

Antecedents of Climate-Protective Behavior: Accounting for System Justification and Neoliberal Ideology

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Abstract

Drawing on psychological system justification theory, this study examines socio-ideological and personal attitudinal antecedents of climate-protective behavior among the younger population in Austria and Germany. Background is the demonstrated inability to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions in light of systemic imperatives in market-based consumer societies, undermining ecological sustainability. An online survey (N = 344) was conducted among students and employed persons (mean age 28 years), administering established self-report scales for system justification (7 items), neoliberal ideology (22 items; subdimensions: individualism, competition, instrumentality), and climate-protective behavior (20 items; subdimensions: housing, energy, mobility, consumption, nutrition, activism). Three aspects of environmental consciousness were included: attitudes towards environmental protection (15 items), environmental knowledge (8 questions), and connection with nature (5 items). Personal carbon footprint was estimated based on 14 questions according to the model of the German Federal Environment Agency. Controls were age, gender, education, income, social status. Statistical analyses involved multiple linear regression, mediation bootstrapping, and structural equation modeling. Results confirmed a chain of serial mediation effects, connecting system justification, neoliberal ideology, climate-protective behavior, and carbon footprint. Environmental attitudes, knowledge, and connection showed mostly expected and partly differential effects on these constructs. Income level was a strong predictor of carbon emissions. Limitations arise from a non-representative, highly educated convenience sample. Self-report measures raise concerns from social desirability to common method bias. Capitalist consumer societies confront individuals with contradictory messages regarding climate-protective behavior. Dominant system-justifying neoliberal ideologies of systemic individualism, competition, and instrumentality undermine or negatively overcompensate the effects of growing individual environmental consciousness.

Keywords: carbon footprint; climate crisis; behavior change; environmental attitudes; systemic influences

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