

World society and the convergence of consumer values: Buying patterns of eco-certification in the UAE

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Abstract

Eco-certifications offer consumers the opportunity to vote with their money for more sustainable methods of production. While consumer-facing eco-labels are mostly recognized and consumed in western countries little is known about their performance in expat societies. This study applies world society theory to a sample of Arab, Western, and South Asian United Arab Emirates (UAE) residents to test whether globalization causes assimilation of familiarity, attitudes, and buying frequencies for major eco-labels. The results show that respondents with Western ethnicities are more familiar with eco-certifications. However, Arab, and South-Asian citizens report similar or higher levels of importance for the purported benefits of eco-certifications. Among respondents familiar with eco-certification, we found no differences in buying frequency by ethnic group. Findings related to ethnicity support world society theory because social, environmental, and quality ideals converge among different ethnic groups in the UAE.

KEYWORDS

certification, development, Fairtrade, green consumerism, sustainability, world society

1 | INTRODUCTION

Eco-certifications help reduce information asymmetry between producers and consumers by labeling products if certain environmental, social, and quality standards are met (Raynolds, 2022). This is especially important in the global marketplace where value chains operate in multiple countries, and national governments and consumers have limited oversight over the social and environmental aspects of the production of the goods they buy (Adolf et al., 2016; Gereffi et al., 2005; Mook & Overdevest, 2017). Therefore, eco-certifications offer an opportunity to close this global governance gap by allowing consumers to vote for more fair and sustainable production with their dollars or rather, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) dirhams (Lusk & Mook, 2020; Mook & Overdevest, 2019). However, it remains unclear to what extent globalization can diffuse eco-certifications such as Fairtrade, Organic, Non-GMO

Project, FSC, and MSC that seek to promote fair prices and sustainable production in non-Western societies.

In this paper, we assess whether world society theory can explain support for the consumption of eco-labels and the values associated with these labels in the UAE. World society theorists contend that transnational interaction and global social change homogenize cultures including their norms and values, thereby shaping the structure and behavior of individuals, organizations, businesses, and nation-states around the world (Cole, 2017, 2022; Meyer, 2010). For example, nearly all nations ranging from North America to Europe, to Africa have similar political structures with a ministry of foreign affairs, defense, agriculture, etc., and the same tripartite organization of the military with an army, a navy, and an air force, as well as similar education systems with bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees (e.g., Babones & Aberg, 2019; Buttel, 2000; Meyer, 2014; Ramirez &

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Meyer, 2013). More specifically related to eco-certifications, globalization converges global retail markets as well as consumer cultures (Frank et al., 2000). World society theory would suggest that importing countries, retailers, and consumers will demand certified products that show that the goods meet social, environmental, and quality standards, as these values diffuse internationally (Lusk & Mook, 2020).

Early on research on eco-certification, showed that uptake in eco-certification differs significantly between countries (e.g., De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Varul, 2009), yet the uptake of these certifications continues to grow globally. Yet there is the possibility of greater convergence over the last decades. To investigate whether values associated with eco-certifications are converging under conditions of advanced globalization, we test to what extent the country of origin predicts familiarity with eco-certification. We also evaluate whether attitudes towards values promoted by eco-certification such as environmentalism, social justice, and personal benefits, as well as frequencies for buying eco-certifications, among a sample of ($n = 848$) Arab, Western, and South Asian students, staff, and faculty members of a major Middle Eastern university.

In addition to assessing convergence in the uptake of eco-certification across these groups, we also assess variations by age group and gender. Older respondents and men generally may be more politically conservative than younger respondents and women in terms of pro-environmental concerns and support for private environmental regulation (e.g., Jorgenson & Givens, 2014; Peterson et al., 2020; Simkus, 2007). Likewise, older respondents and men may be more likely to uphold traditional values and therefore are less likely to adopt globalized values. After reviewing the relevant literature, we present our research design and our statistical results, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Eco-certification growth in the West

Many eco-certifications were established in Europe and the United States the 1990s and 2000s, including Fairtrade (1989), EU (2000)/USDA (2002) Organic, Non-GMO Project (2007), FSC (1993), and MSC (1996) (Mook & Overdeest, 2021; Moore et al., 2012). Therefore, markets in the West are often seen as the primary consumer markets for eco-certifications, with producers from both the developing world and the west supplying them (Naylor, 2014). While eco-labels began on a national or regional scale to promote social and environmental change, they rapidly grew and opened offices to represent the scheme in various countries across the globe or created alliances with other eco-certification (Bulkan, 2020; Herman, 2020; Nguyen & Dekhili, 2019). Using strategies such as advertisements, educational programs, articles in popular media, and events such as film screenings, eco-certifiers achieved high levels of label recognition in many western countries (Dimitri & Oberholtzer, 2009; Peattie & Samuel, 2018; Perz et al., 2018). These marketing efforts to

promote social, environmental, and quality values paid off: Fair-trade label recognition ranged from 22% in Japan to 93% in the United Kingdom (GlobeScan, 2015). For the Organic, label recognition ranged from 33% in Germany to 60% in the United States (Hartman Group, 2017; Zander et al., 2015). A 2020 study by the non-GMO Project indicates that 69% of North American shoppers are familiar with the term Non-GMO (Non-GMO Project, 2020). For FSC, consumer familiarity ranged from 23% in Australia to 68% in Germany (FSC, 2013). Finally, MSC familiarity ranged from 31% of British to 55% of German consumers (MSC, 2020c). Consumers of Fairtrade, Organic, Non-GMO Project, FSC, and MSC eco-certifications rate health, product quality, and environmental reasons as motivations to buy certified goods (Bellows et al., 2008; Curtis, 2018; Higgins & Richards, 2019; Kareklas et al., 2014). These conscious consumer choices created a rapidly growing market with estimated sales worth \$10.9 billion for Fairtrade (UNCTAD, 2020), \$165.52 billion for the Global Organic market (FMCG Business, 2020), \$26 billion for the Non-GMO Project (Non-GMO Project, 2020), 45.11 billion for FSC (2018), and \$10 billion for MSC (MSC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). Given the increasing global demand for environmental regulations by governmental and corporate organizations, it is expected that eco-certifications will continue to play an increasingly important role in the social norms regarding social justice, environmental standards, and product quality.

2.2 | Eco-certification in developing economies

The literature on eco-certification in developing countries has mainly focused on trade relationships between developing and developed economies (i.e., Bulkan, 2020; Lyon, 2007; Naylor, 2014). However, developing countries, like China and India, account for a rapidly growing proportion of global imports (Gereffi, 2014). Furthermore, some of the most demanded resources, such as timber, fish, and soy, are now mainly traded between developing countries (Horner, 2016; Weber et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Wiesz Junior, 2013). Yet, this trend does not necessarily signal a race to the bottom for the cheapest production cost and most lenient environmental regulations; studies show a growing interest in sustainable consumption in emerging economies, including growing demand for eco-certification in countries like Brazil, China, and India (Sacchi et al., 2015). Due to globalism, Western brands and chain stores are increasingly found in emerging economies, where eco-certifications are often already available for conscious consumers. Some eco-certifications are taking advantage of this opportunity for market expansion. For example, Fairtrade declared India and Kenya as both producer and consumer markets in 2013 (Argade & Singh, 2016). In the 2019–2020 annual report, Fairtrade International took it a step further, stating that Fairtrade products are sold in 145 countries; this suggests that the organization is moving beyond just the developing and developed country trade paradigm (Fairtrade, 2020). Similarly, FSC has actively expanded and monitored several emerging economies and finds that citizens in India (53%) and China (49%) are as familiar—if



not more—with the FSC label as citizens in developed countries (FSC, 2013). Furthermore, an FSC survey finds that people in developing economies “exhibit stronger green behaviors and attitudes whether genuinely committed or as a skin-deep badge of honor (FSC, 2013).” Therefore, eco-certifiers are expanding beyond the West and increasingly direct their efforts toward a global middle and upper class that seeks to take responsibility for their consumer choices.

2.3 | Consumerism, sustainability, and eco-certification in the UAE

The UAE and the wider Gulf region is in many aspects a promising market for eco-certifiers. Residents of the UAE have a median income of \$40,000, which is comparable to or higher than many Western countries (Charles, 2020). Furthermore, the UAE is a highly diverse country with only 11% of the residents being Emirati nationals, while the rest are expatriates hailing from emerging and Western countries including India (27.5%), Pakistan (12.7%), Bangladesh (7.4%), the Philippines (5.6%), Egypt (4.2%), Western countries (including the United States, Canada, and Europe) (5.1%), and other countries (37.5%) (GMI, 2020).

The UAE is one of the fastest-growing economies in the Middle East, which experienced GDP growth from 289.8 billion US dollars in 2010 to 422.2 billion in 2018 (World Bank, 2018). This rapid growth, offers opportunities for global business, including Western retailers (e.g., Carrefour, Spinneys, Waitrose, Choithrams, Kibsons International, Marks & Spencers, Spar, Géant), Arab retailers (e.g., Union Co-operative Society, Al Maya Supermarkets, Ajman Markets Co-operative Society, Sharjah Co-op Society Aswaaq, Grandiose), and deterritorialized South Asian retailers like Al Adil Trading, LuLu Hypermarket, and Pakistan Supermarkets (Durand & Wrigley, 2009). Given the large international population, the influence of globalization, and the reliance on imported goods, eco-certifications are relatively common in the UAE. For example, Fairtrade is found on many international chocolate and coffee brands. Organic is widely available on many produce items, and MSC-approved sourcing ranges from cod to fish fingers. Likewise, the Non-GMO Project labeling is found on soy and rice milk, while FSC is available on many paper products including paper towels and toilet paper.

In addition to consumer demand, governments, and government-owned organizations also play an important role in the uptake of eco-certifications through public purchasing policies, technical and financial support, and by formally endorsing certification programs (Gulbrandsen, 2009; Sodhi et al., 2022). The UAE is increasingly investing in improving its local and international impacts, with a sustainable environment and infrastructure high on the UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda (UAE/2020), and the public sector is increasingly committed to a green procurement policy (AlNuaimi & Khan, 2019). As the UAE is highly brand and reputation-oriented, the UAE could be a welcoming environment to expand eco-labels (Authors, year).

3 | HYPOTHESES

Based on these observations above we test the following hypotheses: World society theory would predict similar levels of familiarity between social groups. Therefore, we test a null hypothesis of no difference between social groups with respect to familiarity with eco-labels. On the other hand, eco-labels were established in the West in the early 1990s mostly to reduce trade inequality between the global North and the Global South and diffused globally in the following decades, potentially giving western respondents a greater likelihood of exposure to eco-certifications. Therefore, we test the following alternative hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1a. Individuals with Western ethnicities are more familiar with eco-certifications than Arab and South Asians.

Second, as women are more likely to be responsible for most of the shopping, we test the following alternative hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1b. Women are more familiar with eco-certifications than men.

And as older generations tend to be more traditional, we test the following alternative hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1c. Older generations are less familiar with eco-certifications than younger generations.

After testing hypotheses related to familiarity with eco-certification, we test which purported beneficial aspects of eco-certification respondents find most important. World society theory suggests the global diffusion of dominant western culture. Social movements, businesses, and governments in Western countries developed and promote sustainable and fair values since the end of the second world war. Therefore, we test the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. There are no differences in social, personal, and environmental values associated with eco-certifications between Westerners, Arabs, and South Asians in the sample.

Similarly, we expect the same regarding behavioral intentions which we measure via self-reported buying frequencies of eco-certifications, therefore we test the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3a. There will be no differences between Westerners, Arabs, and Asians.

Hypothesis 3b. Women and men buy eco-certifications with similar frequencies.

Hypothesis 3c. Different generations buy eco-certification with similar frequencies.

4 | METHODS

4.1 | Data collection

To test these hypotheses, an online survey was distributed using Qualtrics® Analytic and was sent to all students, faculty, and staff via distribution lists at a private, American-curriculum, co-ed university in the UAE. The UAE is highly divided with a working-class working in construction, food services, or maids where income is relatively low, most meals are provided by the employer, and savings are often returned as remittances to the home country; while the middle and upper class works mostly in business, oil, and education. This sample of students, faculty, and staff from an internationally oriented University in the UAE reflects the upper class in the UAE. Employees such as janitors, gardeners, security, and food service workers were not included on the listservs as they were hired through subcontractors. The survey remained active for 3 weeks in 2020, starting January 30 with a reminder on February 4 and then closing on February 20.

Survey participation was encouraged by allowing potential respondents to win items sold and distributed by the university's sustainability office, such as reusable shopping bags and water bottles branded with the university's name.

The characteristics of the sample are described in Table 1. The survey collected a total of 848 responses, which comprised 428 Arab respondents, 167 Western respondents, and 241 South Asian respondents. Twelve respondents of multiple nationalities that fell into two different ethnicity categories above were dropped from the analysis to prevent respondents from being counted twice.

4.2 | Measures and analysis

4.2.1 | Familiarity with eco-certifications

To measure their familiarity with eco-certifications, we presented respondents with 16 logos, eight of which were widely diffused eco-

TABLE 1 Frequencies and Percentages of Respondents Country of ethnicity, gender, and age.

Arab = 428			Western = 167			South Asian = 241		
Country	Freq	%	Country	Freq	%	Country	Freq	%
Algeria	6	1.40	Australia	6	3.59	Afghanistan	3	1.24
Bahrain	3	0.70	Canada	21	12.58	Bangladesh	10	4.16
Egypt	90	21.02	Cyprus	1	0.60	India	146	60.58
Iran	18	4.20	Denmark	1	0.60	Pakistan	75	31.12
Iraq	14	3.27	Finland	1	0.60	Sri Lanka	7	2.90
Jordan	76	18.13	France	2	1.20			
Kuwait	8	1.18	Germany	3	1.80			
Lebanon	32	7.48	Greece	2	1.20			
Morocco	2	0.47	Hungary	1	0.60			
Palestine	38	8.88	Ireland	2	1.20			
Saudi Arabia	17	4.06	Italy	4	2.40			
Somalia	2	0.40	Liechtenstein	1	0.60			
Sudan	11	2.57	Netherlands	3	1.80			
Syria	35	8.18	New Zealand	1	0.60			
Tunisia	7	1.63	Poland	1	0.60			
UAE	70	16.35	Portugal	2	1.20			
Yemen	6	1.40	Spain	2	1.20			
			Sweden	3	1.8			
			USA	86	51.50			
			UK	25	14.97			
Gender			Gender			Gender		
Male	148	34.66	Male	63	37.72	Male	100	41.84
Female	279	65.34	Female	104	62.28	Female	139	58.16
Age			Age			Age		
24 and under	362	84.58	24 and under	58	34.73	24 and under	180	74.69
25–39	49	11.45	25–39	31	18.56	25–39	35	14.52
40+	17	3.97	40+	78	46.71	40+	26	10.79



certification schemes (Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, USDA/EU Organic,¹ Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RTSPO), and the NON-GMO Project). The remaining logos were either existing logos not associated with eco-certifications or fabricated logos to test the reliability of the respondents. Respondents were asked to identify all the eco-labels they were familiar with. Less than 1.32% of the total sample indicated familiarity with fabricated logos or identified non-eco-labels as eco-labels, suggesting that the data is reliable. Only a very small proportion of the respondents were familiar with Rainforest Alliance (11%), ASC (8%), and RSPO (4%), therefore we dropped those schemes from our analysis. To analyze the differences between respondents who were and were not familiar with each specific eco-certification, this variable was coded dichotomously, with respondents that were not familiar with the logo of the eco-certification coded as 0, and respondents that were familiar with that eco-certification coded as 1.

4.2.2 | Importance of potential benefits of eco-certification

To test hypotheses related to the importance of the purported benefits in their decisions to buy we used a matrix table asking, “how important are the following factors of eco-certification in your decision to buy a certified product?” (see Table 4 benefits items). Possible answers were presented on a Likert scale which included “not at all important = 1,” “not very important = 2,” “somewhat important = 3,” and “very important = 4.”

Further, we expected that these attitudes would reduce to three underlying dimensions, including one measuring social benefits (benefits to farmers or other producers), a second measuring personal consumer benefits (benefits to consumers), and a third measuring environmental benefit (benefits to the environment). Cronbach's alpha levels for these components were $\alpha = 0.86$ for social benefits, $\alpha = .64$ for personal consumer benefits, and $\alpha = .90$ for environmental benefits, indicating reliability for each of the three retained components above the cut-off score of $\alpha = 0.6$ (Sijtsma, 2009; Taber, 2018).

4.2.3 | Eco-certification purchase frequency

To test Hypotheses 3 about purchase frequency, which posits that Westerners, Arabs, and Asians buy certified products at statistically indistinguishable ways, we presented respondents with a Likert-scale matrix table showing the logo of each of the eco-certificates and asked, “How often do you buy items with any of the following eco-certification labels?” Respondents selected “never” = 1, “rarely” = 2, “sometimes” = 3, “more than half of the time” = 4, “most of the time” = 5, or “always” = 6. We included only respondents that indicated familiarity with the logo of each specific eco-certification described in Section 2.2.

4.2.4 | Ethnicity, gender, and age variables

In this study, we used citizenship groups, gender, and age to test the aspects of diffusion. To operationalize citizenship, respondents were asked “what is your nationality? (Please select all that apply.)” Given the many troubled relationships of the Middle East with Israel at the time of this survey in February 2020, respondents could select most nationalities; however, Israel was excluded, and Palestine was included as an option. We then constructed new variables grouping respondents with “Arab nationalities” = 1, “Western nationalities” = 2, and “South Asian nationalities” = 3. Dummy variables for each of these national origin groups were created for the ordered logistic regression model. For gender we asked, “what is your gender?” respondents could select either “male” = 0 or “female” = 1. Finally, we asked respondents “what is your age?” with options “24 or under” = 1, “25 to 39” = 2, and “40 and older” = 3, we choose these categories to differentiate between students, younger professionals, and more senior professionals.

4.3 | Data analysis

Statistical analyses were performed with STATA 17. χ^2 , *T*-test, and ANOVAs were used to assess differences in familiarity, benefits of certification, and buying behavior between Arab, Western, and South Asian respondents as well as differences in familiarity and buying behavior between different age groups, while chi-square tests of independence were conducted to assess differences in familiarity between men and women; *t*-tests were used to examine differences in buying frequency between men and women. Statistical significance was evaluated at 0.05. If ANOVA analyses proved to be statistically significant, we applied Bonferroni analyses to further test differences between groups (Navarro, 2013).

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Familiarity with eco-labels

Western respondents are more likely to be familiar with Fairtrade, Organic, and Non-GMO project eco-certifications (29%, 49% and 35% respectively) than Arab (7%, 15%, and 17% respectively) or South Asian (12%, 19, and 18%, respectively) residents. Chi square tests reveal a statistically significance of $p \leq .001$ for Fairtrade, $p \leq .001$ for organic, and $p \leq .05$ for non-GMO project certifications. However, no significant differences in familiarity were found for MSC and FSC eco-certifications among Arab. Therefore, Hypothesis 1a is partially supported. In terms of gender, we found that women (24% vs. 17%) were significantly more likely ($p \leq 0.05$) to be familiar with the non-GMO Project than men, but not with the other eco-certifications. Therefore, offering little support for Hypothesis 1b. Finally, we found that respondents older than 40 are more likely to be familiar with Fairtrade, Organic, and Non-GMO eco-certification (23%, 45%, and 31%,

respectively), compared to respondents between the ages of 25 and 39 (18%, 32%, and 28%, respectively) and respondents 24 or younger (10%, 16%, and 18%, respectively). These findings are significant at the $p \leq .001$ for Fairtrade, Organic and Non-GMO project certifications. However, respondents of 24 years or age or younger are more likely to be familiar with FSC eco-certification (19%, compared to 7% for 25–39, and 14% for 40 years or older). This finding is significant at the $p \leq .01$ level. Therefore, Hypothesis 1c is not supported (see Table 2).

5.2 | Social, personal, and environmental benefits associated with certification

The mean score for social benefits was 3.40 for Arabs, 3.31 for Western, and 3.49 for South Asian respondents. ANOVA results showed that the differences between the three ethnic groups were statistically insignificant. The mean score for personal benefits of certification was 3.39 for Arabs, 3.17 for Western, and 3.47 for Asian respondents, and was highly significant at the $p < .001$ level. A one-way ANOVA showed that this finding was statistically significant ($F(2, 591) = 15.77, p < .001$). Bonferroni post hoc analyses indicated that Arab and South Asian respondents are significantly more likely than Western respondents to value personal benefits associated with eco-certification at the $p < .001$ level. Finally, we evaluated the difference in importance rating of the environmental aspect of eco-certifications. Supporting world society theory, none of the items revealed statistically significant differences between Arabs, Westerners, and South Asians. The mean importance ratings for environmental benefits of eco-certification were 3.50 for Arabs, 3.53 for Westerners, and 3.58 for South Asians (see Table 3).

5.3 | Buying eco-certification

Now, we will test three hypotheses to better understand to what extent world society theory can explain consumption patterns of eco-certifications (for descriptive statistics on the dependent variables see Table 4). A strong version of world society theory suggests homogenization, that is, no differences in buying frequencies by ethnicity. When evaluating buying differences by ethnicity, we found no statistically significant differences between Arabs, Westerners, and South

Asians for buying any of the eco-certifications. Therefore, the hypothesis is supported.

Second, as women are more likely to be responsible for household shopping and tend to adopt progressive values related to the environment before men do, we test Hypothesis 3b. The results indicated that being a woman) was a statistically significant predictor ($p < .01$) for buying Fairtrade, Organic, and Non-GMO certified products (means of 3.72, 3.65, and 5.76 respectively), than being a man (means of 2.97, 3.18, and 2.96, respectively). While the average FSC and MSC buying frequency were also higher for women, the difference was not statistically significant. These findings mostly support the hypothesis that women in the sample buy more eco-certified products than men do, probably reflecting the resilience of traditional gender norms and behaviors over forces of homogenization.

Third, as a strong view of world society theory would suggest a correlation between traditional values and age because younger generations tend to accept the diffusion of global values before older generations do, we test Hypothesis 3c. While the mean for buying Fairtrade and Organic is slightly higher for the 40 and older group, the younger generations indicate buying more Non-GMO Project, FSC, and MSC certified products. We found no statistically significant differences in eco-certification buying frequency between respondents of different age groups, except for MSC because respondents 24 years or younger (mean = 3.25) were more likely to buy MSC-certified products than those between the ages of 25 and 39 (mean = 2.25) or 40 and older (mean = 2.25) ($p \leq .05$) (see Table 5). Therefore, our hypothesis that different generations buy eco-certification with similar frequencies is largely supported.

6 | DISCUSSION

This study tested hypotheses grounded in world society theory related to Arab, Western, and South Asian consumers' familiarity with, attitudes towards, and buying behaviors of prominent eco-certifications (Fairtrade, Organic, Non-GMO Project, FSC, and MSC) in the UAE. Western, female, and older respondents were more familiar with eco-certification. While we hypothesized that older respondents would be more traditional, it could be the case that older generations buy eco-certifications more frequently because they have a higher disposable income and are more likely to be responsible for household shopping than the younger respondents who are predominantly students.

TABLE 2 Mean and χ^2 statistics for familiarity with eco-labels of UAE residents by ethnicity, gender, and age.

	Arab	West	S. Asia	F	p	Male	Female	T	p	<24	25–39	40+	F	p
Fairtrade	.07	.29	.12	19.66	.000	.12	.14	0.89	.343	.10	.18	.23	10.31	.000
Organic	.15	.49	.19	17.68	.000	.22	.24	0.18	.677	.16	.32	.45	12.71	.000
Non-GMO	.17	.35	.18	3.95	.047	.17	.24	4.93	.026	.18	.28	.31	7.81	.000
FSC	.17	.14	.16	3.63	.057	.13	.18	3.26	.071	.19	.07	.14	5.57	.004
MSC	.05	.10	.08	2.67	.102	.05	.08	3.16	.075	.06	.06	.09	0.43	.659

Note: Familiarity was coded 0 or 1, depending on whether respondent self-reported familiarity with a logo.

TABLE 3 ANOVA results of importance ratings of commonly promoted benefits of eco-certifications among residents with Arab, Western, and South Asian Ethnicities.

	Arab	Western	South Asia	F	p-Value
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
<i>Social benefits</i>	3.40 (.56)	3.31 (.70)	3.49 (.57)	2.92	.055
Preventing child labor	3.61 (.66)	3.55 (.75)	3.71 (.57)	2.55	.079
Better wages for workers	3.41 (.69)	3.32 (.78)	3.48 (.70)	1.98	.139
Better working conditions	3.5 (.66)	3.38 (.75)	3.54 (.67)	2.37	.095
Fair price	3.44 (.67)	3.35 (.79)	3.50 (.68)	1.78	.173
Increasing gender equality	3.06 (1.00)	3.07 (1.00)	3.24 (.88)	2.15	.117
<i>Personal benefits</i>	3.39 (.48)	3.17 (.50)	3.47 (.43)	15.77	.000
Affordable price	3.58 (.61)	3.37 (.74)	3.71 (.57)	10.86	.000
Approval of friends and family	2.6 (.99)	2.10 (.97)	2.72 (.94)	16.53	.000
Better quality product	3.66 (.66)	3.59 (.06)	3.67 (.58)	0.93	.396
Confidence that product meets food safety standards	3.73 (.53)	3.67 (.60)	3.75 (.48)	0.97	.379
<i>Environmental benefits</i>	3.50 (.42)	3.53 (.55)	3.58 (.63)	1.17	.310
Sustain productive capacity long-term	3.36 (.74)	3.44 (.71)	3.45 (.68)	1.00	.367
Reducing pollution	3.64 (.58)	3.60 (.70)	3.67 (.58)	0.66	.516
Reducing water use	3.44 (.69)	3.45 (.75)	3.56 (.64)	1.84	.159
Improving environmental standards	3.55 (.67)	3.55 (.73)	3.61 (.62)	0.51	.599
Protecting wildlife and biodiversity	3.52 (.68)	3.62 (.66)	3.61 (.60)	1.55	.212

Note: Importance ratings were measured on a 4-point Likert scale 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.

TABLE 4 Frequency of buying eco-labeled products among respondents familiar with the certification scheme.

	Fairtrade		Organic		No GMO		FSC		MSC	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Always	5	4.5	15	8.33	9	6.67	9	6.67	4	6.78
Most of the time	23	20.72	39	20.21	28	15.56	19	14.07	2	3.39
About half of the time	16	14.41	25	12.95	26	14.44	17	12.59	7	11.89
Sometimes	50	45.05	83	43.01	77	42.78	52	38.52	27	45.76
Rarely	10	9.01	23	11.92	25	13.89	28	20.74	13	22.03
Never	7	6.31	11	5.70	9	5	10	7.41	6	10.17

Note: Frequency of buying eco-labeled products was measured as follows: Never = 1, Rarely = 2, Sometimes = 3, About half of the time = 4, Most of the time = 5, Always = 6.

TABLE 5 Means of Frequency of Buying Eco-labeled Products and T-test/ANOVA Statistics of Buying Eco-labeled Products Among Respondent Familiar with the Certification Scheme (Ethnicity, Gender, and Age).

	Arab	West	S. Asia	F	p	Male	Female	T	p	<24	25-39	40+	F	p
Fairtrade	3.57	3.33	3.60	0.55	.580	2.97	3.72	-3.12	.002	3.43	3.39	3.61	0.27	.764
Organic	3.44	3.65	3.24	1.56	.212	3.18	3.65	-2.49	.001	3.43	3.37	3.65	0.76	.471
No GMO	3.55	3.54	3.15	1.37	.256	2.96	3.67	-3.47	.001	3.42	3.65	3.44	0.41	.662
FSC	3.30	3.30	3.27	0.12	.887	3.05	3.34	-.154	.250	3.37	2.44	2.88	2.88	.060
MSC	3.30	2.69	2.85	1.21	.307	2.8	3.02	-.602	.549	3.25	2.25	2.25	3.59	.04

Note: Buying frequency was measured on a 6-point Likert-scale ranging from Never = 1 to Always = 6.

Cronbach's Alpha confirmed three distinct components, namely social, personal, and environmental aspects of eco-certification. Values associated with environmental sustainability and social justice are often claimed by the West, where greater resources allow citizens and governments to prioritize sustainable consumption, participate in social movements, and pay for campaigns to raise awareness for green consumer options. Our results show support for world society theory, because despite the contrasting cultural and religious backgrounds global values appear to have diffused to Arab, Western, and South Asian respondents given their similar views regarding the importance of purported beneficial aspects of eco-certification. However, while eco-certifications are best known among Western consumers, Arab and South Asian respondents found the social and environmental benefits of eco-certification as important, if not more, than Western respondents do. In addition to similar levels of concern for social and environmental benefits, Arab and South Asian respondents were more sensitive about personal benefits of certification, in particular the opinion of friends and family and the price of the product. Therefore, values including social justice and environmental sustainability are similar among this sample of upper-class residents of highly developed countries such as the UAE regardless of ethnic background. In other words, social and environmental concerns embedded in eco-certification may have an increasingly universal normative appeal across rapidly developing political geographies.

Similarly, among those familiar with eco-certification, we found no significant differences in buying frequencies between Arab, Western, and South Asian respondents. This finding again suggests concerns drive a convergence of consumer culture among middle-class educated groups. We did however find persistent gender differences in buying behavior for Fairtrade, Organic, and Non-GMO labels suggesting that women are more concerned about social injustice and environmental sustainability, and health conscious. However, no gender differences were found for FSC and MSC. Women could potentially be less invested in forests and marine life and/or see fewer personal benefits from purchasing these eco-certificates. Despite hypothesizing that older generations would be less likely to buy eco-certifications as they would be more traditional, no significant differences in buying frequencies among different age groups were found in our sample.

Our findings of converging values and buying patterns among Arab, Western, and Asian ethnicities in the UAE have important implications for business strategy in terms of market-based approaches to development and sustainability. While most efforts regarding market-based development and sustainability are focused on the West, certifiers and businesses are potentially neglecting a major marketing tool for both sales and sustainable development in the Middle East and other emerging economies. However, despite the rapid spread of global values and associated buying patterns, women report higher buying frequencies of eco-labels. Campaigns targeting women such as articles in women's magazines, recipe books, education at women's schools (Middle Eastern schools are often single gender) may be most effective in increasing familiarity and sales in the Middle East and beyond.

6.1 | Limitations and suggestions for further research

Our survey was conducted at an elite English-language university in the UAE, with a highly diverse population in terms of its students, faculty, and staff. More research is needed to assess differences between eco-certification uptake between social classes, as lower and middle classes are typically more traditional than upper classes that have the means to travel and send their children to foreign universities. Therefore, we recommend expanding this survey to non-English speaking universities as we suspect that students, faculty, and staff at such universities may be more traditional and could potentially have different values and buying patterns regarding eco-certifications. Furthermore, this study did not study the reputation or the effectiveness in addressing social and/or environmental challenges of eco-certifications (e.g., Raynolds, 2021; Salignac et al., 2021). Therefore, we encourage certification researchers to further explore the links between buyer pressure, certification reputation, and impact on farmers in the global South.

7 | CONCLUSION

This study assessed whether world society theory can explain familiarity, attitudes towards purported benefits, and buying frequency of eco-certifications in a highly international academic population in the UAE. As eco-certifications emerged in Western countries and have a long history there, this likely explains why UAE residents from Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia report higher levels of familiarity with most schemes. The rapid growth of eco-labels in a variety of stores will likely increase familiarity among Arab and South Asian residents in the next few years. Values associated with eco-certification and buying patterns, we find that Arab and South Asian respondents report similar or higher importance for the values associated with eco-certification and similar buying patterns if familiar with the eco-certificate. Therefore, our findings largely support world society theory as the increased focus of the UAE government and retail markets on the regulation of the social and environmental aspects of production seems to converge with the values associated with eco-certification among different ethnic populations in our upper-class UAE sample. Our findings also found higher buying frequencies for women and older respondents for most of the eco-labels, contradicting world society theory. These demographic differences are possibly due to shopping responsibilities, disposable income, and more time to be exposed to eco-certifications outside the UAE.

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ENDNOTE

¹ There are many different types of Organic certification and given that most fresh food is imported a variety of schemes are available in the UAE, including a local scheme. We choose to show our respondents the EU/USDA logos together as most organic certified food in the UAE has these two logos next to each other on the packaging (as they are recognized by the EU/US government as equivalent). Often, however, consumers can bag and weigh their produce and conventional and organic are indicated without a specific certification. Other times, different or multiple certifications are shown on the packaging.

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