

WHAT WOULD THE YOUNGER GENERATION GIVE UP FOR A BETTER, MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?

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The UN defined sustainability as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. That partly means to satisfy the needs of the present and to live a happy and contented life. At the same time, this also means that we should give up remaining within the ecological limits of the Earth. This is one of the major challenges of our century. The PRME Youth Talks survey asked young people how they see the world: what they hope for and what they fear for the future. The questions included a block on what they would and would not give up for a better future. Among the responses were several issues related to sustainability. Based on 80 PRME interviews, this research aims to explore younger generations' opinions about conscious consumption. We found that young people are willing to sacrifice are material consumption, their free time and personal ambitions. This generation seems to be ready to work for a sustainable future.

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1 Introduction

The consumption pattern of the industrialized world is overusing the resources of the Earth (Chen et al, 2022). Besides governments and companies, consumers also have to change their behaviour to be more sustainable. A socially responsible consumer is an individual who considers the externalities of his/her private consumption with respect to environmental and general social concerns (Han & Stoel, 2017). Responsible sustainable consumer behaviour involves a complex pattern of environmental and social issues, in line with the view of sustainability as a construct with both environmental and social pillars (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). Webb et al., (2008) identified three possible dimensions of socially responsible consumption: (1) purchasing based on corporate social responsibility practices, (2) recycling, and (3) rejecting or reducing the purchase of environmentally and/or socially harmful products. The latter category is at the centre of our analysis and leads to our research question: what are those things which young adults are ready to give up for a better future?

For the qualitative analysis we use the interviews of the international project “Youth Talks” of Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). PRME uniquely gathers the opinion of the young generation (15-29 years old) by using open-ended questions to understand their needs, hopes, and fears in connection with topics like climate change, meaningful work and education.

2 Theoretical Background / Literature Review

White et al. (2019) tried to identify the key drivers of sustainable consumption change. Their SHIFT framework highlights the role of (1) social influence, (2) habit information, (3) individual self, (4) feelings and cognition and (5) tangibility in motivating the change in consumer behaviour. Descriptive norms as the dominant behaviour, beliefs and norms of a reference group (Gelfand & Harrington, 2015) have a fundamental influence on the behaviour. Social identity also plays an important role in consumption, - especially in the elements of consumption that are visible to others. If consumers are members of a group in which sustainable behaviour is common, then it has a high probability that they will behave similarly (Han and Stoel, 2017). The role of different reference groups' norms is especially important when we focus on young adults. Finally, White et al. (2019) mention social

desirability, which is the reason why consumers try to make positive impressions on others by choosing sustainable products (Green and Peloza 2014).

Behavioural change for sustainability means people should change their habits – how they dress, what they eat, how they travel, and how they relax. In this way, being more responsible for using the limited resources of the earth, some convenience must be sacrificed. The voluntary simplicity movement for example tries to redefine what a good life means, and two aspects of it are to reduce the quantity of consumption and purchase products that are good socially and ecologically (Chen et al. 2022). Win-win decisions are those which may become most popular (e.g. which provide financial savings or health benefits besides being good for the environment), but those are more challenging and cause both inconvenience and higher costs. For example, convincing people to eat meat alternatives should promise that the taste is very similar, but it is healthier, good for the animals and its production uses less water (Font-i-Furnols, 2023).

The self-concept on the one hand can reassure sustainable consumption by strengthening the positive feelings toward us, that we take care of others and respect them, but also people want to express themselves through what they have, and what they consume. Therefore, self-consistency has a relevant effect on the final behaviour (White et al. 2019). Feelings and cognition also play important roles in changing behaviour. Of course, education and sharing knowledge on different channels about environmental and social issues can form young adults' behaviour, but besides the cognitive way, also an effective way of convincing them can work. In this case, both positive and negative feelings can make a change. Different sources have already studied climate- or eco-anxiety (Kurth & Pikhala, 2022; Boluda-Verdú et al. 2022), which may result in stress, depression and a lack of hope for the future. Almost half of 10000 young people (aged 16-25) asked in 10 different countries say their feelings about climate change are negatively affecting their daily lives, and 77% say they face a scary future because of climate change, (Hickman et al. 2021).

If eco-anxiety is a practical anxiety, which means that a person is uncertain what the right thing to do and how to handle ecological challenges, then it results in questions like these: „Should I have a child given the risk that climate change poses to her future? Should I change my profession, or should I try to bring more environmental responsibility into the job that I have? Should I spend more time raising awareness

about climate change in my community—and should I do that even if it means spending less time with my family?“ (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022, p.6.) Some personality traits like altruism have also been proven a good indicator of both environmentally correct purchase and resource-saving activities (Ribeiro et al. 2016).

The tangibility of the outcomes of sustainability behaviour is another aspect which would motivate people to change (White et al, 2019). Sometimes the results of these efforts cannot be measured or only may influence the environment in the long term, which makes it difficult to be supported by prompt actions now.

A sustainable lifestyle may mean different consumption (e.g. considering raw materials and ingredients) but also mean sacrifices by giving up things we have already gotten used to (e.g. convenience or cheap products). Considering what to give up, it is crucial to know what those fields in household consumption are which could significantly decrease the environmental impact of their behaviour. Spangenberg & Lorek (2002) mention that construction and housing, food and nutrition and transport and mobility are those areas which responsible for two-thirds of material extraction and energy consumption and 90 % of land use. Therefore, these are the areas where households and young people should revise their decisions.

Focusing on gender differences, former studies found significant gender differences in sustainable consumption behaviour, underlying that women show strong concern about the effects on their consumption decisions (Luchs & Mooradian, 2012; Wyrwa et al, 2023). A good example of the complex ecological footprint analysis of university students showed that students' ecological footprint was slightly lower than the national average and male students had significantly higher ecological footprint than female students (Medina & Toledo-Bruno, 2016).

3 Methodology

The Higher Education for Good Foundation (HE4G) created the Youth Talks (YT) Survey as a part of Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) which is a United Nations-supported initiative founded in 2007. HE4G specifically focuses on young people aged between 15-29. One segment of this worldwide extended study is a semi-structured interview round where 78 interviews were carried out and transcribed. The interviews conducted spanned approximately 15 to

20 minutes each and were carried out in diverse locations. YT tried to cover every region of the world. All interviews have been transcribed for thorough analysis. Access to the video interviews is available via the website, and the authors have permission to access the corresponding transcriptions. The transcriptions were explored with NVivo12.

Altogether 38 males, 39 females and 1 nonbinary interviewee participated from 12 countries (see Table 1.), whose average age was 23.8 years.

Table 1: Sample size by countries

Country	Number of respondents	Country	Number of respondents
Australia	6	Lebanon	6
Brazil	8	Morocco	6
China	6	Philippines	6
Finland	6	Romania	6
France	8	South Africa	6
Ivory Coast	6	USA	8
Total		78	

Source: own elaboration

The interview guide contained chapters and in total of 11 question boxes, one question box was selected for this study. Participants were asked that “to build a desired future, what they would be ready to give up”. Young people are faced with a dilemma, choosing between their present needs and their desires for a sustainable future. Their responses reflect this dilemma, as well.

The examination happened in two phases, firstly the auto-coding revealed the most frequently used expression and afterwards based on the synonyms a topic-relevant code book was automatically created.

4 Results

Firstly, the word cloud was created which shows the 50 frequently used (at least 3 letters long) words. Here stemmed words were merged, too.



Figure 1: Word cloud

Source: own elaboration

As Figure 1 shows, mostly, linking words are listed. Only three relevant expressions can be discovered “*materials*”, “*comfort*” and “*love*”. That is why, we continued with topic-relevant auto coding where the synonyms were also handled and the entire sentences (i.e. the environment of an expression were also considered). The first version was pre-evaluated, and the separated but semantically close nodes have been merged. Table 2. provides a summary of relevant topics.

Table 2: Results of auto coding: code book with examples of what to give up

Name	Description
comfort	Subcodes: comfort zone; comfortable situation; comfortable things; extreme comfort <i>I think it's a comfort zone, as the name suggests, it's a place you stay in and it's comfortable. ... So I would be ready, yes, to step out of my comfort zone so that everything can change and the wishes that I have for the future, the concerns that I have can really change and come true. (male, 22, Brazilian)</i>
life	Subcodes: day life; material life; personal life; real life; reasonable life; whole life <i>Actually facing my passion and real life, I'm ready to give up what I like. (male, 25, Chinese)</i> <i>I would be ready to give up things, how to say... ways of living (female, 23 French)</i>
material	Subcode: anything material; material things; fossil materials; material life; material stuff; <i>I would say anything material I would be ready to give up. (female, 29, Finnish)</i> <i>I would also be willing to give up many other things, such as material things. (female, 26, Finnish)</i>
meat	Subcodes: eating meat; meat consumption, overall consumption; <i>I could stop eating meat first of all, because we know it's a product. (male, 20, French)</i>
question	Subcodes: difficult question; great question; interesting question; tough question <i>So it's quite a tough question to say today, well, what am I ready to give up? (female, 28, French)</i>

Name	Description
<i>It's a difficult question, I have to think about it. (female, 18, Brazilian)</i>	
things	Subcodes: bad things, certain things, comfortable things; expensive things; external things; heavy things; important thing everyone; material things; obvious things; precious things; problematic thing; really things; several things; tangible things
<i>I would also be willing to give up many other things, such as material things. (female, 26, Finnish)</i>	
time	Subcodes: free time, full-time career, good times; leisure time; maybe time; personal time; spare time; tough time
<i>I'm ready to give up my hobbies, my outings, the many things I do in my spare time I'm willing at the moment to give up most of my free time. (male, 18, Romanian)</i> <i>So I would give up my free time. (female, 27, Romanian)</i>	
world	Subcodes: conservative world; global world; perfect world; progressive world; utopia world; world sake
<i>Those are some of the things and privileges that, in my utopia world, would not be maintained. (female, 26, Finnish)</i>	

Source: own elaboration

Firstly, the question code indicates that some interviewees were surprised to hear this question. Seemingly, they never thought that their generation should sacrifice anything for a better future. However as one of them said, “*I am part of a generation where we are already aware of certain things, I think.*” (male, 20, French)

A few of them state that they are not willing to give up anything (“*In order to achieve my hopes for the future, what would I be willing to give up? That’s a tough one... I kind of feel like I have nothing to give, I’ve already given everything up. I realize that I’m at such a point in my life that I’m the priority. Oh my, I have to admit that I actually wouldn’t give much up.*” (non-binary, 26, Finnish). or in a more precise way they do not have anything worthy to give up (“*You know, well, I have nothing. So to willing to give but I will put my energy, love and work. I’m willing to give all of it work, love and share it.* (male, 19, Philippine.) That is why a lot of them would sacrifice their free time (“*In terms of what I’m ready to give up to achieve what I hope for on a personal level — to achieve that freedom — I’m probably ready to give up for now some leisure time and certain extra or finer things so that I can work to be free at some point.*” – male, 27, Finnish).

Obviously, some material things were also mentioned (“*I think the tangible things that I have, that expensive things, all those anything, I think I would really give up anything for the world that I’m hoping for.*” - female, 21, Philippine). Surprisingly they are ready to change their food consumption habit, as well. (For example, “*And I think I’d be ready to give up, for example, eating meat, whereas I am a big carnivore, like a huge carnivore*” – female, 23, French)

Based on demographical background information, certain patterns can be also observed. More males (10 from 38) mentioned “*comfort*” and comfort zone than females (2 from 39). While, the girls seemed to have a broader perspective and referred to the “*world*” more (“*I think in terms of the, the broader world sake, I need to compost more.*” – female, 24, Australian). Even though, material things and free time were revealed by both genders. As for the national comparison, we found that meat consumption was declared mainly by French participants and almost all Romanian young people mentioned free time.

5 Discussion

As we are focusing here on young adults, we must emphasise that at this stage of their life – according to the life-cycle hypothesis – they have low income or do not have income, but may have student loans, some still live with their parents or in dormitories or with roommates from the money they get from their parents, which have a significant effect on what they consume, and therefore, what they can give up for a more sustainable future.

Aligning with the findings of AI-based analysis of PRME Youth Talks, we also proved that activities (travel, hobbies and passions), personal ambitions and material consumption (food, cars, technology, etc.), are what young people are willing to sacrifice. The latest also states the crucial importance of the UN Goals. According to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12, it is necessary to change food production and consumption to be more sustainable (UN, 2022). Moreover, this is accepted by both genders. Recently, Barrera-Verdugo & Durán-Sandoval (2024) also examined the positive effect of moral reasoning and environmental concern on sustainable food consumption among university students, and they found that the influence of moral reasoning on food consumption did not differ by gender.

However, some participants clarified items that they would never give up, but the interview guide contained a specific question about things that they would never give up. (“*The things that I won’t sacrifice for this world are my friends, my family and people that I love, even if my own perfect world can’t exist, I can’t lose them*”- female, 20, Libanonese). Mainly their relationships were that they refused to sacrifice for the future.

6 Conclusions

This paper aims to understand the dilemma these young people face between the needs of the present and the aspirations for a sustainable future. The complexity of their responses reveals disagreements, reflecting the challenges between personal goals and collective needs. The sacrifices described by young people reflect a rising awareness of global issues and a willingness to take action for the common good. They are ready to give up the most important resource that they own at their age which is free time.

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"All intellectual property rights in the data used in this work are the sole property of the Higher Education for Good Foundation. The author(s) alone is/are responsible for the views, positions or policies expressed in this work and they do not necessarily represent those of the Higher Education for Good Foundation."

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