

Lectio praecursoria

Toward a greener globe: In the pursuit of culturally embedded pathways to sustainable consumption

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Introduction and background

Problems related to climate change have dramatically increased around the globe in the past few decades. Global warming has been rising due to issues such as plastic waste, deforestation, carbon-dioxide emissions, and pollution caused by fossil fuels, urbanization, and overconsumption (ISO, 2017). Consequently, many countries continuously suffer from the devastating effects of climate change in the shape of resource depletion, floods, rising sea levels, premature deaths, food shortages, poverty, and other social issues. Many worthy pro-environmental steps have been taken to tackle environmental issues, such as the Brundtland Commission's report of Our Common Future (WCED, 1987). The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report of limiting global warming to between 1.5 °C and 2 °C by 2100, and UN's 17 Sustainable development goals. However, the issue of climate change is still challenging therefore needs further steps to be tackled.

Humans in particular are currently experiencing severe environmental issues; therefore, people around the globe may hold different philosophies concerning how to utilize natural resources. Many people are becoming more ecologically conscious and prefer to purchase sustainable, eco-friendly, or "green" products and services. They trust and favour firms that give environmental information and sustainability, as well consumers look for brand differentiation that is meaningful based on the sustainability practices of companies. Not only has the influence of purchase intentions of consumers provoked market mechanisms to respond accordingly, but also many companies are now designing, manufacturing, and distributing environmentally friendly products. Environmentally friendly products emerged as an important component in reducing the environmental impact of overconsumption leading to a greener economy.

Although consumers are willing to take responsibility for the environmental impact of their purchases, however "greening" their consumption patterns is not easy but complex in nature. Many consumers are sceptical of buying these products.

Individuals may state that they care about the environment and planet, but their intentions does not always manifest a willingness to buy green products, leaving a "green gap." The green gap is the distance between the stated importance of protecting environment and the actual behaviour to protect it. The green gap exists for many reasons, such as high prices, lack of availability, the poor quality of some green products, brand loyalty to non-green products, and other non-monetary costs. Accordingly, the market share of green products is declining; the estimated market share of green products worldwide is only between 1 and 6 percent.

Problem identification

To promote and achieve sustainable consumption, research suggest that cultural perspectives shape people's responses to climate change. It is necessary to include environmental criteria and concerns into individual consumption decisions by considering social and cultural aspects of consumption. For example, similarities and differences that exist between different cultures are likely to affect consumers' green responses. Moreover, a fuller research exploration and sound psychometric measures to understand sustainability and sustainable consumption from different cultural perspectives are suggested, which may clarify the role of cultural biases in the debate on climate change. However, there is a gap in existing research examining cross-cultural environmental behaviour, such as

- First, consumers engage in an increasingly complex process of decision-making.
- Second, research on sustainable consumption suffers from relying on outdated cultural frameworks, failing to consider viable approaches to realize sustainability.
- Third, when consumers consider sustainable choices, certain of their values can conflict and potentially lack salience.

The green gap is expanding because consumer sustainable behaviour is multidimensional. Most of the research has been confined to pro-self and pro-others orientations in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. There are previously unexplored motives for green consumption or green consumers are heterogeneous in different cultures. Individualists oriented may choose sustainable products for pro-others' benefits and collectivistic-oriented consumers will prefer these products for pro-self's motives or may prefer these products for both motives. Some studies inform us that, consumers' environmental attitudes vary in different countries in relation to differences in their power distance, individualism, and indulgent cultural values. Accordingly, this dissertation argues that assuming sustainable consumption as pro-self in IND cultures, whereas in COL cultures, only pro-others sustainable consumption behaviour prevails may represent only partial perspectives about consumers' sustainable consumption.

Horizontal and vertical individualism vs collectivism (H/V IND vs COL) and sustainable consumption

Sustainable behaviour is a form of social behaviour that involves buying socially responsible brands, making charity donations, and showing environmentally friendly behaviour like buying ethical and sustainable products. Studies in the marketing and advertising domains have mainly focused on such behaviour at the cultural level via the lens of individualism versus collectivism and the power distance concept. Similarly, H/V IND-COL cultural typology influence the power concepts of individuals across cultures. This typology comprises individualistic versus collectivistic cultural motives, as well as those related to equality and inequality, and it would be more helpful than IND versus COL cultural dimensions for predicting the cross-cultural consumers' sustainable consumption motives. This research is conducted in horizontal individualistic Finland and vertically collectivistic Pakistan, Scandinavian countries are often considered to represent HI cultures, due to behaviours, such as seeking a solution-oriented approach to conflicts, low power distance (PD), and high individualism orientation, Conversely, due to high PD, collectivism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance, East Asian countries can be regarded as VC cultures.

Purpose and objectives of the dissertation

Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is renewing and refining the understanding of the role of H/V IND-COL cultural variation as a direct or indirect influencer of consumers' sustainable consumption. To achieve the purpose of this dissertation, five specific objectives are set, which are:

1. To create a conceptual framework based on extensive literature reviews for tackling the interplay between cultural differences, motivational mediators, and product experiences in the sustainable consumption context.
 2. To explore the role of HI and VC cultural values in the relationship between green branding and consumers' green behavioural intentions (Essay 1).
 3. To analyse how HI and VC cultural values are reflected in consumers' organic food choice motivations and product perceptions when viewed via the lens of life goals (Essay 2)
 4. To study the role of a regulatory focus as a personal motivational construct in determining consumers' sustainable product consumption experience in HI and VC cultures (Essay 3).
 5. To examine whether environmental responsibility as a personal motivational construct mediates the effect of HI and VC cultural values on consumers' environmental attitude and purchase intentions (Essay 4)
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Positioning and contribution

Culture is one of the most significant determinants of consumer behaviour, and this allows companies to tailor their communication and branding strategies. Companies market their products in international markets in a manner that is congruent with the cultural values of consumers in different places. This means that, understanding the interaction of consumers' cultural orientations with firms' sustainability marketing strategies is crucial for their product success. Since, research examining consumers' environmental behaviour is suffering from a lack of consideration of new cultural models to provide credible recommendations to marketers, such as how consumers in a specific country choose environmentally friendly products for culturally congruent or incongruent motives. Therefore, this research position itself between the interaction of culture, sustainability and marketing. This study contribute into existing research in three different ways. First, it seeks to apply the newest theorizing developed for a refined understanding of cultural differences in several sustainable consumption contexts. Second, it seeks to extend current knowledge about the role of mediating factors in leveraging the cultural influences by introducing the concepts of regulatory focus and environmental responsibility to the equation. Third, it seeks to produce an array of innovative research questions for future studies to address as well guide companies to develop cultural-congruent sustainability marketing strategies.

Methodology

In accordance with the positivist paradigm, this study follows a deductive research design to acquire research insights from earlier literature on cultural values and environmentally friendly products. Data was collected using non-probability convenient sampling technique from Finnish and Pakistani consumers using questionnaire surveys. To obtain results from the collected data, data was examined and tested using different software applications such as, statistical program for social scientists (SPSS v.20.0), MECAnalyst v.1.1.0, AMOS v.7.0 and, Partial Least Square (PLS-SEM) v.3.2.6.

Results and findings

Findings of the individual essays of this dissertation show that,

Essay 1 of the dissertation reveals that

- Both Finns and Pakistanis do not pay more because of less trust in green white/energy efficient brands. Pakistanis are also reluctant in showing favourable green word of mouth intentions.

Essay 2 of the dissertation reveals that

- Finns choose organic food products because of price as a quality indicator, their environment friendliness, and that buying these

products help sustain the local agriculture, whereas, Pakistanis choose organic food for taste, environmental friendliness and healthiness motives.

Essay 3 of the dissertation reveals that

- For Finnish consumers buying environmentally friendly products help in achieving gains like a healthy life, an ideal state of mind, satisfaction, and aspirations. However, Pakistani consumers may buy these products to prevent problems caused by environmental damage, pollution, and because of their consumption patterns.

Essay 4 of the dissertation reveals that

- Both Finns and Pakistanis are committed to solving environmental problems in terms of changing their lifestyle and purchases to be more environmentally friendly in a responsible way.

Discussion and conclusion

Theoretical implications

The main theoretical contribution of this dissertation is the application of H/V IND-COL cultural values compared with other applied cultural frameworks that produce partial perspectives of consumers on sustainable consumption across cultures. This dissertation demonstrates that the H/V IND-COL cultural typology is prominently well suited to explaining cross-cultural sustainable consumption. The theoretical contribution of this thesis can be further translated into two separate sub-contributions. First, to overcome the barriers to environmental behaviour the H/V IND-COL cultural typology proved helpful in understanding sustainable consumption behaviour differences. Second, compared with existing cultural frameworks, this study introduced and successfully applied theoretically and statistically sound H/V IND-COL cultural dimensions in sustainable consumption research.

Practical implications

Considering the horizontal individualistic (in Finland) and vertical collectivistic (in Pakistan) oriented environmental behaviour may be a prerequisite to sustainability marketing strategies. Marketers should develop strategies to win consumers' trust and their word of mouth intentions to build brand equities.

- In Finland, green ads promoting health, environment, as well as justifying the price of organic food as an indicator of its good quality and, that buying organic food can help the local farmers can be effective. In Pakistan, green advertising appeals such as, that organic food tastes good, good for health, carries healthy features of living and life satisfaction to family, may be more convincing.

- In Finland, green advertising appeals such as, environmentally friendly products help in achieving living healthy lifestyle, and brings satisfaction, whereas in Pakistan, green advertising appeals such as buying green products prevent loss to family, community and people can be effective.
- In both countries, marketers may convince consumers that it is easy to be green. Moreover, using environmental and ethical advertising appeals influencing consumers' willingness to buy environmentally friendly products can be more persuasive.

Author information

The public examination of Saleem ur Rahman's doctoral dissertation "Toward a greener globe: In the pursuit of culturally embedded pathways to sustainable consumption" was held on 13th December 2019 at the School of Marketing and Communication of the University of Vaasa. The field of dissertation is marketing. Email: saleem.rahman@uva.fi