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Understanding pro-environmental intentions through growth, competitiveness, and concern

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ABSTRACT

The effects of market liberalization and the social institutions contained within are increasingly necessary to understand. The purpose of this paper is to expand this understanding by examining neoliberal institutional variables (i.e., belief in economic growth and individual competitiveness) on pro-environmental behavior. To study this, we use two countries: one that has recently experienced high economic growth (China) and one that has recently experienced low economic growth (Japan), as a moderator variable. Further, environmental concern is proposed to mediate the moderation. The proposed conditional mediation is supported. Findings suggest that citizens with a desire for additional economic growth, in countries with large historical growth, have high environmental concern. Further, citizens with high individual competitiveness, in low historical growth countries, have low environmental concern. However, citizens with high environmental concern have high environmental intentions, regardless of current country growth. Implications for management and sustainability are then given.

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1. Introduction

Marketers are increasingly interested in sustainability and corporate responsibility due to the environmental consequences of consumption on a global scale (Beckmann, 2007; Brennan et al., 2011; Cho et al., 2013; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014; Tan et al., 2016). Humans are reliant on natural resources (e.g., water, energy, materials, land) to consume. In 1998, it was predicted that it would take two additional planets the size of earth to produce the natural resources needed if all of the people on the planet lived in a high consumption or neoliberal country (Wackernagel and Rees, 1998). At the time, North America – specifically the United States – was the largest consumer of world energy at 95.02 quadrillion BTU (British thermal unit) a year. However, other regions of the world have taken the deep plunge into high consumption, and Wackernagel and Rees's (1998) prediction is much more of a reality.

For instance, although North America has historically been the largest consumer of energy, it has only seen a 2.53% increase in energy consumption from 1998 to 2012. However, other regions of the world have seen dramatic percentage increases (e.g., see Fig. 1). Central and South America have, for example, seen a 42.42% increase, Africa has seen a 53.36% increase, the Middle East has seen a 97.87% increase, and Asia has seen a 105.25% increase. Out of the

214 countries for which data exist, China showed the largest energy consumption change from 1998 to 2012 with of 74.13 quadrillion BTU increase and Japan showed the smallest consumption change of –1.14 quadrillion BTU (EIA, 2012).

Due to increased consumption of our natural resources, more people are starting to accept the inevitability of global climate change. For instance, England recently released a “UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA)” that gives a detailed look at the impacts of climate change and 100 potential risks (e.g., massive floods and killer heat-waves). The CCRA also gives advice to companies and individuals on how to best prepare for climate change (Truss, 2013). However, from environmental psychology and marketing perspectives, we must ask ourselves whether anything can still be done to slow down consumption and increase pro-environmental behavioral intentions to prevent the devastating consequences of consumption on the environment – is there a way to shift the consumption paradigm?

To better understand this issue, we examine citizens' ways of looking at the world, or their Dominant Social Paradigms (DSP) (Pirages and Ehrlich, 1974), and the DSP's impact on pro-environmental behavioral intentions, particularly in Asia where increases in energy usage is now greatest. Specifically, we examine the DSP variables, belief in economic growth and individual competitiveness, in two Asian societies: China and Japan. Asia was chosen because of the dramatic energy consumption increase there in the past 20 years. China and Japan were selected because of the dramatic differences in their actual historical growth rates as reflected in their relative increases in energy consumption.

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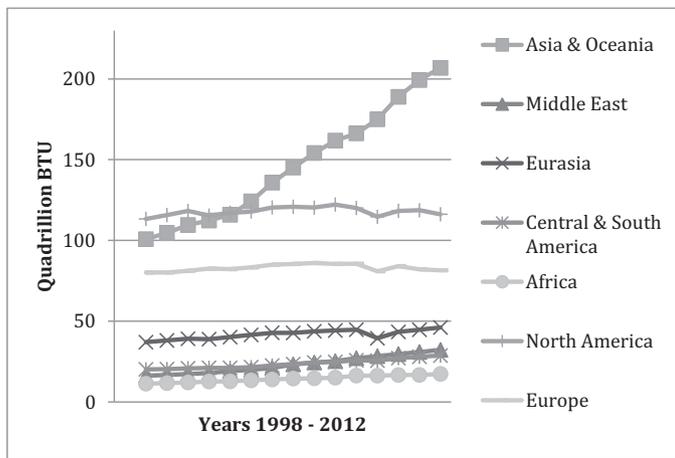


Fig. 1. Consumption of energy from 1998 to 2012 in quadrillion BTU by world region. Data source: EIA (2012).

The DSP variables of economic growth and individual competitiveness were chosen, as the goal of market liberalization is to increase industrial *competitiveness* in order to achieve economic growth on a global scale. It is argued that the consequences of economic growth are closely related to individual competitiveness and belief in more economic growth in a positive feedback loop. Thus, more actual economic growth leads to the belief that growth is good which then leads to more growth. The feedback loop of growth and competitiveness has devastating consequences for the environment. Therefore an understanding of a consumer's belief in economic growth and individual competitiveness as they relate to environmental intentions and environmental concern is essential. We will now theoretically explore and then examine the aforementioned variables.

2. Theory

2.1. Two elements of the DSP: belief in economic growth and individual competitiveness

The concept of scientific paradigms was popularized by Kuhn (1996). The DSP expands this concept to focus on the most commonly accepted social paradigm within a specific culture (Pirages and Ehrlich, 1974). The elements of the DSP capture consumers' perspectives of their society at a macro, institutional level. The important aspect of this is that the DSP of Western industrial societies, particularly the USA, along with their market orientation is contained in the neoliberal philosophy being exported to Eastern economies in the globalization process (Speth, 2009; Xu et al., 2014). This extends the application and consequences of the market orientation and the supporting elements of the Western industrial DSP on a global scale through the imperative of market liberalization that arrives through the mandates of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Stiglitz, 2002).

While the DSP contains multiple dimensions (Kilbourne, 1998; Kilbourne and Polonsky, 2005), only individual competitiveness and belief in economic growth will be examined here, as these are the focal elements of neoliberalism. We define belief in economic growth as a citizen's desire for increased production of material wealth, and we define individual competitiveness as a citizen's favorability of competition over cooperation. Kassiola (1990) and Speth (2009) provided thorough analyses of the relationship between market liberalization and both belief in economic growth as well as individual competitiveness. In the first instance, economic growth, as

measured by GDP, is the imperative of economic systems driven by the market (neoliberalism). For companies to survive in the long run, they must remain competitive, and this is accomplished through production efficiency resulting in lower costs through economies of scale. To do this, it is imperative that companies continue to grow indefinitely (Heilbroner, 1985). This raises the long-standing question of "what can prosperity possibly look like in a finite world, with limited resources and a population expected to exceed 9 billion people within decades?" (Jackson, 2011, pg. 3).

The market decides who is to receive what and how much through individual competitiveness for the resources available. This has two important functions in market society. First, it creates individual competitiveness for rewards; and second, it eliminates the need for politics in the distribution of rewards (referred to as depoliticization). Both Kassiola (1990) and Speth (2009) argue that economic growth and competitive materialism as social values grow out of a competitive market society and form the basis for the environmental problem as it appears today. The reasoning for this is as follows. Because firms must continue increasing economic output to achieve economies of scale, they must ultimately have an expanding consumer base to purchase those products (thus the globalization imperative). But these consumers must want to purchase the products, and the best way for this to be effected is through the development of relentless competitive materialism (see for example Bredemeier and Toby, 1960; Ewen, 1976; Fromm, 1976; Wachtel, 1989).

2.2. Belief in economic growth, individual competitiveness, and environmental concern

Kassiola (1990) states that attitudes toward "relentless competitive materialism" depend on the rate of growth in a society. This has left many scholars questioning the use of GDP as a success measure for an economy, as it does not consider quality of life or the environment (Costanza et al., 2014; Victor, 2010). The logic for this is that the planet and its limited resources cannot keep up with intense economic growth (Victor, 2010). Therefore, we suggest that one's environmental concern and intentions to behave pro-environmentally should be considered when looking at economic growth. We define environmental concern as an individual's attitude toward facts regarding behavior that has consequences on the environment (Fransson and Gärling, 1999; Zhang et al., 2015) and pro-environmental intentions as a citizen's interest to take care of others or the environment (Bamberg and Möser, 2007).

If one lives in a high growth society, then the salience of growth is increased through cultural practices such as economic policies and media attention focused on it. Even if growth is low, politicians also give the economy attention to try to stimulate growth. As a result, the individual is conditioned to accept and value growth and its imperative, increased consumption. The political expedience of high growth, as was argued earlier, is that everyone can consume as much as desired without taking it from someone else (Pareto Optimality). With high growth this condition is readily available because the consumption pie keeps getting larger, and getting what one wants does not necessarily require intense interpersonal competitiveness because there is enough to go around. So in a high growth society belief in economic growth is salient, but belief in individual competitiveness would be less so.

One thing that would change this condition is if growth were to become limited. For example, this might happen if resource shortages occur, thus the environment becomes more salient as it is understood to be the necessary condition for growth. One can consume more and compete less with fellow consumers so long as the natural environment is maintained in productive form. This might instill a prevention mode of thought within society (Bullard and Manchanda, 2013). In this scenario, exponential growth increases

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