

Research on the Shaping of Individual Low-Carbon Psychology in British Political Socialization from the Perspective of Regional Country Studies

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Abstract: This study took the Oxford, United Kingdom (UK), area as a case to explore the path of policy intervention on the formation of individual low-carbon psychology. By analyzing the material lifestyle, behavioral convenience, traditional living habits, and individual economic interests, the study revealed the influence of these factors on the individual carbon footprint and low-carbon psychology. The study examined policy interventions that Oxford had implemented to encourage the formation of low-carbon behavior and psychology. This paper also makes policy suggestions to encourage China's low-carbon consumption behavior, aiming to encourage low-carbon behavioral psychology through policy guidance and to jointly build a more sustainable future.

Keywords: Low-carbon city; Policy intervention; Zero-carbon Oxford; Low-carbon psychology

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1. Introduction

China has, for the first time, proposed the “dual-carbon” goal of achieving a carbon peak and carbon neutrality, which has attracted great attention from the international community. However, the country urgently needs to adopt a sufficiently innovative emission-reduction model to reach the 2030 carbon-peak target ^[1].

This study focuses on the UK's Zero-Carbon Oxford (ZCO) plan as a representative case. The study extracts and analyzes the internal scenarios of individual low-carbon psychology shaped by policy interventions, examining Oxford's policies and implementation methods to foster comprehensive innovation. The aim is to formulate low-carbon policies that transcend conventional regional knowledge frameworks. Although the UK's plan is not without risks and controversies, it establishes a public low-carbon consumption psychological model through the shaping of individual low-carbon psychology, offering substantial reference value for China in achieving its dual-

carbon goals and constructing sustainable low-carbon cities.

2. Theoretical framework of regional country studies and British political socialization

2.1. Overview of political socialization from the perspective of regional country studies

The core of regional country studies lies in exploring the unique social contexts, institutional characteristics, and cultural traditions of specific nations or regions, revealing how these factors influence policy implementation, social behavior, and psychological formation. As a pioneer of industrialization and climate governance, the UK's low-carbon policies reflect distinct regional characteristics. These policies demonstrate a deep integration of legal institutionalization, market mechanisms, and social participation. The Climate Change Act not only set national carbon-reduction targets but also provided a legal framework for local governments to develop regional low-carbon policies.

The UK's political socialization process is a crucial foundation for its successful low-carbon policy implementation. Political socialization refers to the process through which individuals form specific political attitudes, values, and behavioral patterns via education, social participation, and environmental interaction. In the UK, this process is profoundly shaped by its unique political traditions and social culture, leading to diverse urban low-carbon strategies tailored to local historical and socio-political contexts ^[2].

2.2. Theoretical basis and path of political socialization

2.2.1. Core role of political socialization in the shaping of low-carbon psychology

In China's development context, low-carbon transitions are critical in energy, transport, and industrial sectors, prompting government initiatives like carbon emissions trading management regulations. Scholars (e.g., Zhang Yaxin, 2020) have categorized carbon neutrality implementation paths into three types: emissions, technological, and social. While the emissions path focuses on predictive modeling and the technological path on enhancing energy efficiency and zero-carbon technologies, the social path emphasizes positive interactions among government, enterprises, and individuals, with the government playing a leading role. This social path provides an essential supplement for deep societal decarbonization ^[3].

Theoretical support comes from Bandura's social learning theory, which highlights the interaction of individual, behavioral, and environmental factors in learning new behaviors and self-regulation. Similarly, Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action posits that individual behavior is driven by intention, which is influenced by personal attitudes and subjective norms—social pressures perceived from significant others or organizations—often guided by government influence ^[4].

2.2.2. Mechanism of policy intervention in shaping individuals' low-carbon psychology

In 1947, Buck and Wright's behavioral-scene theory proposed that environment and behavior form a bidirectional, ecologically interdependent unit, where environmental material characteristics support specific behavior patterns (Figure 1) ^[4]. This study defines such an environment as a low-carbon scenario, divided into internal and external scenarios.

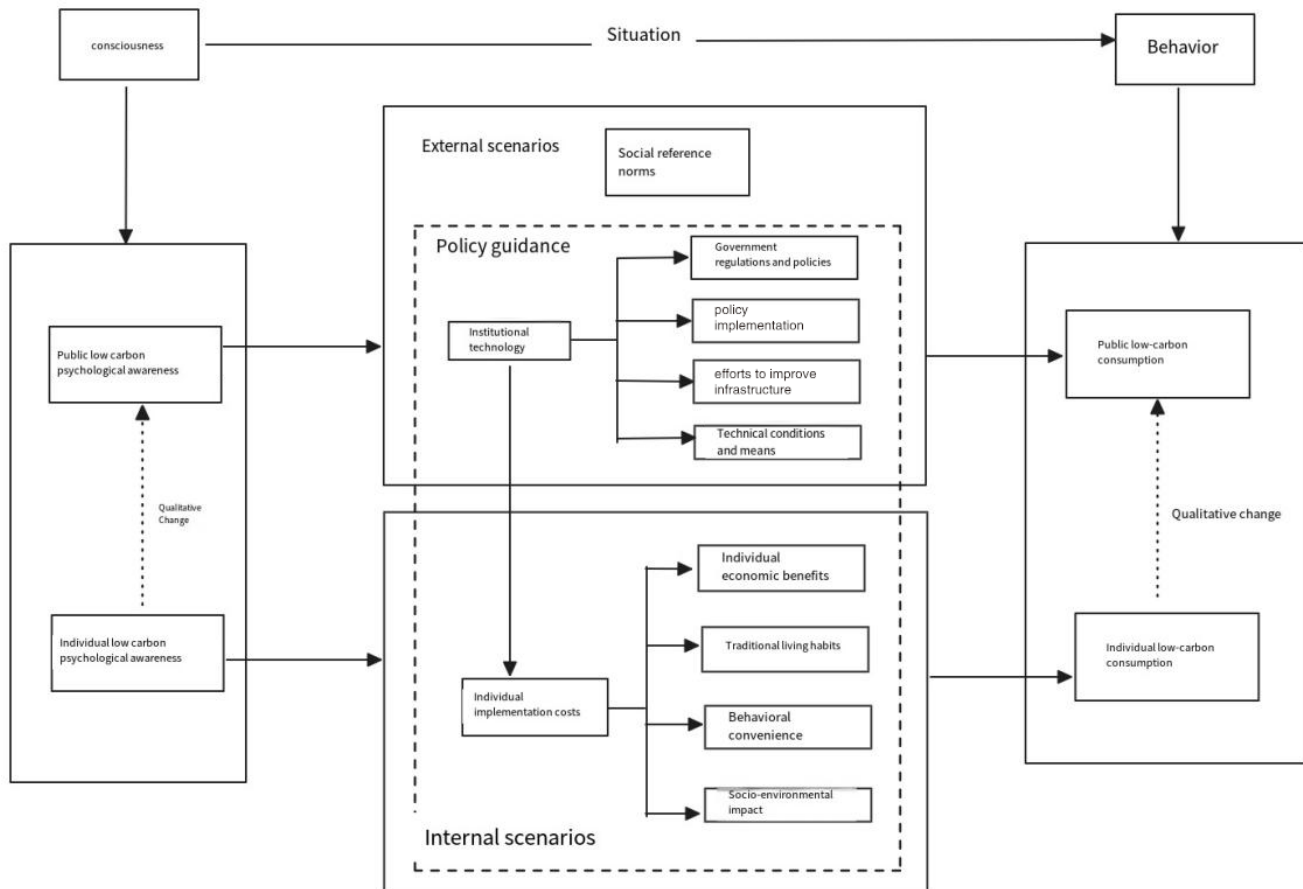


Figure 1. Integrated model of individual low-carbon psychology formation

The external scenario encompasses institutional technologies (excluding social reference norms) directly influenced by the government, while the internal scenario involves individual implementation costs. The construction of internal scenarios is primarily influenced by government and individual roles, affecting the cost of adopting low-carbon behaviors. This cost is a critical factor in the consistency between low-carbon psychology and behavior. It acts on individuals, guiding the formation of low-carbon psychological consciousness into individual low-carbon behavior, which can then qualitatively transform into public low-carbon behavior.

Individual implementation cost, a moderator variable, influences the public adoption of low-carbon consumption patterns. It can be mitigated by factors like individual economic interests, behavioral convenience, traditional habits, and socio-environmental influences (e.g., decisions) ^[5]. These factors affect individuals' willingness to adopt low-carbon consumption. The government plays a key role by using institutional technologies to coordinate multiparty actors, conveying information to change behaviors top-down. Government regulations, policy implementation, infrastructure improvement, and technical means determine the strength of policy guidance and the completeness of scenario construction, significantly shaping low-carbon awareness and its impact on behavior.

2.3. Necessity of individual low-carbon psychology in shaping low-carbon behavior

Awareness, cognition, consciousness, and beliefs constitute the main psychological attributes driving low-carbon consumption behavior from within ^[6]. Cultivating individual low-carbon psychology offers distinct advantages

over relying solely on regulations:

Psychologically driven behavior: Behavior is influenced by psychological factors; changing cognition, attitudes, and awareness increases willingness to adopt low-carbon behaviors. When people consciously believe in the benefits of sustainability, they are more likely to maintain these behaviors.

Long-term effects: Once formed, low-carbon awareness and values can persist even if policy interventions are reduced, ensuring lasting impact.

Voluntary participation: Psychological change encourages voluntary adoption of low-carbon behaviors, fostering more sustainable engagement than compliance driven solely by mandates.

Social influence: Individual psychology and behavior are influenced by peers and society. Changing individual psychology can create a positive demonstration effect, encouraging broader societal adoption of similar behaviors.

3. Intervention and cultivation of individual low-carbon consumption psychology in the ZCO project

3.1. Decarbonization potential of the ZCO initiative

The UK is a pioneer in low-carbon city development, with Oxford serving as a model. The ZCO is a partnership organization uniting universities, hospitals, councils, businesses, and communities to achieve net-zero carbon emissions for the city ^[7]. In 2019, Oxford City Council hosted the UK's first citizens' assembly on climate change, resulting in the Net Zero 2040 action plan.

This plan establishes a five-year carbon budget and emission-reduction pathway for tracking progress. For hard-to-abate residual emissions, Oxford prioritizes maximal reduction efforts over reliance on uncertain carbon-offset markets, focusing instead on building a better society through multidimensional policies and projects that inspire broad community participation. This approach aims to achieve maximum emission reductions by fostering a transition to individual low-carbon psychology.

3.2. Multiparty protection of individual economic interests

Public consumption patterns significantly impact greenhouse gas emissions, making the transition to low-carbon consumption urgent. Research indicates low-carbon psychological consciousness is a key internal factor generating motivation for low-carbon consumption, influencing psychological preferences, and acting as an antecedent to behavior.

Individual economic benefit constitutes the psychological cost of implementing low-carbon consumption. If low-carbon choices conflict with economic interests, adoption is hindered. Changing high-carbon lifestyles requires significant effort. Oxford addresses this through two main areas:

Increasing low-carbon purchasing power: This is directly tied to disposable income, determining the ability to buy eco-friendly products and services. To address regional disparities, the Oxford government provides regional economic incentives, ensuring all residents can benefit from the low-carbon economy. The "Oxford Space Planning 2036" strategy decentralizes urban functions, promoting balanced regional development without compromising economic growth, thereby enhancing individual purchasing power.

Reduce the cost burden: This involves assessing the financial impact of low-carbon choices on individuals and firms. At the individual level, the local government offers incentives, subsidies, or tax reductions, such as scrappage schemes for gasoline vehicles, funding for charging infrastructure, and support for community solar

panels or energy-conservation measures. These reduce the financial burden of adopting low-carbon consumption. For firms facing higher production costs for low-carbon goods, the government assists through tax breaks, incentives, or price policies, making low-carbon products more affordable and attractive.

In sum, the government should consider the economic interests of society, enterprises, and individuals and take various measures to reduce the economic cost of low-carbon consumption to motivate individuals to adopt low-carbon behavior. This can help promote a low-carbon transition, achieve the goal of carbon neutrality, and create a more sustainable economic and environmental future.

3.3. Positive improvement of behavioral convenience

Behavioral convenience directly impacts the implementation of low-carbon consumption. Inconveniences, such as longer public transport times or difficulty finding organic products, can deter adoption. Governments and businesses can reduce these implementation costs by providing easy access to low-carbon options. Oxford's enhancements focus on two areas:

3.3.1. Expanding low-carbon consumption choices

The Oxford government increases the market share of low-carbon goods, promotes sustainable production and shopping modes, and reduces waste by engaging manufacturers and enterprises. Measures include reducing retail stores' reliance on high-carbon goods, charging for non-degradable materials like plastic bags, and improving resource utilization methods by introducing new or enhanced low-carbon products. Addressing affordable housing shortages through rational resource allocation is another approach. The government collaborates with communities to survey housing density, evaluate new development feasibility, and assess reuse potential for older buildings. It promotes increased density, building height, and house-sharing platforms. For instance, by limiting new student dormitories, Oxford University encourages the use of affordable housing, reducing demand for new construction and promoting low-carbon consumption choices.

3.3.2. Enhancing transport and daily convenience

The "Oxford Local Plan 2036" aims to ensure transport, local services, and infrastructure support the 2040 zero-carbon goal while improving residents' quality of life^[8]. It employs effective demand management, such as smart metering for energy/water efficiency and travel planning, to optimize existing infrastructure. For convenient low-carbon travel, Oxford is developing an integrated public transport system and improving cycling infrastructure (parking, routes, road conditions)^[9]. The Citizens' Assembly recommended joint planning among government, councils, and transport providers to create efficient, low-cost, green travel options, enhancing cycling and bus experiences^[10]. Measures include integrated ticketing, optimized bus routes, an accessible system, and reducing city-center bus congestion to boost public transport attractiveness.

4. Implications for the construction of low-carbon cities in China

China plays a vital role in the global carbon peak and carbon neutrality, but there are still many challenges to achieving carbon neutrality. First, China's per-capita GDP is far lower than that of developed countries, including the European Union and the United States, which may hinder it from achieving the carbon-emissions peak. Therefore, although China's low-carbon development can learn from developed countries, it needs to achieve its own innovation under the condition of low per capita GDP. Second, China is undergoing a large-scale urbanization

process. By the end of 2021, the urbanization rate of China's permanent resident population had reached 64.72%, and the urban population had risen from 170 million in 1978 to 910 million, leading to a rapid acceleration of energy-consumption growth and putting great pressure on carbon emissions from urban transportation and construction. Third, China's carbon emissions are significantly more than Europe and the United States, while the United States and the European Union are 1.2 times that of the aggregate proportion of the current base of carbon content, posing high technical difficulty ^[11]. China now urgently needs to adopt innovation patterns to reduce emissions enough to achieve the carbon peak by 2030. Fortunately, China has a large population base, and the accumulation of low-carbon behaviors of each individual can have a huge effect. When hundreds of millions of people adopt low-carbon lifestyles, it will have a significant positive impact on carbon emission reduction.

The ZCO project provides a reference for China to promote the formation of individual low-carbon psychology. In the process of low-carbon city construction, China can construct a low-carbon scenario based on policy guidance and shape individual low-carbon psychology by improving individual implementation costs through policy. China has a great advantage in this respect. First, socialist countries can usually allocate resources and policy more centrally than capitalist countries, thus promoting the development of specific areas. Capitalist countries usually have greater regulatory ability. In terms of carbon reduction and sustainable development, governments can more easily focus on funding, human resources, and policy support to encourage individuals to take low-carbon actions. Second, as China is already the largest applicant of domestic patents and international patents, the government can strengthen the protection of intellectual-property rights, ensure that the intellectual-property rights of R&D personnel and enterprises are legally protected, and formulate innovation-friendly policies, including tax incentives, R&D subsidies, and patent rewards. Thus, China can encourage more people to invest in low-carbon technologies. Third, China's large-scale education system is also an important advantage. The system covers hundreds of millions of students, from kindergarten to higher education. This means that the government has the opportunity to reach and influence a wide range of people and help them understand the importance of low-carbon ideas and sustainable development. Based on these advantages, it will be helpful for the construction and development of low-carbon and sustainable cities in China to learn from the government-intervention approach in the ZCO project to promote the formation of individual low-carbon psychology.

4.1. Establish refined systems and regulations to improve the basic guarantee of low-carbon behavior

Before the implementation of complete low-carbon system regulations in the UK, the Parliament of Oxford unanimously agreed to establish local regulations to ensure the low-carbon construction of Oxford. From various aspects, it participated in the low-carbon action from top to bottom, which can not only contribute to the realization of zero carbon in the UK by 2050 but also create a beautiful and harmonious community, with improved levels of happiness among residents. For China, there are many laws and regulations to guide low-carbon construction, but they are too general and have not kept pace with the times, including the "Environmental Protection Law", "Energy Conservation Law", and "Circular Economy Promotion Law." Such laws and regulations can only ensure that the general direction is correct, but cannot ensure the integrity and accuracy of implementation ^[12]. This is because most laws and regulations are based on the principle of the establishment of the provisions, not on the substantive issues to put forward targeted measures aimed at the public for low-carbon action. Instead, the result is superficial symbolic participation. The popularity of the current regulations is not stellar, and the public lacks guidance on the operational rules and implementation content. At the same time, because the reward and punishment measures are

unclear and the enforcement is low, the enthusiasm of the public is not.

4.2. Government-led construction, low-carbon education innovation and practice

Governments play a pivotal role in spearheading low-carbon education, which is crucial for elevating public awareness and fostering a positive attitude towards sustainability through school curricula and social campaigns. To advance China's low-carbon education, the following strategies are proposed:

First, China should fully leverage its unique advantage in collective education. The nation's comprehensive and well-organized nine-year compulsory education system, with enrollment rates rivaling those of high-income countries, provides an ideal platform. Integrating low-carbon education throughout this nine-year curriculum can systematically cultivate environmental awareness and sustainable values from an early age. This early formation of pro-environmental behaviors and values is instrumental for future low-carbon development. Moreover, starting with students creates a ripple effect; knowledge transferred from students to their families amplifies the social impact of education, guiding households and communities toward low-carbon lifestyles.

Second, China must promote practical low-carbon experiences. This involves encouraging schools and communities to host environmental activities, establishing online platforms for resource sharing, and fostering international cooperation to disseminate best practices. Organizing low-carbon technology and innovation competitions can stimulate student involvement in projects related to environmental protection and emission reduction, simultaneously cultivating scientific innovation and advancing low-carbon technology. Beyond curricular changes, the campus itself should be transformed into a low-carbon living lab. Given students' prolonged attachment to their schools, promoting green campus initiatives—such as adopting renewable energy, constructing energy-efficient buildings, and installing eco-friendly facilities—can tangibly transmit the low-carbon concept. Redesigning textbooks to incorporate themes of low-carbon and sustainable development further ensures these ideas are ever-present in students' daily lives.

4.3. Increase the pressure of a low-carbon society and change low-carbon values

Oxford's approach, which involves detailed carbon emission forecasts and the establishment of scientifically-grounded long-term targets, offers a model of evident feasibility. This data-driven methodology ensures targets are both ambitious and realistic. By regularly evaluating and adjusting these goals, China can enhance its planning resilience, adapting to evolving needs and technological advancements. This model also provides firms with clear guidance, helping them understand the specific actions required to meet emission-reduction targets. Mandating corporate compliance with these hard targets ensures the overall carbon-reduction plan progresses systematically. For China's long-term strategic planning, the following suggestions are offered:

First, maintaining information transparency is essential to increase government credibility. As a core tenet of transparency, the government must clearly communicate the goals, measures, and timetables of its low-carbon policies ^[14]. This allows the public to understand the government's commitments and builds foundational trust. Furthermore, transparency in project implementation—providing public access to data on progress, costs, and benefits—helps citizens grasp the tangible impact of low-carbon initiatives. This practice not only builds trust but also clarifies the government's concrete efforts. To catalyze a cultural shift, successful low-carbon behaviors and government-led green projects should be widely disseminated through media channels. Showcasing these examples stimulates social recognition and a desire to emulate, thereby fostering the formation of mainstream low-carbon values.

Second, establishing clear milestones increases accountability and operational pressure. This requires a comprehensive assessment of target areas, encompassing local needs, development opportunities, and the region's economic, social, and environmental characteristics, including renewable resource potential ^[15]. Based on this assessment, a reasonable regional development plan with clear renewable energy goals can provide definitive direction for individuals and organizations, stimulating enthusiasm and motivation. Achieving each phased goal can be celebrated as a “small victory”, creating a sense of accomplishment that promotes a virtuous cycle of engagement. Breaking down long-term objectives into manageable parts also makes the overall goal more feasible. Crucially, phased goals enhance progress transparency and accountability, making it easier for governments to measure and report outcomes, thereby bolstering decision-making credibility. This approach also allows for greater flexibility in adapting strategies to new challenges, improving overall governance agility ^[16].

4.4. Improve Individual economic benefits to increase low-carbon purchasing power

By 2030, China's per-capita GDP is projected to reach 25,270 international yuan, still far below the levels of the EU and the United States when they reached their carbon peak. Therefore, while learning from developed nations, China must ensure steady per-capita GDP growth alongside its low-carbon transition. Enhancing individual economic prosperity is a prerequisite for increasing low-carbon purchasing power.

First, decentralized urban planning can serve as an economic catalyst. This strategy can manage the urbanization pace while sustaining GDP per capita growth. By building infrastructure and creating employment opportunities in suburban and rural areas, China can attract residents to settle outside overcrowded urban centers. This provides more living options, improves access to workplaces and amenities, and alleviates urban congestion and resource scarcity. When individuals find that their economic welfare and behavioral convenience are less constrained by regional disparities, they are more likely to voluntarily adopt low-carbon lifestyles. Such diversified and sustainable planning reduces urban dependence on finite resources, enhances resource utilization efficiency, and creates more livable environments.

Second, China must actively increase the economic benefits associated with the low-carbon ecology. One approach is to establish foundations that incentivize technological development. These could fund individual innovation grants for patents, solutions, or feasibility studies, motivating broader public participation in innovation and accelerating technological advancement. Such foundations could also partner with government agencies, large corporations, and research institutes to co-fund large-scale low-carbon energy projects. Another strategy is to create more green jobs in fields like clean energy, green technology, and environmental consulting, attracting talent to the low-carbon sector. Finally, employing market incentive mechanisms, such as a carbon emissions trading system, can compel enterprises to reduce emissions. This not only advances low-carbon goals but also provides compliant companies with a competitive market advantage.

4.5. Multilevel improvement of behavioral convenience from the perspective of democracy

To ensure its zero-carbon plan reflected public needs, the Oxford Council engaged 50 citizens from diverse social, educational, and professional backgrounds in parliamentary discussions. This immersive, deliberative process yielded rich, detailed data on the full spectrum of public views, feelings, and behaviors, leading to more reasonable and inclusive conclusions. China can adopt this democratic principle to enhance the convenience of low-carbon behaviors. Through multi-level democratic participation (government, community, individual), low-carbon policies and infrastructure can be developed to better align with citizen needs, thereby promoting broader social acceptance

of low-carbon lifestyles.

First, grassroots communities should be empowered to improve their own facilities. Adopting a community-level approach fosters greater resident participation and a stronger sense of responsibility. Due to the relatively homogeneous living environments and perceptions within a community, it can be treated as a collective entity for targeted interventions. Through decentralization, the government can delegate renovation authority to communities. With active resident participation, a community committee—either elected or volunteer-based—can be established to develop localized low-carbon policies and plans. The management of various projects, from waste sorting to energy conservation, can then operate within this framework of community autonomy. Resource allocation and community advocacy also become integral to this self-governance, ensuring fair distribution and encouraging residents to champion a low-carbon lifestyle, thereby directly improving behavioral convenience.

Second, optimizing low-carbon transportation is critical. China should capitalize on its urban fabric, which is often conducive to bike-sharing. This involves expanding bike lanes, deploying intelligent bike-sharing systems, and using cameras to prevent lane occupation by cars, making cycling safer and more convenient. Concurrently, improving public transport coverage and utilizing intelligent traffic-management systems to optimize routes and provide real-time information can significantly enhance the low-carbon travel experience. Beyond transport, facilitating easy energy use is key. Deploying low-carbon facilities like electric-vehicle charging piles, distributed energy service stations, and smart energy-management systems across cities provides residents with convenient access to clean energy.

Third, increasing the visibility and accessibility of low-carbon goods is essential. Strategies should include enhancing marketing and publicity to make these products more conspicuous and appealing. Creating exclusive, well-merchandised low-carbon product zones in shopping venues, potentially with promotional pricing, can make purchasing them a quick, convenient, and satisfying experience. Furthermore, expanding purchase channels through online platforms, social media stores, supermarkets, and specialty stores ensures that low-carbon goods reach a wider consumer base. Making low-carbon products the easy and attractive choice for consumers will not only popularize low-carbon living but also incentivize more enterprises to produce them.

5. Concluding remarks

This study has explored the successful experience of Oxford's ZCO project, with particular attention to how policy interventions shape individual low-carbon psychology. By focusing on four key factors—material lifestyle, behavioral convenience, traditional living habits, and individual economic benefits—the research reveals their significant impact on individual carbon footprints and psychological shifts. The analysis of policies implemented and recommended in Oxford provides a valuable framework for understanding how to encourage low-carbon behaviors.

These findings offer critical insights for China's low-carbon consumption behavior and urban development. However, the UK's context as a smaller nation means its model requires adaptation. Global achievement of individual low-carbon behavior necessitates a synergistic effort where all countries develop strategies tailored to their unique political, economic, and cultural contexts. China's own zero-carbon experiments, such as the Zero Waste City Pilot (ZWCP), the Low Carbon City Pilot Program (LCCP), and advances in zero-carbon building technologies, demonstrate significant progress and provide a useful reference for the world.

The path forward involves confronting deep-seated challenges, including long-entrenched high-carbon

lifestyles, traditional habits, and the complex balance between economic development and environmental protection. These challenges, however, also present opportunities for innovation. Going forward, China must strengthen policy intervention and public mobilization. In this endeavor, fostering individual low-carbon psychology is paramount, as it motivates public participation in green-space construction and expands low-carbon behaviors, thereby underscoring the vital role of disciplines like landscape architecture in building sustainable cities.

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