

Psychological Factors Influencing Youth Participation in Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Youth participation plays a critical role in achieving global sustainability goals. Young people are increasingly recognized as key agents of change in addressing environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. However, their participation in sustainability initiatives varies depending on several psychological factors. This research paper explores the psychological determinants that influence youth engagement in sustainability practices and movements. Drawing from environmental psychology, social psychology, and behavioral science, the study highlights factors such as environmental attitudes, environmental knowledge, personal norms, environmental self-identity, motivation, and self-efficacy. Previous studies indicate that adolescents with strong environmental awareness and positive attitudes toward nature are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors such as recycling, energy conservation, and participation in environmental campaigns. (West Sciences) The paper also examines how social influences such as peer networks, family support, and institutional opportunities shape youth engagement. The findings suggest that psychological empowerment and environmental education significantly enhance youth participation in sustainability initiatives. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers and educators to foster psychological conditions that encourage active youth involvement in sustainable development.

Keywords: youth participation, sustainability, environmental psychology, pro-environmental behavior, environmental awareness, motivation

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become one of the most pressing global concerns in the twenty-first century. Environmental degradation, climate change, and unsustainable consumption patterns threaten ecological balance and human well-being. In response to these challenges, the concept of sustainable development has gained global importance, emphasizing the need to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Youth play a vital role in achieving sustainable development. As future leaders, innovators, and citizens, young people have the potential to drive social change and promote environmentally responsible behavior. Their involvement in sustainability initiatives—such as climate activism, environmental volunteerism, and sustainable lifestyle practices—has increased significantly in recent decades.

However, youth participation in sustainability varies widely across societies. While some young individuals actively engage in environmental movements and sustainable practices, others remain passive or disengaged. This variation raises an important question: **What psychological factors influence youth participation in sustainability?**

Research in environmental psychology suggests that psychological factors such as attitudes, knowledge, values, motivation, and identity significantly influence pro-environmental behavior. Adolescents who possess strong environmental awareness and positive environmental attitudes are more likely to adopt sustainable

behaviors. (West Sciences) Furthermore, social contexts such as family, peers, and educational institutions also play a crucial role in shaping environmental engagement.

This paper aims to explore the psychological determinants that influence youth participation in sustainability. Understanding these factors can help educators, policymakers, and organizations design effective strategies to promote sustainable behavior among young people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental Attitudes

Environmental attitudes refer to individuals' beliefs, values, and feelings toward the environment. Positive environmental attitudes are strongly associated with sustainable behaviors such as recycling, conservation, and participation in environmental programs.

Studies indicate that adolescents who develop a sense of responsibility toward nature are more likely to engage in pro-environmental actions. Environmental attitudes are often shaped by early experiences with nature, environmental education, and social influences.

Research also suggests that emotional connection with nature enhances environmental commitment. Young people who feel connected to natural environments tend to show stronger environmental concern and are more willing to take action to protect ecosystems.

Environmental Knowledge and Awareness

Environmental knowledge refers to understanding ecological issues and the consequences of human actions on the environment. Awareness of environmental problems often motivates individuals to adopt sustainable practices.

Environmental education programs play a significant role in increasing awareness among youth. Studies show that increasing knowledge about climate change, biodiversity, and resource conservation encourages young people to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors. (West Sciences)

However, knowledge alone does not always lead to action. Psychological engagement and motivation are necessary to translate awareness into behavior.

Environmental Self-Identity

Environmental self-identity refers to the extent to which individuals see themselves as environmentally responsible persons. When sustainability becomes part of a person's identity, they are more likely to consistently engage in sustainable behaviors.

Research indicates that adolescents who identify themselves as environmentally conscious individuals are more likely to participate in sustainability activities such as environmental volunteering and advocacy. Biospheric values and personal norms significantly contribute to the formation of environmental self-identity. (Frontiers)

Environmental self-identity often develops through repeated exposure to sustainability practices and participation in environmental initiatives.

Motivation and Personal Values

Motivation plays a crucial role in determining whether young people participate in sustainability initiatives. Motivation can be intrinsic (driven by personal values and beliefs) or extrinsic (driven by external rewards or social recognition).

Intrinsic motivation—such as concern for nature and moral responsibility—is often a stronger predictor of sustainable behavior than external incentives. Studies show that ecological concern and environmental values significantly influence youth participation in environmental volunteerism. (Enviro-Behav Proceedings Journal)

Personal values such as altruism, empathy for nature, and social responsibility also encourage sustainable behavior among youth.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a specific action or influence outcomes. In the context of sustainability, environmental self-efficacy determines whether young people believe their actions can contribute to environmental protection.

Youth who believe their actions can make a difference are more likely to participate in environmental campaigns, adopt sustainable lifestyles, and advocate for environmental policies.

Conversely, feelings of helplessness or skepticism about the effectiveness of individual actions can reduce participation in sustainability initiatives.

Social and Cultural Influences

Psychological factors influencing youth participation are often shaped by social environments. Family attitudes, peer influence, and community norms significantly affect young people's environmental behavior.

For example, families that practice sustainable lifestyles often instill environmental values in children. Similarly, peer groups that support sustainability can motivate youth to participate in environmental activities.

Social recognition and opportunities for participation also enhance youth engagement. Studies show that social institutions and community programs play an important role in encouraging youth participation in sustainable development. (IJRISS)

Theoretical Framework

Several psychological theories help explain youth participation in sustainability.

Social Cognitive Theory

According to social cognitive theory, behavior is influenced by interactions between personal factors, behavior, and environmental conditions. This concept, known as reciprocal determinism, suggests that individuals both influence and are influenced by their social environments. (Wikipedia)

In the context of sustainability, youth behavior is shaped by environmental attitudes, social norms, and institutional opportunities.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior proposes that behavior is determined by three factors:

1. Attitudes toward behavior
2. Subjective norms
3. Perceived behavioral control

When young people have positive attitudes toward sustainability, perceive social support for environmental actions, and believe they have the ability to act, they are more likely to engage in sustainable behavior.

Value-Belief-Norm Theory

This theory suggests that environmental behavior is influenced by personal values, environmental beliefs, and moral norms. Youth who value environmental protection and believe that environmental problems threaten society are more likely to feel morally obligated to act.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper is based on a qualitative literature review of existing studies on environmental psychology and youth participation in sustainability.

Data Sources

The study analyzed academic articles, research journals, and sustainability reports related to:

- Environmental psychology
- Youth engagement in sustainability
- Pro-environmental behavior

Analytical Approach

The collected literature was analyzed to identify key psychological variables influencing youth participation. Themes were categorized into individual psychological factors and social influences.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that youth participation in sustainability is influenced by a complex interaction of psychological and social factors.

First, **environmental attitudes and awareness** are fundamental determinants of sustainable behavior. Youth who understand environmental problems are more likely to participate in sustainability initiatives.

Second, **environmental self-identity** plays a critical role in shaping long-term commitment to sustainability. When sustainability becomes part of an individual's identity, environmental behavior becomes consistent and habitual.

Third, **motivation and values** strongly influence engagement. Intrinsic motivations such as concern for nature and ethical responsibility are particularly effective in encouraging sustainable actions.

Fourth, **self-efficacy** determines whether young people believe their actions matter. Programs that empower youth and demonstrate the impact of their actions can significantly increase participation.

Finally, **social support systems**—including families, schools, and communities—play an important role in encouraging youth engagement in sustainability.

Implications for Policy and Education

The findings highlight several strategies to enhance youth participation in sustainability:

1. **Environmental Education:** Schools should integrate sustainability education into curricula to increase awareness and knowledge.
2. **Youth Empowerment Programs:** Programs that encourage youth leadership in environmental initiatives can strengthen self-efficacy and motivation.

3. **Community Participation:** Community-based environmental programs provide opportunities for young people to engage in sustainability activities.
4. **Social Media Campaigns:** Digital platforms can be used to spread environmental awareness and mobilize youth participation.

CONCLUSION

Youth participation is essential for achieving sustainable development and addressing global environmental challenges. Psychological factors such as environmental attitudes, knowledge, self-identity, motivation, and self-efficacy significantly influence young people's engagement in sustainability initiatives.

The research suggests that strengthening environmental education, promoting intrinsic motivation, and creating supportive social environments can enhance youth participation in sustainability. Policymakers and educators should focus on developing programs that empower youth and foster environmental responsibility.

By understanding and addressing the psychological factors influencing youth behavior, societies can cultivate a generation of environmentally conscious citizens committed to building a sustainable future.

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