

I Don't Buy It: Inferring Environmental Concern from Non-Purchase Choices

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Abstract

A reduction in consumption is one of the changes needed to meet global sustainability goals. Despite consumer's belief that non-purchase (i.e. meeting a need or want without purchasing anything new) is the most sustainable option, observers infer other consumers have lower environmental concern when they choose non-purchase compared to when they buy an item with sustainable features. I propose that non-purchase choices, despite their superior perceived sustainability, are relatively less diagnostic of environmental concern because they fulfil multiple goals (e.g. frugality and sustainability) and therefore reflect ambiguous motives. Accordingly, I find that non-purchase choices are recognised as sustainable in situations where frugality goals are unlikely. This lack of signal value causes a paradoxical effect whereby people who seek to appear sustainable in public choose non-purchase less often than people who are making private sustainable choices, in effect being less sustainable.

Track: Consumer Behaviour