

## **How government eco-exemplarity influences sustainable consumption**

### **Short Abstract:**

Considering the need for greater collaboration between governments, citizens, and companies to curb climate deregulation, this research provides the first exploration of the influence of government eco-exemplarity on citizens' sustainable consumption. We argue that governments guide citizens through the demonstration of exemplar behaviors regarding their impact on the environment, and particularly through the dissemination of institutional norms, which establish what is right/wrong in terms of eco-responsibility within a country. Using a quantitative exploratory study, we show that that citizens' sustainable consumption behavior is positively influenced by institutional norms, intended as the expression of perceived government eco-exemplarity. This influence is hierarchically mediated by institutional norms, social norms, and personal norms; and in parallel by the ascription of responsibility. Findings allow to define the role of government's example in promoting sustainable consumption and lay the foundations for further in-depth studies.

*Keywords: Sustainable consumption; Government eco-exemplarity; Institutional norms*

## Introduction and Research Aim

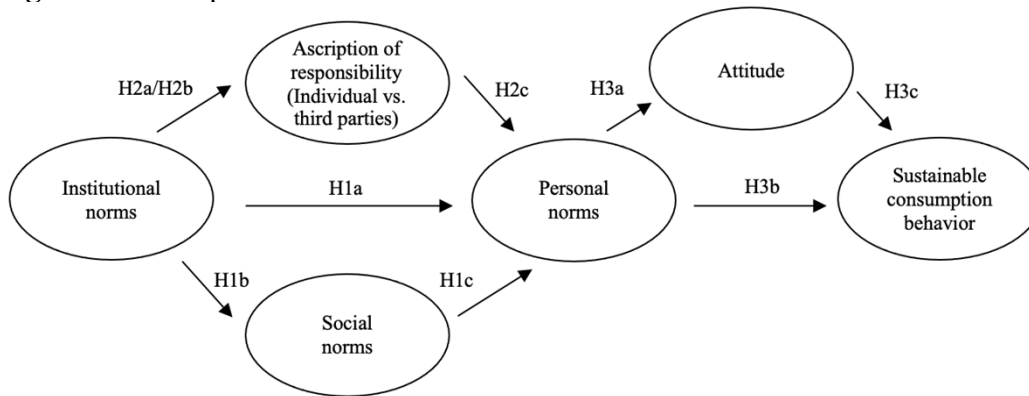
By 2050, we would need three planets to meet the demand for natural resources to support today's lifestyles (UN, 2019). One of the greatest sustainability challenges at a global level regards the overexploitation of resources and increased levels of pollution linked to ever-increasing consumption (European Environment Agency, 2015), making sustainable consumption an essential goal to achieve (Mont and Plepys, 2008; Vergragt et al., 2016). Scholars investigate how to motivate sustainable consumption, focusing mainly on motivation through different forms of communications (e.g., eco-labels, campaigns), but ignore the role of governments. In this research, we focus on motivation through governments' eco-exemplarity, which we define as the demonstration of exemplar behaviors regarding their impact on the environment. It involves the expectation that when citizens observe their government behaving in an exemplary way in terms of sustainability, it triggers their admiration and civic sense of responsibility, which, in turn, triggers their desire to adopt sustainable behaviors. We argue that the government guides citizens by example, by participating in the dissemination of institutional norms, which establish what is right/wrong in terms of eco-responsibility within a country. Specifically, we address two research questions: **RQ1/ Does government eco-exemplarity influence citizens' sustainable consumption? and RQ2/ How?**

## Background and Conceptual Model

The Norm Activation Model (NAM; Schwartz, 1977) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1991) have long been used to explain sustainable consumption. They address the role of personal norms (PN) at a micro level, and social norms (SN) at a meso level, but do not consider the existence of a larger macro normative perspective. Taking it into account could provide an additional value as it is now widely recognized that sustainable consumption cannot be achieved by consumer action alone and that the interventions of macro institutions (i.e., the government) are essential for shaping discourse, norms, incentives, and infrastructure (Wolff and Schönherr, 2011). In a larger political perspective, Parguel and Johnson (2021) have highlighted how an individualized approach to social problems, which relies on consumers to correct the world's wrongs, is doomed to fail. Though governments have the power and the responsibility to guide companies and citizens towards pro-environmental behavior (Chang et al., 2016), the role of governmental institutions in this scenario is still largely unexplored.

To fill this gap, we integrate a new variable in the models classically used to explain individual behaviors, institutional norms (IN), defined as behavioral patterns that are commonly considered stable and expected within an institutional environment (e.g., an industry or a country) (Birenham and Sagarin, 1976). We consider that governments actively participate in the diffusion of institutional norms inside their countries by behaving in an exemplar way in terms of sustainability. Following the hierarchy logic (macro-meso-micro), we hypothesize that *IN, as the expression of perceived government eco-exemplarity, will influence both SN (H1a) and PN (H1b); with a mediation role of SN (H1c)*. Furthermore, we consider the NAM's ascription of responsibility (AR) to themselves or third parties (e.g., government or companies), in relation to environmental protection. Since it is considered a key factor in activating a person's personal obligation to an altruistic behavior (Park and Ha, 2014), we assume that it may mediate the influence of IN on PN. We hypothesize that *the higher the IN, the higher the AR referred to the individual (H2a) but the lower the AR referred to third parties (H2b); with a mediation role of AR on PN (H2c)*. Finally, we apply notions of NAM and TPB to sustainable consumption behavior and we replicate previously demonstrated dynamics such that *PN will enhance both attitude (H3a) and sustainable consumption (H3b); this latter through attitude (H3c)*. Figure 1 displays our conceptual research model.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual research model



## Methodology

We recruited 313 subjects through a professional panel institute (50.2% men, average age = 42.05; SD = 11.26) to participate in an online survey. IN were measured using 9 items adapted from Wang et al. (2014) (e.g., “Our government puts much value on sustainability”). AR was measured using 4 items adapted from Zhang et al. (2018), SN using 4 items adapted from Zhang et al. (2017), PN using 4 items adapted from Onwezen et al. (2013). All variables were measured on 7-point Likert scales. Finally, the state of change scale (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1983) (adapted from Donovan et al., 1998) was used to measure sustainable consumption. We finally controlled for participants’ gender, age, and political orientation.

## Results and Discussion

We ran confirmatory factor analyses and analyzed data using partial least squares path modeling (PLS-PM) with XLStat software. Results reveal that IN enhance SN ( $\beta=0.14$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and PN ( $\beta=-0.09$ ,  $p<.01$ ), the latter through SN ( $\beta=0.45$ ,  $p<.001$ ), corroborating **H1a**, **H1b**, **H1c** and confirming a hierarchy of norms. Furthermore, the higher the IN, the higher the AR related to the individual ( $\beta=0.16$ ,  $p<.01$ ), but the lower the AR towards third parties (e.g., government, companies) ( $\beta=-0.21$ ,  $p<.001$ ), corroborating **H2a** and **H2b**. AR appears as a mediator between IN and PN (AR related to individual:  $\beta=0.28$ ,  $p<.001$ ; AR related to third parties:  $\beta=0.18$ ,  $p<.001$ ), corroborating **H2c**. Interestingly, the relationship between IN and PN is negative, indicating a substitution perspective, where individuals feel less of a moral obligation to act sustainably as the government seems to take care of it. When mediators come into play, however, this relationship becomes positive, indicating a complementary perspective, where the sense of responsibility and social expectations push citizens to feel more the moral obligation to act sustainably. Finally, PN enhances attitude ( $\beta=0.43$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and sustainable consumption ( $\beta=0.38$ ,  $p<.001$ ), the latter relation being mediated by attitude ( $\beta=0.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ), corroborating **H3a**, **H3b**, **H3c**.

## Implications for Theory and Practice

This research shows that government eco-exemplarity enhances citizens’ sustainable consumption (RQ1) through norms and responsibility both in a substitution and a complementary way (RQ2). Theoretically, it sheds light on an under-investigated topic in the literature on sustainable consumption: it demonstrates the relevance of a macro perspective, which considers institutional norms; and highlights the coexistence of a dual citizen approach (substitution and complementarity). From a practical point of view, public policymakers can use our results to develop strategies that foster a more sustainable society and encourage citizens to make eco-responsible choices. Being aware of the performativity of a positive role model, there are many initiatives that could be implemented to make the best use of government eco-exemplarity in encouraging citizens’ sustainable consumption.

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