

Way of Zen – Interweaving religion in the mindfulness-sustainability framework

Over the past 50 years, scholars and practitioners have continued to develop *Sustainability-Interventions* to engage consumers with more sustainable brands and behaviours. While consumers respond to specific messages (Olsen et al., 2014; Winterich et al., 2019) and appeals (White and Simpson, 2013), studies have also found that consumers develop resistance towards sustainability-interventions which present their conduct as being responsible for societal issues (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Shove, 2010). This resistance is caused by physical and psychological discomfort (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021); an inability to comprehend complex environmental problems within the limited time they engage with an advertising message; or a lack of context for or empathy with the message presented (Ćirović, 2022). Communicating effectively to consumers and educating them about sustainability, therefore, must now accommodate strategies for reducing consumer resistance.

Prominent among present efforts to engage consumers with the sustainability agenda, studies have observed the significance of *Mindfulness-Interventions*. Jacob et al. (2009) suggested regular meditation practices enable people to commit to an ecologically-sensitive lifestyle. Emotional awareness and self-regulation have clear value in contributing to the disruption of unsustainable habits (Ericson et al., 2014). Recently, Sajjad and Shahbaz (2020) developed an integrative framework to formalise the connections between ‘meditative mindfulness’ and social sustainability. In line with this growing interest in *Mindfulness-Interventions*, further empirical studies are needed to understand the processes by which mindfulness and sustainability interact, and how the benefits from the individual level (mindfulness) can be taken and integrated into society (sustainability) (Thiermann and Sheate, 2021). Further, this research strand calls for qualitative studies that can offer rich explanations as to why and how people respond to interventions (HM Treasury, 2020; Sheate et al., 2016).

To contribute to this study field, we adopted the curation method (Persohn, 2021), an arts-based qualitative approach, into our research context. From September to December 2023, we invited 62 consumers to co-curate an exhibition entitled ‘Zen Studio – The healing journey’ in London that focussed on enhancing wellness in urban environments. Through contributing their own insights, concepts and sketches, identifying their own pathways to finding their ‘way of Zen’, project participants illustrated how the world is shaped and changed by individual decisions and actions. The quest for regular meditation practices has inspired them to develop a commitment to ecologically-sensitive space and adjust their unsustainable habits, which include decluttering; moving towards dematerialisation (Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019); learning; and spending on new cultural activities rather than on alcohol and smoking for leisure. A focus on the Zen Buddhist tradition enables us to gain fresh insights into the roles religion can play in developing *Mindfulness-Interventions*, illuminating the connection between the human body and nature, and the synchronicity between the tasks of healing the planet and healing ourselves. Our analysis supports and expands extant studies on integrative mindfulness-sustainability frameworks, which see the transformation of the inner dimensions of individuals as the root of a successful transition towards a sustainable society (Wamsler, 2019; Ives et al., 2019) and demonstrates how fuller understandings of contemporary spiritualities can profitably inform marketing communications.

Keywords

Sustainable communications, sustainability interventions, mindfulness interventions, Zen, religion, Curation, Arts-based research

Summary statement

The study adopted *Mindfulness-Sustainability* framework to look into interventions in engaging consumers with sustainable brands and behaviours. Using curation method, in which participants co-curate an exhibition about ‘way of Zen’, we offer rich explanations as to why and how people respond to interventions. A focus on the Zen Buddhist tradition highlights the roles religion can play in developing Mindfulness-Interventions and the synchronicity between the tasks of healing ourselves (mindfulness) and healing the planet (sustainability).

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