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Bilbao, Spain

Benjamín Tejerina,
Cristina Miranda de Almeida
and Clara Acuña
Editors

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Are Young People Really Concerned about Climate Change? Evidence from Italy¹

Ariela Mortara and Rosantonietta Scramaglia
IULM University of Milan, Italy

Abstract: *This paper presents specific findings from a comprehensive research project designed to explore the repercussions of a climate of uncertainty on Italian consumers, focusing on the realms of environment, technology, and consumption. Through a snowball sampling approach, a total of 12,050 self-completed questionnaires were gathered in November 2022. The non-probabilistic sample, while representing all age groups, is skewed towards the younger population.*

In particular, our emphasis will be on the consumption patterns and daily habits related to sustainability among young respondents. Our findings highlight that while certain practices such as recycling and using glass or water bottles are widely adopted, more involving and demanding behaviours, such as purchasing local or organic food, prioritizing fair trade products, or steering clear of fast fashion retailers, are less prevalent, particularly among the younger generations. Furthermore, our results highlight how, contrary to what is reported by various studies, it is the older generations that are more willing to adopt sustainable behaviours.

Keywords: *Consumer behaviour, sustainable practices, young people, Italy, climate change*

1 Introduction²

The rapid changes in Earth's climate caused by human activity are significantly altering the natural conditions that support life for all species, including humans. Consequently, this poses a serious threat to the future of society (Brulle and Dunlap, 2015).

In recent global surveys, a rising concern about climate change has been underscored (Narawad, 2023). The Pew Research Center's annual Global Attitudes survey (2022) reveals a consistent increase since 2014 in the percentage of people worldwide who view climate change as a "major threat." Nonetheless, according to Poortinga *et al.* (2019), men, older individuals, and those with lower levels of formal education typically harbour more scepticism regarding the reality and human-induced origins of climate change. This

scepticism often manifests as doubts regarding trends and attributions, leading to lesser concern about the repercussions of climate change.

Notably, environmental protection has become a top priority, particularly among the younger demographic actively engaging in sustainable practices. According to Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey' (2022), approximately three-quarters of Generation Z and Millennial respondents express the belief that addressing climate change is crucial, yet less than half hold optimism about the success of global efforts to safeguard the planet.

Both generations are doing their part. Nine in ten say they are committed to protecting the environment. In everyday life, they buy second-hand clothes and prefer local or organic food. In the near future, despite economic constraints, half of them will be more sustainable in all their purchases, opting for products such as solar panels and electric vehicles. They believe that businesses and governments need to do more to combat climate change. Only 15% of Generation Z and 14% of Millennials fully agree that companies are taking significant action to protect the environment. This is only slightly higher than the 11% of Generation Z and the 13% of Millennials who think their governments are doing a lot to combat climate change.

In this context we conducted our research project.

2 Research Objective and Methodology

In the following sections, we will focus on the results of a survey, conducted in Italy, aimed at investigating changes at the individual and territorial levels in three specific areas: Environment, Technology, and Consumption, taking into account the Sustainable Development Goals recommended in the 2030 Agenda and promoted by the National Recovery and Resilience Plane (PNRR). To carry out this project, we conducted a survey through an online self-completed questionnaire, administered via the SurveyMonkey platform, following a snowballing process (Gabor, 2007; Handcock, Gile, 2011). 12,050 self-completed questionnaires were collected between November 5 and 25, 2022, entered into an Excel database, and then processed using SPSS.

Various types of analyses were then performed, significance tests and comparisons with other studies and statistics on the trends in question. The results reported in the following sections are statistically significant. Data have been matched with some demographic variables, such as age, gender, and geographic area.

2.1 The Questionnaire

After collecting demographic information, the questionnaire proceeds to understand whether and how the climate of uncertainty has changed the individual's scale of values, his worries, his hopes for the future, and very specifically his behaviour in everyday life.

Afterwards, the questionnaire focused on the level of knowledge of Italians about the goals of the 2030 Agenda and whether their implementation is the responsibility of individuals, companies, or institutions.

2.2 The Sample

After careful data cleaning, the non-probabilistic convenience sample (Coomber, 1997) was reduced from approximately 16,000 questionnaires to 12,050. Participants come from all over Italy, mainly from the northwest of the country (62.3%), and are equally distributed among small town, medium and big cities.

As can be seen from Table 1, the genres are evenly distributed among the different age groups. Women and young people are overrepresented. Regarding age, we used the classification provided by ISTAT, specifically the age groups 18-24 and 25-34, which partially correspond to Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2013) and Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) respectively.

More than half of the sample lives with their parents and includes students or working students. The educational level of the sample is high, considering that 63.4% of respondents are between 18 and 24 years old and do not yet have a bachelor's degree.

The amount of income was determined by an indirect question, however more than half of the respondents indicate that they "live decently with some sacrifices" (they could choose also "just survive," "live inconspicuously but with many sacrifices," "live without sacrifices").

Table 1. The Sample

Age groups	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	over65	Tot.
Gender						
Male	34.40%	42.80%	30.90%	35.30%	39.90%	35.20%
Female	65.00%	56.70%	68.80%	64.60%	60.10%	64.40%
Non binary	0.60%	0.50%	0.40%	0.10%	0.00%	0.50%
Tot.	63.40%	9.80%	9.40%	15.50%	2.00%	100.00%
Who do you live with?						
Alone	3.2%	12.1%	8.5%	7.8%	20.6%	5.60%
Parents	80.2%	42.1%	5.3%	2.8%	1.3%	55.90%
Spouse/partner	2.4%	35.8%	75.2%	77.1%	68.9%	25.4%
Sons/nephews	0.2%	9.6%	65.2%	65.0%	14.3%	17.60%
Friends	9.5%	4.9%	0.4%	0.5%	1.3%	6.60%
Brothers/sisters	35.2%	12.3%	1.2%	1.0%	0.8%	23.80%
Pet	20.2%	16.7%	25.3%	25.0%	16.8%	21.00%
Educational level						
Primary school/junior high	2.5%	2.3%	7.0%	7.1%	19.3%	4.00%
Vocational courses	2.4%	3.3%	5.9%	7.1%	8.0%	3.60%
High school	78.0%	35.4%	44.0%	51.1%	47.1%	65.90%
Bachelor's degree	15.5%	25.0%	11.2%	6.4%	2.9%	14.30%
Master's degree/postgraduate course	1.6%	34.0%	31.9%	28.4%	22.7%	12.20%
Employment status						
Student	60.3%	8.7%	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	39.10%
Working student	21.0%	9.8%	0.4%	0.3%	0.0%	14.30%
Untemred worker	7.3%	18.3%	9.6%	5.1%	0.0%	8.10%
Temred worker	6.1%	43.6%	64.6%	55.9%	3.8%	22.90%
Freelance	2.0%	12.2%	15.7%	20.6%	11.3%	7.40%
Unemployed/looking for work	3.1%	6.0%	3.2%	2.7%	0.0%	3.30%
Housewife	0.2%	1.2%	5.8%	8.4%	8.0%	2.20%
Retired	0.1%	0.2%	0.4%	7.0%	76.9%	2.70%
Perception of income						
Just survive	3.2%	7.7%	8.9%	6.1%	5.0%	4.70%
Live discreetly but with many sacrifices	17.3%	23.2%	20.9%	18.9%	12.2%	18.4%
Live decently with some sacrifices	57.9%	52.0%	53.3%	53.5%	57.1%	56.2%
Live without making sacrifices	15.1%	12.3%	12.6%	16.3%	17.6%	14.8%
Rather not answer	6.5%	4.8%	4.3%	5.2%	8.0%	5.9%

3 Results

3.1 Consumption and Everyday Practices toward Sustainability

Our results confirm what emerges from previous research projects showing that concern for environmental sustainability can lead to choosing local products

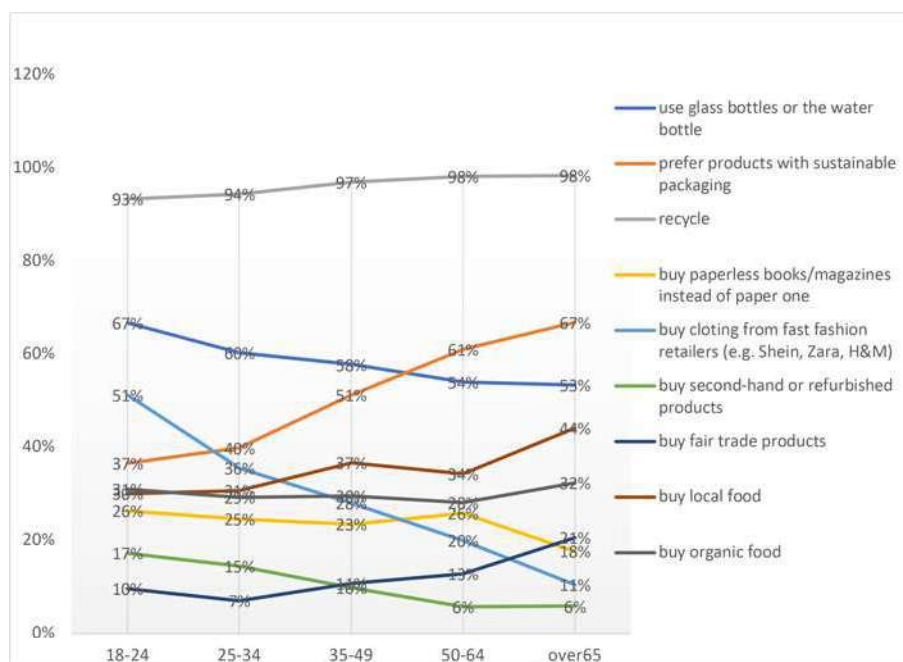
(Balzano and Vianelli, 2020), promoting a reduction in consumption (Shaw and Newholm, 2002), or even adopting an anti-consumption stance (Makri *et al.*, 2020).

As with other attitudes and behaviours, women pay more attention to sustainability, as ISTAT data confirm (2022). However, gender differences are not as pronounced as for concern about environmental and economic sustainability.

Some unsustainable behaviours (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020) are more likely to be shared among young people, such as the purchase of fast-fashion clothing, which gradually decreases with age. On the other hand, the preference for products with sustainable packaging increase with age. Finally, the over-65s are more likely to buy fair trade products or local food.

Thus, contrary to what is repeatedly voiced in the media and what emerges from other national (Ipsos, 2022) and international research (Deloitte, 2022), younger groups appear to be less interested in adopting sustainable behaviours and engaging in critical consumption practises than older participants. As confirmed by ISTAT (2022), interest in environmentally friendly behaviours is not the main characteristic of young age groups (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Thinking about Your Everyday Life How Often...
(Sum of "Much" and "Very Much" by Age Groups)



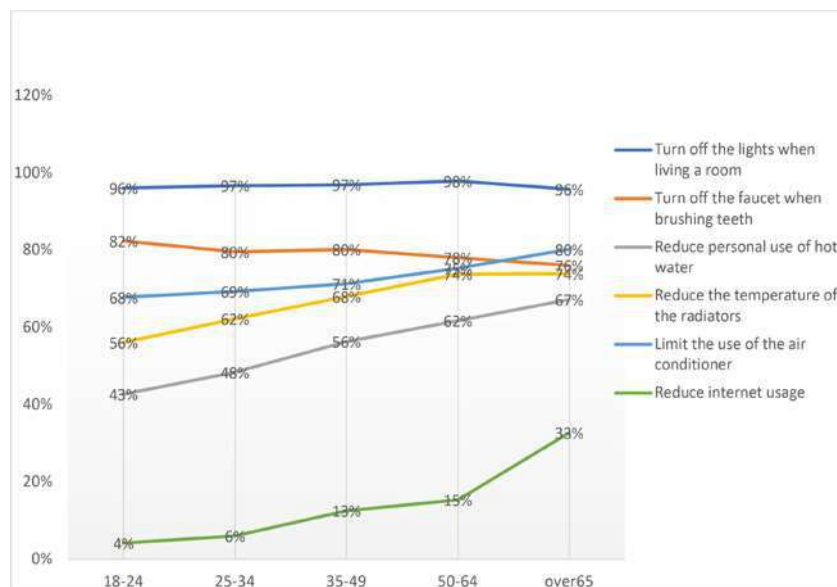
When asked about the sustainable gestures in everyday life, approximately three quarters of respondents always make sure to turn off the lights when leaving a room, the percentage of those who always turn off the tap when brushing their teeth decreases slightly, while other virtuous behaviours are practiced less systematically.

Interestingly, the behaviour that is least likely to change is the use of the Internet, perhaps because it is not so immediately seen as a polluting factor or because it is now perceived as an indispensable tool.

There are not relevant differences between men and women.

Instead, the number of those who embrace sustainable practices increases with age. The only behaviour that adolescents implement more frequently, albeit with a minimal difference from the adult groups, is turning off the faucet while brushing teeth. Finally, the most widespread behaviour that unites all age groups is turning off the lights when leaving the room (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Thinking about Your Everyday Life How Often...
(Sum of "Much" and "Very Much" by Age Groups)



As is known, consumer behavior and sustainable daily practices are influenced by values systems (Samarasinghe, 2012), fears, and hopes for the future (Norgaard, 2009) that will be analyzed in the following sections.

3.2 Consumers' Values

According to Lim *et al.* (2023), in line with the global movement toward environmental-social governance (ESG) and sustainable development goals (SDGs), consumer ethics and sustainable consumption are at the centre of recent consumer research behaviour. In this paper, we look at the two elements, from a ten items table, that according to literature (Mondelaers *et al.*, 2009; Yeng and Yazdanifard, 2015) are most useful in explaining consumers' choices: health and protecting the environment.

As expected, health is very important for 89.3% of respondents, as confirmed by the Coop report (2023).

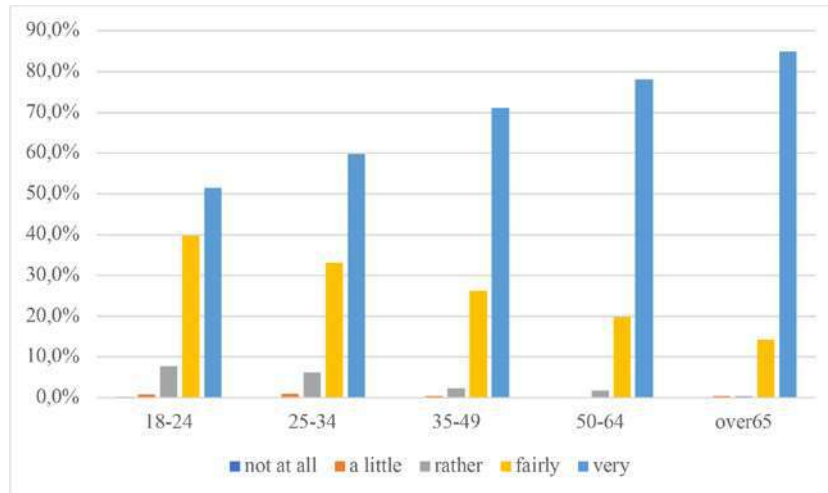
Looking at the data by age group, the results reinforce what other studies (Di Santo, 2023) have also shown: in recent years, health has become an important value for all age groups, including the youngest who used to take it for granted.

The value judgment is generally less strong when it comes to the environment. Again, there are more women (61.6%) than men (53.9%).

Regarding the distribution of results by age, there is a gradual and surprising rise in scores as age increases. This contrasts with the findings of other surveys, which suggest that Millennials or Generation Y and Generation Z are considerably more inclined to take responsibility for the environment compared to Generation X and Baby Boomers (Dwidienawati *et. al.*, 2021).

Despite the extensive media attention given to the Friday for Future movement and the "rhetoric of the new generation of environmental youth movements" (Friberg, 2022, p. 49), the data indicates that there is still a long way to go before young individuals fully grasp the significance of the planet for our survival. Even though they may engage in numerous struggles and challenges for their own well-being and validation, there's a need for them to comprehend the vital connection between the health of the environment and our own health, a concern that is widely acknowledged. Awareness of this seems to be developing over the years (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3. In Your Opinion, How Important is Respect for the Environment?

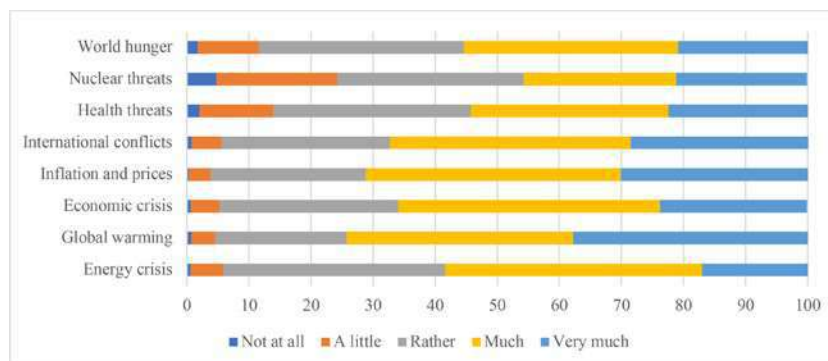


The concept of “eco-anxiety” could explain why the youngest rated the item “respect for the environment” as less important. According to the American Psychology Association (Clayton et al., 2017), eco-anxiety is “the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one’s future and that of next generations”; this fear affects young people in particular (Clayton et al., 2017; Clayton and Karazsia, 2020) and leads to various coping strategies (Ágoston et al., 2022) that promote sustainable practices on the one hand and lead to a kind of apathy waiting for the problem to solve itself on the other.

3.3 Consumers’ Fears

As previous studies confirm (Clayton and Karazsia, 2020), climate change (global warming) is of greatest concern to our respondents (see Fig. 4).

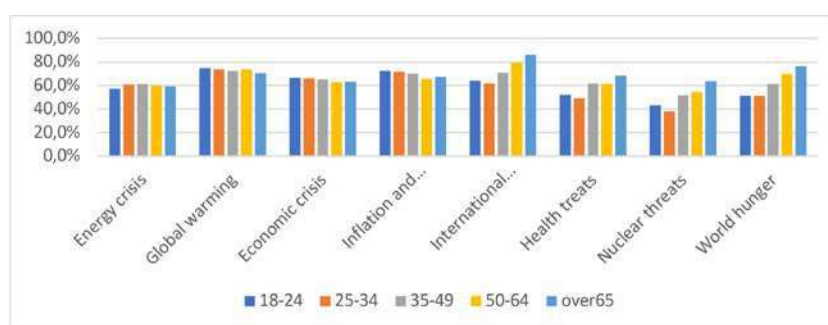
Figure 4. Thinking about the Current Situation, How Worried are You about...



There are notable differences between the level of concern of men and women, which is higher for the latter on all the proposed items.

Analysis of the data by age group reveals that some concerns are cross-cutting and affect all respondents equally, while others increase with age (see Fig. 5).

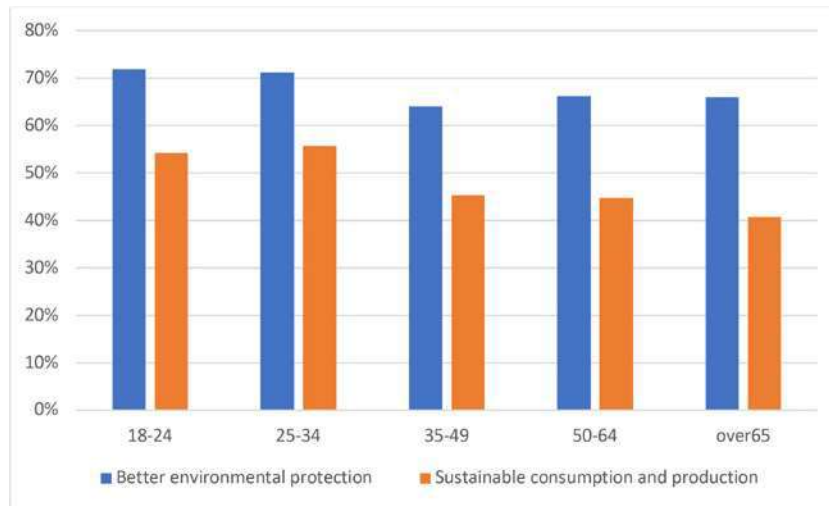
Figure 5. Thinking about the Current Situation, how Worried are you about...
(Sum of "Much" and "Very Much" by age groups)



3.4 Consumers' Wishes for the Future

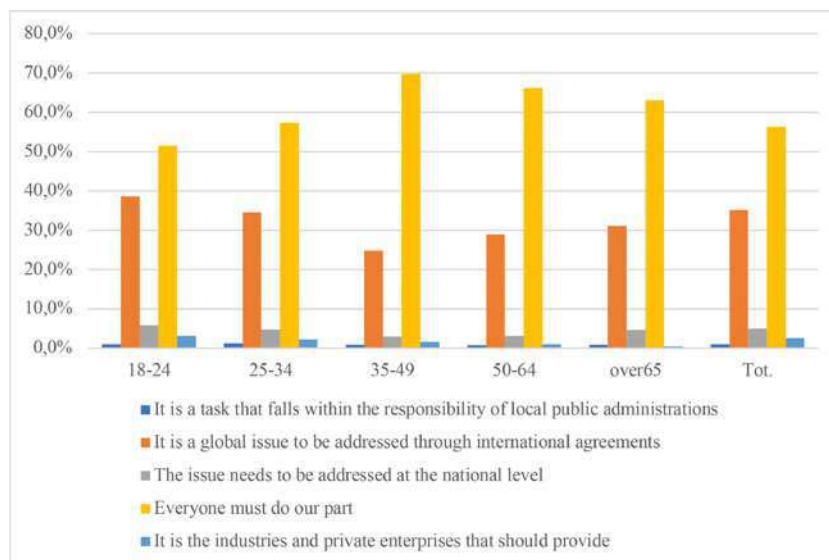
Participants were prompted to envision the world they wish to inhabit in a decade and choose three aspects that hold the highest significance for them. 70.0% named "better environmental protection" and more than half (51.8%) wanted "more sustainable consumption and production" (possible alternatives included "less conflicts", "more equality within countries", "more equality between countries", "more respect for human rights", "better environmental protection", "more sustainable consumption and production", "more employment opportunities", "better access to education", "better access to health care", "more gender equality", and "better management of international migration flows") (see Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Try to Imagine the World you Want to Live in 10 Years from Now. Which are the Three most Important Aspects for You? (by Age Groups)



Speaking of sustainability, more than half of our respondents are aware that everyone has to do their part. The 35-49 age group in particular shares this sense of responsibility, which is reduced to a minimum among younger people (see Fig 7).

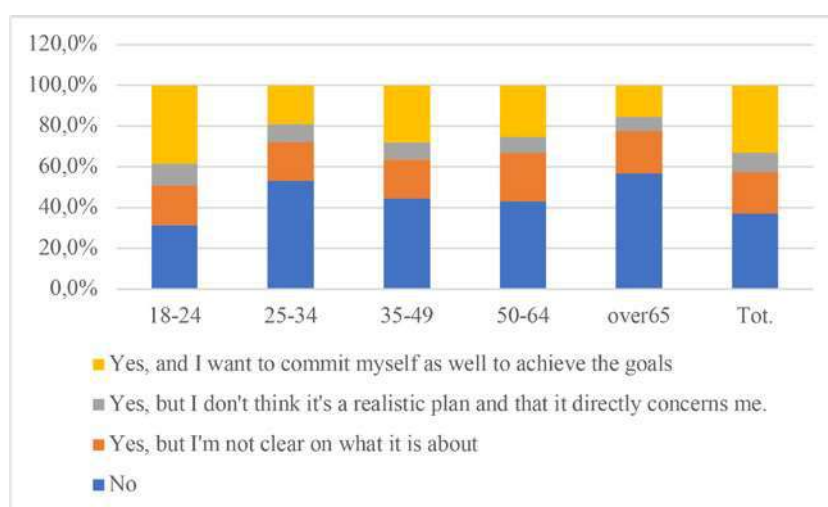
Figure 7. Who do You Think Should Primarily Take Care of Sustainability?



To verify whether respondents had heard of official initiatives in favour of sustainability, including concrete ones, they were asked questions about the 2030 Agenda. More than a third of the sample had never heard of it.

It is primarily the 18-to 24-year-olds who want to get involved, while the next age group is already less invested (see Fig. 8).

Figure 8. Have you Ever Heard of Agenda 2030?



4 Conclusion and Final Remarks

To answer the question “Are Young People Really Concerned about Climate Change?” we have reviewed previous literature and collected primary data. According to our results, climate change is indeed of great concerns for all our informants. In terms of awareness regarding programs beneficial to the health of the planet, the youngest individuals are the ones who are most familiar with the 2030 Agenda’s goals and are willing to implement them.

Younger generations aspire, slightly more significantly than older people, to a future where the environment is better protected and characterized by more sustainable consumption and production. However, when asked about values, young people attach great importance to their own health and - compared to older age groups - appear to value less the health of the planet. It seems that, on younger generations, the years marked by pandemic-related fears have exerted a more significant influence than Greta Thunberg’s environmental movements.

When it comes to determining who is responsible for taking care of the health of the planet, most respondents believe in individual responsibility, but younger people seem to be less inclined to act on this belief, resulting in less emphasis on buying sustainable products or packaging and adopting energy-saving practices.

Our results confirm those of other research (Istat, 2022), which suggest that young people, even if very concerned about the climate change, seem to be more reluctant to adopt sustainable behaviours compared to older generations. In this sense, the consumption choices of young people are influenced by the well-known gap between attitudes and behaviours, typical of sustainable consumption (Carrington *et al.*, 2010; Vieira *et al.*, 2023).

A limitation of the study resides in the non-probabilistic convenience sample that does not allow generalising the results to the Italian population. Nevertheless, the sample's size enabled us to conduct significant comparisons, even among less represented groups.

Further inquiry could incorporate an examination of the influence of eco-anxiety (Clayton *et al.*, 2017) on young people's perspectives regarding the link between personal well-being and planetary health. This is especially relevant given our findings suggesting a notable prioritization of personal health over environmental concerns.

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Notes

1. Corresponding author: ariela.mortara@iulm.it. The research project was funded by IULM University of Milan and conducted as part of the course «Sociology of Change in the Digital Age».
2. The paper is the joint work of its two authors. However, following standard academic practice, it should be mentioned that Ariela Mortara wrote paragraphs 1, 2, 4 and Rosantonieta Scramaglia wrote paragraph 3.