

Generational Analysis on Sustainable Consumption: A Systematic Literature Review for Theory and Practice Innovation

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ABSTRACT:

The rise of sustainability studies over the past twenty years has drawn the attention of both academics and practitioners. This research examines the existing literature on sustainability from the perspective of different consumer generational cohorts. Using the TCCM framework and the PRISMA protocol, we synthesize existing knowledge and describe how it has been done. Through this literature review, we identify research gaps, including weak theoretical foundations, limited regional coverage, and the understudied economic and social dimensions of sustainability. This study emphasizes the significance of understanding generational differences in shaping sustainability-driven marketing strategies and addressing the ongoing value-action gap in consumer behavior. We propose a future research agenda that focuses on applying less commonly used theories, particularly in underrepresented regions, investigating emotional branding across generations, and examining the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability in various contexts and cross-cultural settings. This work provides a roadmap for researchers and practitioners to translate generational insights and behaviors into practical strategies that foster sustainable consumption and systemic change.

Keywords: Sustainable Consumption, Consumer Behavior, Sustainability, Generational Cohorts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability research is a broad field that encompasses various perspectives across multiple disciplines. Given its tremendous scope, scholars have reviewed diverse operational definitions and terms related to sustainability and

its dimensions (Glavič & Lukman, 2007). Areas of analysis include circular economy and consumption (e.g. Camacho-Otero et al., 2018); waste management (e.g. Oluwadamilola et al., 2021; Rotimi et al., 2021) sustainability in the age of digitalization (e.g. Grybauskas et al., 2022), and

the effects of product/service sustainability attributes on consumers (e.g. Acuti et al., 2022; Majer et al., 2022), sustainable fashion (Busalim et al., 2022; Rotimi et al., 2021) and more recently social sustainability (Alwani & Bhukya, 2025; Govindan et al., 2021; Madanaguli et al., 2022).

The research in sustainability also includes intergenerational cohorts which have been performed importantly over the past two decades (e.g. Diprose et al., 2019; Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Kamenidou et al., 2020; Liang & Xu, 2018; Lin & Chen, 2022; Nadanyiova et al., 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Park and Lee, 2021; Pencarelli et al., 2020; Sogari et al., 2017; Stanes et al., 2015; Yap & Ng, 2018). Most of these studies indicate that the concept of sustainability and its underlying factors vary among consumers based on their generational cohorts

Given the significance of sustainability and intergenerational research, this study conducted a systematic review to establish a thorough understanding of what has been studied on sustainability from the perspective of different consumer cohorts, how they engage with sustainability as a value-laden, identity-relevant phenomenon, and how motivations (e.g., self-expression vs. conformity), brand preferences, emotional attachment, and economic constraints shape behavior across generational lines. The review intends to identify what constructs have been evaluated, if there are differences between cohorts, and if these differences are consistent across studies or if there are contradictions depending on the context. It further explores whether generational marketing is an effective mechanism for sustainable transition and calls for a deeper theoretical and empirical integration of identity, value, and behavioral constructs into generational sustainability models.

This systematic literature review employed the Theories, Contexts, Characteristics, and Methods (TCCM) framework developed by Paul *et al.* (2019) to logically synthesize what we currently know and how we know it. Our review was also supported by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Moher et al., 2009; Page et

al., 2021), thereby demonstrating the principles that characterize robust systematic reviews (Paul & Criado, 2020).

Our work contributes to the extant literature on sustainability and consumer behavior by providing an overview of the current scientific knowledge on sustainability across generations through a framework-based study. It organizes and coherently synthesizes information to unveil the theoretical potential within these disciplines and establishes a future research agenda (Paul et al., 2023). This study brings together two increasingly popular research topics: sustainability and intergenerational studies. As generational cohorts evolve, so do their perceptions of and responses to sustainability. As observed in this review, intergenerational studies are relevant to understanding factors shaping sustainable consumer behavior.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING GENERATIONAL COHORTS

The idea of generation gained further prominence through the Strauss–Howe Generational Theory (1991), which proposed that the history of a country could be understood as a succession of generational biographies. Strauss and Howe (1997) defined a generation as an aggregate of all people born over roughly the span of a phase of life, who share a common location in history, and hence, a common collective persona. Their works contributed to the development of an industry based on generational management, wherein a generation typically spans 20–25 years and is delineated by its year of birth (Paul & Barari, 2022).

The groups of each generation cannot be precisely delineated because these generations are not sharply divided but exist along timelines with certain similarities. The older generational cohort refer to as the “Silent Generation,” who was born in the U.S. between 1925 and 1945. Described as “a generation with strongly middle-aged values” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 279), the Silent Generation was composed of individuals who hold conventional beliefs and aspired to marry early, raise families, and work diligently.

The term “Baby Boomers” refers to the generation born following World War II, from 1946 to 1964 (Roberts & Manolis, 2000), which now includes seniors. Their attitudes and perceptions were largely shaped by countercultural and social changes during the 1960s, which led to greater concern for the environment (Barber et al., 2010). Atkins and Hyun (2016) indicated that Baby Boomers exhibit consumption behaviors that are more deal-prone compared to other generational cohorts. They employ more cost-saving strategies and report higher levels of smart shopping.

Generation X was born between 1966 and the late 1980s. They are characterized as individualistic, self-reliant, and “digital immigrants” who acquire digital skills by investing time and effort (Ahn & Jung, 2014). These consumers are heavy spenders, notably on housing, clothing, entertainment, and food, and they hold an attitude of risk avoidance while also caring about others’ opinions (Reisenwitz and Iyer, 2009).

Generation Y, also called “Millennials,” includes consumers born between 1981 and 1995 (Brosdahl & Carpenter, 2011). Their early exposure to technology shaped their behavior and had significant psychological, social, and cognitive consequences (Bolton et al., 2013). They are connected 24/7 on multiple devices, which has helped them forge their vision of the world, a vision where they feel comfortable questioning established authority and where traditional hierarchical structures are no longer the prevailing operational model (Chaney et al., 2017). Their communication modes are shaped by the Internet, and social networks (Smith, 2011).

Generation Z, the cohort born between 1995 and 2010 (Bencsik et al., 2016) comprises the most educated, mobile, and connected consumers. Members of Generation Z are socially conscious, tech-savvy, highly innovative, and constantly seeking change. They remain connected through smartphones, tablets, and the Internet of Things (Bencsik et al., 2019). They prefer written to oral communication. They have access to more

information than any previous generational cohort (Kardes et al., 2014).

McCrindle and Wolfinger (2008) named the youngest generational cohort, typically considered to have been born between 2010 and 2025, “Generation Alpha”. “Alpha” signifies the onset of this new generation. Few studies have targeted Generation Alpha as a subject, but this cohort is also referred to as the glass generation, screenagers, digital natives, and connected or wired generation (Tootell et al., 2014; Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021).

Studies of generational cohorts and sustainability have evolved dramatically over the past two decades, and extends to various fields in the literature, including lifestyle habits (Diprose et al., 2019; Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Stanes et al., 2015), fashion and luxury (Liang & Xu, 2018; Park & Lee, 2021; Pencarelli et al., 2020), food consumption patterns (Kamenidou et al., 2020; Sogari et al., 2017; Yap, J. B. H., & Ng, 2018), and generational dynamics across diverse geographical contexts (Schewe & Meredith, 2004). We now know that attitudes and values towards sustainable behaviors vary across generational cohorts (Stanes et al., 2015; Lin & Chen, 2022; Nadanyiova et al., 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). To enhance our understanding of what has been done on sustainability from the perspective of different generational cohorts of consumers, i.e. what constructs have been evaluated, if there are differences between cohorts, if these differences are consistent across studies or if there are contradictions depending on the context, and how this knowledge has been generated, we performed this systematic literature review. The methodology is presented below.

3. METHODOLOGY

This literature review relied on reproducible methods and procedures for objectively identifying, selecting, evaluating, and analyzing published works on specific topics (Ngai, 2005; Paul & Criado, 2020). It benefited from the recursive and iterative processes of defining and refining keywords (Saunders et al., 2019), and accordingly employed a framework-based

approach to address the following questions: *What* has been studied about sustainability in terms of consumption/consumers across different generational cohorts? *How* has this been studied? *Where* should the future research be heading? Among the framework-based reviews, we adopted the Theories, Contexts, Characteristics, and Methods (TCCM) framework developed by Paul *et al.* (2019).

In the TCCM framework (Paul *et al.*, 2019; Paul & Criado, 2020), *Theories* encapsulate the perspectives or models on which scholars rely to guide their investigations. *Contexts* relate to the specific conditions under which the construct of interest is examined. *Characteristics* refer to the specific attributes or properties of the subject being studied. *Methods* refer to the approaches used to conduct the investigation. We favored TCCM because recent studies have shown that it produces more comprehensive and useful results (Çelik *et al.*, 2023), assist others in gaining a clear understanding of the scope of theories, contexts, characteristics, and methodologies necessary to justify and conduct empirical research (Paul *et al.*, 2021), and helps make important contributions to both the field and practitioners (Çelik *et al.*, 2023).

3.1. Procedure

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol was used to identify articles for inclusion in this literature review (Moher *et al.*, 2009; Page *et al.*, 2021). This protocol provides the guidelines for reporting a systematic review in four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The synthesis is presented in Figure 1 and an explanation of each is presented in the following sections.

Identification. The identification stage involved defining the (1) search engine, (2) source type, (3) search period, (4) source research areas, and (5) search keywords. SCOPUS was chosen as the most suitable search engine because of its broader range of journals and publications, including publishers such as Elsevier, Wiley, Sage, Emerald, and Taylor, worldwide (Çelik *et al.*, 2023). SCOPUS is a major database that offers high-quality online bibliographic data

(Pranckutė, 2021). Only articles (including those in press) and reviews published in peer-reviewed academic journals were included. Incorporating these articles into a systematic literature review ensured that the evidence was reliable and valid.

Only studies published between 2002 and 2022 were retained for the search. This timeframe was chosen because of the heightened interest in sustainability since 2002 from the perspective of different generational cohorts. However, the increase in publications between 2011 and 2022 was more significant than that between 2002 and 2010; 295 articles were published between 2010 and 2022, compared with 16 articles published between 2002 and 2010.

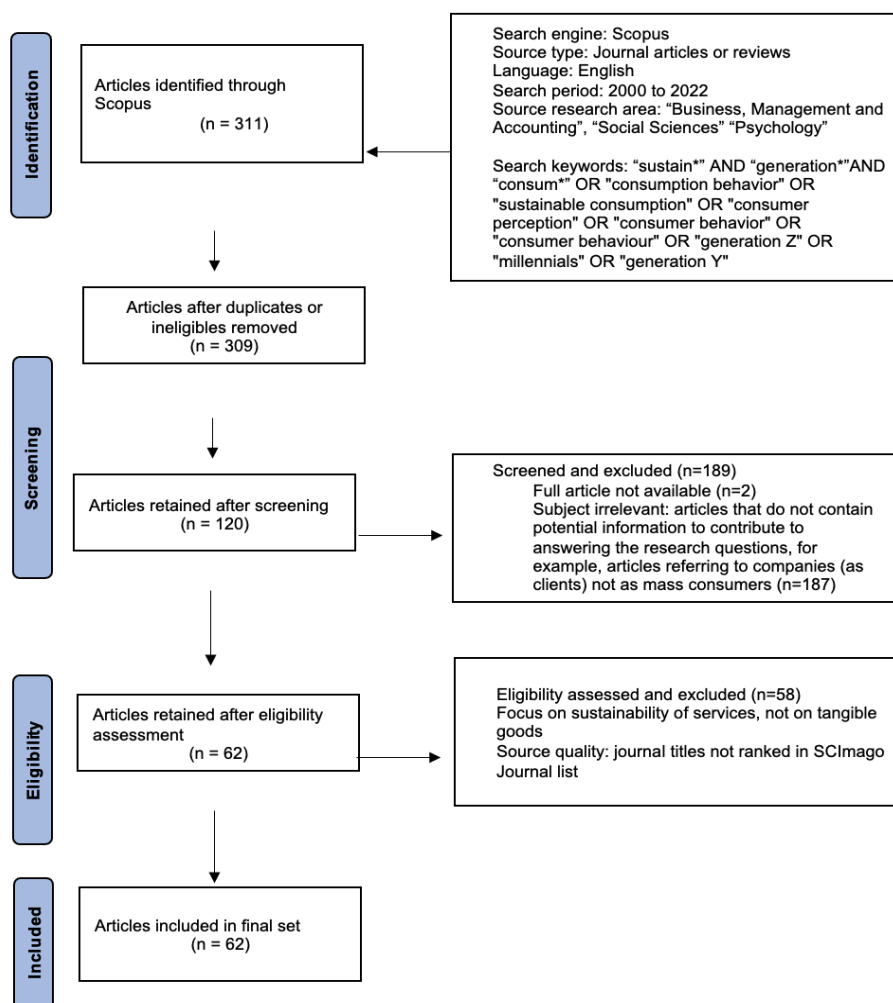
The selected source research areas were Business, Management, and Accounting. We also included “Social Sciences” and “Psychology” to access articles related to consumer behavior and sustainability. The selected keywords for the search were “sustainability” and its closer synonyms by searching “sustain*,” generation by selecting “generation*,” and finally consumer/ consumption by searching “consum*.” Exact keywords were also included: “consumption behavior,” “sustainable consumption,” “consumer perception,” “consumer behavior,” “generation Z,” “millennials,” and “generation Y.” Ultimately, 311 studies were included in the analysis. One duplicate article was removed, and another article was eliminated because it was deemed ineligible by the SCOPUS automation tool.

Screening. Two screening rounds were conducted. Of the 309 articles identified in the previous stage, two were excluded because it was not possible to obtain a full-text document. Another 187 were excluded because they did not contain potential information to contribute to answering our research questions; the term “sustainable” was used in another context, such as financial sustainability; the articles referred to companies (as clients) but not to mass consumers; the articles focused on sustainable production processes rather than consumption; and finally, the articles did not refer to any specific consumer cohort.

Eligibility. Articles were selected according to two inclusion criteria: (1) focus on the sustainability of tangible goods, not services, and (2) source quality. Related to the first criterion, we decided to concentrate on tangible goods, because sustainability perceptions may differ greatly depending on whether they are products or services. For tangible products, consumers can evaluate the complete life cycle of a product, including its final disposal, which makes their

perception of sustainability more detailed than if it were a sustainable service. Regarding the second criterion, articles listed in the SCImago Journal Rank were retained to assess the source quality. The SCImago Journal Rank is a widely used journal categorization system recognized as a reputable measure of quality by industry experts and is encouraged for use in systematic literature reviews (Paul et al., 2021). After applying these criteria, 58 studies were excluded.

Figure 1. Review process following the PRISMA protocol.



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Inclusion. Finally, 62 full-text articles were included in this systematic literature review (see Appendix 1). These articles were cross-checked with co-authors to ensure the accurate inclusion of relevant papers. After the inclusion stage, we followed Krippendorff (2018) and conducted a content analysis of the data from the final set of studies.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. General Information

Journal of publication. Table I lists the journals that have published articles on sustainability from the perspective of different consumers generational cohorts, along with the number of articles in each publication and its rank. The journal with the greatest number of articles was *Sustainability* ($n = 24$). Although 30 different journals published articles on this topic during the study period, the vast majority had only one article; therefore, their number was limited. Unexpectedly, only 19% of the articles focusing on sustainability from different generations were part of the marketing field (12 articles). Most of the articles (90%) were published in SCImago Q1 and Q2 journals; only a small percentage of them was published in the top two categories, A* and A, on the Australian Business Dean's Council list, suggesting an area where future research can fill the gap (Bornhausen, 2022).

Table I. Journals and number of articles.

Journal	Articles (n = 62)	ABCD 202	SCImago 2022
<i>Sustainability</i>	24	Not listed	2
<i>Young Consumers</i>	3	B	1
<i>Journal of Cleaner Production</i>	2	A	1
<i>International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management</i>	2	A	1
<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	2	A	1
<i>British Food Journal</i>	2	B	2
<i>Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management</i>	2	B	1
<i>Journal of Risk and Financial Management</i>	2	B	3
<i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i>	1	A	1
<i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	1	A	1
<i>International Journal of Consumer Studies</i>	1	A	1
<i>Journal of Consumer Marketing</i>	1	A	2
<i>Australasian Accounting, Business and Finance Journal</i>	1	B	2
<i>Social Responsibility Journal</i>	1	B	2
<i>SAGE Open</i>	2	Not listed	2
<i>Applied Ergonomics</i>	1	Not listed	1
<i>Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space</i>	1	Not listed	1

<i>Fashion and Textiles</i>	1	Not listed	1
<i>Geoforum</i>	1	Not listed	1
<i>Sustainable Development</i>	1	C	1
<i>International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education</i>	1	Not listed	1
<i>Journal of Business Economics</i>	1	Not listed	1
<i>Clothing and Textiles Research Journal</i>	1	Not listed	2
<i>Competitiveness Review</i>	1	C	2
<i>European Journal of International Management</i>	1	C	2
<i>Social Sciences</i>	1	Not listed	2
<i>Polish Journal of Management Studies</i>	1	Not listed	3
<i>Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice</i>	1	Not listed	4
<i>Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences</i>	1	Not listed	4
<i>Social Behavior and Personality</i>	1	Not listed	4

Most cited articles and published journal.

Table II lists the ten most cited papers on sustainability and consumption from a generational cohort basis; these articles accounted for 61% of all the articles in the dataset. The article with the most citations was “Baby Boomers’ reasons for choosing specific food shops” by Worsley et al. (2011), with 340 citations, followed by Gazzola et al.’s (2020) “Trends in the fashion industry. The perception of sustainability and circular economy: A

gender/generation quantitative approach,” with 143 citations. Both articles represent the evolution of generation-based studies. Similarly, Wei et al. (2017) ranked third with 119 citations and Su et al. (2019) ranked fourth with 109 citations, addressing the likelihood of consumption of sustainable products by young consumers, focusing mainly on Generation Z, with the former considering Gen Y and X as part of the research sample.

Table II. The ten most cited articles.

Rank	Journal title	Article Title	Authors	Year	Cited by	Average citations per year
1	<i>International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management</i>	Baby boomers’ reasons for choosing specific food shops	Worsley T.; Wang W.C.; Hunter W.	2011	340	30.91
2	<i>Sustainability (Switzerland)</i>	Trends in the fashion industry. The perception of sustainability and circular economy: A gender/generation quantitative approach	Gazzola P.; Pavione E.; Pezzetti R.; Grechi D.	2020	143	13.00
3	<i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i>	Toward sustainable livelihoods: Investigating the drivers of	Wei C.-F.; Chiang C.-T.;	2017	119	10.82

		purchase behavior for green products	Kou T.-C.; Lee B.C.Y.			
4	<i>Sustainability (Switzerland)</i>	U.S. sustainable food market generation Z consumer segments	Su C.-H.; Tsai C.-H.; Chen M.-H.; Lv W.Q.	2019	109	9.91
5	<i>International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management</i>	The sustainable clothing market: An evaluation of potential strategies for UK retailers	Goworek H.; Fisher T.; Cooper T.; Woodward S.; Hiller A.	2012	104	9.45
6	<i>Journal of Cleaner Production</i>	Before and after the outbreak of COVID-19: Linking fashion companies' corporate social responsibility approach to consumers' demand for sustainable products	Vătămănescu E.-M.; Dabija D.-C.; Gazzola P.; Cegarro-Navarro J.G.; Buzzi T.	2021	90	8.18
7	<i>Sustainability (Switzerland)</i>	Millennial generation and environmental sustainability: The role of social media in the consumer purchasing behavior for wine	Sogari G.; Pucci T.; Aquilani B.; Zanni L.	2017	84	7.64
8	<i>Sustainability (Switzerland)</i>	Segmenting the generation Z cohort university students based on sustainable food consumption behavior: A preliminary study	Kamenidou I.C.; Mamalis S.A.; Pavlidis S.; Bara E.-Z.G.	2019	72	6.55
9	<i>Fashion and Textiles</i>	Factors influencing consumers' purchase intention of green sportswear	Nam C.; Dong H.; Lee Y.-A.	2017	72	6.55
10	<i>Sustainability (Switzerland)</i>	Studies and investigation about the attitude towards sustainable production, consumption and waste generation in line with circular economy in Romania	Lakatos E.S.; Cioca L.-I.; Dan V.; Ciomos A.O.; Crisan O.A.; Barsan G.	2018	66	6.00

4.2. What we know?

Given the focal point of this literature review on generational cohorts, the paramount characteristic pertains to specific generations targeted by the studies. The distribution of different generations in the studies is provided in

Table III. Note that 11% of the studies (seven papers) did not specify a particular generation in their research. However, their segment identified specific age groups and analyzed them based on age, allowing us to recognize the generation(s) being referred to.

Table III. Articles by generational or intergenerational cohorts.

Generational cohort	<i>N</i> Articles	Total %
Generation Z	21	34%
Generation Y or Millennials	12	19%
Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z	9	15%
Silent Gen, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z	5	8%
Generations Y and Z	5	8%
Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z	3	5%
Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y	3	5%
Generation X and Gen Y	2	3%
Baby Boomers	1	2%
Generation Z and Baby Boomers	1	2%
Total	62	100%

Literature reveals contrasts in sustainability attitudes and behavior among generations. Millennials and Generation Z consistently demonstrate stronger pro-environmental concern, are more active in sustainability-focused social media discourse and exhibit a preference for ethically branded products (Han & Stoel, 2016; S. T. Lin & Niu, 2018; Mohd Suki, 2016). These groups show a greater orientation toward universalism, benevolence, and self-direction, making them more receptive to sustainability campaigns with emotional, identity-driven framing (Bhalla & Sharma, 2017).

Conversely, Generation X and Baby Boomers display a more utilitarian and pragmatic orientation. Their sustainability engagement tends to focus on reliability, product longevity, and trust in established institutions (Chiang et al., 2022; Diprose et al., 2019; Goworek et al., 2019). They are more likely to be influenced by instrumental values such as security, conformity, and economic efficiency. This distinction is not rigid, but suggests that generational context, shaped by economic, political, and technological transitions, matters in shaping how individuals relate to sustainability.

Few studies to date have deeply analyzed Generation Alpha, though preliminary evidence suggests they are being socialized into sustainability from an earlier age, through digital climate content, parental influence, and early education (Mukendi et al., 2020). As such, they may internalize sustainability as a norm rather than a choice, a hypothesis worth exploring in future research.

These generational differences have real implications for designing policies, educational programs, and marketing strategies that resonate with diverse audiences. What motivates one cohort (e.g., eco-innovation for Millennials) may fall flat with another (e.g., affordability and durability for Gen X). These findings underscore that intergenerational differences are not just sociological curiosities—they are actionable levers in crafting effective sustainability transitions.

4.3. Theories Used in the Reviewed Articles.

Related to findings around the TCCM framework, we will begin by addressing the theories used by the authors, which provided rigor to their studies and guided their work. Because theories offer a basis for supporting

research propositions, theory-based research is undeniably more robust than research that lacks a theoretical framework (Lim & Rasul, 2022). Nineteen theories (or models) were identified in 62 articles. Table IV presents the theories used in sustainability research from the perspectives of

different generational cohorts. Nearly half of the studies (46.8%) had at least one theoretical foundation, with multiple theories used in seven articles (e.g., Afridi et al., 2021; Hasbullah et al., 2022).

Table IV. Theories applied in sustainability from the perspective of different generational cohorts' research.

Theory (or Models)	Original study	N Articles	Total %	Citation
N/A	N/A	33	53.2 %	N/A
Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)	Ajzen (1991)	12	19.4 %	e.g., Djafarova and Foots (2022)
Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)	Fishbein & Ajzen (1975)	5	8.1 %	e.g., Robichaud and Yu (2022); Sung and Woo (2019)
Generational Theory (GT)	Mannheim (1970); Strauss & Howe (1997)	4	6.5 %	e.g. Nikolić, Paunović, Milovanović, Lozović and Đurović (2022); Lin and Chen (2022)
Stimulus-Organism-Response Model (SOR)	Mehrabian and Russel (1974)	2	3.3 %	Sun and Xing (2022); Grădinaru, Obadă, Grădinaru and Dabija (2022)
Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability Model (LOHAS Model)		2	3.3 %	Balázsne, Kovács, Balázs and Beke (2022); Sung and Woo (2019)
Expectancy Value Theory (EVT)	Atkinson (1964), Eccles (1984)	1	1.6 %	Kol, Zimand-Sheiner and Levy (2022)
Consumption Values Theory	Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991).	1	1.6 %	Bhutto, Khan, Ertz and Sun (2022)
Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)	Bandura (1986)	1	1.6 %	Roxas and Marte (2022)
List of Values (LOV)	Kahle (1983)	1	1.6 %	Falke, Schröder and Hofmann (2022)
Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA) Theory	Blumberg & Pringle (1982)	1	1.6 %	Hasbullah, Sulaiman, Mas'od and Ahmad Sugiran (2022)
Fuzzy Set Theory	Zadeh (1965)	1	1.6 %	Yeo, Tan, Tseng, Tam and San (2022)
Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000)	1	1.6 %	Hasbullah, Sulaiman, Mas'od and Ahmad Sugiran (2022)
Stakeholder Theory	Freeman (1984)	1	1.6 %	Pelikánová and Hála (2021)

Theory of intergenerational value change	Inglehart (1970, 1971)	1	1.6 %	Diprose, Valentine, Vanderbeck, Liu and McQuaid (2019)
Value Attitude Behavior Hierarchy Model	Homer and Kahle (1988)	1	1.6 %	Moslehpour, Chaiyapruk, Faez and Wong (2021)
Moral Norm-Activation Theory	Schwartz (1977)	1	1.6 %	Afridi, Khan, Haider, Shahjehan and Afsar (2021)
Value-Belief-Norm Theory	Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, and Kalof (1999)	1	1.6 %	Afridi, Khan, Haider, Shahjehan and Afsar (2021)
Common Cause framework		1	1.6 %	Diprose, Valentine, Vanderbeck, Liu and McQuaid (2019)
Cognitive Behavior theory		1	1.6 %	Wei, Chiang, Kou and Lee (2017)

The most used theory was the theory of planned behavior (TPB), appearing in 12 articles (19.4%), followed by the theory of reasoned action (TRA) with five articles, and generational theory with four articles. First, TPB (Ajzen, 1991) provides an important theoretical foundation for explaining consumer behavior and has been widely utilized in the context of sustainability, particularly for environmental sustainability (e.g., Chen, 2016; Paul et al., 2016; Su et al., 2019; Swaim et al., 2014). Second, TRA is a predecessor to TPB. The TRA was developed to better understand the relationship between attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Given that TRA components may be insufficient for predicting behaviors in which volitional control is reduced, Ajzen (1991) added perceived behavioral control to the TRA to account for factors outside individual control that may affect intentions and behaviors, resulting in the development of the TPB. TRA has also been used in sustainability research to explain consumer behavior (e.g., Copeland and Zhao, 2020; Leclercq-Machado et al., 2022).

Third, generational theory describes a recurring cycle of age cohorts, referred to as “generations” with specific patterns of behavior (Strauss & Howe, 1997). Each generation is assumed to have experienced similar social events and external

influences during their formative years owing to their shared lifespans, leading to similar life experiences (Li et al., 2013). These external events have shaped their core values, which generally remain stable throughout their lives (Schewe & Meredith, 2004). As generational theory is a sociocultural theoretical framework that identifies patterns and propensities at an aggregate level across generational groups (Pendergast, 2010), generational analysis is deemed useful for understanding attitudes, preferences, and behaviors among generations (Li et al., 2013).

Apart from the TPB, no theoretical approach has emerged as dominant in sustainability and generational cohort studies, suggesting a paucity of theoretical perspectives. Unexpectedly, over half of the reviewed articles (54.1%) did not utilize a theoretical framework. Although it is possible to publish a work without employing theories, as Çelik et al. (2023) argue, integrating theories undoubtedly enhances the study's theoretical foundation.

4.4. Context

The context refers to the environmental circumstances under which the research was conducted (Çelik et al., 2023; Paul & Criado, 2020; Paul & Singh, 2017). This review examined

two primary contextual factors: geographical location and the industry addressed by each study (see Table V). An analysis of the regions or countries covered within the studies revealed that 39% of the articles in the review focused on the European Union, totaling 23 articles; 29% of the articles (18) were performed in Asian countries, and 18% of the articles (11 in total) conducted their research in North America, with nine in the U.S. and two in Canada. The remaining regions included in the studies were Ibero-America, Africa, Oceania and non-EU Europe.

The breakdown of studies based on industry focus reveals that a significant portion (61%) is centered on specific industries, indicating a keen interest in exploring sustainability within these sectors. For instance, the apparel and clothing industry has garnered considerable attention, with 39% of the studies dedicated to examining aspects such as sustainability practices within the apparel and luxury product segments. Similarly,

the food industry commands attention, with 16% of the studies focusing on ecological or organic food production, environmental sustainability in the food sector, and local food/agri-food systems.

The analysis extends to other sectors such as personal care, cosmetic products (5%), and automobiles (2%), indicating a broad scope of inquiry into sustainability practices across different industries. A substantial proportion (39%) of studies did not align with a specific industry. Instead, these studies adopt a more interdisciplinary approach, exploring broader themes such as sustainable consumption, ethical consumption, CSR, and the perception of sustainability. This comprehensive analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of sustainability research across generational cohorts, encompassing industry-specific investigations and cross-cutting themes that transcend traditional boundaries.

Table V. Research context.

Region	Country or Countries	<i>N</i> Articles	Total %
EU	Cypriot	1	39%
	Finland	1	
	Germany	2	
	Greece	2	
	Czech Republic	1	
	Hungary	1	
	Ireland	1	
	Italy	5	
	Poland	1	
	Romania	3	
	Slovakia	2	
	UK	4	
Asia	China	2	29%
	India	3	
	Israel	1	

	Korea	2	
	Malasia	2	
	Pakistan	2	
	Philippines	1	
	Taiwan	3	
	Thailand	1	
	Vietnam	1	
North America	Canada	2	18%
	USA	9	
Iberoamerica	Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru	1	3%
	Brazil	1	
Africa	Egypt	1	3%
	South Africa	1	
Oceania	Australia	2	3%
Non-EU Europe	Western Balkans, Bosnia–Herzegovina and Serbia	1	2%
Mixed regions	Asia, USA, Middle east, Europe, Africa	1	3%
	UK, USA and China	1	
Total		62	100%

Industry and research focus	<i>N</i> Articles	Total %
Apparel and Clothing	24	39%
Apparel industry & sustainability	23	
Luxury products	1	
Food Industry	10	16%
Ecological food or organic food	4	
Environmental sustainability	1	
Local food / agri-food	1	
Sustainable food	4	
Personal Care & Cosmetic Products	3	5%

Cosmetic Products	1	
Personal Care Products	2	
Automotive industry	1	2%
Green Vehicles	1	
Nonspecific industry	24	39%
Sustainable consumption	14	
Ethical consumption	2	
Environmental attitudes	2	
Corporate Social Responsibility	2	
LOHAS-Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability	1	
Corporate Social Advocacy	1	
Socially responsible consumption	1	
Perception of the definition of sustainability	1	
Total	62	100%

4.5. Characteristics.

Characteristics encompass the unique attributes or inherent properties pertinent to the subject of inquiry (Paul et al., 2019). The distribution of different generations in the studies is provided in Table 4. The largest proportion of articles, 34% (21 papers), focused on Generation Z, the first generation to have never known a world without the Internet or smartphones, making them true digital natives (Alruthaya et al., 2013). The largest proportion of articles, 34% (21 papers), focused on Generation Z, the first generation to have never known a world without the Internet or smartphones, making them true digital natives (Alruthaya et al., 2013). Additionally, they represent a significant portion of the current and future markets. The other group with the most studies was Generation Y, also known as Millennials, comprising 19% of the total (12 studies). This reinforces the point that researchers aim to study younger generations to understand trends, as they will shape future markets. Among the remaining studies, only one (2%) focused on Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). All other studies (45%, 28)

incorporated an intergenerational mix (studies involving two or more generations).

4.6. Methods.

Following Bolt *et al.* (2022), we assessed the methodology section of each article in terms of the methods, data collection, and data analysis (see Table VI). Approximately 65% of studies used quantitative methods, particularly self-administered surveys (67%). Other quantitative methods included face-to-face surveys (4%), neurotechnology to analyze facial expressions and brain activity (3%), panels (1%), and experiments (1%).

In the articles that used qualitative methods (21%), the most common techniques were in-depth interviews (5%) and focus groups (4%) to explore the attitudes and behaviors of different generations. Articles using mixed methods (13%) combined a quantitative design, particularly self-administered questionnaires, with content analysis.

Considering the data analysis used in the quantitative articles, factor analysis (21%) and structural equation modeling (SEM) (18%) were performed using SPSS and AMOS. Partial least

squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for hypothesis testing, exploratory analysis, and handling of nonparametric data (7%). Other analyses included a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), correlation, regression, and descriptive statistical analysis. Articles that used qualitative or mixed-method approaches used thematic or content analysis to identify recurring themes (11%), linguistic analysis (2%), and word association (1%).

The articles also reported on the limitations of the methodology employed. These include limitations in sampling and generalizability (Kamenidou et al., 2020, 2019), limited items (Kamenidou et al., 2020) or possible bias (Rita & Ramos, 2022), and limits to the external validity and generalizability of the results to other cultural and geographical contexts for articles conducted in a single country (Gazzola et al., 2020).

Table VI. Research methods used in the articles selected for the literature review.

Methodology	N Articles	Total %
Quantitative	49	65%
Qualitative	16	21%
Mixed methods	10	13%
Data collection technique	Number of studies	Total percentage
Self-administered survey	53	67%
In-dept interviews	4	5%
Focus groups	3	4%
Face-to-face survey	3	4%
Neurotechnology to analyze facial expression	2	3%
Semi-structured interviews	2	3%
Theoretical discussion	2	3%
Open-ended survey	2	3%
Case study	1	1%
Panel	1	1%
Word association	1	1%
Neurotechnology to analyze brain activity	1	1%
Purchasing data	1	1%
Field observation	1	1%
Experiment	1	1%
Delphi method	1	1%
Data analysis	Number of studies	Total percentage
Factor analysis	23	21%

SEM	20	18%
SEM-PLS	8	7%
ANOVA	7	6%
Thematic analysis	7	6%
Content analysis	6	5%
Correlation	6	5%
Logistic regression	5	4%
Chi-square	5	4%
Cluster analysis	4	4%
Simple regression	3	3%
Multiple regression	2	2%
Linguistic analysis	2	2%
Kruskal-Wallis	2	2%
Descriptive statistics	2	2%
Word association	1	1%
Bibliometric analysis	1	1%
Kollmus	1	1%
RPL-EC	1	1%
None	1	1%
Hierarchical regression	1	1%
Single proportion test	1	1%
Z-test	1	1%
MANOVA	1	1%
Ordinal regression	1	1%
Fuzzy DEMATEL	1	1%

This review consistently finds that generational cohorts differ significantly in their values, expectations, and behaviors toward sustainable consumption (e.g., Afridi et al., 2021; Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Lin & Chen, 2022). These differences influence their consumption behavior, from brand loyalty to willingness to pay for sustainable products, demanding generationally tailored marketing strategies. Generation Z and Millennials, who comprise most recent studies (39% and 19%, respectively),

are shown to exhibit stronger pro-environmental intentions, often mediated by social media use and peer influence (Sogari et al., 2017; Su et al., 2019). Yet, a value-action gap persists, meaning their attitudes do not always translate into behavior, making it crucial to understand the psychological and contextual variables behind this disconnect.

5. CONCLUSION

To the best of our knowledge, this systematic literature review is the first to comprehensively consider the constructs of sustainability, consumer/consumption, and generations. It provides an up-to-date overview of the subject and summarizes the most relevant research findings. In our review, we identified the most used theories to address this topic, the frequently evaluated constructs, and the preferred methodologies. Additionally, we examined the contexts in which these studies were conducted, with the majority taking place in the European Union and Asian countries, particularly within the food and clothing industries.

Where should upcoming research be headed? Building on relevant research gaps identified in this literature review, we propose a future research agenda aimed at advancing the integration and significance of sustainability studies across different consumer generations.

5.1. Include other theoretical foundations. Except for the TPB and TRA theories, no theoretical framework or approach has gained dominance in sustainability and generational cohort studies. Future studies should prioritize less-explored frameworks to achieve different insights into this topic, such as the theory of intergenerational value change (Inglehart, 1971). It could be interesting to explore whether younger generations influence older generations' sustainability practices and vice versa. It could involve examining cross-generational households to see how shared experiences and interactions shape sustainability preferences and brand loyalty, especially between Generation X and Alpha.

5.2. Broaden the research on the marketing field. Only 19% of the articles focusing on sustainability from different generations were part of the marketing area. Future research should prioritize the research on branding by exploring, for example, how different types of eco-friendly packaging influence consumers' willingness to buy sustainable brands among different generations (e.g. Gen Z and Alpha). This research could also investigate how emotional factors such

as nostalgia, pride, and hope influence their relationship with these brands by exploring how these emotions shape consumer behavior and brand loyalty across generational cohorts.

5.3. Promote interdisciplinary research. There are opportunities for interdisciplinary research on sustainable consumption. For example, how behavioral economics and environmental science can be combined to promote sustainable consumption among different generational cohorts in urban areas is an interesting question. Researchers may gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of sustainability this way, enabling the development of innovative solutions to address urgent sustainability challenges, such as reducing environmental impact, enhancing social equity, and promoting economic resilience.

5.4. Consider various generational cohorts simultaneously. 54% of the studies reviewed refer to one specific generation, only 38% of the literature reviewed refers to intergenerational studies, supporting the need to consider various generational cohorts to elucidate similarities, differences, and trends in sustainable consumer behavior. Such insights could inform the design of targeted marketing campaigns and sustainability interventions tailored to specific generational segments.

5.5. Expand the context. Contextual analysis revealed the need for more comprehensive coverage of underrepresented regions, such as Ibero-America, Africa, and Oceania, to ensure a more balanced understanding of sustainability and generational cohorts worldwide. It could also be valuable to perform more cross-cultural comparative studies to examine how cultural differences influence generational attitudes and behaviors towards sustainability. Comparative research could help identify universal versus culturally specific drivers of behavior and inform culturally sensitive strategies for promoting sustainability across diverse populations. Future research should also delve deeper into specific industries such as automotive, home appliances, electronics, and battery function-based devices, where consumer adoption of their sustainable versions remains relatively low, particularly in emerging economies.

5.6. *Deepen the research on waste management.* The transition towards more frequent product updates, the proliferation of new technologies, customer experience platforms and changing seasonal offerings underscores the importance of addressing electronic, food, apparel, and plastic wastes. Despite their growing impact, there remains a notable gap in understanding the multifaceted implications of waste management practices across environmental, social, and economic spheres, warranting further exploration and innovative solutions in the realm of sustainability research. Understanding how different generational cohorts of consumers respond to these technological advancements and changing consumption patterns could be essential in developing tailored approaches to address waste management challenges from consumers' perspectives.

5.7. *Refine methodological aspects* by improving various components, such as sampling procedures, to select representative and diverse samples that accurately reflect the population's views towards sustainability and enhance the generalizability of results. Conduct extensive pilot testing and iterative revisions to ensure the reliability and validity of measurement instruments across diverse populations, applying Item Response Theory as needed. Develop measurement instruments that incorporate objective, sustainable behavioral indicators (e.g., actual behaviors instead of behavioral intentions). Additionally, qualitative analysis techniques, such as thematic or content analysis, could be refined to extract deeper insights into sustainability issues and identify emerging themes and patterns. The use of software tools (e.g., NVivo, ATLAS.ti) may assist in this task by identifying complex relationships and patterns within the data. The employment of AI and machine learning algorithms to analyze large qualitative datasets may uncover patterns that might be missed through manual analysis.

This literature review is subject to certain limitations. First, it was restricted to conceptual

and empirical articles written in English, published in journals indexed by SCOPUS, and temporally limited to the period 2002–2022. Second, the focus was on articles addressing sustainability from a consumer or consumption perspective, with generational cohort as an attribute. Although the careful selection of keywords ensured specificity, this may have limited the breadth of the dataset. Third, the ambiguity inherent in the extensive literature on sustainability as a concept, and the scarcity of literature when incorporating keywords such as “consum*” and “generation*,” added complexity to the keyword search process.

Despite these limitations, this systematic literature review provides an up-to-date analysis of the current scientific knowledge on sustainability across generations through a framework-based study. Our work organizes and coherently synthesizes information to unveil the theoretical potential within the sustainability and consumer behavior disciplines and establishes a future research agenda. Consequently, the unifying framework and proposed future research agenda may serve as a valuable resource for further discussions among scholars and practitioners and inspire future research.

Finally, this study shows that further research on sustainability across generations should matter because generational differences shape market dynamics, younger generations are driving sustainability shifts, and for firms, failing to consider generational nuances in sustainability perceptions and preferences can result in ineffective branding and miss market opportunities.

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Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest regarding this paper.

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Appendix 1. List of articles included in the review

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