

Article

Agenda 2030 and COVID-19: A Young Consumer's Perception of Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract: COVID-19 threatens sustainable development and is a potential opportunity for downsizing the consumer economy. The virus's impacts on society are still unclear and additional contributions are required to investigate its effects on sustainable consumer behaviours. The paper aims to evaluate consumers' awareness regarding the emergency impacts on the 2030 Agenda SDGs achievement and sustainable consumption (SDG 12) in terms of societal and environmentally responsible behaviour. A qualitative study is planned to reach the research goal and 133 in-depth consumer interviews are performed. The sample is composed of young students informed on sustainability topics and issues. The thematic analysis is used to assess the data. The paper contributes to the existing literature about the 2030 Agenda and young consumers' sustainable behaviours by identifying the goal perceived by respondents as most negatively and positively impacted by the crisis and detecting those that can help overcome the emergency. Five themes (Social factors, Knowledge, Habits, Values, and Price) describing the main young consumer behaviour dimensions influenced by COVID-19 and lockdown in sustainability and social responsibility are detected. A theoretical framework is proposed to describe the effects of the five themes on sustainable behaviours. Finally, a roadmap for future research is identified.

Keywords: sustainable consumer behaviour; sustainability; social responsibility; sustainable consumption; COVID-19; 2030 agenda



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 infection originated in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, in December 2019 [1]; it spread rapidly across the world and on 11 March 2020, it was characterised as a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Since then, many countries have adopted a lockdown strategy and introduced measures to guarantee social distancing, movement, and travel restrictions to contain the virus diffusion [2]. Italy was the first Western country to face this threat and implement lockdown measures and they were also considered one of the most restrictive [3]. The first total shutdown in Italy started on 8 March 2020 and lasted until 3 May 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered both a health and economic crisis [4]; its impacts on the global economy are unprecedented since the 1930s Great Depression [5] and are worse and more long-lasting than that of the 2007–2009 crisis [6]. COVID-19 has negatively impacted the economy and health but has brought some environmental improvements due to the quarantine measures [7–9], showing the real effects of human activities. An association between better air quality, environmental noise reduction, clean beaches, and improvement in surface water quality was identified [10]. It registered a decrease in CO₂ emissions [11], a lower concentration of particulate matter [2,12] and a decline in global energy demand [11]. COVID-19 diffusion shows that the planet has a limited capacity to satisfy our unlimited needs and desires [13]. Moreover, Fattorini and Regoli [14] showed

the correlation between air pollution and COVID-19 spread. However, at the same time, the emergency can threaten sustainable development, and the following months will be fundamental in understanding if the countries can develop a more sustainable society and implement the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [15]. Due to the pandemic, profound and pervasive social changes will likely occur over the next few years [16]. The virus seems to have forced people to rethink their connection with nature and act more responsibly, enhancing their sustainability awareness and changing their way of consuming [17]. While studies about sustainable production have expanded in recent years, less attention has been given to sustainable consumption [18]. The COVID-19 impacts on society are unclear and will be long-lasting, so more contributions to the literature and research are required to cover this aspect [19]. The first studies on COVID-19's impact on consumer behaviour highlighted that the pandemic had influenced consumers' perceptions and attitudes. [20]. However, its effects have not yet been fully identified and studied [1]. In this frame, it is a priority to detect how the mentioned changes can influence sustainable consumption and, accordingly, the ability of organisations to pursue the SDGs [21]. The pandemic has decelerated the advancement of most of the 17 SDGs [22]. Nevertheless, studies on the COVID-19 implications for sustainability practices are still lacking in the literature [23].

Moreover, several authors noticed that young consumer seem to pay particular attention to global issues [24]. They demonstrated a more favourable orientation toward sustainable behaviour than older consumers and they represent a relevant consumer group considering their important spending collective power [25]. Accordingly, it is essential to investigate their perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on young consumers' sustainable behaviour.

Due to what authors have identified regarding the effects of the emergency on the 2030 Agenda and the threat caused by the virus on sustainable development, the opportunities triggered by COVID-19 in changing sustainable consumer practices, and the research gap enlightened about sustainable consumption studies, the current research plans to assess young consumers' awareness about the influence of COVID-19 emergency on SDGs achievement. Moreover, it aims to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 spread and the subsequent first lockdown in a Western country (Italy) on young consumers' sustainability and social responsibility behaviours.

A qualitative survey with young consumers informed on key concepts and principles of sustainability and Agenda 2030 is designed to address the research purpose. A convenience sample of key informants is adopted and 133 in-depth interviews with students of a master's degree program dealing with sustainability were carried out.

This article contributes to the existing literature about the 2030 Agenda and sustainable consumer behaviour by understanding the young consumers' perception of sustainable development achievement and implementation of the 2030 Agenda SDGs during and after COVID-19 and by investigating the effects of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the related restrictions imposed in a Western country on consumer behaviour. Specifically, the significant contribution lies in determining the SDGs perceived as negatively affected by the emergency, those positively impacted by the pandemic, and those that can help overcome the crisis. A focus on SDG 12 is carried out to identify the main themes describing the young consumer behaviour dimensions influenced by COVID-19 and the lockdown regarding sustainability and social responsibility. A final theoretical framework is proposed. In this way, the study contributes to highlighting new ways to trigger sustainable consumption.

This paper invites us to reflect upon the changes caused by the emergency and understand how this affected the consumers' perceptions and behaviour.

The article is organised as follows: first, a literature review is presented; second, the methodology is explained in terms of data collection and data analysis; then, the authors provide findings and discussion regarding the impact of COVID-19 and restrictions on sustainable development, consumer sustainable, and socially responsible behaviour; finally, conclusions with implications, limitations, and future research are outlined.

2. COVID-19, Sustainable Consumer Behaviour and 2030 Agenda

Cohen [17] stated that COVID-19 is a public emergency and an experiment in downsizing our consumer economy. Policymakers and sustainability scientists have tried to achieve similar objectives in recent years regarding sustainable consumption evolution, i.e., [26,27]. Consumers have modified their behaviours in response to the pandemic and government restrictions; they have reorganised their purchases and habits and experimented with innovative practices [28]. Cohen [17] declared that COVID-19 begins a sustainable consumption transition. A more significant number of individuals have developed more attention regarding the impacts of their consumption behaviours [22]. For example, Jribi et al. [29] demonstrated that the virus spread had impacted positive way awareness and behaviours regarding food waste in Tunisia. Social scientists observed that disasters catalyse processes of social change [17]. At the same time, there is the risk that when the emergency is over, we will be pushed back to “normal” [17]. These improvements can only be temporary if society does not learn how to manage in the long term the new knowledge acquired [8]. In addition, the current generations are responsible for future actions impacting the environment, quality of life, and economy [1].

Sustainable consumer behaviour was defined by Epstein [30] as a behaviour based on awareness of the long-term effects on the natural and social environment. Hosta and Zabkar [31] (p. 275) incorporated the concept of social responsibility in the sustainable behaviour definition. They identified a responsible, sustainable consumer as “someone who carefully weighs what s/he truly needs and also considers how this will affect others (nature, society)”. Finally, Lee et al. [32] (p. 79) defined sustainable consumer behaviour as “a consumer’s wise balance of financial responsibility, environmental stewardship, social equity and sustenance of personal health”.

Researchers have called for more studies to identify predictors of sustainable consumer behaviour [33]. Indeed, strong uncertainty about new behavioural patterns arose during the pandemic, especially regarding sustainable consumption [22]. Esposti et al. [28] revealed that the pandemic also influenced the frequency of consumption practices. The increased time spent at home pushes consumers towards new habits and consumptions [34]. This paves the way for an important transformation in production and consumption practices. Indeed, several studies showed that people could proactively contribute to sustainability transitions by changing their consumption practices [35]. Due to COVID-19, individual behaviours strongly influence organisations’ strategies and it has become a priority to investigate the consequences of these changes for sustainability [16]. Severo et al. [1] point out a research gap concerning the impact of COVID-19 on sustainable consumption and the social responsibility of generations. Accordingly, research on sustainable consumption and SDGs has become even more of a priority today [36].

In analysing sustainable consumer behaviour, special attention must be devoted to young adults considering their special attitude toward sustainable practices. Post-Millennials (or Generation Z) prefer brands that pay attention to sustainability issues (environmental and social) [37]. Young consumers are attracted by sustainable end-ecological products and services, which can influence the behaviour of their family members [38]. Mishra et al. [39] define young consumers as “pro-sustainability loving”, namely people looking for ethical, repairable, sustainable, long-lasting, and artisanal products. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda underline in Goal 12 the need to shift toward more responsible consumption and production patterns and that COVID-19 represents an opportunity to reverse trends toward a more sustainable future. Therefore, it is important to design possible scenarios for the long-term effects of COVID-19 on Agenda 2030 and SDG 12 [22]. Consumers can help in two ways, by reducing our waste and by being aware of our role in promoting sustainability [13].

In addition, it is necessary to underline that COVID-19 is likely to slow down the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation, considering there was a delay even before the outbreak [40–43]. However, more than ever, the SDGs represent a means to restore quality of life and face social, economic, and environmental issues [36]. Indeed,

countries are currently starting recovery plans and SDGs as, generally, the principles of sustainable development represent a guide to building a more sustainable and resilient society and a healthier environment [19].

Hence, based on the literature review, the authors have identified two research questions:

RQ1. How did COVID-19 and the related crisis affect the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs?

RQ2. How and why did COVID-19 impact sustainable consumption (SDG 12), influencing young consumers' sustainable and socially responsible behaviour?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The research uses a qualitative methodology to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 spread and the subsequent first lockdown in a Western country on the 2030 Agenda SDGs achievement and consumers' behaviours regarding sustainability and social responsibility. The qualitative methodology is considered appropriate to study how individuals and communities interpret a specific issue [44,45] and less studied and complex phenomena [46]. An empirical investigation was carried out through in-depth interviews with 133 young adults. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the participants [47,48]. This approach is typically used in qualitative research. Specifically, key informants' in-depth interviews were planned; this method allows for a focus on the young consumer with certain essential features to perform the study and is well-informed about the phenomenon of interest [49]. The 133 young consumers belong to Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010), a generation more concerned about sustainable issues than others [25]. It was pivotal to conduct the survey involving young consumers with valuable knowledge of sustainability principles and awareness of 17 SDGs. As recognised in the literature, key informants can share perceptions with "more knowledge than might be contributed by "ordinary people" [50] (p. 1) on a specific topic, and they are open to sharing this knowledge [51]. Accordingly, to develop a sample of key informants, in-depth interviews were conducted with students enrolled in a master's degree in Business Studies, attending the course Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability (CSRS) divided into two classes based on the teaching language (English and Italian). The course is organised into three modules (economic, managerial, and juridical) taught by different professors. Hence, the sustainability and social responsibility themes are assessed from a diverse viewpoint allowing students to acquire complete knowledge. The data collection took place at the end of the sixty hours CSRS course when students had received the information necessary to analyse the phenomenon critically. This way, the sample could share an opinion as consumers were specifically informed on sustainability topics and issues. In addition, current master's degree students represent the future leaders who will participate in the scenario to achieve the 2030 Agenda [52].

The interviews were conducted in May 2020 during the first Italian lockdown and online due to the government travel restrictions using Microsoft Teams platform; the average length was 40 min. They were audio-recorded and then transcribed (resulting in 632 pages); the transcriptions were entered into the data analysis software MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 to be coded. An interview guide was developed based on the literature analysis. The guide helped organise the questions, but participants had the freedom to share ideas and concepts not included. A pilot interview was conducted to test the contents' clearness and completeness.

The interview began by explaining the study objective and description of the general topics. Then, questions were divided into two sections: pre-emergency and the emergency phase, to better analyse the impacts of the pandemic and restrictions on sustainable development and consumers' sustainable behaviours. Regarding the consumer's perspective, a set of questions were presented to identify: (i) the point of view regarding the SDGs; (ii) the typical consumer of the pre-emergency phase and his/her level of awareness about social responsibility and sustainability; and (iii) which changes occurred during the lockdown.

3.2. Data Analysis

Once all the interviews were completed and transcribed, the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 software was used to organise and code the data. Thematic analysis is commonly applied in qualitative research [53] and it helps researchers identify critical features in a data set through a structured process [54]. Nowell et al. [55] argued that this method could be used across many research questions. Thematic analysis can produce trustworthy findings by observing a rigorous process [36]. In the current article, the authors followed the six phases identified by Braun and Clarke [53] to conduct the analysis: (1) Familiarising Yourself With Your Data: the first step aims to familiarise with all the data collected. Therefore, the authors transcribed the interviews, each file was named, and the raw data were stored and archived with the corresponding date. As recommended by Braun and Clarke [53], researchers read the data once before starting the coding activity; (2) Generating Initial Codes: during the second phase, authors produced codes to simplify the data collected. Boyatzis [56] (p. 1) identified a “good code” as one “that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon”. Multiple investigators were involved in the coding procedure to guarantee the research’s credibility and rigour [57–59]. The files were entered in MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 to work efficiently with a large amount of data; the researchers identified text sections and attached labels [54], working systematically through the data set. In addition, memos and notes were utilised to keep track of ideas and insights to form future themes. The coding process was completed when all the interviews were coded [60]; (3) Searching for Themes: once the list of codes had been developed, authors grouped the relevant coded data extracts into themes identifying patterns of shared meaning across the text for capturing important information to answer the research questions [53,61]. The authors integrated the inductive and deductive analysis to provide a balanced view and a more detailed description of the data [55,62]. Specifically, the codes were examined considering the relevant literature and models utilised to describe young adults’ perception of SDGs and interpretation of sustainable consumer behaviours, i.e., [63,64]; (4) Reviewing Themes: during this step, the researchers reviewed the codes for each theme to verify if they formed a coherent pattern considering the research question and if they described the meanings of the whole data set; (5) Defining and Naming Themes: in the fifth phase, the authors depicted each theme and its scope. Finally, they identified names considering the suggestion of Braun and Clarke, who affirmed that the theme name must immediately provide the reader with a sense of what the theme is about; (6) Producing the Report: the authors established the final themes, they wrote up the report to illustrate how the findings were developed and proposed the final interpretation of the data set. As King [54] suggested, quotations from the participants were used to support the understanding of the themes. In addition, the authors followed the guideline of Nowell et al. [55] to guarantee trustworthiness during each step of the analysis and thus meet the trustworthiness criteria established by Lincoln and Guba [58] (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability).

4. Results

The results and discussion are organised to respond to the two research questions. First, it is presented the analysis of student’s perception of the impact of COVID-19 on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs’ achievement. Second, a focus on SDG 12 and sustainable consumption are presented to understand the effects of COVID-19 spread and government restrictions on consumers’ sustainability and social responsibility behaviours.

4.1. Perceptions on SDGs and the 2030 Agenda

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the weaknesses of the current system and highlighted the fundamental role of sustainable development today more than ever. According to the respondent’s perception, the economic crisis triggered by the emergency negatively influences SDGs implementation. Hence, the results demonstrate that the pandemic has an influence on sustainable development that goes beyond health.

The interviewees highlighted as the COVID crisis can negatively impact 7 out of 17 SDGs (Table 1): SDG 1 (83% of respondents cited the Goal), SDG 2 (59%), SDG 3 (70%), SDG 4 (60%), SDG 5 (23%), SDG 8 (80%), and SDG 10 (67%).

Table 1. COVID-19 influence on SDGs.

SDG Detected (Theme)	COVID-19 Effect	Frequency	%	Quotations Example
SDG 1—No Poverty	Negative	110	83%	“We have witnessed a worldwide increase in poverty due to a decrease in incomes and many cases lack of it, increasing the poverty rate in the short term in an alarming way.” “Poverty is increasing, due to the precariousness of work already in the pre-emergency phase, as many people working illegally have not been able to receive state aid.” “A pandemic such as COVID-19 can increase poverty around the world.”
SDG 2—Zero Hunger	Negative	78	59%	“The lack of agricultural employment may be decisive in the coming months for the loss of crops due to the lack of temporary workers. On the other hand, it is very likely that malnutrition associated with obesity has also increased during these weeks of lockdown.” “Can increase the possibility for people not to have the chance to have enough food and not to have a guaranteed food safety.” “Food production and distribution have been disrupted.”
SDG 3—Good Health and Well-being	Negative	93	70%	“The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the health systems quality and the strong limits of the organizational structure in our country.” “The emergency has devastating effects on health structures showing their weaknesses.” “The COVID-19, of course, has been very negative for the health, the SDG 3, which has been key to stop the pandemic and minimize the deaths and the number of people infected by the virus.”
SDG 4—Quality Education	Negative	80	60%	“A strong negative impact on SDG 4 regarding education as the school year has been interrupted and millions of school and university students have had their classes cancelled.” “More than 80% of the world’s students are studying from home. Many, however, do not have electronic equipment to follow the online teaching.” “School closed and the remote learning can be less effective and not accessible for many students.”
SDG 5—Gender Equality	Negative	30	23%	“Women’s work is more at risk than men’s and the danger that confinement can pose in protecting women victims of abuse, who are at serious risk during a lockdown.” “Women’s economic gains at risk and increased levels of violence against women.” “COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the resurgence of violence on women.”
SDG 8—Decent work and economic growth	Negative	107	80%	“The prolonged shutdown of activities will reduce GDP, employment, and an increase in unemployment.” “Will be affected in a drastic or even dramatic way. Millions of new unemployed are expected, and unemployment rate is expected to grow strongly.” “Economic activities suspended; lower-income, less work time, unemployment for certain occupations.”
SDG 10—Reduced Inequalities	Negative	89	67%	“The way out of the crisis is sure to affect much more the classes with fewer resources and that this will be accentuated in the coming months and years, leading to the impoverishment of the middle class.” “The negative effects of the emergency will increase inequalities.” “Concerning SDG 10, of inequality, the impact has been and is expected to be very significant.”

Table 1. Cont.

SDG Detected (Theme)	COVID-19 Effect	Frequency	%	Quotations Example
SDG 12—Responsible Consumption and Production	Positive	60	45%	“COVID-19 showed the need to redesign consumption and production processes to protect the environment and resources.” “The consumers’ current behaviour based on limiting food waste, focusing on social and sustainable options, is expected to continue in the future, thus contributing to the SDG n.12 of Agenda 2030.” “Companies were forced to think about their production processes and the development of new sustainable business models, to be able to globally share the value they produce and promote a responsible production.”
SDG 11—Sustainable Cities and Communities	Positive	42	32%	“During the emergency, the city was transformed, no traffic, no pollution, no noise, Rome become more liveable!” “... studying and working from home, the traffic and the pollution of the city decreased, and the roads became safer. If we keep this habit, we can completely change the city’s well-being.” “Having more free time people can enjoy walking or cycling instead of using the car. This allows having a more sustainable city.”
SDG 13—Climate Action	Positive	97	73%	“It was positive for the health of the planet . . . In only one month of industries stop, we measured a vast improvement in air quality all over the world.” “The interruption of our lives has positively contributed, for example, to reducing CO₂ emission.” “The environmental effect may be positive in the short term, as the shutdown of activities leads to a reduction in pollution, but risks tend to be a short-lived trend unless countries step up their efforts towards sustainable development.”
SDG 17—Partnership for the Goals	Positive	71	54%	“The crisis represents the possibility of ensuring, for society and the planet, a change. This difficult situation has made us understand how important cooperation and solidarity between countries, governments, businesses and people are. As a result, goal 17 of the 2030 Agenda can be the starting point to reach all the others.” “A partnership for the goals is needed more than ever. There has been a great collaboration in the exchange of information, good practices, shared research on the virus genome, and possible vaccines to win together this terrible battle that concerns us all.” “The cardinal SDGs to follow is the aim number 17 “Partnerships for the goals”, to bring more collaboration and solidarity for carrying out of emergency and build a more sustainable society, guided by partnership and equity.”

For other four SDGs, namely SDG 11, SDG 12, SDG 13, and SDG 17, experimented with some positive effects from the shutdown of all activities. In contrast, the two goals identified as the ones that can help overcome the pandemic effects are SDG 3 and SDG 17. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Additionally, there emerged a strong integration of the negative effects. For instance, “poverty reduction” (SDG 1) is attributed to a negative impact due to the factories’/companies’ closures, the profit and salary reduction, and the job losses. These respondents will lead to an increase in people suffering from hunger (SDG 2) and impact the achievement of decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). Similarly, it contributes to the increase in inequality, slowing down the achievement of SDG 10.

For the respondents, women have paid much more for school closures and smart working because they have often been forced to take charge of the family by neglecting their professional careers. To aggravate this situation, according to the interviewees, violence against women has increased during the pandemic and the lockdowns due to forced cohabitation and the impossibility of leaving home. Moreover, negative impacts on gender equality were perceived by the interviewees (SDG 5).

Another critical aspect raised from the analysis regards the negative effect on the quality of education (SDG 4). During the pandemic, schools and universities were forced to alternate closing and opening periods bringing students of all ages to experiment with

new ways of learning (distance learning, mixed learning). The respondents expressed their concerns about this situation and its potential negative repercussions on the learning process. In addition, the crisis showed the technological endowments of the schools were not up to the task.

Most of the sample recognised that the COVID-19 crisis had shown the weakness of healthcare systems worldwide. For the respondents, it strongly compromises the achievement of the SDG 3 target (70%). Nevertheless, the students identified the restoration of national healthcare systems as a key element to overcoming the crisis and fostering society's well-being. Similarly, SDG 17, "Partnership for the Goals", is perceived as fundamental to facing the emergency because the respondents view the pandemic as a global challenge. As such, it requires the contribution of every component of society. In this regard, the emergency seems to positively influence SDG 17, emphasising the importance of working together nationally and internationally to find common solutions, as it happened for the vaccine against COVID-19.

The respondents pointed out a potentially positive impact on promoting Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11) through the diffusion of sustainable mobility. Indeed, during the pandemic, citizens have moved closer to more innovative sustainable transport systems such as e-bikes and e-scooters thanks to the drastic reduction in car usage and the increase in free time. Similarly, SDG 13, "Climate action", also seems to have benefited from the emergency. Indeed, most of the sample affirmed that the lockdown and production shutdown have shown how much human activities pollute the environment. In addition, due to the consumers' awareness-raising, respondents believe that the crisis will help move towards a more sustainable mode of consumption and production (SDG 12).

4.2. Perception on Sustainable Consumption and SDG 12

To investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable consumption, the authors asked respondents to express their perceptions regarding consumer behaviours before the pandemic and describe any changes triggered by the emergency considering their personal experience and the observations they have made on relatives, friends, or people they hang out with. From the data coding and the content analysis, five key themes were identified, describing the main consumer behaviours influenced by COVID-19 in terms of sustainability and social responsibility as shown in Table 2: Social factors, Knowledge, Habits, Values, and Price. Specifically, for every key element, the impact of the emergency on customer behaviour and attitudes towards sustainability is provided.

Table 2. Consumer behaviour themes.

Theme	Key Codes	Fq of Codes
Social Factors	Personalisation	80
	Unsustainability/Unethical	75
	Social identification	72
	Trend increase	95
	Demonstration/new economic paradigm	62
	New generations	50
	Insecurity	111
	Consumption rationalisation	77
	Health and Safety	108
Knowledge	Knowledge limitation	45
	Awareness-raising campaigns	60
	ICT Role	50
	Digitisation revolution	105
	Evidence of negative impacts of human activities	82

Table 2. Cont.

Theme	Key Codes	Fq of Codes
Habits	Unsustainable habits	89
	Fast-paced lifestyle	55
	Smart working	113
	Slower lifestyle model	91
Values	Egoistic values	71
	Future impacts myopia	75
	Re-evaluation of altruistic values	97
	Companies' assessment	90
Price	Price influence	74
	Economic uncertainty	82

4.2.1. Social Factors (Self-Concept, Roles, and Norms)

According to key informants, during the pre-emergency phase, the consumer sought personalised products to express his/her individuality and distinguish himself/herself from others. Thus, the consumer was oriented toward purchases that could externally share and communicate a specific image of himself/herself. The data revealed that the consumer generally did not have a strong sustainable identity, which translates to unsustainable and unethical decisions and behaviours.

Respondent quotation: *"The consumer orients his consumption choices mainly towards the satisfaction of the personal interest, without considering the impact that it can have on the society or the ecosystem in which he lives"*.

At the same time, the consumer felt the need to be identified in the specific social groups/he believed to belong. The pre-pandemic consumer is described as a fickle and easily influenced person who changes his/her purchasing choices concerning the moment's trend.

Respondent quotation: *"He is an easily influenced subject and follows fashions and influencers"*.

However, the analysis shows that there has been a general increase in the trend of consumers interested in sustainability and social responsibility issues with a corresponding increment in ethical purchases in recent years. They argued that this reversal of the trend of rampant consumerism of previous years has been fostered by greater attention of the governments to these issues but, above all, by the events that in recent years have contributed to raising citizens' awareness (i.e., Greta Thunberg demonstration). In addition, respondents associate this with a vision change, especially with the new generations. In the interviews, it emerged that consumer empowerment is essential for building a sustainable society.

Respondent quotation: *"The demonstrations have raised awareness of the unsustainability of the current development model and the need to put in place concrete actions to protect our world"*.

During the interviews, it emerged that the COVID-19 spread had involved the establishment of new social norms regarding what was accepted or not accepted by the community. According to the respondents, the pandemic has led to greater citizen/consumer empowerment due to increased awareness of its contribution to the virus's spread. The health and safety of all have become the main goal. Moreover, key informants noted more rationalisation of purchases during the emergency phase. The consumer experienced a sense of confusion and insecurity concerning the relationship with himself/herself, society, and the future, which led him/her to reconsider his/her priorities.

Respondent quotation: *"However, in my opinion, if there is one possible positive aspect in consumer behaviour resulting from this crisis, people are certainly shopping more consciously. Consumers are more careful about what they buy"*.

Respondent quotation: *“The main problem is not to avoid an infection of your own. It is more important to behave exemplary to save the people in the risk groups. This was the way I felt. I felt socially responsible for elderly people, who could die if I am ignorant and do not adhere to government regulations”.*

A summary is provided in Figure 1.

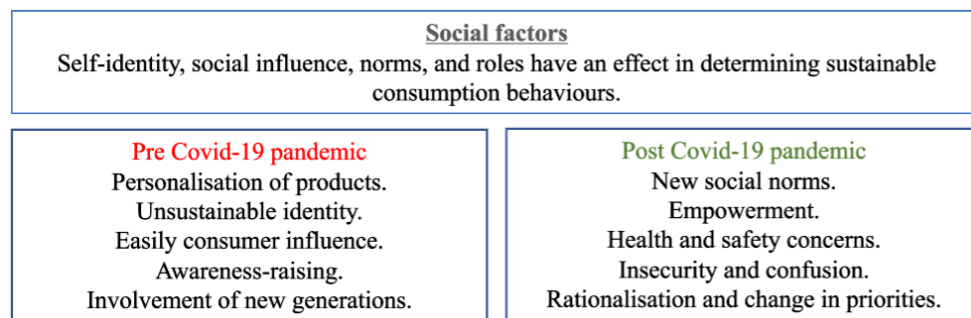


Figure 1. Social factors (Self-concept, Roles, and Norms) theme.

4.2.2. Knowledge

The lack of knowledge is, according to the interviewees, one of the main causes of non-responsible choices. The respondents affirmed that before the pandemic, there had been the dissemination of information about social and environmental issues that had contributed to raising awareness of the impact of consumer practices, even if not sufficiently. For example, they said that the numerous awareness-raising campaigns by public and private organisations and the development of the 2030 Agenda helped cause consumers to be more informed about the past and more sensitive to ethical and sustainable issues. According to key informants, new technologies (social networks, the Internet) have also played a central role in making it easier to find information. They have enabled the creation of virtual communities in which participants exchange opinions and assess the companies' behaviours.

Respondent quotation: *“The dissemination of information on human lifestyles' environmental and social impacts has increased responsible consumption”.*

From the respondents' point of view, it becomes impossible for the consumer to ignore the environmental impacts of human activities during the emergency phase. They affirmed that citizens began to question themselves more and more about sustainable issues after an initial phase of uncertainty because of the diffusion of information about the possible causes that led to the development of COVID-19. Moreover, respondents noted that the closure of factories led to a sharp decrease in environmental pollution, causing their impacts to be evident. The interviewees also enlightened that the pandemic has contributed to accelerating the process of society's digitisation; consumers were forced to use new technologies due to the impossibility of going to stores. In addition, there have been widespread practices such as ATM payments. According to the respondents, all this has contributed to enhancing consumer awareness regarding social and environmental problems and will lead to a more sustainable society. As highlighted in Figure 2.

Respondent quotation: *“As a result of the pandemic, people are more aware and informed of the environmental and social negative impact of human activities, which has helped make more virtuous decisions”.*

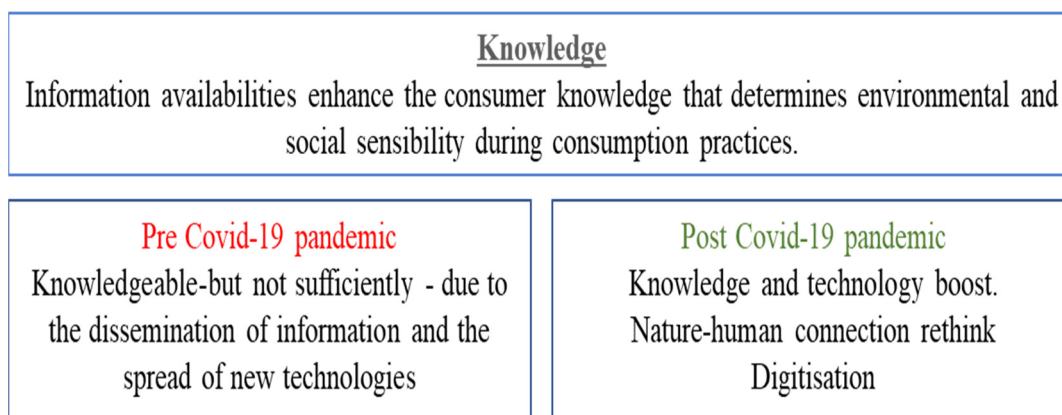


Figure 2. Knowledge theme.

4.2.3. Habits

The interviewees affirmed that habits played an important role in developing consumer ethical and sustainable behaviour before the emergency phase. Indeed, they felt that what was missing was not consumer awareness of the impacts of their actions as much as a lack of willingness to change their habits.

Respondent quotation: *“Consumers were mostly aware of their power to influence business and their behaviour’s social and environmental impact, but they lack the willingness to change their habits and the collective commitment to do so”.*

According to the key informants’ point of view, the consumer is forced to a radical change in his habits during the emergency. The government restrictions forbade citizens from moving freely within the national territory and carrying out normal daily activities. The sample pointed out another significant change in the habits of consumers/citizens, the introduction of smart working, which Italian companies did not widely use before COVID-19. From the interviews, it emerged that the result was establishing a less frantic and slower lifestyle model. The interviewees indicated some examples of new and more sustainable habits such as the use of slow mobility (bicycles, electric kick scooters); a lower purchase of unnecessary products with an impact also on the fast fashion industry; new family eating habits who have begun to prefer healthier foods, have found pleasure in producing bread, pizza, and pasta at home and have paid more attention to food waste.

Respondent quotation: *“The travel and movement restrictions have led to a change in consumer habits, resulting in greater responsibility in purchases and greener practices”.*

A summary is provided in Figure 3.

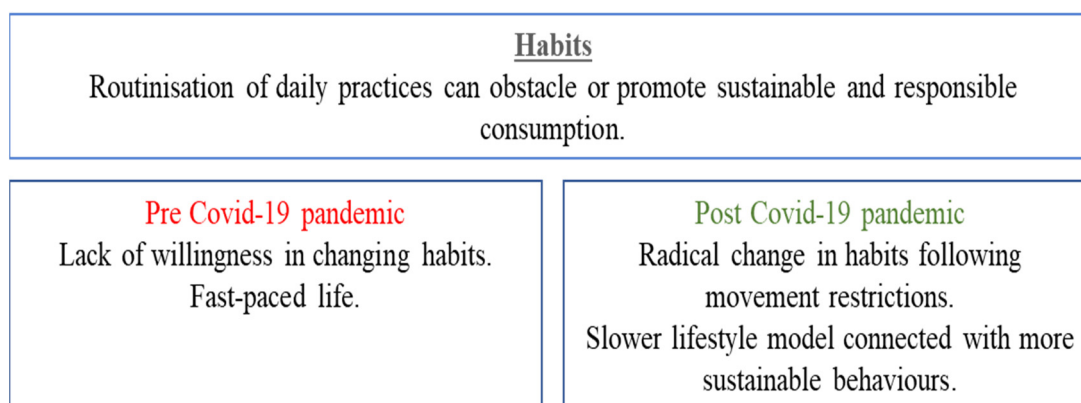


Figure 3. Habits theme.

4.2.4. Values

Most of the key informants affirmed that the consumer of the pre-emergency phase based his consumption choices on individual egoistic values. The decisions were made mainly by assessing the personal benefits the purchase could generate without considering the impact on society's well-being. The consumers were more sensitive to social and environmental issues directly linked to their well-being. For example, the interviews revealed that the dissemination of organic products was not due to the consumer's desire to reduce environmental impacts but to safeguard personal health. Therefore, interviewees identified that consumers were less interested in issues that did not directly affect them, such as respect for human and workers' rights in developing countries. In addition, this led people to have a poor vision of the future and be predominantly focused on benefits that could be achieved in the present.

Respondent quotation: *"They considered environmental and social aspects only if they also affected their well-being"*.

Respondent quotation: *"The citizens tended to ignore issues and problems that did not directly affect their sphere"*.

The COVID-19 emergency brought, according to respondents, a change in the values on which most consumers/citizens had based their lives. The interviewees noted that during the crisis and the subsequent lockdown, the return to altruistic values and the sense of belonging to the community led to greater solidarity. The numerous activities developed during the emergency phase by citizens to help those most in need were highlighted, such as the "suspended grocery shopping", the collection of food for families in economic difficulty, and donations to the Civil Protection. In agreement with the interviews, the pandemic has contributed to a reflection by citizens/consumers, which has led them to understand the importance of common well-being and that they are part of a community. This new system of values has also been extended to assess companies; respondents declared that the consumers' attention towards gestures of solidarity of companies has been great. It emerged from the interviews that consumers ask businesses to be responsible and contribute to the community's well-being (Figure 4).

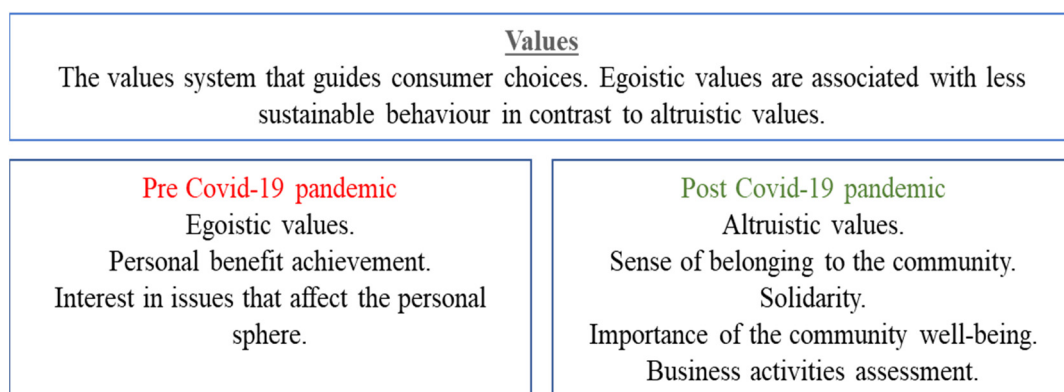


Figure 4. Values theme.

Respondent quotation: *"Who can donate, who cannot take"*.

Respondent quotation: *"Maybe the difference is that the concept of sustainability in consumer mind evolved, from environmental concerns to a raise of awareness regarding the social and human well-being in general"*.

Respondent quotation: *"Now, in this second phase, consumers claim firms to be more engaged in helping communities. There is an increase in consumers' awareness about CSR and responsibility issues, seeing the companies as the drivers of social and financial recovery"*.

4.2.5. Price

According to the respondents, price has a central role as a purchasing variable in the pre-emergency phase and during the COVID-19 emergency. It exerts a strong influence on consumer sustainability and ethical choices. The interviewees pointed out that the consumer was oriented to buy products or services that guaranteed the maximum price convenience in the pre-emergency period, even if this meant sacrificing social and environmental benefits.

Respondent quotation: *“First there is the price, then all the other considerations, including ethical ones; it is useless to delude ourselves and think that the price does not come first”.*

During the health emergency, the population experienced a significant phase of economic uncertainty, many businesses were forced to close, and many citizens had work issues. In agreement with key informants, this condition has accentuated the consumer tendency to assess their purchases based on the lowest price, which could result in a decrease in purchases of sustainable products that usually have a higher cost.

Respondent quotation: *“The willingness to pay a premium price for low-impact products has given way to (necessary) savings”.*

A graphic representation is provided in Figure 5.

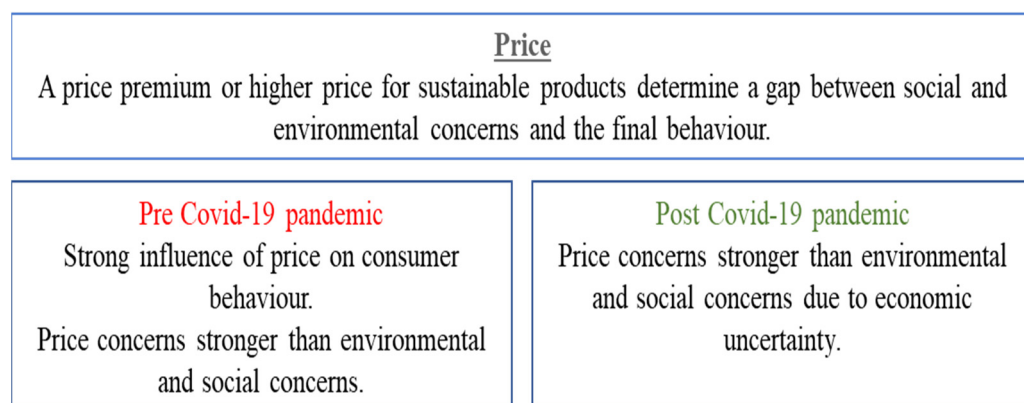


Figure 5. Price theme.

5. Discussion

The respondents have detected adverse effects of the COVID-19 crisis on several SDGs. Specifically, from their point of view, the emergency has determined an increase in poverty due to job losses and salary reduction, which is associated with more people suffering from hunger, less possibility to find decent work, and an increase in inequalities. In addition, the interviewees stated that the pandemic has negatively influenced gender equality, because women have suffered the most from this situation, and the quality of education due to the inability of the system to cope with periods of distance and present studies. Then, the key informants affirmed that the virus has strongly shown the weaknesses of our health system, causing a lot of damage, and its recovery was also identified as a key element in overcoming the pandemic. They perceived that the crisis had some positive effects on reducing pollution, developing more sustainable cities, and sustainable consumption and production processes. Finally, the emergency has shown the importance of collaborations and partnerships needed to restore our society and economies.

As the WHO [9] demonstrated, the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly slowed down the SDGs' achievement. The economic crisis triggered by the emergency has enlarged the number of people living in poverty. For the first time in decades, a rise in extreme poverty was registered [9,65]. The economic consequences are widespread and exacerbate hunger and job losses and feed the gap between developing and developed

countries [9,40,66]. Indeed, education was impacted and forced to become digital and many students could not access education anymore.

Moreover, the virus caused the deaths of millions of people and has severely tested our healthcare systems. The pandemic also increased gender inequality. Even if the consumers and citizens perceived some benefit on the heart, climate change, and biodiversity during the lockdowns, it has been too short of having a long-lasting positive impact [9]. However, though the pandemic had adverse effects, some benefits can be found; for example, the virus contributes to accelerating digitalisation and presses for collaboration encouraging multilateral systems [19]. Finally, the SDGs provide the framework needed to exit the crisis and mitigate its negative effects.

In addition, key informants described the consumer of the pre-emergency phase as a person with an insufficient sustainable identity, interested in buying the product at the lowest price even if it means sacrificing ethical concerns, and little motivated to change their habits and driven predominantly by an egoistic vision. At the same time, the interviewees pointed out that, thanks to the numerous demonstrations, the advancement of a new economic paradigm focused on sustainability and the increasing dissemination of information emerged, meaning that the trend of consumers interested in ethical and sustainable issues was increasing. The COVID-19 spread, and the subsequent travel and movement restrictions, have accelerated some social mechanisms. First, a change in consumer/citizen habits has contributed to establishing more sustainable behaviours. Then, consumers acquired more knowledge about the impacts of their activities on the ecosystem, making it impossible to ignore them. New social norms were established with a new definition of what is or is not accepted by society. A new system of more altruistic values and a sense of solidarity and belonging to the community have prevailed with numerous initiatives to help others. This new system of values was also used to judge the companies' practices. The key informants affirmed that people will not forget the companies' gestures of solidarity during the crisis and that the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility can no longer be ignored. Therefore, the current research shows that the emergency, although negative, has helped the consumer/citizen to be more informed, responsible, and aware of the direct impact that his/her choices may have on society and the environment. The pandemic has highlighted the negative effects that unwise decisions have on the ecosystem and, according to the respondents, this awareness will accompany people in the future. Young consumers have understood that their actions have consequences and can create a difference even alone. However, price is an important variable that impacts the transformation of consumer concerns into a real contribution to purchasing sustainable products/services. A final graphic representation of the results is provided in Figure 6.

For consumers, psychology widely recognises that people's consumption behaviour has a role in determining the concept of the self [67]. People generally want to distinguish themselves from others and develop a sense of self-identity [68]. Studies demonstrate that individual identity has a role in enhancing sustainable behaviour [68]. Thus, someone with an environmental self-identity will probably be more environmentally active [69–71]. Trudel et al. [72] found that people wanted to recycle more of the products associated with the self.

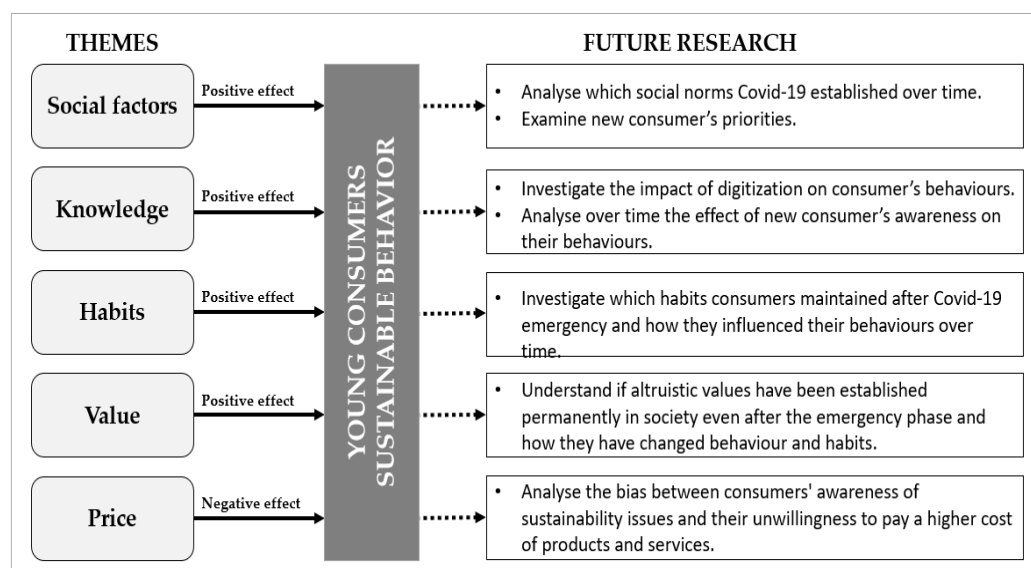


Figure 6. Post COVID-19 pandemic impacts on consumers behaviours—graphic representation.

Moreover, Tajfel [73] affirms that people are affected by their individual and social identities; thus, social groups influence their behaviours. This mechanism can also affect people's sustainable behaviours [72]. For example, Brough et al. [74] demonstrated that men do not have green behaviours if they think their masculinity is threatened. This happens because sustainable behaviours are often associated with females. In addition, many studies demonstrated that social norms influence consumer behaviour and consumption [33,75,76]. In particular, studies show that social norms and social influence affect sustainable behaviours [69]. Norms are social rules about what should or should not be done [77] and going against them leads to social sanctions and disapproval of peers [78–80]. Roles are defined by Triandis [64] (p. 8) as “sets of behaviours that are considered appropriate for persons holding particular positions in a group”. In the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour [64], “Social Factors” (composed of roles, self-concept, and norms) are a variable that can influence intention and, in this way, consumer behaviour. There is already some attempt in the literature to use this model to interpret sustainable consumer behaviour, i.e., [81,82]. Knowledge is considered a predictor of sustainable consumer behaviour; more awareness about environmental issues determines more motivation to act responsibly [83]. Consumers are influenced by the quality and quantity of information [84] and information availability is very important to enhance environmental and social sensibility about consumption practices [85]. At the same time, the lack of information can hinder this trend [86,87]. The authors demonstrated that some determinants of behavioural intention were influenced by providing information [88]. Hosta and Zabkar [31] found that information availability positively impacts environmental and social consumer behaviour. Changing consumer habits represents a challenge for developing sustainable practices [89]. As also indicated by Peattie [83], habits and other factors such as financial constraints and lifestyles can be obstacles to green behaviours. Jackson [82] stated that habits are central to many activities affecting the environment (i.e., travel, leisure activities, and shopping).

Habitual practices often prevent intentions to change and determine a behavioural “lock-in” [79]. Stern et al. [43] affirmed that dimension habits need to be included in a model that analyses consumer behaviour. Triandis [64] defines habits as the level of the routinisation of behaviour. According to his Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour, habits are one of the three dimensions determining behaviours. It can also influence the “Affect” dimension (that represents the emotive component).

In the literature, it is possible to find some attempts to study the effect of values in promoting sustainable consumer behaviours. Schwartz [63] developed the Ecological Value Theory and affirmed that environmental behaviour depends on pro-social and moral values.

According to the model, people who have an egoistic orientation and are self-centred are less likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours; instead, individuals with altruistic values and a pro-social orientation are more likely to adopt these kinds of behaviours. In his Value-Belief-Norm model, [43] postulated that accepting the new environmental paradigm is positively correlated with altruistic and biospheric values and negatively with egoistic values. In addition, Thøgersen and Olander [90] demonstrated that individual priorities influence sustainable consumption patterns. Van Doorn and Verhoef [91] found that egoistic values and price consciousness negatively impact organic purchases.

Moreover, several studies showed that a higher price or a price premium negatively influences the purchase of sustainable and ethical products. Indeed, the price considerations prevail over the ethical ones, i.e., [88,92]. Green practices and the acceptance of a price premium for a green product are two separate concepts [90]. The environmental concerns are not related directly to the will to pay more for the product. Therefore, the price creates a gap between the environmental attitudes and beliefs and the final behaviour [90]. The connection between the literature review and the themes is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes literature review.

Theme	References
Social Factors	[33,64,67–82,93]
Knowledge	[31,82–89]
Habits	[43,64,79]
Values	[43,63,90,91]
Price	[88,89,92]

6. Conclusions

The study brings out some implications for organisations and public policymakers. First, the research enlightened the importance of understanding the process that led young people to make sustainable and responsible choices. Social norms, roles, and self-concept seem important as obstacles or for promoting sustainable consumption behaviours. Organisations and policymakers should contribute to changing social mechanisms so that people perceive sustainable and responsible behaviour as the new status quo, making the consumer feel that this type of behaviour improves his reputation within society, for example, through their communication campaigns. In addition, disseminating information plays a crucial role in contributing to sustainable behaviour, so it is essential to allow the consumer to acquire the necessary knowledge to make his choices. Policymakers and organisations should help strengthen the community's sense of belonging and increase awareness campaigns to support the social changes that occurred during the COVID-19 emergency.

Moreover, they should analyse the mechanisms that led to changes in consumer habits during the pandemic linked to increased sustainability. Policymakers should, for example, increase incentives for slow mobility, build cycling routes, and limit car use. At the same time, companies could promote activities to support the work–life balance since a slower lifestyle is associated with more sustainable choices. In addition, Corporate Social Responsibility should be practised by all companies and become an engine to encourage changes in terms of sustainable consumption. On the other hand, price is a variable that has negatively affected sustainable choices even during the emergency phase. Therefore, it is necessary to develop ways to reduce the premium price of sustainable products or identify tangible benefits that the consumer can associate with a more expensive product in terms of the environmental and societal effects. The research also has some limitations. First, a limitation is that it used a purposive sample of young adults from Generation Z. More specifically, the sample is formed only by key informants selected among the students involved in two classes of a master's degree program on social and environmental sustainability. Even if it may generate some bias, to fulfil the research aim, it focused on

having a sample of young consumers able to deal with sustainability issues and Agenda 2030 goals. Hence, the future research should enlarge the sample by considering students attending similar courses in other universities. Moreover, comparing the opinions of informed young consumers attending a university course with the ones without a specific awareness of sustainable topics should be useful to consolidate and integrate our findings.

Second, the study involved only one country. Thus, future research should extend the analysis to different geographical areas to understand if the vision expressed by respondents changes in different social contexts. It might be interesting to compare the perceptions of CSRS students from multiple countries. Third, the study adopted a qualitative method and provided themes to interpret the changes in sustainable consumer behaviour triggered by the COVID-19 spread and government restrictions. Accordingly, future research should continue the analysis by adopting quantitative methods to test the current results and framework. The future research should also investigate the changes caused by the emergency in companies' sustainable and socially responsible behaviour. Finally, future research should strive to understand how it can encourage sustainable development and not waste the opportunity that originated from the current health and economic emergency.

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