

# Do I Recycle Less Than My Peers in West?: Social Norms of Adolescents and Their Effects on Recycling

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to find the relationship between the social norms of western and eastern societies and recycling behavior in adolescents. Recycling behavior is necessary for preventing environmental disasters and understanding what causes it is a step in spreading the behavior. This paper is a literature review. The analysis shows that the social norms of different societies do affect recycling behavior, but they are not the biggest factor in the spreading of the behavior. Adolescents are mostly influenced by the adults in their households. Social norm's effects on adolescents are not widely researched and should be investigated more in the future. The social norms of each society have a positive effect on recycling behavior but social norms on their own are not enough. Recycling cannot be classified as a western or eastern behavior. The conclusion was that the social norms of different societies do have different effects on the recycling behavior of the people and so on the adolescents.

**Keywords:** *Adolescent, Recycling, Social Norms, Society*

## 1. Introduction

Recycling is a series of processes, that collects recyclable used materials, sorting and processing the recyclables into raw materials, and making these raw materials into new products. In most basic terms, recycling is turning waste into beneficial products. (Jorgensen, 2019, pp. ix-x) Young people and their attitudes on recycling play a big role in the future of our planet and our survival as species. Especially with a major problem like global warming rising, recycling is more important than we might give credit for. Recycling has several benefits for society and the environment, such as decreasing pollution and greenhouse gasses, protecting natural resources and preserving energy, maintaining continuity of economic and technological development, and preserving funds reserved for waste disposal. (Prestin & Pearce, 2010, p. 1017) In this paper, it is wanted to see if the differences between cultures affect how we recycle to understand how we can encourage this behavior more and make it widespread. Since adolescents are grown enough to be affected by the social norms and they are the future adults, it is beneficial to study how they are affected. By understanding how the social norms of the east and west affect recycling behavior we may be able to interpret how we can adapt the positively affecting norms to other cultures. Furthermore, if the outcomes of these norms are negative, we can find out why do these norms affect negatively and what could be some ideas on solutions to this problem. It is useful to know the effects of social norms on recycling behavior for further research on how to use these social norms in our favor or how to inform people about these norms to prevent the negative effects of them.

Recycling behavior begins within our family lives or in other places where the waste was created. (Kamaruddin et al., 2019, p. 12008) Due to differences in culture and norms eastern and western societies have different household environments, thus different approaches to recycling waste. We know that today, recycling is a popular trend in the European Union and a widespread approach towards recycling has been ongoing. Even with the popularity, it has been proved that there is a gap between people's preference and public support for recycling activities and the actual participation of individuals during the daily home routine. (Mavropoulos, 2009, p.2) As for the middle east or far eastern societies, recycling does not seem to be as widespread due to the government's lack of interest in recycling in the past. Even though, now the governments are more inclined to encourage recycling behavior. It does not seem to be widespread in households.

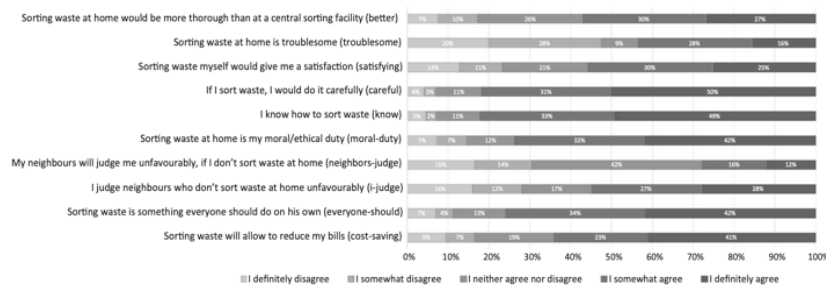
The differences between social norms in societies affect adolescent's recycling behavior and this paper aims to determine if the norms in western and eastern societies affect this behavior differently.

If they have different effects, do social norms in western societies encourage recycling in adolescents?

## 2. Main Body

### 2.1. Recycling in Western Societies

**Figure 1.** Respondents' attitudes with respect to in-home sorting (Czajkowski et al., 2015, p. 658)

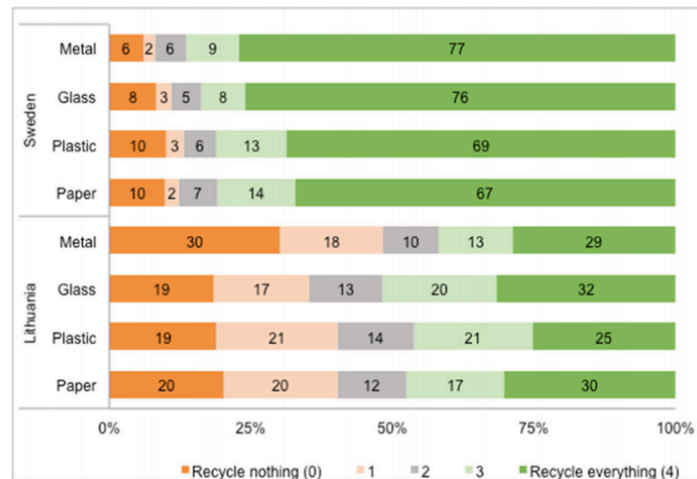


The situation in every western country is not the same. Social norms on recycling behavior in western societies are formed due to the policies of the country, the education given in school, and the education given inside the household. Recycling is more formal and observable thanks to most western country's policies of using recycling bins and encouragement of the behavior through media. Also, the social pressure on recycling is why many people in western societies recycle. (Czajkowski et al., 2015, p. 657)

In a study conducted in Poland, ¼ of respondents agreed with the statement "My neighbors will judge me unfavorably, if I don't sort waste at home". This suggests that recycling behavior can be a result of social pressure in western societies. Also, the respondents agreeing with the statement "I judge neighbors who don't sort waste at home unfavorably" was over 50%, supporting the claim of social pressure being a factor in recycling behavior in western societies. Most of the respondents also see waste sorting as a moral duty. (Czajkowski et al., 2015, p. 657) Most of the respondents seem to believe that the recycling behavior is a moral duty rather than an imposed rule suggesting

the behavior was learned through social norms and not taught through explicit teaching in environments such as schools.

**Figure 2.** Self-reported recycling effort in Lithuania and Sweden (%) (Miliute-Plepiene et al., 2016, p. 45)



According to another study conducted in Sweden and Lithuania, there are recycling behavior differences between western society-based countries. (Figure 2.) While Sweden engages in recycling behavior setting a good example, Lithuania is not as involved in recycling. Researchers assume that the reason Lithuanians do not engage in recycling behavior as much as Swedish people is because of the lack of information on it in bigger households. (Miliute-Plepiene et al., 2016, p. 45) However, through answers to open-ended questions, it is also seen that people's recycling behavior in Lithuania is also affected by how the government administers the waste and waste separation. The lack of containers and information on recycling affects encouragement on recycling. (Miliute-Plepiene et al., 2016, p. 45) This suggests that, even if the households in Lithuania have social norms that could encourage recycling behavior, the lack of effort from the government prevents the behavior from exhibiting and improving.

## 2.2. Recycling in Eastern Societies

In the eastern societies due to the government's lack of policies and interest, the behavior is not as observable as it is in western societies. However, people in eastern societies recycle for income and savings. They take advantage of the economic gain of the behavior within the household. Such as reusing glass pickle jars to stock other foods (Sorkun, 2018, p. 363) or collecting recyclables to later sell to have an income. (Li, 2003, p. 790)

In China, due to the socialist views of the government and propaganda in Mao's time, recycling behavior had adopted into a social norm, causing people to feel guilt when they threw away reusable waste. (Li, 2003, p. 798) Older people engaging in recycling behavior encourages the rest of the members of the households to engage in the behavior as well. This shows that social norms play an effect on recycling in China. Recycling behavior is also considered as part of their income in low-income families in China. People tend to collect reusable waste to sell it for small amounts

of money. (Li, 2003, p. 789) This also seems to encourage and help inhibit recycling behavior in society.

In a study conducted in Turkey, it was seen that recycling in Turkish households is mostly dependent on social norms. Even though there was a positive effect of social norms on recycling, there were not any findings suggesting the behavior was affected through task knowledge. (Sorkun, 2018, p. 366) Turkish people, also recycle for economic reasons. They are most likely to recycle for keeping their money, unlike Chinese people who use recycling for earning money. The lack of knowledge does not seem to affect the positive feature of the behavior. However, there are still observed factors other than social norms that have a great effect on recycling behavior such as, the distance of recycling bins. The size of the household also helps to enhance the influence of social norms thus, influencing the recycling behavior positively.

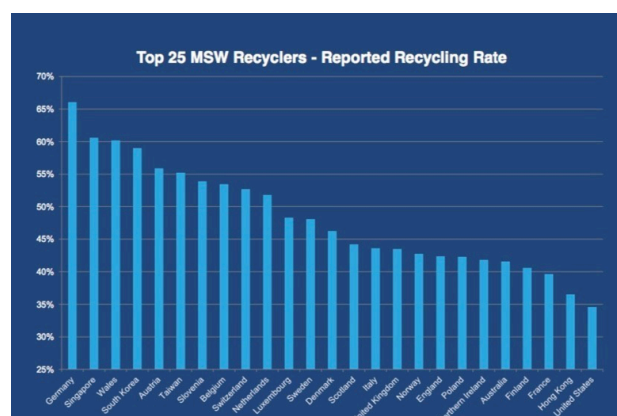
### 2.3. Recycling and Adolescents

Adolescents in different societies come across recycling behavior in different places for different reasons. While the behavior is mostly taught explicitly in schools or in the household in western societies, the eastern societies are not as explicit. The adolescents who learn about recycling behavior in eastern societies may not know they are performing the behavior. Unfortunately, there is not enough data on how different cultures or social norms affect adolescent's recycling behavior, therefore a comparison between adolescents in western societies and eastern societies cannot be made. (Prestin & Pearce, 2010, p. 1022)

Most adolescents report that they learn recycling behavior in school and wish they could learn more about it. Most of them have a positive attitude towards recycling behavior and think it should be more widespread than it is now. (Prestin & Pearce, 2010, p. 1021) Their thought on recycling behavior suggests that they are in favor of the behavior. Participants in a study conducted with adolescents also believe their recycling behavior is not just dependent on the influence and knowledge gained from school but also their households have an effect on it as well.

### 2.4. Comparing Recycling Rates

**Figure 3.** Top 25 MSW Recyclers



Source: Eunomia

While looking at the social norms and their effects on adolescents' recycling behavior, it is also important to see how the general policies on the behavior affect societies. According to Eunomia, an independent consultancy that specializes in sustainability analytics, Germany is the leader in recycling with a rate above 65%. Followed by Singapore, Wales, South Korea, and Austria. (Specialist, Independent Consultancy for Sustainability, 2019) (Figure 3.) The table provided by Eunomia is varied between countries from the east and the west. Even though a western society-based country is the most recycling country, this does not mean all the western society-based countries are leaders in recycling. Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan come on top compared to most of the other western society-based countries. The table being dominated by western society-based countries does not mean all the eastern society-based countries are recycling less. In this case, generalizing eastern society-based countries on recycling less and western society-based countries on recycling more would be wrong. It can be deduced that recycling rates have more to do with government policies than the culture and norms of the society.

## Discussion

This paper aimed to see if the social norms of different societies affect the recycling behavior of adolescents differently. The results indicate that social norms do affect recycling. However, the social norms of eastern and western societies do not necessarily have a positive or negative effect on recycling behavior. It all comes down to how countries individually work on recycling behavior with the policies and education. Furthermore, adolescents are affected by the adults around them thus the social norms, but there is not enough research on which social norms of which societies directly affect the recycling behavior of adolescents for better or worse.

According to studies from Miliute-Plepiene et al. (2016, p. 46) and Czajkowski et al. (2015, p. 665), different western countries have different social norms formed on recycling behavior. This leads to a difference within western societies. So, we cannot speak of a western recycling culture.

According to research from Li (2003, p. 787), social norms in China were formed due to the old policies of the government, and these social norms are kept in big households. China also has an economical aspect that encourages people from all classes and ages. According to Sorkun (2018, p. 367) in Turkey, the social norms on recycling behavior are also more dependent on economic aspects within the household. This leads to people being more encouraged to engage in recycling behavior and the adolescents of families to follow in their footsteps.

Due to the lack of research on how adolescents of different societies are affected by their social norms on recycling behavior, there is not much data on it. However, many adolescents today whether they are from the east or the west have knowledge of the behavior and are inclined to learn more about it. (Prestin & Pearce, 2010, p. 1022)

This paper is significant in understanding how different societies might affect a new generation on pro-environmental behavior such as recycling behavior. With the rising threats such as air pollution and global warming, it is important to understand how future generations will act considering the problems. However, there is still research to be done in regards to the connection between the social norms of different societies and adolescents.

The areas 'social norms' and 'western-eastern society' cover too wide topics to be researched. In future research, I would suggest narrowing the research area. Also, 'adolescents' does not include enough research to have a clear answer I would suggest having a wider age range. Since the

areas I focused on my research covered a wide area, there is still research to be done on each society individually. Also, while the recycling behavior is dependent on social norms, researching how the government policies affect it might be useful as well.

In conclusion, generalizing society's social norms and their effect on recycling behavior is not possible. Every country and its people are independent of society-based stereotypes. Both should be researched individually for a better understanding of the topic.

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