

# Do consumers really care about sustainability?

## Written by

[Eduardo B. Andrade](#)

## Published

7 October 2024

## Category

[Marketing](#)

## Key topics

[Climate Change](#), [Consumers](#), [Sustainability](#)

**Consumers may care about sustainability in theory, but how much does it impact their spending habits? And what can policymakers do to encourage us all to make more eco-friendly choices?**

The world is experiencing a **severe climate and biodiversity crisis**. According to the WWF's [Living Planet report](#), addressing this will require "transformative, game-changing shifts in how we produce [and] how we consume", with [household consumption a key factor](#) in the fight to mitigate the crisis.

Consumers indicate they care about sustainability. [A recent EU survey](#) found that 73 per cent of surveyed EU citizens said the environmental impact of a product is "very important" or "rather important" to them when making a purchasing decision.

Acting on this sentiment, though, is a different matter. Even when consumers genuinely care about the environment, they often [fail to act on these principles](#) by actually making sustainable choices. This is commonly held to be due to barriers

such as higher prices for environmentally friendly options, or a perception that these options will be lower in quality.

However, this explanation assumes that people are first thinking about sustainability, and then weighing it against other factors before choosing less environmentally friendly options. What's missing from our knowledge is evidence as to whether this is actually the case – **do consumers really think about the environmental impact of products** when making purchases? Our research seeks to address this gap.

## **Sustainability neglect**

Through six different studies with consumers from three different countries (Brazil, the UK and the US), we found people tend to overlook environmental sustainability entirely in most purchases of fast-moving consumer goods, giving **more focus to factors such as price, brand or appearance**.

This is due in part to the greater "contextual salience" of these factors: how noticeable and explicit they are in the purchase context. In other words, environmental considerations often suffer by not being front-and-centre when purchases are made.

Even when consumers genuinely care about the environment, they often fail to act on these principles

Additionally, for most people **the environment is an external, detached consideration** compared to their personal needs and wishes, such as taste or convenience. This means it is less cognitively accessible than the more immediate information we are conditioned to rely on when making decisions.

Sustainability neglect takes place even when people face two choices in which one is clearly more sustainable than the other such as vegetables wrapped in plastic or unwrapped, and chocolate wrapped in multiple plastic packets or a single paper packet. Even in this situation, we found that environmental considerations are **largely overlooked**.

Only for products that more obviously represent and remind people of sustainability, such as cups (plastic versus bamboo fibre) and bags (plastic versus paper), did

environmental considerations become a dominant factor. That may help explain why our eco-friendly reusable bags are full of eco-unfriendly, plastic-wrapped products.

## Taking action

Overall, our studies show that consumers tend not to consider the environment when making purchases, and this holds true across countries, subgroups and product types. This suggests that **individual action is unlikely to make a real difference** in mitigating the climate crisis, unless steps are taken to change the current dynamic.

Informing this, we found that consideration of the environment increases when consumers have strong beliefs about sustainability, when the product in question strongly represents environmental issues, and when consumers are prompted via eco labels. With this in mind, our research points to a **three-pronged strategy for policymakers** to help more people consider the environment more often.

1. **Education:** Increasing awareness of the scale of the climate crisis can promote environmental values and help consumers better identify sustainable products. Over time, it has the potential to **increase the proportion of individuals with strong environmental beliefs**, who we found are more likely to consider the environment when purchasing.
2. **Price:** Even among those with strong beliefs on sustainability, environmental considerations were still below 50 per cent in our studies. Embedding sustainability into other factors that are closer to the top of consumers' minds may help take this further. Price, for example, can be **interlinked with sustainability through taxing unsustainable options and subsidising sustainable variants**, while a focus on health can promote sustainable organic food.
3. **Sustainability reminders:** Using reminders close to where purchases are made can help to **evoke environmental considerations**. This could include signs in shops, labels on products, and careful product placement. For example, putting second-hand options next to new ones to highlight sustainability and to take advantage of the existing association between used items and eco-friendliness.

Taken together, our research shows **that these tactics have the potential to materially increase environmental consideration among consumers**. This could be a vital step towards boosting individual action to meaningful levels, which

is sorely lacking in climate action as it stands.

*This article draws on findings from "[Environmental Sustainability Considerations \(Or Lack Thereof\) in Consumer Decision Making](#)" by Larissa Elmor (Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration), Guilherme A Ramos (Vanderbilt University), Yan Vieites (Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration), Bernardo Andretti (Imperial College London) and Eduardo B. Andrade (Imperial College London).*

## Written by

[Eduardo B. Andrade](#)

## Published

7 October 2024

## Category

[Marketing](#)

## Key topics

[Climate Change](#), [Consumers](#), [Sustainability](#)

Main image: VectorMine/iStock via Getty Images Plus

## Share



## About Eduardo B. Andrade

Professor of Marketing, Head of the Analytics, Marketing and Operations (AMO) Department - Academic Director of the MSc Climate Change, Management & Finance  
Eduardo B. Andrade is a professor of marketing at Imperial Business School and the Co-Director of the MSc Programme on Climate Change, Management & Finance. As a

behavioural researcher, he is interested in how individuals feel, think and make decisions in contexts related to sustainable consumption, inequality, and health.

His articles have appeared in marketing (Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Marketing Research), medicine/public health (Lancet, Public Health Nutrition, Preventive Medicine, JAMA Network Open), and psychology journals (Psychological Science, Nature Human Behavior), among others.

Read [Eduardo's Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

## **Monthly newsletter**

Receive the latest insights from Imperial Business School

[Sign up now](#)

## **Climate: 7 articles on solving the crisis**

Our researchers delve into the critical themes of climate change, such as sustainability, energy, and carbon credits. Join us as we explore some of our most popular climate-themed articles.

[Read more](#)