



Religion and motives for sustainable behaviors: A cross-cultural comparison and contrast



Elizabeth A. Minton^{a,*}, Lynn R. Kahle^{b,1}, Chung-Hyun Kim^{c,2}

^a College of Business, University of Wyoming, Dept. 3275, 1000 E University Ave, Laramie, WY 82071, United States

^b Lundquist College of Business, University of Oregon, 1208 University Street, Eugene, OR 97403, United States

^c School of Communication/Grad School of Mass Communication, Sogang University, C.P.O. Box 1142, Seoul, Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT

Many previous studies investigate altruism's influence on sustainable behaviors, yet few studies examine the more foundational relation between religion and sustainable consumption-related behaviors. Therefore, this paper builds on values research, self-determination theory, and inoculation theory to examine the link between religion and sustainable behaviors from a sample of both South Korean and US consumers (N = 388, average age = 33). Results show a moderating effect of religiosity with consumers who are more religious being more likely to participate in sustainable behaviors (e.g., purchasing green cleaning supplies, recycling, purchasing organic foods). In contrast to Christians and Atheists, highly religious Buddhists more likely participate in sustainable behaviors, with little difference between locations. Interestingly, differences exist with minority religions (e.g., Buddhists in the US) that change agents must note to maximize the effectiveness of campaigns encouraging sustainable behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the motives for sustainable behaviors is becoming increasingly important. The future of humans and the planet, as well as many other species, may depend on an accurate and thorough understanding of sustainable behaviors (Kahle & Gurel-Atay, 2014). Some indicators give reason for optimism. A recent Nielsen study of 25,000 people in 51 countries indicates that 66% of consumers across the globe are concerned about climate change and global warming (Frighetto, 2011). Of the greatest concerns to these consumers are water shortages, waste packaging, and pesticide use in food and agriculture. In addition, roughly three-quarters of respondents indicate concern for air and water pollution. Given sustainability's prominence in the eyes of the consumers and the importance of excessive consumption as a threat to sustainability, understanding foundational consumer motives (e.g., core values) is critical for consumer widespread adoption of sustainable behaviors.

Prior studies investigate the link between sustainable behaviors and consumers' basic demographic and psychographic traits

(e.g., McDonald, Oates, Young, & Hwang, 2006; Tanner & Wölfling Kast, 2003) as well as extrinsic rewards as an incentive to increase participation in sustainable behaviors (Thøgersen, 2005); however, research inadequately investigates intrinsic motivators such as a consumer's core values, rooted in fundamental belief systems (e.g., religion) (Engelland, 2014; Minton & Kahle, 2013). Religiosity reflects fundamental belief systems. In this paper, religiosity is examined as a potential missing link in the sustainability research stream. This research considers how consumers' religious principles and values influence sustainable consumption behaviors in a systematic fashion. Therefore, the purposes of this paper are (1) to examine the influence of religion and degree of religious belief on sustainable behaviors, (2) to investigate religion's varying influence on sustainable behaviors requiring various levels of effort, and (3) to explore potential cultural influences to the relation between religion and sustainable behaviors with adult samples in both Asia and America.

2. Sustainability and values

As the world population continues to rise and resources decrease, sustainability is becoming increasingly important (Kahle & Gurel-Atay, 2014; Prothero et al., 2011). However, research into the intrinsic and extrinsic motives for such sustainable behaviors is still embryonic. Before delving into motives, an understanding of sustainability is in order. The United Nations defined sustainability in 1987 as "development

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 307 766 3616.

E-mail addresses: eminton@uwyo.edu (E.A. Minton), lkahle@uoregon.edu (L.R. Kahle), chkim@sogang.ac.kr (C.-H. Kim).

¹ Tel.: +1 541 346 3373.

² Tel.: +82 2 705 8386.

that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987). Thus, even if sustainability may be passé in some circles, the concept of preserving resources for future generations is still imperative.

Companies today benefit from the increasing importance of sustainability. This *sustainability craze* encourages tactics such as developing naturally-sourced products and services, using recycled packaging, and designing communications emphasizing environmental preservation. For consumer motives, sustainability involves purchasing and using green products and services, recycling packaging and containers produced by businesses (whether environmentally-focused or not), and contributing to for-profit and non-profit environmental organizations, among other behaviors. Understanding consumer motives for participating in these sustainable behaviors helps business and the environment alike by increasing purchase of sustainable products and services as well as participation in behaviors that help preserve earth's limited resources. Going forward, this paper builds off the United Nation's definition of sustainability and uses the term *sustainable behaviors* to refer to consumer actions that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future consumer generations to meet their own needs. Sustainability's core is about consumption.

With this understanding of sustainable behaviors, this paper turns to examining the gap between values and attitudes, particularly driven by religious values. Prior research examines extrinsic attitudinal and behavioral motives such as price savings and public policy changes as well as extrinsic disincentives such as fines for not being sustainable (Thøgersen, 2005). Other research examines several intrinsic motivators (e.g., personal satisfaction from preserving natural habitats for wild animals); however, most studies use student samples or lab studies (Thøgersen, 2005), potentially clouding true intrinsic motivators.

Sheth, Sethia, and Srinivas (2011) emphasize the importance of understanding the consumer as critical to intrinsically motivating sustainable behaviors. These authors define a term "customer-centric sustainability" as "a metric of performance based on sustainability outcomes that are personally consequential for customers and result from customer directed business actions" (p. 24). Given this consumer focus as the key to understanding intrinsic motivation, examining core values also is vital, as such values are the driving force behind consumer behaviors (Kahle, 1996; Kahle & Xie, 2008; Sheth, 1983).

3. Religion and sustainability

A key determinant of one's core values is a belief system, such as religion (Minton & Kahle, 2013; Roccas, 2005; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dermelle, 2004). Although the term belief system is often synonymous with religious beliefs, non-religious backgrounds also carry a belief system (i.e., beliefs about the scientific origins of earth) (Minton & Kahle, 2013). Prior research emphasizes the importance of understanding religion as a key determinant of core values influencing consumer attitudes and behavior (Djupe & Gwiasda, 2010; Hirschman, Ruvio, & Touzani, 2011). This research stream is similar to the theory of reasoned action that proposes that consumer values and attitudes motivate behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Religion and culture appear to be the same concept, but the two value systems differ in locus. Culture comes specifically from a geographic location, whereas religion transcends geographic bounds, thereby making the latter more applicable to marketers, regardless of location. Additionally, religious values are rooted in religious scripture that provide consistent insight into beliefs, whereas culture often represents a milieu of transitory beliefs that incorporate religious beliefs.

Relating to sustainable consumption, religious scripture discusses views toward sustainability and sustainability-related values (Djupe & Gwiasda, 2010; Wolkomir, Futreal, Woodrum, & Hoban, 1997;

Woodrum & Wolkomir, 1997), thereby suggesting that core religious beliefs may influence sustainable purchase and non-purchase behaviors.

With differences among specific religious affiliations, James (1902/2004) describes that Western religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) believe that God created nature and therefore God and humans hold a superior position to nature. Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism), on the other hand, follow a pantheistic view that God is in and through everything, including nature. Sarre (1995) expands on this distinction between Western and Eastern religions, identifying that Western religions follow White's thesis (1967) that God created nature, God gave control of nature to humans, and therefore Western religions should be less apt to be environmentally friendly and more willing to alter the environment. More specifically, White (1967) explores Christian doctrine, with a focus on the book of Genesis in the Bible, finding repetition of human's dominance over nature (e.g., humans appointed to name animals, humans exploiting nature for their own benefit) and positing that Christians should be less sustainable as a result. More recent studies confirm these conjectures with Christians participating in fewer sustainable behaviors than people with other belief systems (Eckberg & Blocker, 1989; Wolkomir et al., 1997).

However, more recent competing research shows that participation in sustainable behaviors depends on personal factors, including values – suggesting that more altruistic consumers likely participate in more sustainable behaviors (Corraliza & Berenguer, 2000; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Additionally, values related to helping others lead to increased participation in sustainable behaviors (Granzin & Olsen, 1991; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002).

Looking at the antecedents to altruism and values of helping, strong intrinsic religious beliefs are driving causes of altruism and helping behaviors (Blogowska & Saroglou, 2011). Although religion and altruism closely intertwine, these constructs are not the same. Religious and non-religious people alike can be altruistic. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate how religious values, rooted in core belief systems, influence sustainable behaviors and help explain the gap between values and sustainable attitudes in the values–attitudes–behavior hierarchy (Prothero et al., 2011). Religion is more informative to marketers and change agents because one's religious values are easier to ascertain through self-reports and secondary sources than one's altruism level. In addition, religion transcends geographic bounds, providing applicability to marketers across the globe.

Tanner and Wölfling Kast (2003) develop a comprehensive model of participation in sustainable behaviors showing that personal norms (often rooted in values), education, employment status, and place of residence potentially influence sustainable consumption. Recently, Western religions have started encouraging sustainable behaviors (Djupe & Gwiasda, 2010). For example, the Genesis Covenant encourages churches to reduce their environmental footprint (Wilson, 2012). As a result, this competing research shows that highly religious consumers may be more likely to participate in sustainable behaviors than less religious consumers.

Regardless of this connection between religious values, altruism, and sustainability, research on consumers adhering to Eastern religions points to higher participation in sustainable behaviors. Eastern religious groups follow the pantheistic view that destroying an element of nature is destroying part of God or other divine being (Hunt & Penwell, 2008; Sarre, 1995) and, therefore, should be more likely to participate in environmentally-friendly efforts. Because sustainable consumption is a means to express environmentally-friendly attitudes and beliefs, consumers adhering to Eastern religious beliefs are expected to participate significantly more in sustainable behaviors in contrast to consumers adhering to Western religious beliefs.

In contrast to religious consumers, Atheists (believing that a God does not exist) should be more likely to believe that the world needs preservation for generations to come and be more sustainable

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