

Eco-labels shift consumers to more sustainable clothing choices^{1, 2}

Shane Timmons*, Adam Joachim Shier, Olga Poluektova and Pete Lunn

ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

INTRODUCTION

Producing clothes causes water pollution, microplastic waste and greenhouse gas emissions that add to climate change. However, consumers are rarely informed about the environmental costs of clothing while shopping. This study aimed to test whether simple visual indicators of a product's environmental impact ("eco-labels") lead consumers to choose more sustainable clothing options. Specifically, we tested two types of labels: one that simply identified the most sustainable products, and another that graded all products from A to E based on their environmental impact. The study also explored whether these labels are more effective for certain groups of consumers, such as those most concerned about the environment.

DATA AND METHODS

A nationally representative sample of 1,200 adults in Ireland took part in the online experiment. Participants used a realistic online clothing store that featured real products, prices, and brands. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of three versions of the store: one with a simple eco-label applied to the most sustainable products, one with a colour-coded A-E "eco-score" rating applied to all products, or one with no labels.

Participants were given a randomly assigned budget (€180–€540) and instructed to shop as if they were making real purchases. Participants knew that some of them would be randomly selected to receive the items they chose. The environmental ratings for each product were taken from independent sustainability ratings from *GoodOnYou*³ and converted into the A-E scale. After shopping, participants

¹ This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: Timmons, S., Shier, A. J., Poluektova, O. & Lunn P. D. (2025). Fashion, Fast or Slow? Effects of binary and graded eco-labels on sustainable clothing purchases. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2025.146575>

* Correspondence: shane.timmons@esri.ie

² This research was funded by the Environmental Protection Agency.

³ Good On You - Sustainable Fashion and Beauty Brand Ratings

answered questions about their shopping experience, environmental concern, and support for eco-label policies.

RESULTS

Both types of eco-labels increased the proportion of sustainable clothes purchased, but the colour-coded eco-score label was significantly more effective. Compared to people who saw no labels, those who saw the simple label chose 10% more sustainable items. Those who saw the eco-score label chose 20% more and were twice as likely to choose only sustainable products. The labels had the biggest impact on participants with high concern for the environment. Importantly, the labels did not reduce satisfaction with the shopping experience or how much people liked the clothes they picked.

The study also showed that most consumers underestimate the environmental harm of clothing production. There was nevertheless strong public support for using eco-scores both online and in-store.

CONCLUSIONS

Revealing the environmental impact of clothing production at the point of purchase helps consumers to make more sustainable clothing choices. Labels that rate all products using colours and grades (like A to E) are especially effective. These labels work best for environmentally concerned consumers, enabling them to shop in line with their values. The findings support the introduction of a standardised eco-score system for clothing, which could be implemented under upcoming EU sustainability regulations. This kind of label would not only empower consumers but could also encourage competition among brands to improve their environmental practices.