



Flemish people weigh comfort against energy savings

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For months, rising energy prices have been the concern of everyone who pays an energy bill. In response, we have been overwhelmed in recent weeks with articles that suggest possible strategies for saving energy, because 'the cheapest kilowatt hour is the one that was not consumed'. People are encouraged to save energy by lowering the temperature of the gas boiler to nip their dormant consumption in the bud.

But how many of these strategies are already part of the Flemish people's savings palette? The imec/UGent research group mict took a closer look. Within the European NUDGE project, they are charting the digital and sustainable behavior of Flemings with the ultimate goal of facilitating sustainable behavioral change. This project specifically focuses on energy savings within the home that are repeatedly undertaken, such as turning down the heating or using the eco-program on the washing machine. A survey among 1133 Flemings, conducted in the spring of 2021, shows that a number of savings are already regular habits. Actions such as turning off the lights, closing windows, not leaving water running, turning off the TV when no one is looking and preferring showering to bathing are behaviors that 6 out of 10 respondents always undertake. In terms of sustainable behavior, the Flemish are certainly not at their wits end.

The results did show that people make a trade-off between comfort and saving. If energy saving means that the heating has to be one degree lower or that the water in the shower feels a bit more lukewarm, then people are quick to adapt. The results show that people initially try to go energy-wise, for example by closing the windows (91.9% often/always) or closing off unheated rooms from heated ones in winter (83.7% often/always). Only after that do people consider saving energy, but preferably with as little loss of comfort as possible. For example, 16.5% of households rarely or never turn down the thermostat, 22.8% rarely or never wear an extra layer of clothes in exchange for a cooler room temperature, and 54% rarely or never lower the boiler temperature. An extra thick sweater or one less shower? The Fleming is quick to decline when his comfort is compromised.

Moreover, the actions that are undertaken most frequently do not immediately result in the greatest energy savings. More than 9 out of 10 respondents usually or always turn off the lights when leaving the room, which is the most energy-saving action undertaken. While nearly 1 in 3 of those surveyed rarely or never turn off appliances completely to reduce standby consumption. Previous research by the Columbia University (NY) has already shown that people overestimate energy actions with a low savings potential, such as turning off the lights. Saving energy therefore requires a profound attitude and behavioral change from the citizen. One that cannot be achieved overnight.

These findings point to the potential of energy savings and are an ideal breeding ground for future behavioral interventions. Here, nudging is often suggested as a potential cost-effective solution. Nudging makes choices that are positive for the end consumer and/or society easier. By displaying options more attractive or easier without excluding alternatives, the final responsibility remains with the end user. In the case of energy consumption, info about the energy behavior of neighbors or a



default saving program within an energy app can have a positive effect on the saving behavior of the user. In the midst of an energy crisis, it is therefore more interesting to endorse alternative ways of saving energy than hoping for a lower energy bill.

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The results of this research have been published in a research report:
<https://www.nudgeproject.eu/report-profiling-of-energy-consumers-psychological-and-contextual-factors-of-energy-behavior/>