

Symbolic significance of sustainable products needs to be emphasised more among consumers

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Consumers appear to embrace sustainable innovations, such as electric vehicles and smart energy systems, because it means something positive

for their status and identity. Raising people's awareness of this symbolic significance can make an important contribution to the adoption of such innovations, says researcher Ernst Noppers. On 22 November 2018, he hopes to defend his doctoral thesis at the University of Groningen. His Ph.D. research was funded from the NWO Energy Transitions programme.

Consumers who switch to an electric car, for example, not only want this car due to its functionality or environmentally friendly effect. The symbolic value of such a car is just as important. Ernst Noppers, environmental psychologist, explains: 'Such a car says something about the owners, for example that they are a climate-aware trendsetter. The six studies I have carried out concerning the [adoption](#) of sustainable innovations reveal that perceptions of the symbolic characteristics are a good predictor for whether a sustainable [innovation](#) is adopted. Consumers, however, do not appear to recognise the importance of such symbolic attributes. If you explicitly ask people about the role played by status and identity when they purchase sustainable products, they say that these scarcely have any influence on the decisions made.'

Symbolic value particularly important in the introduction phase

During the introduction phase, sustainable innovations are considered by very few people around you and often have disadvantages in their daily use as well. These disadvantages, however, appear to strengthen the symbolic characteristics. Furthermore, people who identify themselves as early adopters are more positive about the symbolic characteristics of sustainable innovations than people who see themselves as late adopters.

Noppers states that the real breakthrough of sustainable innovations can be facilitated if more attention is paid to the symbolic characteristics

when promoting the innovations. 'For example, campaigns could position the owners and users of sustainable innovations as innovative, environmentally friendly and successful people, and in this way communicate the idea that adopting sustainable innovations says something positive about the user.' Furthermore, the research reveals that the symbolic significance of adoption not only depends on the message conveyed about a person to other people, but also the message conveyed to the individual concerned.

Diagnostic framework

Marketers and policymakers can use Noppers' theoretical model to develop strategies to promote the adoption of a sustainable innovation. The model provides insights into how the target group assesses the attributes of sustainable innovation and how these can influence adoption by this group.

Ernst Noppers carried out his doctoral research, "Driving adoption: The symbolic value of sustainable innovations," at the University of Groningen, with funding from the NWO programme Energy Transitions. His supervisor is Prof. Linda Steg and his associate supervisor is Dr. Kees Keizer.

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