

Humanizing Shelf Life: Anthropomorphism as a Moral Trigger for Choosing Near-expired Products

Jiajia Liu

The University of Hong Kong

Zhengyu Shi

Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Echo Wan

The University of Hong Kong

Cite as:

Liu Jiajia, Shi Zhengyu, Wan Echo (2026), Humanizing Shelf Life: Anthropomorphism as a Moral Trigger for Choosing Near-expired Products. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (132520)

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



Humanizing Shelf Life: Anthropomorphism as a Moral Trigger for Choosing Near-expired Products

Abstract

When choosing among similar products on a shelf, such as selecting one carton of milk from many, consumers typically favor the option with a longer remaining shelf life and avoid near-expired items. This tendency creates substantial economic losses for retailers and environmental waste. The present research shows that anthropomorphism can increase consumers' willingness to choose products with shorter remaining shelf life. This effect occurs because anthropomorphizing products encourages consumers to view their remaining shelf life as similar to a human lifespan, which elicits a sense of moral obligation toward products that are nearing the end of their "lives." We also demonstrate that this effect becomes weaker when consumers make purchase decisions for vulnerable others, such as babies, rather than for themselves. This work contributes to the literature on near-expired products and anthropomorphism and offers actionable implications for shaping consumers' shelf-life preferences.

Track: Consumer Behaviour