

Engaging the public in environmental issues: An exploratory study of social capital, communicative action, and pro-environmental behavior among residents of Dubai

(Executive Summary)

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1. Introduction

- Dubai is the most populous city in the United Arab Emirates and an “entrepôt” of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (The Economist, 2022). In recent years, regional unrest and economic development has attracted an influx of people to the city: Between 2010 and 2024, Dubai’s population reached a 104 percent increase (Al Msaddi, 2024), of which 88.5 percent are migrants.
- With a surge in population, Dubai faces the challenge of addressing growing environmental issues, including its scarce fresh water, waste management, desertification, and air pollution. Over the past decade, the UAE government has actively invested in environmental awareness and education

initiatives in line with its national priority of environmental sustainability (UAE Government Portal, 2024).

- Although the general population demonstrates a fairly high level of acceptance of climate change with 61 percent expressing the belief that climate change induced by human activity is real (Sustainability Middle East, 2023), there is a lack of theoretically and empirically grounded research that examines whether and how climate change acceptance leads to pro-environmental action (PEB).
- Research Objective: The objective of this research is to identify the precursors to engaging the publics in pro-environmental behavior in Dubai, UAE.

2. Research Question(s)

- Hypothesis 1. Social capital is significantly and positively associated with pro-environmental behavior.
- Hypothesis 2. Social capital is significantly and positively associated with situational motivation.
- Hypothesis 3a: Information seeking mediates situational motivation and pro-environmental behavior.
- Hypothesis 3b: Information forwarding mediates situational motivation and pro-environmental behavior.

3. Research Methods

- *Approach:* This study conducted a quantitative analysis (path analysis) using survey data.
- *Data Collection:* A survey was administered through YouGov, a local survey company, in December 2024. Eligible participants were non-UAE national residents currently living in Dubai and aged 18 years or older. The survey was created using Qualtrics and offered in English to accommodate Dubai's diverse expatriate population. Participants who met these criteria were recruited by the survey company, informed about the study through the informed consent process, and voluntarily agreed to participate. After completing the survey, participants were compensated at a rate determined by YouGov. A total of 272 individuals participated in the study. However, responses from 25 participants were excluded due to incomplete surveys or completing the survey in significantly less time than the minimum time (8-10 minutes, determined based on multiple pre-tests) needed for thoughtful responses. Consequently, data from 247 participants were included in the final analysis (male = 123, 49.8%; female = 124, 50.2%; M age = 38.26, SD = 10.13).

4. Key Findings

All hypotheses were supported.

- H1: Social capital was directly associated with pro-environmental behavior, $\text{coeff.} = .34$, $\text{SE} = .07$, $p < .001$, $\text{CI} [.21, .48]$.
- H2: There was a significantly positive association between social capital and situational motivation, $\text{coeff.} = .52$, $\text{SE} = .09$, $p < .001$, $\text{CI} [.35, .69]$.
- H3: There were significant indirect associations between social capital and pro-environmental behavior through the paths mediated by situational motivation and then information seeking sequentially, $\text{coeff.} = .05$, $\text{BootSE} = .02$, $\text{BootCI} [.00, .10]$; as well as through the path mediated by situational motivation and then information forwarding sequentially, $\text{coeff.} = .05$, $\text{BootSE} = .02$, $\text{BootCI} [.02, .10]$. The paths indicated that both information seeking and information forwarding were mediators of the association between situational motivation and pro-environmental behavior.

5. Implications

Our findings suggest that intervention strategies, such as community environmental initiatives, may effectively encourage residents to adopt PEB. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of social capital are more likely to engage in both individual and collective PEB, ranging from household energy conservation to participation in environmental volunteer activities. While more research is needed, we propose that emphasizing collective action framed around norms of public good, rather than focusing solely on individual cost-saving benefits, may enhance the effectiveness of community-driven intervention programs. For example, public interest framing in such initiatives could promote greater participation in PEB.

6. Conclusion

- *Summary of Impact:* This study provides new insights on the social, situational, and communicative antecedents leading to PEB among non-national residents of Dubai. Specifically, this study has applied the STOPS (Kim & Grunig, 2011) framework to propose and test a PEB model. Theoretically, this study is unprecedented in that it integrated a social level variable to the STOPS. Our finding supports previous research that shows inconsistency in the direct relationship between pro-environmental motivations and PEB. However, we find that individuals that frequently interact with their neighbors and friends are more likely to be motivated as well as to actively seek out and

share information related to environmental issues in Dubai, and this can lead to environmental action.

- *Future Research:* More research is needed to explore variations in PEB across socioeconomic groups. Previous research has found that residents with lower incomes, particularly those living in poorer neighborhoods, are less likely to engage in PEB (Ling & Xu, 2020). Given the wide income disparities among Dubai's residents, it is crucial to further investigate how socio-economic status influences environmental practices.

Furthermore, future research should examine specific types of PEB individually, given the wide range of PEB considered in the study. Jin's meta-analysis (2013) on the relationship between social capital and PEB revealed that pro-environmental actions that are 'invisible' to others in the community are less likely to be significantly related to social capital. Namely, while recycling was significantly associated with social trust, norms, and civic participation, water conservation had a negative relationship (Jin, 2013). Building on such findings, future studies could refine the current model by examining whether similar patterns apply to the relationships between social capital, situational motivation, information seeking and forwarding, and various types of PEB.