

When pro-environmental behaviors are more widely adopted, penalties for non-adoption feel fairer

Kobe Millet

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Bert Weijters

Ghent University

Cite as:

Millet Kobe, Weijters Bert (2026), When pro-environmental behaviors are more widely adopted, penalties for non-adoption feel fairer. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (132425)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



When pro-environmental behaviors are more widely adopted, penalties for non-adoption feel fairer

Abstract

A preregistered experiment (N=2401) using 81 different choice pairs across various consumption contexts shows that rewards for adopting sustainable consumption choices are generally seen as fairer than penalties for non-adoption. However, as pro-environmental behaviors become widely adopted, especially penalties gain acceptance, narrowing the fairness gap with rewards. This suggests that social diffusion can turn voluntary behaviors into moral obligations, legitimizing sanctions for non-adoption. Practically, policymakers may therefore begin with rewards to encourage sustainable consumption and later shift to penalties once adoption rates are high. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how a multi-proxy experimental approach (Millet & Weijters, 2025) can exploit variation across numerous behavioral proxies to examine generalizability and between-proxy moderation, and how standardized proxy pools can foster more cumulative and collaborative experimental research in marketing.

Track: Consumer Behaviour