

**Does the ecological transition pose a threat to the cultural worldview of the
responsibilised consumer? An exploration of social justice concerns within national
sustainability policies.**

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Abstract

In line with the European Green Deal, national governments across Europe have introduced a wide array of regulatory, incentive-based and facilitative measures to accelerate the ecological transition. These policies have substantial implications for household consumption. This research investigates how such national sustainability measures impact the cultural worldview of the responsabilised consumer—a central figure in neoliberal approaches to sustainability, defined by a moral agency oriented toward informed climate-friendly choices. While prior studies show that even environmentally concerned consumers can experience psychological and social tensions when adopting particular prescribed conduct, consumer research has rarely examined how individuals interpret ecological measures holistically and relate them to the broader cultural standards that underpin the value of individual conduct. In particular, moral concerns about social justice—despite their prominence in recent public debates and protest movements—remain understudied in marketing research on the ecological transition.

Drawing on the theoretical lens of expectation violations, we examine whether the sustainability policy landscape, taken as a whole, may threaten the social stability of consumers' worldviews, thereby generating cognitive dissonance and weakening identification with responsabilisation. We adopt an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Study 1 consists of qualitative interviews in France ($n = 43$), which reveal that ecological transition policies are perceived as raising major social justice issues. These perceptions cluster around three types of threats to social stability: (1) technological inequalities affecting older or digitally excluded consumers; (2) territorial disparities in public infrastructure between urban and rural areas; and (3) income-based barriers to accessing green products. Building on these insights, Study 2 uses an online experiment ($n = 300$) to test the effects of a sustainability measure involving territorial inequalities. Results show that perceived threats to societal stability significantly mediate the relationship between the ecological measure which is associated with territorial inequalities and cognitive dissonance.

This research extends the existing literature on consumer responsabilisation by shifting the focus from discrete consumption practices to consumers' justice-related interpretations of the ecological transition as a policy system. The study demonstrates the value of drawing on consumers' cultural worldviews to fully grasp the issues at stake in terms of the acceptability of transition measures. From a policy standpoint, the findings emphasise the necessity for more inclusive sustainability narratives and infrastructural strategies that acknowledge social and territorial inequalities. This is an essential condition for avoiding disidentification with ecological objectives and securing broader public support for the transition.

Keywords: ecological transition; expectation violation; consumer responsabilisation; cognitive dissonance; social justice.