



# To be or not to be green: Exploring individualism and collectivism as antecedents of environmental behavior



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## ABSTRACT

Sustainability and environmental initiatives continue to receive an increasing amount of attention, both within the corporate, consumer, and individual domains of behavior. As individuals act on their environmental interests, or lack thereof, it is incumbent upon researchers to continue delineating factors that may influence the commitment and behaviors that take place. To this end, this research effort capitalizes on the long history of cultural orientation, examining the influence of individualism and collectivism as antecedents to perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE), environmental attitude, and environmental commitment. Utilizing cross-cultural data drawn from South Korea and the United States, the empirical results provide support for horizontal collectivism and vertical individualism as important influencers of perceived consumer effectiveness. In turn, PCE positively affects environmental attitude which results in pro-environmental commitment manifested in specific behavioral intentions.

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*Be the change you wish to see in the world.*

*~Mahatma Gandhi*

## 1. Introduction

The objective of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) is to act as a catalyst for companies to achieve sustainable

development. In order to fulfill this ambitious goal, over two hundred companies from more than thirty countries engage actively in WBCSD to achieve a sustainable future (WBCSD 2010). As a member of the WBCSD, Coca-Cola launched a recyclable PlantBottle, made partly of plant-based materials derived from sugarcane. Companies such as Unilever and General Electric are leading the marketplace with their imaginative ventures in sustainable business practices.

Sustainability efforts have been an important issue not only within the corporate market, but regions of the world are also gaining reputations for specific competencies. Japan has focused intensive efforts on sustainable technology in the hybrid car industry, while China's reputation is growing in the fields of solar and wind energy (Bacani, 2009). South Korea announced a five-year "green growth" strategy in October 2010 in which the government hopes to bring a green revolution (Young, 2010). According to Prime Minister Han Seung Soo, South Korea is transforming the country into "a new paradigm of qualitative growth, which uses less energy and is more compatible with environmental sustainability" (Bacani, 2009). It is clear that there is a growing global awareness of sustainability development and initiatives.

Despite a sustainability trend that has been increasing for decades in both the environmental and corporate arenas, academic attention has been slower to grow (Rapert, Newman, Park, & Lee, 2010). To that end, we endeavor to increase our understanding of sustainability through examining the long-standing theoretical foundations in cultural domains as a possible antecedent to environmental behaviors. Eco-minded individuals have a plethora of avenues for pursuing their

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environmental interests, including engaging in activities within their employment undertakings, basing their personal consumption decisions on the sustainability pursuits of firms, and altering their lifestyle behaviors in accordance with their personal environmental identities. While the extant literature and anecdotal press have provided some insight into these pursuits, researchers must focus their efforts on understanding the sustained growth in both individual and corporate interest in eco-minded pursuits.

The extensive research on collectivism and individualism offers an interesting avenue of insight which may help us to understand why people make the environmental decisions that they do. Cultural orientation and its effects on individuals enjoy an abundance of research, albeit with mixed findings (Van de Vliert, Huang, & Levine, 2004). While Hofstede's (1980) cultural orientation has been widely influential, the measurement is questionable because of its generalizability and validity issues. For instance, past studies have found that Hofstede's findings are difficult to generalize because the study used one single organizational sample (McSweeney, 2002). Further, the measurements of horizontal and vertical dimensions of cultural orientation are also questionable (Soh & Leong, 2002). Based on the controversial findings in the literature, there is a need to further refine and specify cultural orientations.

In addition to the need to further explore cultural orientations, the extant literature suggests a lack of research examining the antecedents of consumers' environmental behavior (Kilbourne, Beckmann, & Thelen, 2002; Stern, Dietz, & Guagnano, 1995; Stern, Dietz, Kalof, & Guagnano, 1995). Hence, the current research focuses on the primary antecedents of environmental behavior, such as cultural orientation and perceived consumer effectiveness. Given the timely and relevant status of sustainability initiatives combined with their strong global presence, the call for further exploration of cultural orientation and antecedents provides an interesting opportunity to explore these variables in concert. Accordingly, this research is built on three underlying premises: (1) the aforementioned growth in sustainability initiatives as companies embrace this business approach while individuals concurrently engage in pro-environmental movements, (2) the value-belief norm as a framework gaining acceptance in the environmental behavior literature and (3) the premise that cultural orientations may help to explain consumers' environmental behaviors.

## 2. Theory

It has been a consistent struggle to derive a model that accurately predicts pro-environmental behavior (Stern, 2000). As an emerging theory to capture pro-environmental behavior, value-belief norm theory (VBN) has gained acceptance in the realm of the environmental behavior literature (Steg, Dreijerink, & Abrahamse, 2005). The most important aspect of VBN is that beliefs mediate the linkage between

values and actions, such as perceived consumer effectiveness. Stern (2000) suggests that predicting pro-environmental behavior is difficult partly due to a broad range of causal factors. Further, Stern, Dietz, and Guagnano (1995), Stern, Dietz, Kalof, and Guagnano (1995), and Stern (2000) suggest that VBN is best suited to account for the attitude formation process by incorporating environmental concerns and issues (Dietz, Stern, & Rycroft, 1989). VBN suggests that the values individuals hold represent by their cultural orientation (Gaines et al., 1997; Yau, 1994) and the constructs examined can be captured by VBN, this theory is particularly well-suited for the proposed model. The conceptual framework can be found in Fig. 1.

### 2.1. Cultural orientation

Hofstede (1980, p. 25) defines culture as “a collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one group from another.” Based on this definition, it is likely that culture is embedded within each individual, forming a unique school of thoughts and practices. The cross-cultural literature has used specific types of cultural variables. For instance, horizontal-vertical (H-V) and individualism-collectivism (I-C) orientations examine differences in four distinct cultural patterns: horizontal individualism (HI), vertical individualism (VI), horizontal collectivism (HC), and vertical collectivism (VC).

Horizontal patterns assume that “one self is more or less like every other self” whereas vertical patterns are composed of hierarchies and assume that “one self is different from other selves” (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998, p. 19). Since the foundation of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, research has used the I-C continuum to capture cultural variability (Sivadas, Bruvold, & Nelson, 2008). The I-C continuum reflects the way people live together as well as differences in values. According to Hofstede (1980), individualism refers to “a preference for a loosely knit social structure in which individuals take care of themselves and their immediate families only” (p. 87). Individualism assumes that individuals are independent of one another and is conceptualized with personal goals (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Collectivists, on the other hand, assume that “groups bind and mutually obligate individuals” (pg. 5). In collectivist cultures, people are tightly integrated where individuals belong to one or more close “in-groups” (Hofstede, 1980). The literature suggests that most Western countries rate high on individualism, whereas Asian countries are associated with high collectivism (Sivadas et al., 2008).

In summary, four distinct cultural patterns display distinct characteristics. HI and VI are similar in that they emphasize being unique and highly self-reliant, but are different in other aspects, such as acquiring high status. Compared to HI individuals, VI individuals are more likely to acquire status by competing with others to be the “best.” While individuals in both HC and VC consider interdependence to be important, VC individuals are willing to

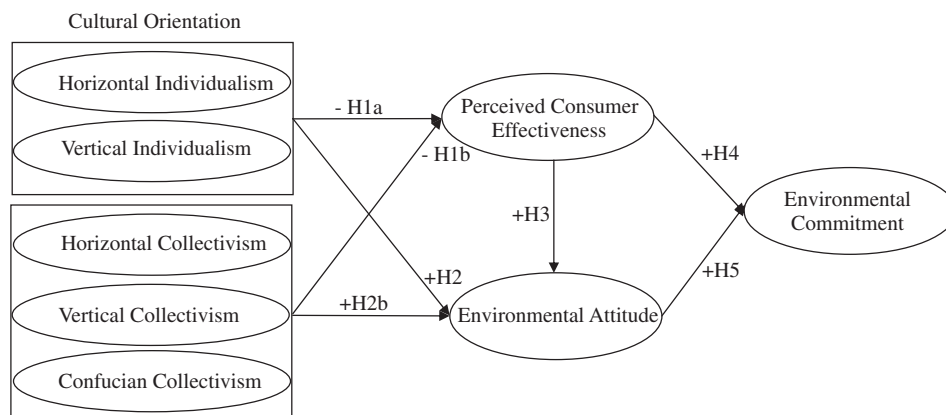


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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