

A protection motivation explanation of base-of-pyramid consumers' environmental sustainability



Guohao Zhao ^a, Erin Cavusgil ^b, Yushan Zhao ^{c,*}

^a School of Management Science and Engineering, Shanxi University of Finance & Economics, Taiyuan, Shanxi 030006, China

^b School of Management, University of Michigan-Flint, 2126 Riverfront Center West, Flint, MI 48502, USA

^c College of Business and Economics, University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, 3436 Hyland Hall, Whitewater, WI 53190, USA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to use the protection motivation theory to examine base-of-the pyramid (BoP) consumers' environmentally friendly behaviors. BoP consumers suffer from the threat of environmental degradation and resource scarcity, particularly in emerging economies. They have not benefited from worldwide economic development as much as their counterparts in the middle and affluent classes. Based on the protection motivation theory, we investigate how threat appraisal and coping appraisal affect BoP consumers' intentions to engage in pro-environmental household behaviors. The proposed relationships are tested using self-reported data of Chinese BoP consumers. The results indicate that these threat and coping appraisal variables are related to BoP consumers' low-cost and/or high-cost household green behaviors. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the world has witnessed both dynamic economic development and environmental deterioration in emerging economies such as China (Yu, 2014). Many studies have focused on examining the factors contributing to the rapid growth as well as developing models to explain the unique economic phenomena (Buckley, Clegg, & Tan, 2006; Christmann & Taylor, 2001). Nevertheless, scant attention has been given to base-of-the-pyramid (BoP) consumers and how they are affected by the environmental degradation in the emerging markets. Accordingly, scholars have called for research on the distinctive characteristics of BoP consumers with respect to environmental protection and how to better serve them (Barbier, 2010; Chokor, 2004; Viswanathan, Jung, Venugopal, Minefee, & Jung, 2014; Yu, 2014).

BoP consumers' health is threatened by the severely poor environment, and they lack the basic necessities to handle the environmental degradation. BoP consumers are often associated with low-quality living conditions and environmental deterioration. Scholars argue that, in emerging economies such as China, economic growth has come at the expense of its natural

environment (Rozelle, Huang, & Zhang, 1997). BoP consumers have not benefited from the economic development and, in fact, have become the victims of environmental degradation (Yu, 2014). On one hand, environmental deterioration has become a big threat to the health of the Chinese public, especially to BoP consumers. Water and air pollution, food safety, and other environmental problems have grown so severe that BoP consumers are suffering the health effects of a poor environment. For example, lack of access to safe drinking water and a high level of mercury contamination from excessive coal burning cause chronic illness to BoP consumers. On the other hand, BoP consumers lack the capability to cope with the environmental threats. They do not have adequate education, health care, and appropriate infrastructure. They have less financial and material resources and lack access to basic necessities to cope with environmental deterioration (Busse & Menzel, 2014; Chokor, 2004; Rozelle et al., 1997).

Since BoP consumers are suffering the health effects of a poor environment, they are very concerned about environmental quality. Interestingly, BoP consumers are actually far less wasteful of natural resources. Scholars find that BoP consumers have a lower level of household consumption and generate much less waste than the middle and upper class segments (Mellor, 1988). In this aspect, BoP consumers contribute positively to environmental sustainability compared to middle and upper class consumers. BoP consumers are likely to perform pro-environmental activities to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: zhaoy@uww.edu (Y. Zhao).

demonstrate their care of the environment. On environmental issues, BoP consumers are willing to engage in activities that are beneficial to the environment, based on the principle of the protection motivation theory. However, some scholars argue that BoP consumers perceive environmental issues differently and are more likely to behave in ways that seem to be beneficial to self in the short-run but harmful to long-term success (Viswanathan et al., 2014). For example, the family's use of pesticides and insecticides has a negative effect on mental health, especially to children. Therefore, we require an in-depth understanding of BoP consumers' individual green behaviors and their antecedents (Carrete, Castaño, Felix, Centro, & González, 2012; Rozelle et al., 1997; Viswanathan et al., 2014). There is a need to use theories to examine green behaviors of BoP consumers, and this issue becomes even more critical in China as Chinese BoP consumers appear to press more on the improvement of environmental quality (Barbier, 2010).

The present study is designed to study BoP consumers' intentions to engage in household green behaviors. The protection motivation theory is used to structure the research framework. The protection motivation theory (Lazarus, 1968; Rogers, 1975) points out that when people face a threat, they experience both threat appraisal and coping appraisal. After assessing the severity of the threat and personal ability to cope with the threat, they decide how to deal with the danger (Rogers, 1983). In this study, BoP consumers are facing (1) severe threats from environmental deterioration and (2) a lack of capability to cope with environmental threats. We research how threat appraisal (their perceived severity of environmental problems, perceived vulnerability) and coping appraisal (self-efficacy, response efficacy, and perceived difficulty of environmental protection) influence BoP consumers' intentions to engage in pro-environmental household behaviors.

The empirical setting is four urban areas in China. To test the relationships, we conducted surveys on BoP consumers and collected useable data from 402 BoP consumers. We also collected data from middle and upper classes as a control group to validate the testing results of BoP consumers. The contemporary Chinese society provides an ideal context for the purpose of this study. This emerging economy offers a large representation of BoP consumers, and environmental issues have become crucial for the nation's sustainable development. Our analysis offers significant implications for understanding BoP consumers and their pro-environmental behaviors. In the remainder of this paper, we first review the pertinent literature and develop our hypotheses. We then describe the statistical analysis and explore the findings. Finally, we offer a discussion and implications of the study.

2. Theoretical development and research hypotheses

The research model based on the protection motivation theory is presented in Fig. 1. Both BoP consumers' threat appraisal (perceived severity and perceived vulnerability) and coping appraisal (self-efficacy, response efficacy, and perceived difficulty of environmental protection) are identified as important antecedents of their intention to engage in pro-environmental household behaviors. Since BoP consumers are short of financial and material resources, we compare the effects of antecedent variables on intention to engage in the high-cost and low-cost pro-environmental household behaviors.

The protection motivation theory was originally developed by Rogers (1975) to predict and understand protective behaviors in response to a fear or threat. Its basic principle is that people who sense a harmful event together with a belief that they can cope with the threat are more likely to engage in protective behaviors. Rogers (1983) further uses the cognitive process to explain how consumers recognize a health threat and the mechanisms behind their motivations to react to the threat and to prevent an expected negative outcome. The theory has been formulated by scholars to study the effects of environmental threats on pro-environmental behaviors (Carrete & Arroyo, 2014; Kantola, Syme, & Campbell, 1982; Kautish & Soni, 2012; Lindsay & Strathman, 1997; Nelson, Cismaru, Cismaru, & Ono, 2011; Wiegman, Komilis, Cadet, Boer, & Gutteling, 1992; Zur & Klockner, 2014). The protection motivation theory suggests that when people are presented with a threat, they experience the cognitive process of both threat and coping appraisals.

2.1. Threat appraisal

A main process of the threat appraisal is to evaluate the severity and vulnerability of environmental problems. Threat appraisal refers to the personal judgment of the threats posed by environmental degradation (Rogers, 1983). Perceived severity of environmental problems is the personal assessment of how serious the BoP consumers perceive the threat from the environmental deterioration (Arthur & Quester, 2004). The protection motivation theory suggests that when people are presented with a threat from environmental pollution, they experience the cognitive process of threat appraisal. In the study of environmental protection, for BoP consumers, perceived threats are mainly health aspects and poor life conditions from environmental pollution (Zur & Klockner, 2014). The threat is managed through certain behaviors to protect their normal lives. BoP consumers' defense against the threat of a poor environment and protection of personal life lead to motivation to perform benevolent, pro-environmental behaviors (Wiegman et al., 1992).

Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, and Almakias (2008) find that threat of

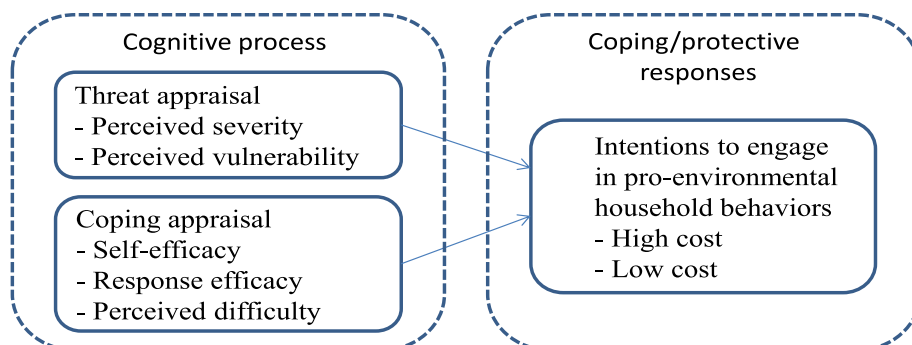


Fig. 1. The Research model.

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