

# **A comparison of consumption values and intentions to purchase environmentally friendly products across generations: the moderating role of individual priorities**

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## **Abstract**

Faced with the climate emergency and increasing pressure on natural resources, sustainable consumption has become a central issue for governments, businesses, and citizens. Understanding the determinants of responsible purchasing behavior is therefore essential to encourage more sustainable consumption patterns. Among these determinants, generational differences and individual priorities are attracting growing interest in the academic literature. The aim of this study is to compare responsible consumption values and intentions to purchase environmentally friendly products between different generations (Z, Y, X and baby-boomers), while examining the moderating role of individual priorities. The data was collected using a face-to-face questionnaire administered to 203 respondents. The results show that generation Z has the highest levels of both responsible consumption values and intentions to purchase environmentally friendly products, followed by generation Y. However, no significant differences were observed between generation X and baby-boomers. Furthermore, the results reveal that individual priorities (environmental vs. economic) significantly moderate the relationship between generation type and responsible consumption values and purchase intentions, but only for generations Z and Y compared with baby-boomers.

**Key words:** Generational cohort, sustainability, consumption values, purchases intention, individual priorities.

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## **1. Introduction**

Today we live in a world facing a triple global environmental crisis, characterized by the growing and alarming effects of climate change, the accelerated erosion of biodiversity, and the intensification of various forms of pollution, particularly plastic-related pollution (Smith and Brisman, 2021). These global challenges, which spare no country, call for urgent collective action. In this context, Tunisia is deploying ambitious public policies aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change, preserving biodiversity and combating pollution. These initiatives are part of an approach to environmental sustainability and building resilience to future crises and disasters (Tunisian Ministry of the Environment, 2024). At the same time, companies are taking a strategic position by integrating approaches aimed at reducing their environmental footprint, while contributing to social well-being and improving their economic performance (Nichols and Holt, 2023). This dynamic reflects growing consumer awareness of the environmental impact of production and consumption methods. In response, marketers are

increasingly using environmental claims to appeal to customers who want to make responsible choices (Nichols and Holt, 2023).

Although there is growing interest in responsible consumption both in academic circles (Leary et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2017) and within the marketing community (Nichols and Holt, 2023), the majority of existing research focuses principally on young consumers. This focus is largely explained by the fact that sustainable marketing campaigns frequently target this age group (Fischer et al., 2017; Kadic-Maglajilic et al., 2019; Somad et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this focus creates a gap in the literature on intergenerational comparison, limiting marketers' ability to identify the most strategic generational segments for optimal resource deployment (Ham et al., 2022). However, individual priorities (economic vs. environmental) can play a crucial role in shaping responsible consumption values and intentions to purchase environmentally-friendly products. Indeed, some people may favour economic support measures, such as subsidies for basic necessities (bread, sugar, fuel) or social assistance programs, to the detriment of environmental issues. Conversely, others may give greater importance to environmental issues, which may guide their choices towards environmentally friendly products (Lundquist, 2024). This divide in priorities may influence not only individual behavior, but also the level of public support for environmental policies. In the absence of sufficient societal support, governments may be reluctant to implement ambitious environmental protection policies (Anderson et al., 2017). It is therefore essential to analyse the extent to which these priorities vary between generations, and how they influence responsible consumption values and intentions to purchase environmentally-friendly products. Indeed, these priorities may be shaped by the specific concerns of each generational cohort. Such an analysis would enable companies and public decision-makers to better target their strategies in order to encourage environmentally-friendly purchasing behaviour. It would also help to identify the generations most receptive to environmental messages, thereby optimising the impact of public policies and awareness campaigns. From this perspective, the aim of this research is to compare the values of responsible consumption and intentions to purchase environmentally-friendly products across generations, incorporating individual priorities as a moderating variable. It seeks to answer the following two research questions:

- Do responsible consumption values and purchase intentions for environmentally friendly products differ between generational cohorts?
- Do individual priorities moderate the effect of generation type on responsible consumption values and intentions to purchase environmentally friendly products?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Sustainable attitudes and behavior across generations**

Age is commonly considered to be one of the main predictors of differences in behavior and attitudes (Nichols and Holt, 2023). From this perspective, analyzing sustainable consumption through the prism of generational cohorts can offer particularly enlightening insights. Generational cohorts correspond to groups of individuals born over the same period, generally around twenty years, who have been exposed to similar historical events and societal trends. This approach is based on the generational cohort theory (Inglehart, 1977), according to which the experiences of early adulthood tend to shape the values, attitudes and behaviors of individuals, which

persist throughout their lives. The generational cohort theory thus makes it possible to understand how specific socio-cultural contexts profoundly influence the value systems and consumption patterns of different generations (Sanchez-Bravo et al., 2021). Unlike approaches based only on age, this theory highlights lasting generational effects, shaped by economic, political and social events which influence attitudes and consumption behavior (Nichols and Holt, 2023). In this sense, the generational cohort theory provides a relevant analytical framework for understanding intergenerational disparities in consumption values and intentions to purchase environmentally-friendly products. It is therefore essential for a better understanding of the dynamics of responsible consumption behavior across generations.

Marketers often find that cohort analysis is a useful tool to better understand consumer behaviors and attitudes, particularly in terms of how these change over time (Nichols and Holt, 2023). For example, generations X and Y are generally more attentive to environmental information on food labels, as well as to more complex nutritional aspects, such as the local origin of food, than baby-boomers and generation Z (Sanchez-Bravo et al., 2021). In addition, several researchers have highlighted the emergence of post-materialistic values among younger generations, suggesting that Millennials (or generation Y) are particularly aware of and concerned about environmental issues (Fien et al., 2008; Hwang and Griffiths, 2017; Heo and Muralidharan, 2019). For example, younger Chinese consumers are found to be more inclined to adopt economic behaviors, such as buying second-hand clothes, compared to older generations (Liang and Xu, 2018). However, this trend appears to be driven differently across age groups: while consumers born after the 1990s are driven more by a desire for uniqueness and perceived value for money, those born in the 1970s and 1980s are more likely to invoke environmental values. Heo and Muralidharan (2019) also demonstrated that, among American Millennials, environmental knowledge is a key determinant of green purchasing behavior. In the same vein, Severo et al (2021) revealed that Millennial consumers in Brazil and Portugal were more sensitive to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the need to engage in sustainable consumption, compared to older generations. Generally speaking, the work summarized in the meta-analysis by Kamenidou et al. (2020) confirms that Millennials are characterized by increased familiarity with sustainable food consumption practices, as well as an overall more favorable attitude towards them. However, this sensitivity does not seem to be exclusive to this generation: a systematic review by Dabija et al. (2019) suggests that generation Z may be even more engaged in preserving the environment, surpassing previous generations. Thus, despite the evolution of consumer attitudes and behaviors across generations, research is converging towards the recognition of marked generational divides when it comes to sustainable consumption (Gelski, 2019). These studies highlight the specific characteristics of younger generations, who appear to be more aware, although their motivations vary. More recently, Nichols and Holt (2023) have shown that younger consumers have more positive attitudes and a greater interest in sustainable consumption, whereas baby-boomers are less receptive overall, particularly to environmental messages. Our hypotheses are therefore as follows:

***H1: Generation Z have stronger responsible consumption values than generations Y, X and baby-boomers.***

***H2: Generation Z have stronger purchasing intentions for environmentally friendly products than generations Y, X and baby-boomers.***

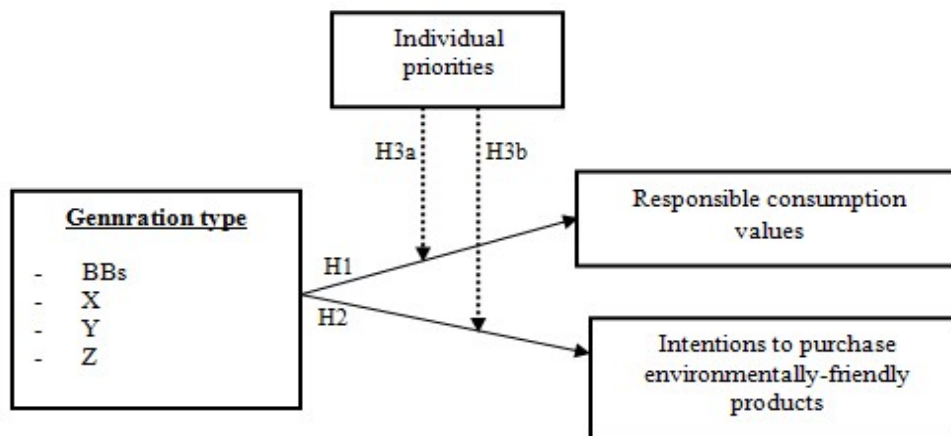
## 2.2 The role of individual priorities

The compromise between economic and environmental concerns, which has been studied extensively in the literature, shows that individual priorities tend to fluctuate depending on the economic context. In times of uncertainty or crisis, economic considerations generally take precedence over environmental issues. This dynamic is in line with the hierarchy of needs established by Maslow (1943), according to which basic needs, such as economic security, dominate human motivations and relegate environmental concerns to a secondary level. To complement this, Weber (2010) proposes the concept of a “limited pool of worry”, according to which individuals have a limited emotional capacity to manage several concerns simultaneously. Thus, in a context marked by economic tensions, the attention paid to environmental issues tends to fade in favor of concerns perceived as more immediate or urgent.

Empirically, previous research highlights nuanced dynamics that vary across contexts. For example, Kachi et al (2015) observed that economic security positively influenced support for environmental policies in the United States, while no significant correlation was found in Germany. For their part, Benedetta and Vincenzo (2020) found that, despite the 2008 financial crisis, environmental concerns within the European Union remained relatively stable, suggesting a resilience of environmental priorities in the face of economic instability. Furthermore, several studies question the existence of a systematic link between economic well-being and environmental concerns. Mildemberger and Leiserowitz (2017), for example, found no significant correlation between level of economic well-being and climate change beliefs. Similarly, Bakaki and Bernauer (2018) concluded that economic crises did not significantly affect support for climate mitigation policies in Brazil. Even more, Mayer and Smith (2017) showed that individuals directly affected by the 2008 crisis showed increased concern about climate change, which runs counter to expectations derived from the classic trade-off between economy and environment. In this context, the concept of “attitudinal decoupling”, proposed by Lundquist (2024), provides an innovative theoretical insight. It refers to situations in which environmental priorities evolve independently of economic cycles.

The meta-analysis conducted by Wiernik et al (2013) highlights that the literature on the influence of age or generation on pro-environmental concerns and behavior remains inconclusive. Indeed, the results of research in this area are mixed. On the one hand, some authors argue that younger generations adopt behaviors that reinforce the idea of a society increasingly focused on consumption and having a negative impact on the environment (Carr et al., 2012). On the other hand, several studies show that young people are more sensitive to ecological issues and tend to adopt pro-environmental attitudes (Egan & Mullin, 2012; Kvaløy et al., 2012). In comparison, baby boomers are often described as having a strong sense of economy, a characteristic attributed to the context of scarcity in which they grew up (Carr et al., 2012). This experience is thought to encourage a certain sobriety and a tendency to under-consume. Furthermore, some research has found very few differences between generations when it comes to self-reported sustainable consumption behavior (Huttunen and Autio, 2010; Bulut et al., 2017). According to Gray et al. (2019), generational differences are not sufficient to explain the observed differences in environmental concerns. Rather, individual priorities and personal values - including the importance attached to the environment - appear to play a key role. Based on the above-mentioned literature, the following hypothesis was formulated:

**H3: Individual priorities (economic vs. environmental) moderate the effect of generation type on (a) responsible consumption values and (b) intentions to purchase environmentally-friendly products.**



**Figure 1: Conceptual model**

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1 Data collection method and sample

In order to obtain a more diverse sample and increase the external validity of the results, data collection was conducted using a face-to-face questionnaire administered in the field. Respondents were randomly selected, primarily in shopping malls, stores, and other public places. Respondents were informed that their answers would be anonymous and that there would be no right or wrong answers, in accordance with the ethical principles in force. The initial sample consisted of 205 participants. However, in the interests of methodological rigor and to ensure data quality, incomplete questionnaires were discarded, in line with the recommendations of Jia et al. (2017). The final sample size was 203 respondents. After complete data collection, the sample was segmented into four generational cohorts (Z, Y, X, and baby boomers), following the classification proposed by Wolfe (2020): baby boomers (1946-1964), generation X (1965-1980), generation Y (1981-1996), and generation Z (1997-2010). Both genders were well represented, with 54.7% females and 45.3% males. The average age of participants was 42.32 years, with an age range of 16 to 71 years. Most participants had at least a primary school education.

#### 3.2 Measures

In order to measure the variables, we relied on scales taken from the literature and adapted to the context of our study (Table 1). To measure responsible consumption values, the Haws et al. (2014) scale was used. This scale is a seven-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), composed of 3 items and a single dimension, and measures tendencies to express the value of environmental protection through purchases and consumption values. Intention to purchase environmentally friendly products was measured using a 4-item Likert scale (from 1 'no impact' to 7 'major impact') developed and adapted by Nichols and Holt (2023). In line with the measure adopted in previous studies, such as those by Birch (2020), Kenny (2020), Gugushvili (2021) and Lundquist (2024), the measure of individual priorities is based on a single question asking respondents to choose between the following statements: a) 'Protecting the environment should be a priority, even if it results in slower economic growth and job losses', b) 'Economic growth and job creation should be the top priority, even

if the environment suffers'. This variable is coded 1 if an individual responded that the environment should take priority over economic growth and 0 if the respondent indicated that job creation and economic growth should take priority.

The reliability and validity of the measurement scales were assessed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The results obtained (see Table 2) indicate that all the scales used have satisfactory levels of reliability and validity.

**Table 1: Measures**

Item	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
<b>Responsible consumption values</b>	.837	.838	.633
It is important to me that the products I use do not harm the environment	.802		
I consider the potential environmental impact of my actions when making purchase decisions	.789		
I would describe myself as environmentally responsible	.795		
<b>Intention to purchase environmentally friendly products</b>	.901	.909	.715
How much impact do products that contribute to sustainability have on your grocery purchase decisions?	.813		
How much impact do products that has responsibly sourced ingredients have on your grocery purchase decisions?	.807		
	.801		
	.816		

#### 4. Results

In order to test the first two hypotheses (H1 and H2), two ANOVA analyses with Tukey post-hoc were carried out. The use of this analysis is particularly relevant, as it allows us to compare the averages of consumption values and purchase intentions for environmentally-friendly products between several generational groups. The results of the first ANOVA analysis (Table 2) showed a statistically significant difference between the groups ( $F(3,199) = 32.050$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .326$ ). The score for responsible consumption values was highest for generation Z ( $M_{\text{Generation Z}} = 4.59$ ), followed by generation Y ( $M_{\text{Generation Y}} = 3.80$ ), generation X ( $M_{\text{Generation X}} = 2.80$ ) and generation BBs ( $M_{\text{Generation BBs}} = 2.74$ ). Post-hoc analyses (Table 2) revealed that the average difference between generation Z and the other generation groups was statistically significant. Similarly, the difference between generation Y and generations X and baby-boomers was statistically significant. On the other hand, no statistically significant difference was observed between generation X and the baby-boomers. Consequently, when it comes to responsible consumption values, generation Z stands out with the highest score, followed by generation Y, while generation X and baby-boomers show the lowest scores. *Hence, hypothesis H1 is supported.*

The results of the second ANOVA analysis (Table 2) showed a statistically significant difference between the groups ( $F(3,199) = 79.995$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .547$ ). The intention to purchase environmentally friendly grocery products was highest for generation Z ( $M_{\text{Generation Z}} = 5.33$ ), followed by generation Y ( $M_{\text{Generation Y}} = 3.82$ ), generation X ( $M_{\text{Generation X}} = 3.22$ ) and generation BBs ( $M_{\text{Generation BBs}} = 3.12$ ). Post-hoc analyses (Table 2) revealed that the average difference between generation Z and the other generation groups was statistically significant. Similarly, the difference between generation Y and generations X and baby-boomers was statistically significant. On the other hand, no statistically significant difference was observed between generation X and the baby-boomers. As a result, when it comes to purchase intentions for environmentally-friendly grocery products,

generation Z stands out with the highest score, followed by generation Y, while generation X and baby-boomers show the lowest scores. *Hence, hypothesis H2 is supported.*

**Table 2: Results of ANOVA with post-hoc analyses**

Dependent variable	Independent variable: Generation type						
	BBs (N=50)	X (N=51)	Y (N=56)	Z (N=46)	F	p	Eta <sup>2</sup>
	M	M	M	M			
Responsible consumption values	2.74	2.80	3.80	4.59	32.050	.000	.326
Intention to purchase environmentally friendly products	3.12	3.22	3.82	.533	79.995	.000	.547
Post-Hoc							
Dependent variable	(I) Generation	(J) Generation	Mean difference (I-J)		Signification		
Responsible consumption values	BBs	X	-.06		.991		
		Y	-1.06*		.000		
		Z	-1.85*		.000		
	X	BBs	.06		.991		
		Y	-1.00*		.000		
		Z	-1.78*		.000		
	Y	BBs	1.06*		.000		
		X	1.00*		.000		
		Z	-.78*		.002		
	Z	BBs	1.85*		.000		
		X	1.78*		.000		
		Y	.78*		.002		
Intention to purchase environmentally friendly products	BBs	X	-,10		,928		
		Y	-,70*		,000		
		Z	-2,21*		,000		
	X	BBs	,10		,928		
		Y	-,61*		,001		
		Z	-2,11*		,000		
	Y	BBs	,70*		,000		
		X	,61*		,001		
		Z	-1,50*		,000		
	Z	BBs	2,21*		,000		
		X	2,11*		,000		
		Y	1,50*		,000		

To test the moderating effect of individual priorities, two moderation analyses using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) model 1, with 5000 bootstraps were performed. The generational cohort was a multi-category independent variable using indicator coding. The results of the first analysis (Table 2) indicate that Generation Z and Generation Y have significantly higher responsible consumption values than Baby Boomers ( $B_{\text{Generation Z}} = 1.15$ ,  $p = .000$ ;  $B_{\text{Generation Y}} = .99$ ,  $p = .01$ ). On the other hand, Generation X have similar responsible consumption values to Baby Boomers ( $B_{\text{Generation X}} = .11$ ,  $p = .46$ ). The results also reveal that individual priorities (coded 1 if an individual considers that the environment should take priority over economic growth, and 0 if job creation and economic growth are considered priorities) significantly moderate the relationship between generation and responsible consumption values, but only for generations Z and Y compared to Baby Boomers ( $B_{\text{X3* Individual priorities}} = .83$ ,  $p = .000$ ;  $B_{\text{X2* Individual priorities}} = .77$ ,  $p = .004$ ), which shows that environmental



priorities (as opposed to economic priorities) accentuate the relationship between generational cohort and responsible consumption values. Consequently, the moderating role of individual priorities is conditioned by cohort. Consequently, the moderating role of individual priorities is conditioned by generational cohort. *Hence, hypothesis H3a is supported.*

**Table 3: Results of moderation analyses (Hayes' Macro PROCESS, model 1)**

	Responsible consumption values			Intention to purchase environmentally friendly products		
	B	t	p	B	t	p
Gen X vs. Baby Boomer (X1)	.11	.75	.46	.27	.87	.39
Gen Y vs. Baby Boomer (X2)	.99	2.76	.01	1.30	3.17	.000
Gen Z vs. Baby Boomer (X3)	1.15	5.39	.000	1.69	10.72	.000
Individual priorities (W)	1.03	4.96	.000	1.05	3.71	.000
X1* Individual priorities	-.20	-.48	.63	-.18	-.62	.54
X2* Individual priorities	.77	2.03	.004	.85	2.96	.000
X3* Individual priorities	.83	2.88	.000	.88	3.07	.000

The results of the second analysis (Table 3) show that generation Z and generation Y have significantly higher purchase intentions for environmentally-friendly grocery products than Baby Boomers ( $B_{Generation\ Z} = 1.69$ ,  $p = .000$ ;  $B_{Generation\ Y} = 1.30$ ,  $p = .000$ ). On the other hand, Generation X had similar purchase intentions for environmentally-friendly products to Baby Boomers ( $B_{Generation\ X} = .27$ ,  $p = .39$ ). The results also reveal that individual priorities significantly moderate the relationship between generation and purchase intentions for environmentally friendly grocery products, but only for generations Z and Y compared to Baby Boomers ( $B_{X3* Individual\ priorities} = .88$ ,  $p = .000$ ;  $B_{X2* Individual\ priorities} = .85$ ,  $p = .000$ ), which shows that environmental priorities (compared to economic priorities) accentuate the relationship between generational cohort and intentions to purchase environmentally friendly grocery products. Consequently, the moderating role of individual priorities is conditioned by generational cohort. *Hence, hypothesis H3b is supported.*

## 5. Discussion

This study compared consumption values and purchase intentions for environmentally-friendly grocery products between generations (Z, Y, X and BBs), incorporating individual priorities as a moderator. Firstly, the results show that generation Z has the highest scores in terms of responsible consumption values and purchase intentions for environmentally-friendly grocery products, followed by generation Y. These results support the work of Dabija et al (2019) and Nichols and Holt (2023), who highlighted that younger generations, particularly generation Z, are the most oriented towards preserving the environment. This can be attributed to growing post-materialistic values among these generations, as highlighted by Fien et al. (2008) and Hwang and Griffiths (2017). These values include an increased awareness of environmental issues and a willingness to take action to mitigate them. Furthermore, in line with generational cohort theory (Inglehart, 1977), the differences observed can be explained by the collective experiences of each generation in early adulthood. For example, generation Z grew up in a context where climate concerns were omnipresent, which could explain their greater engagement in preserving the environment. The significant differences between younger generations (Z and Y) and older generations (X and baby-boomers) are in line with research by Gelski (2019), which indicates marked generational divides in sustainable consumption. These differences could also reflect changing social norms and



awareness campaigns targeted at younger consumers, reinforcing their interest in environmentally friendly products. The lack of a significant difference between Generation X and baby boomers is consistent with studies showing that older generations often share similar attitudes, but are less engaged overall than younger generations (Nichols and Holt, 2023). This could be due to less exposure to educational campaigns or to individual priorities focused more on economic concerns.

The results of this study also highlight the moderating role of individual priorities in the relationship between generation type and responsible consumption values, as well as purchase intentions for environmentally friendly grocery products, but only for generations Z and Y compared with baby boomers. These results add to the debate on the economy-environment trade-off, widely studied in the literature, where environmental priorities are often relegated to second place in times of economic uncertainty, as Weber (2010) suggests. However, the stronger relationship between younger generations and consumption values and purchase intentions for environmentally friendly products, when they prioritize the environment, is consistent with the “bottom-up decoupling” described by Lundquist (2024), where environmental priorities increase independently of economic conditions. These results are also in line with the work of Benedetta and Vincenzo (2020), which showed that environmental priorities can persist despite economic crises, and with that of Mayer and Smith (2017), who observed an increase in environmental concerns among individuals affected by the 2008 economic crisis. This dynamic could be attributed to increased awareness among younger generations, a trend documented by Egan and Mullin (2012) and Kvaløy et al. (2012), who highlight their greater propensity to display pro-environmental attitudes. In contrast, Baby Boomers, who are often associated with a cautious economic orientation due to the historical contexts of their youth (Carr et al., 2012), show themselves to be less influenced by environmental priorities.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study contributes to the literature by deepening our understanding of generational differences in sustainable consumption, while incorporating individual priorities as a moderator. First, this research extends generational cohort theory by combining socio-demographic factors with personal values to explain consumption values and sustainable purchase intentions. In addition, it enriches the existing literature on generational differences in sustainable consumption, by highlighting the important role of individual priorities in the adoption of responsible behavior. From a managerial point of view, this study offers valuable insights for those involved in environmental communication, particularly NGOs, public organizations and companies. It highlights the importance of adapting marketing strategies to take account of generational differences, by adjusting messages, communication channels and offerings to the specific expectations, values and preferences of each cohort. In addition, it would be appropriate to develop targeted educational campaigns, particularly aimed at Generation X and baby-boomers, highlighting the practical and economic benefits of environmentally-friendly products. This could involve explanatory content, user testimonials or impact comparators. Finally, it is essential to tailor marketing messages to consumers' individual priorities. For example, for generation X and baby-boomers, it is often more effective to focus on concrete, tangible arguments - such as health benefits, sustainability or practicality - rather than purely ecological messages.

Although this study makes significant theoretical and managerial contributions, it has certain limitations that open up interesting perspectives for future research. Firstly, the sample was drawn exclusively from Tunisia, which may restrict the scope and generalizability of the results to other cultural contexts. To overcome this

limitation, it would be relevant to test the proposed model in other countries or on other populations, and then compare the results in order to assess the cross-cultural robustness of the conclusions (Kachi et al., 2015; Nichols & Holt, 2023). Secondly, the analysis focused on the moderating role of individual priorities (environmental vs. economic). It would therefore be useful to extend this approach by integrating other moderating variables likely to influence responsible consumption values and sustainable purchasing intentions, such as gender and income level (Park and Lin, 2020; Nichols and Holt, 2023).

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