium, the performance must justify it” (P10). Functional framing reduced abstraction and helped participants assess whether the sustainability narrative justified price and product switching decisions. Some participants implicitly prioritized functional performance over ethical narratives, particularly when the product was unfamiliar or costly. “If it is not any better than what I use now, I do not see the reason to switch” (P11). This supports previous findings that ethical positioning alone is insufficient to drive willingness to pay without demonstrated utility (Signori et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024).

Synergistic Interaction and Sustainability Perception

The findings indicate that positive perceptions of sustainability emerged from the alignment of credibility, emotional appeal, and functional benefit framing. Narratives perceived as coherent and consistent were associated with higher trust and perceived value. “It is the alignment that makes me trust a brand over the long term” (P9). Conversely, the absence of any one element weakened the entire narrative system. High emotional appeal without credibility evoked skepticism; credibility without functional relevance was viewed as ethically positive but practically insufficient; and strong functionality without ethical meaning was perceived as “just another product.” These patterns support the sustainability perception framework, in which consumers interpret narratives as signals that reduce information asymmetry and enable risk assessment (Ogachi & Zéman, 2020; Landier & Lovo, 2020). From a communication perspective, sustainability narratives function not merely as persuasive messages but as mechanisms that shape trust, authenticity, and perceived value in green niche markets (Mandják, 2003; Tömöri & Lakatos, 2024). Overall, the findings suggest that eco-conscious European consumers evaluate sustainability narratives as indicators of market credibility. Credibility reduces perceived risk, emotional engagement follows credibility, and functional benefit framing anchors value. Sustainability perceptions are strongest when these elements operate in combination, allowing niche products such as illipe butter to be perceived as both ethically meaningful and economically rational.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study shows that, in the green niche market, the sustainability of illipe butter contributes to both the communicative and economic levels simultaneously. Research findings indicate that European consumers with an ecologically sustainable narrative receive sustainability narratives and interpret them in terms of risk, credibility, and value. While credibility is a necessary condition for communicating sustainability, its role as a risk-control mechanism sustains the narrative. This is why it is either accepted or rejected in the case of greenwashing. An emotional or sentimental narrative is only relatable when supported by documented evidence. This claim about the product's sustainability, framed in terms of functional benefits, adds to perceived value and trust. This study contributes to the scholarship on the narrative of sustainability within the integrated communicative process of credibility, emotional appeal or sentiment, and functional framing, treating them as a synergy rather than merely as separate persuasive elements or domains. From this context, the study adds to the literature on narrative persuasion, particularly in the domain of communication for sustainability. In practice, sustainability communication that relies solely on storytelling misses

the target. There is a need for the nexus of evident credibility, transparency in the sourcing process, and functional clarity. It also means that for niche sustainable products, the intersection of the ethical narrative and demonstrable product performance is fundamental to building enduring trust and value in sustainability markets.

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