

COHESIVENESS OF SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL FORCES IN STRENGTHENING ATTITUDE-PRO-ENVIRONMENT BEHAVIOUR RELATIONSHIP – A CONCEPT PAPER

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ABSTRACT

Urbanisation, population growth and increasing affluence have had a significant impact towards climate changes and environmental challenges. Generally speaking, there is a reversed relationship between the advancement in human development and the state of the environment. The world shares similar concerns and worries pertaining to the environmental changes, and various initiatives, legislative framework, reward mechanisms and investments have taken place to combat and address the immense environmental consequences. However, the return of the effort is unsatisfactory, judging from the upward trend of greenhouse gas emission, exhausted natural resources, biodiversity loss and natural disasters. Initiatives at the macro level lack the magnetic effects and disconnect from the grassroots and masses. This study is therefore to extend existing body of knowledge in understanding the nexus of pro-environment behaviours adoption from following perspectives (a) Individual engagement with society based on pro-environmental activities for fulfilling social needs, where the social activities will enable one to enjoy the social gathering by interacting with other members; (b) Empowerment and efficiency in realizing desired collective benefit through an ethical community as compared to acting individually. Moreover, collective action is able to ensure transparency, authenticity and reliability as the community is operated systematically; and (c) Diffusion of sustainable behaviour through interaction, knowledge and experience sharing among members. Ethical community serves as a platform for members to sought guidance when they are trapped in ethical dilemma. This paper is aimed at facilitating subsequent strategic action plans development from policy makers and marketers, to strengthen links between producers and environmental-conscious users, which subsequently cultivate environmental-friendly lifestyle.

Keywords: human agency; agency role; self-efficacy; attitude-behaviour gap; collective action.

Introduction

Human activities and the environment are closely interlocked, and the relationship is reciprocated. For instance, the degradation of the environment and natural resources are attributed by human activities, and human quality of life is undermined by global environmental problems. Waste generation is inextricably and significantly linked to a country's economic development, industrialisation and urbanisation. These factors contribute to the increase in consumption of products and services to improve one's standard of living.

It is a natural progression that every country strives to advance itself to a higher level for betterment, which may have been taken for granted for the natural resource endowments. The climate change phenomenon has a lower persuasiveness power and a limited domino effect on daily activities. Population growth and rapid urbanization contribute to the exponential increase of products and services demand for utilisation. When demand increases, more resources are set to soar to fulfil market demand.

Inevitably, climate change and environmental challenges are a matter of the utmost importance for all walks of life. There are no lack of publications and activities by established institutions globally to monitor and project the future outlook of the earth's health status. To date, there are a total of fourteen major global activities initiated by international well known institutions and NGOs each year to promote awareness in relation to environmental issues from natural resources and species. All of the activities embrace an objective to increase awareness and disseminate knowledge on the conservation and reservation of natural resources such as water and endangered species.

The central notion of sustainable environment is to harmonise human activities and natural resources. All indicators discourse that environmental issues are not able to impart and sustain a significant share of the minds of people, and are always in the position to wrestle with other forceful events to gain mind share of the general public. This alludes to Bucic, Harris, and Arli (2012)'s findings, which stated that the righteous of environmental consideration is placed after the utilisation characteristics is fulfilled, adding additional hurdles to be dealt with.

The underpinning motivation for the green community is the effects of collective action, with shared same goal and objective, individuals act together, share experience, memories, and moreover, the collective learning experience, either consciously or not, through the frequent and dense connections with fellow activists. However, by the sheer of total number of environmental institutions, did indicate neither the success nor the failure of green movement. Most of the green NGOs organise pocket of initiatives. There are random and short-term interactions between the NGOs, and provide minimal support to each other by joint project implementation.

Literature review

Addressing climate challenges is of utmost urgency, as it affects the human physiological and security needs, ranging from shelter, food, breathing, and health. Acknowledging the vast effects of climate changes, mere incremental and individualized efforts will not be able to result in the desirable impact on the environment and contain the climate crisis effectively.

Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell (2010) highlighted that ethical decision making is complex and it is important to identify and integrate relevant external environmental factors into the decision making process for better explanation of sustainable behaviours. Several research findings point out that social factor as one of the linchpin for sustainable consumption behaviour. The fundamental argument is that individuals form attitude and behaviour at later stage about sustainable behaviours adoption within a milieu of influences emanating from the social context in which they interact with.

Thus, it is important to examine how social factors shape individual attitude about sustainable consumption behaviour. Subhani, Hasan, Osman, and Rudhani (2012) found that social influence has greater impact on female consumers in their choice of purchasing environmental friendly product. Through the lens of Theory of Planned Behaviour in understanding the underlying motivation factors for pro-environmental behaviours, subjective norm such as environmentalist and green movement emerge as one of the significant determinant to green behaviour intention (Teng, Rezai, Mohamed, & Shamsudin, 2012). Rahim, Shamsudin, Radam, and Mohamed (2011) suggest that referent of non-family related members are highly correlate with individuals' intention to purchase green product as compared to family members.

Papaioikonomou, Valverde, and Ryan (2012) delineated ethical consumers behave collectively for several reasons: (a) Individual engagement with society based pro-environmental activities for fulfilling social needs, where the social activities enable one to enjoy the social gathering by interacting with other members; (b) Empowerment and efficiency in realizing desired collective benefit through an ethical community as compared to acting individually. Moreover, collective action is able to ensure transparency, authenticity and reliability as the community is operated systematically; (c) Diffusion of sustainable behaviour through interaction, knowledge and experience sharing among members. Ethical community serves as a platform for members to sought guidance when they are trapped in ethical dilemma.

Research gap and its importance

This paper aims in search of answers for this array of questions: majority of people know climate is changing but why there are not enough behavioural changes to sustain the environment? Why people who practices sustainability are selective and not repetitive? Why pro-environmental behaviour is not imparted as way of life, but as choice of life? What are the elements to convert 'knowers' to 'doers'?

Grassroots environmentalism is mushrooming in Malaysia but in fragmented and highly localised manner; where there are at least 20 non-profit oriented environmental activism organisations presence in Malaysia. The number of environmentalism establishment signals the environmental concerns among Malaysians; but at the flip side, with the pockets of environmental activism posit challenges to organise fragmented public opinion into powerful environmental-voice. Besides intensive attention to the government and policy changes in, environmental NGOs, an advocate of environment, also play an important role to coordinate various campaigns and activities to persuade local community to change and manage the change of attitudes towards environmental degradation, and pro-environmental behaviours adoption.

This paper does not intend to examine the effectiveness nor the modus operandi of environmental activist, but to propose a conceptual framework to extend the body of knowledge to the collectiveness of environmental community. This study aims to understand the underlying determinants and mechanism to leverage environmental community to help organise, initiate & mobilise the individuals, and possibly organise high levels of engagement, solidity and feelings of cohesiveness through both cognitive and strategic processes, and equipped the environmental activist community as a whole a solid foundation to band together and endure the dynamic context, in addition to position it as cradle of green society.

Theoretical underpinnings

Chen and Peng (2012) explicated that green communities will be the source of reference for individuals who have lower knowledge, lack of confidence on green decision's implication and doubt about their own ability in contributing to benefit the environment in the choice of green hotel. Through interaction, exchange of information and communication in a group/institution will improve individuals' level of knowledge on green food products and further enhance their intention to purchase green food products. Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, and Tribe (2010) acknowledged community champion as an effective channel to inspire and encourage favourable pro-environmental behaviour, by overcoming sense of disempowerment and lack of understanding.

The key debate of this study is extrinsic variables' influences operating in selected environments will re-orientate and promote or impede certain individuals' characteristics, competencies, values, and affections. Thus, by choosing and shaping their environments, which provide conducive setting, people can be empowered and motivated in what they become. Social factors are among the catalysts to pro-environmental behaviours; institutional factors are equally important to encourage and sustain pro-environmental behaviours (Rodríguez-barreiro et al., 2013). Kalamas, Cleveland, and Laroche (2013) combined both the government and the business community as major powerhouses to make a significant difference in the environmental domain. In a nutshell, the context of the study will employ Social Cognition Theory and Institutional Theory to understand the individuals' behavioural shift under the influence of the environmental shift from being non-environmental oriented to becoming pro-environmental oriented.

(a) Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory opines human behaviour is not insular, neither in a linear input-output mode as suggested by behavioural theories. The distinctive concept of the theory that is both intrinsic and extrinsic factors will interact and influence individual's behaviour. The basic key concept of the theory is human are both products and producers of social system. The theory suggests that individual will decide how to react in the environment they are exposed to, and in turn their behaviours are influenced by the environmental setting (Bandura, 1991). Bandura reckoned reciprocal interaction between behaviours, personal factors and environment, oppose to one-dimension determinism (Bandura, 1989).

Bandura recognized reciprocal determinism in consumer behaviours. Reciprocal causation model argues the influence of and interaction between behaviours, personal factors such as cognitions, and environmental influences are bi-directionality. All antecedents are characterized as interacting determinants that influence each other bi-directionally. However, the theory highlights all the three factors may not interact with equal strength, nor exist simultaneously for a change of behaviour.

The theory renews the understanding of why individuals behave the way they behave, which suggest two important concepts to address human functionality, namely (i) Human agency, and (ii) self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Under the human agency concept, the theorist brings forth three different types of agency, namely direct personal agency, proxy agency and collective agency.

Direct personal agency suggests individual will act with his or her own capability to achieve desired outcome. Self-efficacy is the core determinant for personal agency to govern and reflect own behaviours (Bandura, 1991). According to Social Cognitive theory, self-efficacy is capacity boundary set by an individual, and the perceive efficacy will be assessed in relation to the desired goal, whether the goal being pursued are within or beyond attainable boundaries.

Self-efficacy is not a personality trait, instead a measurement of an individual's goal-oriented capability of coordinate and orchestrates skills and abilities to achieve the desired goals in particular sphere and conditions. The theorist corroborates the beliefs that one who can perform will have effects on choice selection process, regulate one's behaviours, stress coping capabilities, level of motivations and goal accomplishments (Bandura, 2001;1993). According to Bandura, self-efficacy is self-system at individual level. It monitors, judges against personal standards, evaluates different aspects of one's behaviours and reacts according to the post-performance behaviours. Individuals with high self-efficacy, whose beliefs he or she has the capability to act towards the desire goal. On the other hand, low self-efficacy individuals will not pursue the desired goal, if he or she perceived the task is beyond one's own capability, even presence of potential opportunities from surrounding (Jin, 2013; Bandura, 1991).

Bandura (2001) elaborates that self-efficacy is about self-reflection when an individual perform certain action or task. When a task is successfully completed, he or she will attribute the success due to his or her skills, knowledge or other capabilities an individual possess; reversely, when an individual fail to perform a task, he or she will attribute the failure to own deficiency. The scholar argues that efficacy beliefs posit relative significant motivating effect as compared to other inner factors. Therefore, the belief influences individual to adapt or make necessary changes correspond to the situation either own behaviours or influence surrounding characteristics. Efficacy beliefs are root of whether people react pessimistically or optimistically in a particular situation. Furthermore, self-efficacy beliefs will have influence on individuals' coping efficacy, and will shield individuals from any stress or mental pressure, subsequently strengthen one's attitude towards an attitude object.

Action identity theory concurs with the self-efficacy concept and exerts the influence of one's capabilities and competencies with respect to an action. Action identify theory propounds every individual knows the underlying reasons and rationale to every action he or she did. However, when two individuals perform an identical action, both may identify the action in different ways (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). The said theory elucidates the action identification can be ranging from low levels to high levels of personal agency. Different level of personal agency is due to the respective form of self-understanding in terms of self-efficacy, locus control and ability to rationalize own action.

Low levels of personal agency will identify the tactical characteristics of an action, how an individual perform an action. He or she is thus always "recycle is to recycle". Low-level agents have tendency to be not 'loyal' to own behaviours, and have high tendency of withdrawn from behaviours when there are presence of new information, new method or other stimulus that project better and effective action performance. Intrinsically, low-level agents have relatively less self-motivated and, lower skills and self-efficacy.

High-level agents' are the opposite of their low-level agents, where they are determinant, and conscious of the consequences and effects of own action. He or she identifies "recycle" as "reduce greenhouse emission", "reduce government expenditure in waste management and improve quality of air", relative higher-level action identification as compared to their low-level agents' counterpart. They are able to ascribe the rationale ('why') they act. As such, high level agents will be consistent in their behaviours over time because the agents choose an action aligning to own capacity and supported by own experiences (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989).

Carrington et al. (2010) agree and enquire that decision making process does not take place in isolation from the external environment beyond their own cognitive. It is essential to have richer understanding of position of individuals in social relations and interpret their context from an ethical community/institution perspective on such issues as: how are the sustainable consumptions implicated in individual's behaviour?

Proxy agency is employed when a desired goal is beyond one's capabilities and is depending on others for their resources and capacities to act on behalf. Lastly, collective agency operates through orchestrated and interdependent efforts with other social actors (Bandura, 2001). In the environmental dimension suggested by Social cognitive theory, only proxy and collective agency will be taking into consideration. As such, this theory will rationalize the perceived role and degree of involvement of other social actors, government, and community and business institution in combating climate changes and environmental challenges.

(ii) Institutional Theory

Secchi (2009) positions social network as resources individuals can capitalize to enhance their cognitive capabilities and serves as channel for individuals to perform the desired behaviours. This research will employ sociology based meso-level of Institutional theory as the theoretical frame for structural and systemic understanding for how sustainable behaviours are embedded in complex interdependent social, economic, and political networks, and how they are consequently shaped by such broader institutional influences.

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, is to draw upon Institutional theory to present empirical evidence that coercive, normative, and mimetic social forces exhibit significant and differential impacts on individual's sustainable behaviours. Researches assert both government and organization resume bigger roles and responsibilities in facilitating and promoting sustainable behaviours. Regulation is the lynchpin in diffusing the desired result through introduction of legislation in monitoring and addressing environmental issue, along reinforces behaviour change (Kalamas et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2010). The scholars also suggest beside carrot-and-stick approach, that Government should set a good example to the public in preaching sustainable behaviours. Kalamas et al. (2013) elaborate that further presence of government effort will instill more confidence to individuals, where their pro-environmental efforts will be meaningful and fruitful.

Normative forces, occur when individuals behave voluntarily, but unconsciously, replicate others' same beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and practices, without coerce pressure. The Institutional Theory proposes the underlying motivating factors to the acts of copying are more likely if that action has been mainstreaming and adopted by a large number of community members. Inevitably, individuals will then been forced to adopt certain behaviour due to their expectation for legitimacy and not necessarily for suitability. Across the time, spill over effect of attitudes, behaviours and practices demonstrated by most community members will be projected as legitimized as the 'right' way how things are done, and formation of normative effect take place. The normative effects cause individuals experience discord, and hence discomfort when they are not in the wagon of approved value.

In the context of sustainable behaviours, normative effects indicate that individuals will be more likely to adopt the behaviours if they perceive that a considerable number of other individuals within the same social context had already adopted sustainable behaviour. Under such circumstances, individuals may be afraid that they will be loneliness and lack of competitiveness if they do not adopt sustainable behaviour. In many cases, individuals may be afraid that they will be deemed 'old fashioned' if they do not follow the current trend.

The third forces propagate in Institutional Theory, mimetic forces urge individuals to seek examples of established behaviours and practices to follow through voluntarily and consciously copying the same behaviours and practices of other high-status and successful actors, due to the belief that action taken by successful actors will be more likely to get positive outcomes. In addition, through imitating, actors can reproduce with a minimal effort on search costs and experimentation costs, and avoid risks inherent from being the first-movers.

In the sustainable behaviours context, individuals may selectively imitate the attitudes and behaviours that have been adopted by higher status individuals. Individuals may believe that they may get promoted to the higher position by mimicking what their peer are doing, i.e. benchmark learning. It indicates that individuals will be more likely to adopt sustainable behaviours if they perceive high status people have already adopted sustainable consumption behaviour.

From the three forces as suggested by Institutional Theory, it is critical to understand the perceived role of each force from general public perspective; either all forces are perceived to be the proxy agency for individual in engaging sustainable behaviour, where individuals belief pro-environmental activities are beyond their capabilities, where weak perceived behaviour control, and the institutional forces should act on behalf to reduce stress to the environment. On the other hand, individuals belief they own self have a role to play, through collaborate effort. Thus, individuals may perceive the institutional actors are collaborative agency in the context of sustainable behaviour.

The conceptual framework

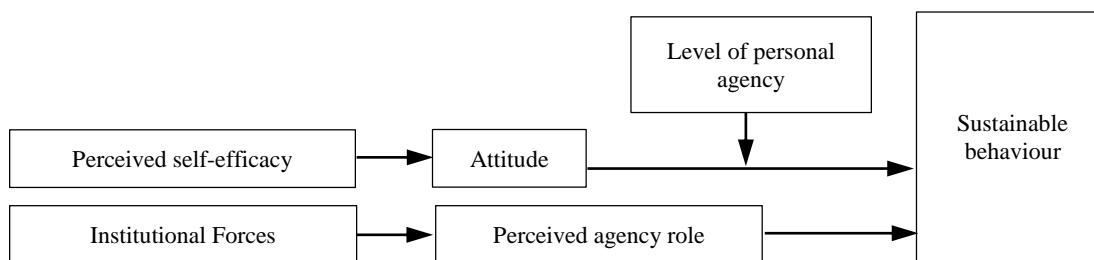
The conceptual framework (refer Figure 1) addresses the two research questions. With respect to the first question of what is the antecedence in attitude formation and foster stronger attitude and sustainable behaviour relationship. With respect to the second question, it is grounded that environmental issues require integrated efforts from various stakeholders, and this study to examine the effects of institutional forces towards sustainable behaviours.

This study focuses on the factors that enable individuals to keep up their pro-environmental behaviours across different times and contexts, with attention on the effect of two underlying factors, namely, institutional forces and intrinsic factors that strengthen the attitude, and are subsequently consonant with sustainable behaviours. Consequently, the study hypothesises that perceived human agency role will mediate the relationship between attitude, institutional forces and behaviour.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on Social cognitive theory and Institutional Theory. According to Social Cognitive Theory, behaviours are dynamic and contingent to spatial and temporal setting. When an individual interacts with the environment, his/her behaviours will be influenced by the surrounding setting. Based on the Social Cognitive Theory, this study argues that perceived self-efficacy, which individuals belief own self has the ability to overcome any external obstacle and withstand their attitude, and subsequently the intended sustainable behaviours. The theory also suggest level of personal agency will act as moderating factors by aligning to own capacity in performing targeted sustainable behaviours.

Based on the Institutional Theory, individuals did not behave in isolation from environmental setting, and the theory propagates individuals' behaviours are consequently shared by interdependent social, economic, and political networks. Therefore, this study put forth that individuals behaviours will be shaped by such broader institutional influences, namely coercive, normative and mimetic forces. The presence of perceived agency role as mediating factor is drawing from Social Cognition Theory, when individuals perceived they are not capable to drive the result, he or she will turn to external forces and leverage on the external factors' capabilities and capacities to achieve instead of abandon the intended goal.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework



Conclusion

This paper aims to extend body of knowledge based on Social Cognition Theory and Institutional Theory, by investigating the factors that could encourage sustainable behaviour adoption and narrow the attitude-behaviour gap. The determinants identified in this paper (perceived self-efficacy, institutional forces and perceived role) suggest that social elements could be the cohesive forces in attitude-behaviour relationship. The main contribution of this paper is that emphasising social interactions could be the key success factors in strengthening customers' sustainable behaviours. Future studies could investigate other factors such as perceived fairness and trust level in the social interaction process, particularly within green communities' activities. Acknowledging the considerable challenges in adopting sustainable behaviours, the sustainable ecosystem stakeholders must understand the underlying factors that influence and motivate sustainable behaviours before further embarking into any governing initiatives and activities with the intention to encourage and foster sustainable consumption.

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