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The subjective norms of sustainable consumption: A cross-cultural exploration

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ABSTRACT

Although extensive research has explored aspects of sustainable consumption, such as specific sustainable behaviors and motivations for participating in sustainable activities, little research has examined the role of national culture and how pragmatism influences sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption can encompass both sustainable attitudes and sustainable behaviors, and in this research, two types of social norms related to sustainable consumption (normative and self-enhancing) are also included and examined across three nations (France, Japan, and US). The findings suggest that differences in consumption are explained, in part, by the country's level of pragmatism, a cultural value (Hofstede, 1991). Building off the theory of reasoned action, findings also show that sustainable attitudes mediate the relationship between the level of pragmatism of a respondent's nation and sustainable behaviors.

1. Introduction

The importance of sustainability, both from a marketing perspective (e.g., obtaining sustainability standards certification, such as Fair Trade and UTZ) and from a consumer perspective (e.g., purchasing local produce (Seyfang, 2006)) is increasing tremendously. Marketers in particular afford more attention to sustainability given that consumer spending power for sustainable goods and services exceeds \$230 billion annually (Burst Media, 2010). Although consumer spending power is large, consumers' sustainable attitudes and behaviors are still disconnected (Prothero et al., 2011). Sustainability is defined by the United Nations as: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987), with sustainable consumption referring to consumers' sustainability-related attitudes and behaviors. Yet, when thinking about the following sustainable behaviors: recycling plastic, composting food scraps, using alternative modes of transportation to get to work, and buying an energy-efficient appliance, not all consumers worldwide are engaged in all of these behaviors. Yet do all consumers worldwide have a positive attitude toward sustainable behaviors, and concurrently, do national values influence sustainable attitudes and behaviors? In other words, could participation be due to

whether or not these behaviors are socially expected and approved as a social standard (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990)? The answer to this question may depend on the national culture of the consumers in question.

Speaking to national cultural standards and infrastructure, Thøgersen (2010) finds that part of the reason sustainable consumption differs among countries is due to differences in political regulation, financial support given to sustainable infrastructure, and labeling requirements for sustainably produced goods. Yet, what remains unanswered is why even in light of established infrastructure, incentives (e.g., convenient and cost-free recycling bins, rebates for purchase of energy-efficient appliances), and normative social influence (e.g., friends' perceptions that not recycling or not buying energy-efficient appliances is wrong), some consumers and some nations consume sustainably more so than others. Consider an example with recycling as a sustainable consumption practice. Within the European Union, consumers in countries such as Spain, Finland, and France recycle < 35% of total waste, whereas consumers in countries such as Belgium, Austria, and Sweden recycle at least 50% of total waste (European Environment Agency, 2010).

Sustainable behaviors are separated into dual factions. Some behaviors are normative and based more on cultural standards and

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infrastructure common to a nation, such as recycling newspaper being easy given the availability of recycling bins provided by most communes in North America. Alternatively, other behaviors are learned and performed for self-enhancing motives, such as purchasing organic produce in order to satisfy value expressive and hedonic motives (Tellström, Gustafsson, & Mossberg, 2006), because in certain nations value expression is an esteemed cultural dimension. Prior research provides evidence that value differences are directly related to intention to engage in sustainable behaviors (De Maya, López-López, & Munuera, 2011). In countries where individuals are governed by what is socially acceptable, certain sustainable behaviors are more likely to occur, even in light of weak attitudes toward sustainability (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). However, an examination of which norms drive sustainable consumption is not provided. Furthermore, rather than focusing on sustainable behaviors as multidimensional (i.e., as many activities versus one), most research tends to examine the motivations of consumers to engage in one sustainable behavior, such as organic food consumption (De Maya et al., 2011). Focusing on just one behavior offers an examination of consumer perceptions of a sustainable activity versus an examination of how much they value a sustainable lifestyle.

Consumers in different cultures may have personal and/or social reasons for engaging in a sustainable lifestyle. As such, this research examines differences in sustainability by identifying a cultural determinant to normative and self-enhancing sustainable consumption. Research demonstrates that cultural values, such as uncertainty avoidance, can explain differences in attitudes and behaviors and moderate the relationship between attitudes and behavioral intention, however not in the context of sustainability (Chai & Pavlou, 2004; Pavlou & Chai, 2002). In this paper, the focus is on the cultural dimension of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a cultural value that defines how consumers make sense of their present situation and face the future, and the concept of time is omnipresent in the definition of sustainable consumption. Thus, the study of the cultural value of pragmatism should offer a more complete understanding of why certain consumers may or may not engage in a sustainable consumption lifestyle. Second, a more detailed explanation of why consumers might or might not engage in sustainable consumption is provided, thereby contributing to and extending the literature on sustainable consumption. Specific and distinct sustainability-related norms capable of shaping and influencing sustainable attitudes and behaviors are examined, providing a more granular analysis of why consumers are more or less likely to adopt a sustainable lifestyle.

Finally, current research streams in sustainability tend not to make the distinction between behavioral intention (e.g., thinking that recycling is a good idea or thinking that all appliances should be energy-efficient) and the actual behavior itself (e.g., actually placing a carton in the recycling bin or buying an energy-efficient appliance). As such, actual behaviors rather than intended behaviors are measured. Also, using the basis of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), pragmatism is hypothesized as directly related to the subjective norm that influences attitudes leading to sustainable behaviors. The cultural origin of a consumer is hypothesized as an antecedent to attitudes, which precedes sustainable behaviors, and the pragmatism in a national culture is hypothesized as moderating sustainable behavior intentions. A three country (France, US, and Japan) study is conducted and sheds light on how the cultural dimension of pragmatism, also known as long-term orientation (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), mediates the relationship between sustainable attitudes and sustainable behaviors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability and normativity

In past research, what constitutes sustainable attitudes and behaviors is usually adjusted based upon the needs of a study (Minton, Lee,

Orth, Kim, & Kahle, 2012). In other words, a comprehensive list of what represents sustainability to consumers is difficult to attain. Some authors describe sustainability through organic food consumption (Thøgersen, 2010), while other authors focus on reducing overall consumption and minimizing environmental impacts through public transit use and water/energy restrictive devices, such as low flow shower heads and energy-efficient light bulbs (Banbury, Stinerock, & Subrahmanyam, 2011). As many authors highlight, sustainable consumption is, in part, influenced by norms (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Thøgersen, 2005). These norms often derive from cultural standards embedded within a country (Thøgersen, 2010) but can also emerge from group norms (Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999). In other words, a consumer is influenced by macro level norms of the culture they reside in as well as micro level norms of groups the consumer desires to include in their self-identity. A consumer desiring to live a healthy lifestyle may receive conflicting messages regarding the importance of health at the macro cultural level but receive strong encouragement to participate in healthy behaviors at the micro group level. For example, in Western cultures an increased number of fast food establishments and strong cultural values of accomplishment may lead to unhealthy eating, while a micro work group may encourage bringing salad to eat for lunch or develop norms of walking meetings.

Similarly, a consumer interested in an environmentalist lifestyle may receive messages that general recycling is the norm at the macro level but that other sustainable behaviors (e.g., composting, biking to work) are not the norm at the macro level. Instead, the environmentalist consumer may attach to micro level group norms that encourage all types of sustainable behaviors (e.g., donating time or money to an environmental organization). These micro level group norms then become self-enhancing toward the consumer's desired environmental lifestyle. For clarity, all following discussion uses the terms normative sustainable behaviors and self-enhancing sustainable behaviors to refer to macro-level, cultural norms regarding sustainability and micro-level, group norms of sustainability, respectively.

Whether norms consumers perceive are at the macro or at the micro level, these norms represent individual beliefs regarding how the consumer should act and what others think of the consumer when they engage in certain behaviors. Referred to as the subjective norm in theories such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), this antecedent of behavioral intent and behaviors is most often modeled as unidimensional. However, research on sustainable consumption, particularly on consumption communities such as locavores (i.e., people that primarily eat locally produced food) and organic food consumers, hints at two dimensions of the subjective norm: (1) the specific expectations relevant to the consumption group (macro-level) and (2) the way in which the individual within the group complies with these expectations (i.e., the way they consume) versus other group members (micro-level).

First, norms can be cohesive glue, encouraging those actively involved in a group to share, actively participate, and be individually responsible to the group in light of their actions. This type of subjective norm references the us versus them mentality and defines the boundaries of the consumption community. For example, subjective norms help to define what differentiates and what is expected of locavore consumers in comparison to non-locavore consumers (Feagan, 2007; Spielmann & Bernelin, 2015; Stanton, Wiley, & Wirth, 2012).

Second, consumers can experience a subjective norm when they engage in specific types of consumption within a social group. For example, some consumers engage in sustainable consumption by being adamant recyclers while others define themselves as locavores, although both types of consumers are part of the sustainable movement. In line with the literature on social identity theory, individuals can express their personal consumption motives within a group as a means to outline not just their legitimacy as a group member but also as a means to establish their rank within the group (Moghaddam, 2006). For example, research demonstrates that organic food consumption is often

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