

Sustainable Consumption Practices: An Awakening Call

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Abstract: Sustainable consumption is the part and parcel of sustainable development. Several studies discussed about this issue where focus goes on reducing poverty through sustainable consumption. However, most of the studies are conceptual in nature. Moreover, the benefit of SC practices can go beyond of poverty reduction. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies that highlight on SC awareness building. Although, this movement has been getting priority among developed nations, it is yet to be popular among developing countries. Considering this, the present study attempts to shed some light on awakening strategies of sustainable consumption practices from a developing country perspective. About 15 interviews have been conducted to gain in-depth understanding about the phenomenon. Findings suggest for three strategies to create awareness among Malaysian citizens regarding this issue. These suggested strategies are: including the discussion on sustainable consumption and sustainable development in school curricula, creating awareness development programs at rural as well as urban areas and implementing rules and regulations from the government level. The implications, future research directions and limitations are discussed at the end of the study.

Key words: Sustainable consumption, awakening call, Malaysian consumers, perspective, directions and limitations

INTRODUCTION

The notion of sustainable consumption indicates such consumption practices that fulfil the need of the present consumers without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Hinrichsen, 1987; Thøgersen, 2010). Due to the increased rate of pollution, rapid growth of population, alarming rate of shrinking natural resources and environmental hazards the academicians and practitioners became concern about the sustainability issue (Alisat and Riemer, 2015; Kaiser *et al.*, 1999). It is suggested that sustainability development and sustainable consumption are inter-connected (Peattie and Collins, 2009).

There are several discussions on sustainable consumption. Different researchers considered this phenomenon from different aspects such as from economic aspect (Connolly and Prothero, 2003), environmental aspect (Seyfang, 2005) as a tool for quality of life (Kilbourne *et al.*, 1997) and so on. However, most of the studies are conceptual and there is still lack of studies that provides empirical findings in regard to this issue. Moreover, the understanding of sustainable consumption greatly varies from culture to culture and

country to country (Thøgersen, 2010). It is needless to say that the way developed nations perceive, behave and react to this issue is far different than the developing nations' perception, behaviour and reaction. The present research aims to provide in-depth understanding about the mechanism that can be considered to develop sustainable consumption awareness among Malaysian consumers.

The rest of the study is fourfold. First, a brief discussion on sustainable consumption is discussed. In the next section, the adopted methodology is stated followed by findings and discussion. Lastly, conclusion has been made, implications are highlighted and future research directions are provided.

Literature review

Sustainability: Sustainability refers to the ability of any system and process to sustain itself to future successfully (Mohammad *et al.*, 2015). And sustainability development can be defined as human ability and capacity to meet their present needs without affecting the needs of future generations (Quoquab and Mohammad, 2016). It involved balancing national and universal efforts, satisfying human basic needs and avoids damaging the natural environment

(Kates *et al.*, 2005). Its main objectives are the development of human being economically, socially as well as the protection of environment (United Nations General Assembly). Sustainability is a crucial concept that brings together interrelated and interdependence issues previously presented separately, i.e., physical environment, society and the economy; it leads to collaboration and partnership among companies, government and environmental supporters in environment-related issues; and it perceives all problems related to environment as a symptom of unsustainable production and consumptions (Peattie, 2001).

Past studies addressed the concept of sustainability from three different perspectives, i.e., economic, environmental and social. From an economic perspective, sustainability focuses on the production system's ability to continuously produce goods and services that meet current needs. The social side of sustainability emphasizes the fair distribution of resources, equal opportunity and availability of adequate social services in terms of health and education. And the environmental side of sustainability focuses on the stability of natural resources by avoiding excess use or exploitation of these resources.

To achieve environmental sustainability it is important that everyone in the system is consuming his/her portion of natural resources in terms of water, land, fuels, materials, food, clothes, etc., in reasonable ways. As the viability of natural resources varies in terms of abundance, some resources are more abundant than others and hence it is necessary to consider scarcity of resources and the loss to environment from taking out these resources. An unsustainable situation is likely to happen when natural resources are consumed faster than they can be replaced. This situation probably will result in degradation of the environment and ultimately the inability of human life to sustain. Therefore, human being practices and patterns in consumption are crucial factors that can have serious positive or negative effects on the sustainability of the environment as well as humankind.

Sustainable consumption: Individual consumption of goods and services is reaching high levels nowadays due to growth in population rate, significant increase in resources that encourage consumers to buy more such as social media, advertising (Usal, 2012). According to the UN Human Development report, the consumption expenditure reached \$24 trillion around the world in 1998. The major issue is not in consumption but rather in the way and pattern that individuals adopt for consumption purposes, hence it is very important to evaluate consumption patterns that dominate specific nations and to promote sustainable consumption (Dolan, 2002).

Sustainable consumption can be defined as such consumption practice and pattern that meets the present needs without sacrificing the needs of future generations. It considers reducing the overuse of natural resources, suggests reuse and recycling and considers quality of life instead of a materialistic view of consumption. Some researchers claimed that sustainability consumption is the pre-requisite to gain sustainable development. Studies in this field suggested considering this approach as the mechanism to reduce poverty, while other researchers perceived it as the way to reduce overuse of natural resources.

The discussion on sustainability is not new. Environmental concerns and activities started to become popular during the 1970s. However, it came to the forefront of academicians and practitioners in 1992 after the Rio "earth summit" (Holt, 2012). It is suggested that in order to get a sustainable economy, a fundamental societal transformation is required which can be gained through shared learning (Kates *et al.*, 2001).

While the modern trend of consumerism advocates for consuming more and possessing more (Holt, 2012), sustainable consumption suggests consuming less (Quoquab and Mohammad, 2015). It is commonly perceived that marketing activities create excess demand which provokes materialism. That is why many researchers consider marketing as the antithesis of sustainable consumption (Nkamnebe, 2011). However, some other researchers advocate for sustainability marketing in order to motivate and inculcate sustainable consumption (Jones *et al.*, 2008).

Based on the concept of the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), it is assumed that in order to obtain desired behaviour, it is important to create awareness and intention among consumers. Kaiser *et al.* (1999) found that knowledge and attitude play significant roles in creating ecological behaviour among German consumers. However, the understanding and practice of such consumption is not the same around the world. Particularly, developing countries are still behind in adopting this concept.

In order to inculcate such consumption practice, it is crucial to make individuals understand it first. But also, it is required to convey the proper message to rectify misleading information and understanding. Unfortunately, many individuals may possess the wrong understanding about the issue. For example, the use of green colour does not assure that the product is maintaining the concept of 'green marketing'. Therefore, it is of utmost necessity to build awareness in order to get a faster adoption.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative approach has been chosen to carry out this research. This is because for preliminary research it is advisable to conduct interviews in order to gain deeper understanding about the phenomenon (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002; Quoquab *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, the research question of this study starts with ‘how’ which is more appropriate to answer using qualitative approach (Yin, 2013).

About 15 interviews have been conducted in this regard. Among these 15 participants, eight of them were female and seven were male. Their age were varied greatly and were ranged between 28-40 years.

Three of them had a Doctoral degree, four of them had Master degree, six of them Bachelor degree where as only two of them had a diploma.

In terms of occupation, it varies greatly from university lecturer, school teacher, company manager to hair dresser, unemployed youth and even house wife. Contacts have been made through personal calls since all of the participants were known to the researchers. Few interviews were conducted at researchers’ house while some other interviews were conducted in coffee shops as well as at respondents’ house based on their convenience. At first, participants were asked whether they aware about the sustainable consumption phenomenon.

The researchers then briefed the participants about the meaning of sustainable consumption. Semi structured interviews were considered and the interview protocol has been prepared before the interviews were conducted. In order to assure the reliability of the answers, two basic questions were asked to all respondents:

- Have you ever heard about sustainable consumption? If yes what is your perception about this phenomenon?
- Do you practice sustainable consumption? If yes what are the aspects that you practice?

- If no then why you do not practice this consumption style?
- What strategies do you recommend to create sustainable awareness among Malaysian consumers?
- What is your opinion about adopting sustainable consumption among Malaysian consumers?

Permissions were sought from the participants in order to tape record the conversation. After that, transcriptions were made for each interview.

The transcriptions were re-read several times by the researchers while preparing the verbatim transcriptions. Next, the researchers contacted with the participants again and showed them the transcriptions in order to get their opinion whether the write up reflected their thought and opinion about the issue.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researchers read the transcription several times to come up with the themes to answer the research question. Findings reveal that, three strategies can be considered in order to create the awareness about sustainability consumption.

There are by launching awareness campaigns to raise sustainable consumption practices by incorporating this issue in the school text book to inculcate such ideology among children in their very early stage of life and by implementing policies and actions from the government level to reinforce such consumption practice. The awareness can be strengthened if the activities are to done in larger community. The Table 1 highlights these themes that are generated from the interviews.

It is crucial to disseminate consumer education programmes highlighting the sustainable development and sustainable consumption concepts. The discussion should not be limited to the school text books but also needs to be furthered by local play, theatre and educative short movies.

Table 1: Theme generated from the interviews

Awareness campaigns	Incorporating this issue in the text book	Reinforcement
The awareness campaign can be launched by government, non-government organizations and social marketers	Today’s children are the future leaders so, it is believed that if this understanding can be built among children at their early stage of life, they will be able to practice it from their childhood	Reinforcement can be applied by the government as well as by the policy makers for manufacturers as well as for individual consumers
Such campaigns are needed to be done frequently to consider the hammering strategy	It may help to change the mind-set of a greater community. In so this way, they will learn to think for the others without being myopic in their consumption practices	Biodegradable materials can be mandatory for the factories to produce packaging Use of plastic bag as package can be banned from the government
These campaigns should be meant for both rural and urban citizens regardless of the division of social class	Consumer psychology suggests that childhood is the best time to learn and to adopt any new thing. The learning at this stage creates long term effect on human behavior	Some policy can be implicated in regard to modify consumption practice

CONCLUSION

The main concern of this study is to explore the level of awareness among Malaysian consumers about the concept of sustainable consumption. Also to highlight strategies that can help decision maker to awaken and stimulate the awareness of the consumer about the sustainable consumption. In order to achieve the objective of the study 15 interviews were conducted with the target respondents and content analysis was employed to analyse the data. The finding of this study showed that level of awareness about sustainable consumption is low among the Malaysian citizen especially among elder people.

Furthermore, the output of the interviews demonstrated that the concept of sustainable consumption is more suitable for developed countries and less important for Malaysia and developing countries as these countries are still struggling to survive in their life. Regarding strategies that can help policy maker to spur the Malaysian consumer awareness about sustainable consumption the result of this research has identified three strategies, i.e., incorporating the dialogue about sustainable consumption at the school level, developing awareness programs about the best practices of sustainability across the country and the legislation of rules and regulations from the government side that help to educate citizen about best practices of natural resources sustainability.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have some practical implications for decision maker. First, policy maker can launch a campaign in rural and urban areas to inculcate and advocate the concept of sustainable consumption and sustainable development. This involved conducting training program, public talk, seminar, preaching at mosque, church and temple, broadcasting educational and documentary programs with the intention to increase citizen understanding, awareness and knowledge about the concept, its importance, how to practice it in our daily life. Second, decision maker is recommended to include the concepts, ideas, thought, importance, implication of sustainability in consumption and development at the school, college and university levels.

Past studies demonstrated that changing the attitude and behaviour of people is easier at their early stage of life (Organ, 1988; Mohammad *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, ministry of education and higher education are advised to have certain courses related to sustainability and development that have the potential to educate new generation how to take care of their future life. Third, the

output of this research suggests policy makers in Malaysia and developing countries to come up with strict legislation that can help to protect the natural resource not only for this generation but for next generation as well.

Although, this study has its merit it is not free from some limitations that suggest future research direction. For example, the study has used the qualitative methods to achieve its objective. Future studies can use the quantitative approach to reach global principles related to sustainability and development. Future studies are recommended to target respondents in different areas across the countries to target respondents from other developing countries to target different age, race, religion which can increase the generalizability of the result.

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