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# Appraising the influence of pro-environmental self-identity on sustainable consumption buying and curtailment in emerging markets: Evidence from China and Poland

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding sustainable consumption buying and curtailment behavior in emerging markets is limited, yet this knowledge is vital to the future of these economies. The newer conceptualization of pro-environmental self-identity (PESI), as environmentally-friendly dynamic-self, can significantly inform comprehension of these behaviors, and strengthen them. Utilizing intra-personal influences and situational cueing, this paper appraises the influence of PESI on the sustainable buying and curtailment behaviors of consumers in China and Poland. Surveying these consumers, PESI was confirmed as a significant influence on their buying and curtailment behaviors. Contextual and behavioral distinctions also emerged, highlighting a buying emphasis in China and curtailment orientation in Poland. Notably, PESI was found to be multi-activated by situational cueing, moral responsibility, assessment, social desirability, tinted by consumer effectiveness and knowledge. Important implications arise for eco-innovation and buying and curtailment policy-making in emerging markets. PESI consumers have a potential active stakeholder role in this innovation and policy development.

## 1. Introduction

Emerging markets are increasingly being recognized as the economic powerhouses of the near-future, and as ‘champions’ of sustainable economic growth and responsible consumption and production (Lacy & Hayward, 2011). Two of these markets – China and Poland – are the focus of this paper because of the interplay between their sustainability endeavors and pursuit of resource intensive, consumerist economic growth (Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, Koenig-Lewis, & Zhao, 2015).

Provisional research indicates that consumers in emerging economies engage more with sustainable consumption buying behaviors than consumers in developed markets (Accenture, 2014). However, little is known about what activates this consumption, and where curtailment fits. This is hampered by a lack of culturally-informed, conceptually-rich and multi-behavioral studies critically analyzing consumption behaviors of consumers in emerging markets (Sharma, 2011; Sheth, 2011;

Steg, Bolderdijk, Keizer, & Perlaviciute, 2014). Most notable in this research narrowness is Western concentration on the attitude-behavior gap. This limits appraisal of broader interconnected intra-personal and macro influences, including the cultural distinctiveness of emerging markets (Chabowski, Mena, & Gonzalez-Padron, 2011; Ertz, Karakas, & Sarigöllü, 2016; Prothero et al., 2011). Thus researchers are calling for new conceptual approaches (Hassan, Shiu, & Shaw, 2016).

The under-researched concept of pro-environmental self-identity (PESI) as dynamic self-construal is one such approach. The contribution of this paper resides in appraising the influence of PESI on both sustainable consumption buying and curtailment behaviors of consumers in the emerging markets of China and Poland. This study proposes and empirically tests a comprehensive framework focusing on the intra-personal influences on the ‘action-readiness’ of PESI in two distinct emerging markets, thus significantly advancing how sustainable consumption buying and curtailment in emerging markets can be understood and strengthened.

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## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. The interplay between economic growth and sustainability in emerging markets

The evolving economic power of emerging markets is fueled by a relatively new phenomenon, namely the rise of their affluent consumers with unprecedented consumerism demands (Lacy & Hayward, 2011). This is expressed by their avid demand for luxury Western brands, most visible from China's new super-rich elite and expanding affluent consumers (Anand & Segal, 2016; Chadha & Husband, 2006; Hao, 2014; Sharma, 2011). These super-rich consumers are from a global rich class system renowned for its significant political and economic influence (Anand & Segal, 2016). Poland's economic growth and stability is also noteworthy when contrasted with its European cousins, with nearly double the GDP growth of prominent Euro states (Piatkowski, 2015). In parallel with China, this has increased Polish consumer affluence and spending (Vadovics, 2008), rendering it a major contributor to Poland's economic prosperity (Sielewicz, 2015).

Within this economic positioning, emerging markets are also becoming more active and powerful as sustainability champions (Lacy & Hayward, 2011). The strong 'voice' of their political leaders at COP21 (Paris climate change agreement 2015) and the 2016 G20 China-US climate agreement (BBC, 2016) is testament to this. An 'Easternization-effect' (Sheth, 2011) may be unfolding as China increases its influence in progressing sustainability policy and innovation. Albeit the challenge of this role is huge because accelerated man-made climate change and resource depletion are having catastrophic consequences for the life chances of people and the planet (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2013; Krausmann et al., 2009). As 'champions', emerging markets have potential to assume leadership to redress major climatic and pollution calamities. This includes wide scale and life threatening polluted air and water, flooding, drought and heat waves that increase mortality in all life-forms as they deplete landmass and increase desertification, disease and health epidemics, food and water insecurity, and dispossession.

However, navigating market growth, consumer spending and sustainability generates significant challenges for emerging markets. One major challenge is the potential conflict between emerging markets prioritization of economic prosperity fueling the luxury consumerism of their super-rich and affluent consumers and growing a more ecologically sustainable economy that values human and environmental capital. For example, even if consumers in emerging markets are more engaged in sustainable buying behavior (Accenture, 2014), this may be negated by the political and economic influence of the super-rich and their status-consumption. Indeed research shows that luxury consumerism is unlikely to have ethical or responsible credentials (Davies, Lee, & Ahonkhai, 2012). It may, though, trigger human-centric happiness as these consumers enjoy their economic liberalism and/or their hard-earned Soviet-free prosperity (Czapiński & Panek, 2014).

Building on more recent ideas on situated social cognition (Smith & Semin, 2007), this conflict resides within the multilayered contextually-sensitive, economic, political, and social situational cueing that underpins identity-syntonic consumerism and sustainable consumption behaviors. These cues are evident in warnings from climate scientists that unprecedented temperature rises have propelled climate change impacts into an immediate emergency (National Centers for Environmental Information, 2016); thus many nations are on a crash trajectory with Paris (2015) COP21 climate agreements (The Guardian, 2016), including China and Poland. For example, while agreeing with COP21 and the pro-environmental values of its European neighbors, Poland will collide with COP21 because of its reliance on fossil fuels and nuclear energy (not smart energy) – both signals of its economic prosperity (BBC, 2012; The Economist, 2014).

Cues from emerging markets' frontline experiences of ecological problems might mitigate some friction, for instance, increasing drought

in southern Poland (Kundzewicz & Matczak, 2012), high mortality from extreme air pollution in China (coal/vehicle emissions) (WHO, 2015). Increasing understanding of consumer's sustainable consumption behaviors will also be invaluable. This is because sustainable consumption embraces buying and curtailment (Prothero et al., 2011), thus reducing natural resource usage/waste and pollution emissions to safeguard future generations' needs, while fulfilling current generations' primary needs and quality of life (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 1994). Accordingly, it can serve as economic, political, and social cueing to influence the behaviors of consumers, politicians and business leaders in emerging markets. One potential outcome could be growing consumer commitment towards consuming more sustainably, thereby building much needed trust with business eco-innovators (Accenture, 2014; Lacy & Hayward, 2011). Notwithstanding business leaders are often more interested in consumers buying than curtailing their consumption, reflecting an economic cue of a marketplace-dominant 'Westernization-effect'. However, China could use its political cueing to lessen this dominance via its 'Easternization-effect' (Sheth, 2011). Overall, these economic, political, and social cues highlight the challenges emerging markets face in progressing identity-syntonic sustainable consumption buying and curtailment behaviors, and emphasize the need for further investigation of PESI.

### 2.2. Clarifying the concept of PESI

While there is obfuscation within identity-environment classifications (Kashima, Paladino, & Margetts, 2014; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012), PESI is distinctive as an environmentally friendly self-concept that is symbolically expressive and shaped by mainstream socio-cultural forces. Supported by situated social cognition (Smith & Semin, 2007), this socio-cultural dimension suggests PESI is situationally-cued, and, in turn these cues direct consumers' environmentally-friendly behaviors. As highlighted above, within emerging markets a major situational cue for consumers to navigate is the potential friction between sustainability and economic growth and consumerism representing the marketplace status-quo (Dermody et al., 2015; Kashima et al., 2014; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010).

Predominantly, consumers with PESI will assert their environmental-friendliness through publically endorsed normalized consumption choices (e.g. fair-trade), embedded within their sustainable consumption identity projects and lifestyles. Turner (1987) labels this normalization 'mundane environmentalism' because of widespread acceptance, not rejection or reconfiguration, of dominant economic growth/consumerism norms and situational cues driving consumption mindsets in both emerging and developed economies.

Generally, self-identity entails temporal interplay between social and personal self-identity working together as an organizing system in constructing who a person was, is and could become in the future (Oyserman & James, 2008). Hence, PESI can be inferred as dynamic, fluid, multidimensional, situationally-cued, and both a conscious/unconscious influence on consumers' consumption actions and evaluative sense-making of the world around them (Oyserman, 2009). Furthermore, as an adaptive energetic force, PESI can be conceived as 'self-in-action' (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013; Oyserman, 2009), where the strength of individuals' pro-environmental self-concept is so pervasive, it drives their pro-environmental behaviors. Emphasis therefore shifts to what an individual is – 'I am an environmentally-friendly consumer', not what they do – 'I buy fair-trade products'. Less is understood, however, about PESI as active-self in emerging markets like China and Poland, particularly given identity is situationally-cued. This paper addresses this knowledge gap.

### 2.3. PESI and sustainable consumption behaviors

Numerous studies confirm the connection between identity and consumption, acknowledging consumption is integral to consumers'

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