



Plastic-Free Brand Choices as a Holistic Approach to Self-Care: A Netnographic Analysis of Young Consumers' Motivations

Angela A. Beccanulli¹ · Silvia Biraghi¹

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Abstract

Young consumers are increasingly taking on the mantle of champions for sustainable behavior. However, notwithstanding the long-established and rich debate on sustainable consumption, studies are missing that delve deeper on how young consumers, especially Millennials and Gen Z, dialogically frame their sustainable consumption choices and their favor for sustainable brands. We conduct an in-depth netnographic investigation that provides a deep cultural understanding of the motivations and priorities that young consumers associate with sustainable choices in their social media conversations, which represent the most common ground where sustainable commitments are discussed. Considering that plastic-free refillable water bottles are emerging as the daily consumption choice that young consumers are adopting to pursue a more sustainable lifestyle, we see in that a compelling research context in which the motivations that young consumers prioritize when they embrace plastic-free brands can be explored. Our findings visually map and dig deeper into the complex constellation of the dominant themes and interplays among them that young consumers discuss in their conversations about the adoption of plastic-free refillable water bottles. Across all the conversations we analyzed, the notion of care emerges as the key priority for young consumers and sustainable consumption is depicted as a holistic form of self-care. Our paper contributes to delve deeper into those conversational dynamics in and through which the priorities related to sustainable consumption choices are shaped and constructed through the expressive and material capacities of the different social formations that are engaged into the discussion of sustainability issues. Our paper also provides a methodological blueprint for the investigation of the dialogic process of sustainable brand building.

Keywords Sustainable consumption · Sustainable brand · Plastic-free packaging · Millennials · Gen Z · Netnography

Introduction

Consumers and stakeholders are more than ever judging brands based on how companies operate within their broader communities. Among the pressing issues that are driving stakeholders' scrutiny toward corporate conduct, commitment to environmental causes represents a fundamental driver of consumption choices (Baskentli et al. 2019), especially for the younger generations. As champions of

sustainable consumption behaviors, Millennials (people born between 1981 and 1996) and Gen Z (born after 1996 until 2010) are the most proactive in making an impact by reducing, for instance, their use of throwaway plastics (EY and JA Worldwide Generational Sustainability Survey 2023) and in discussing their sustainable habits on social media (Seyfi et al. 2023). According to the Pew Research report on "Gen Zers and Millennials' activism for climate change" (2021), a large majority (89%) of people who make a daily and constant effort to live in ways that help protect the environment say they use fewer single-use plastics such as bags, cups, bottles, and straws to protect the environment.

Since consumers are shifting their buying choices toward products with plastic-free-related claims, over the last few years the market of plastic-free, reusable, and refillable packaging has been booming. Within this market, refillable food and beverage packaging stands out as the most rapidly advancing domain (Coelho et al. 2020), with plastic-free

✉ Angela A. Beccanulli
angelaantonia.beccanulli@unicatt.it

Silvia Biraghi
silvia.biraghi@unicatt.it

¹ Corporate Communication, Branding, and Consumer Culture, LABCOM, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, LABCOM, Dept. Economics and Management Sciences, Largo Gemelli, 1, 20123 Milan, Italy



refillable water bottle dominating as the swiftest-growing segment (McKinsey Report on the reusable water bottles market 2023), boasting a value of USD 7.92 billion in 2022 and a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.4% from 2023 to 2030. Considering that plastic-free refillable water bottles are emerging as the daily consumption choice that young consumers are adopting to pursue a more sustainable lifestyle, we see in that a compelling context in which the motivations that young consumers prioritize when they embrace plastic-free brands can be explored.

Notwithstanding the long-established and rich debate on sustainable consumption, studies are missing that delve deeper on how consumers, and especially Millennials and Gen Z, dialogically frame their sustainable consumption choices and their favor for sustainable brands. So far, most of the research has focused on adults' attitudes and behaviors toward sustainability (Davies et al. 2020) and we know less on how young consumers engage with sustainable choices (Singh et al. 2022). As youths increasingly take on the mantle of champions for sustainable behavior, it becomes imperative to fill this gap. Over the past few years, the number of studies that specifically looked at younger generations' commitment to sustainability has continued to grow (see for example Kadic-Magljalic et al. 2019; Kim and Austin 2020; Confetto et al. 2023; de Brabandere et al. 2022; Grønhoj and Hubert 2022; Lisboa et al. 2022; Narayanan 2022; Schill et al. 2022; Singh et al. 2022). However, most of these studies have adopted experiential designs to assess if and how the attitude of young consumers toward sustainability translates into pro-environmental behaviors and outcomes. That has led the existing body of research to focus primarily on an abstract conceptualization of sustainability (Reczek et al. 2018). This approach presents challenges in understanding the connection between sustainable consumption and the formation of individuals' identities as environmentally conscious consumers, as well as the influence dynamics within social networks, such as social media, where consumers engage in discussions and share their sustainable consumption choices (White et al. 2019). Nowadays, social media represent, in fact, the most common ground in which sustainable commitments and choices are discussed by young consumers (Bedard and Tolmie 2018; Seyfi et al. 2023).

Therefore, in this paper, we call for a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of sustainable consumption as a dialogic process (Gambetti et al. 2017) in which consumers, stakeholders, and brands share, negotiate, and shape their priorities and commitments through constant dialogue and confrontation based on which positive change and transformative behaviors can be inspired and constructed (Biraghi et al. 2017). With this in mind, our paper seeks an answer to the following questions: How do young consumers discuss and frame their sustainable consumption choices? What are the specific motivations that young consumers prioritize in

conversations when they embrace plastic-free brands? How are these motivations and priorities framed, negotiated, and assembled in consumers' social groupings? To reply to these questions, we conduct an in-depth netnographic investigation (Kozinets 2020) that provides a deep cultural understanding of the motivations that young consumers associate with sustainable choices in their social media conversations.

Our findings allow us to identify the complex constellation of the dominant themes (i.e., #sustainableliving; #self-care; #aesthetics) and interplays among them that young consumers discuss in their conversations about the adoption of plastic-free refillable water bottles and brands. In reconstructing the repertoire of the motivations that Millennials and Gen Z prioritize when discussing their sustainable plastic-free consumption choices, we detect and deep dive into the analysis of different social formations definable as communities (that are #EcoWarrior; Outdoor Travelers; Neo-Moms; #bethatgirl). Based on our analyses, we identified four key motivations that each community prioritizes in their conversations: (1) transforming; (2) finding a mate; (3) staying healthy; and (4) pacifying. Across all the conversations we analyzed, the notion of care emerges as the key priority for young consumers and sustainable consumption is depicted as a holistic form of self-care.

In terms of contribution, we think that the dialogical viewpoint we develop in this paper may help scholars address the "problem of abstractness" (White et al. 2019) typical of the research on sustainable consumption by firmly grounding the exploration of young consumers' motivations in the context of their social media discussions. Intentions, actions, and outcomes of sustainable consumption are often difficult to capture because they are abstract, vague, uncertain, and difficult to grasp for consumers (Reczek et al. 2018). In contrast with that, our netnographic approach allows for a situated immersion into the culture of sustainable consumption by deep diving into young sustainable consumers' lived experiences that are communicated through and reflected in the online traces of their social media discussions and in the social and influence dynamics enacted within those discourses and interest networks. Our paper then contributes to delve deeper into those conversational dynamics in and through which the priorities related to sustainable consumption choices are shaped and constructed through the expressive and material capacities of the different social formations that are engaged in the discussion of sustainability issues. In so doing, it contributes to better orienting brands in their efforts to construct a sustainable covenant and product offering by providing a more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneous motivations that are at play in dialogically framing sustainable consumption choices.

Our paper is organized as follows. First, we characterize young Millennials and Gen Z as generations of consumers



committed to sustainable consumption choices as well as to the discussion of sustainability issues and causes on social media platforms. Then, guided by netnographic principles, we explore the discursive practices that shape young consumers' choice of plastic-free refillable bottles. Our findings visually map and explore in depth the motivations and priorities that young Millennials and Gen Z discuss in their social media groupings when discussing sustainable lifestyles and behaviors.

The Ever-Increasing Rise of Sustainable Consumption: Millennials and Gen Z as Committed and Connected Consumers

The importance of sustainability, both from a marketing perspective and from a consumer perspective, is increasing tremendously (Minton et al. 2018). This growth has given rise to a prolific stream of literature in marketing and consumer research that has explored the drivers, motivations, practices, behaviors, and implications of sustainable consumption.

Within this body of literature, scholars agree that sustainable consumption is a fuzzy concept that is hard to define (Connolly and Prothero 2003). Sustainable consumption behaviors can include, in fact, a varied set of practices and actions like voluntarily reducing one's consumption in the first place, choosing products with sustainable sourcing, production, and features, conserving resources, and utilizing more sustainable approaches to product disposal (White et al. 2019).

Nowadays, young people are considered key actors in the transition to more sustainable behaviors, to the point that they are commonly identified as key agents of change in the mobilization toward more sustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns (Singh et al. 2022). Previous research on sustainable consumption has identified generational and age-based differences in pro-environmental concern and behavior (Grønhoj and Hubert 2022).

Despite the increasing importance of sustainability for young people, relatively little is known about how they engage with sustainable issues, especially within the academic literature (Singh et al. 2022, 831). In general, we do not know as much about young consumers and sustainability as we do about adults, considering that most extant research has focused on adults' understanding of sustainability (Davies et al. 2020). However, the ways in which young generations discuss their priorities about sustainability and make their sustainable consumption choices differ from those of adults (Davies et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2022). Given that young people differ from adults in terms of their experiences with sustainability, they deserve research attention in their own right (Singh et al. 2022).

So far, research on sustainable young consumers has mainly investigated how Millennials and Gen Z react to sustainable product offerings and CSR-related communications (Bedard and Tolmie 2018; Kim and Austin 2020; Confetto et al. 2023), to assess young consumers' pro-environmental orientation (Grønhoj and Hubert 2022), engagement with environmental issues (Schill et al. 2022), and willingness to reward and buy those products and brands that show their commitment to sustainable business practices (de Brabandere et al. 2022; Lisboa et al. 2022; Narayanan 2022). These studies have adopted experiential designs (Kim and Austin 2020) or have analyzed retrospective (Schill et al. 2022) and self-reported data (Confetto et al. 2023). Most of the research on sustainable consumption has investigated the attitude-behavior gap extensively (see for example White et al.'s 2019 literature review on the status of the field) by focusing on attitudinal (such as intentions, motivations, and beliefs or values) and behavioral constructs (McDonald et al. 2012) to understand if and how the willingness of individuals or groups to undertake actions that can promote positive and/or adverse negative environmental consequences (Milfont and Markowitz 2016), actually translates into pro-environmental behaviors. With its emphasis on evaluating the attitude-behavior gap, this body of research has predominantly centered on an abstract conceptualization of sustainability (Reczek et al. 2018), making it difficult to grasp how sustainable consumption relates to the construction of individuals' identities as sustainable consumers and to the dynamics of social influence within relational networks, like social media, in which consumers share and discuss with others their commitments to sustainable consumption choices (White et al. 2019).

We argue that this is an import gap to be filled by current research considering that preoccupation for the environment is now at the center of young consumers' social media conversations, in which they often pressure companies to integrate sustainability and zero-waste commitments into their brand's covenant and product offering. Young consumers, especially Millennials and Gen Z, have grown up in a more connected world than previous generations and have shown greater connectivity in discussing their sustainable consumerism choices (Seyfi et al. 2023). Social media has made it easier for committed consumers to express their beliefs and initiate their mobilization and civic engagements (Kozinets and Jenkins 2022). More than any previous generation, Millennials and Gen Z are using social media in constructing themselves as sustainable consumers. Compared with older social media users, in fact, "Millennials and Gen Z are talking more about the need for action on climate change; they are seeing more climate change content online, and they are doing more to get involved with the issue" (Pew Research "Gen Zers and Millennials' activism for climate change" 2021).



Although few studies have already problematized the individualistic and decontextualized nature of much research into sustainable consumers (Chatzidakis et al. 2012), investigations are still missing that provide a more nuanced understanding of how young consumers' sustainability-related discourses on social media, micro-cultures, and identities are constructed and negotiated. Therefore, we aim to develop a deep cultural understanding of how young consumers discuss and frame their choices for sustainable brands and products and the specific motivations that they prioritize in their conversations in the context of their unfolding in social media aggregations, where it is customary for Millennials and Gen Z to discuss their sustainable consumption choices and to construct and express, through those choices and the motivations behind them, their identity as sustainable consumers.

Toward a Dialogical Framing of Sustainable Consumption Choices

Scholars have recognized that sustainable consumption and sustainable branding are two complementary sides of the same coin (Connolly and Prothero 2003; White et al. 2019). Sustainable branding encompasses many facets, like accountability for climate and environmental impact, savvy use of technology and innovation to experiment and introduce novel and less impactful product solutions (Faroudi and Palazzo 2021) and gauging the impact that production techniques and products have on the environment by optimizing and reducing waste and carbon emissions, and limiting the dependence on raw materials that cannot be recycled. The management of all these facets requires listening and adapting to the varying demands of heterogeneous consumers and stakeholder groups. This heterogeneity can give rise to a set of expressive and material capacities (specific aesthetics, values, terminologies, practices, repertoires, ways of doing things) that differ from those activated by another consumer group with different identity, community, and social connections (Celia 2009; Molander et al. 2023). Within their networks, “different consumer collectives can interact with brand components in new ways, producing new distinct value arrangements characterized by distinct expressive and material capacities of value pertaining to the specific consumer group in question” (Molander et al. 2023, p. 767).

Considering that, we think that exploring the activities of heterogeneous consumer groups, related to the discussion of their sustainable consumption choices and their interactions with different components of sustainable brands, is needed in order to better understand the diverse motivations that might be at play in dialogically framing sustainable consumption choices.

Sustainable branding “requires a more socially, dialogically embedded kind of corporate practice and greater levels

of critical reflexivity” (Balmer et al. 2007, p. 7). That since sustainable brands occupy a discursive space, in which meanings are created and contested and are the outcome of an interactive process with stakeholders (Melewar et al. 2012), that takes place within the context of a highly active, socially charged web of societal actors (Handelman 2006), who are using social media platforms to manifest and spread their commitments and priorities. Through this dialogic interactive process, brands, consumers, and stakeholders share and negotiate priorities and engagements, which mold and are reflected in the sustainable brand promise and product offering.

Although sustainable branding has been recognized as a dialogical process, in which companies, society, stakeholders, and consumers co-construct their commitments to sustainability, studies are missing that develop a deep understanding of the conversational dynamics that inform its creation. Studies have not investigated, so far, the highly conversational and contextualized nature of sustainable brand building in social media interactions, in which consumers—especially young Millennials and Gen Z—discuss their motivations and priorities in making sustainable brand and product choices. Our paper addresses this gap by providing a deep understanding of how young Millennials and Gen Z dialogically frame sustainable choices.

Method

Context of the Study: Plastic-Free Refillable Water Bottles

Recently, literature on sustainable consumption has shown an increasing interest in consumer perception and behavior related to plastic use and disposal (Rhein and Schmid 2020; Zwicker et al. 2020) and the radical reduction of the use of plastic (Raimondo et al. 2022). This is not surprising considering plastic's overwhelming presence in the consumer experience of a countless number of products (Cronin et al. 2022).

The plastic-free packaging market is currently experiencing substantial growth, fueled by the rising interest of Millennials and Gen Z in reducing plastic waste (Fortune 2023). According to the Cognitive Market Research Report on Plastic Free Packaging Market (2023), numerous brands are actively introducing plastic-free reusable packaging options to minimize plastic consumption. Among the various segments within this market, the plastic-free refillable water bottle is the fastest-growing one (McKinsey Report on the reusable water bottles market 2023). The success of this segment stems not only from its inherent commitment to reducing plastic waste but also from its association with



another enduring trend among Millennials and Gen Z, which is the relentless pursuit of hydration.

Over the past few years, water has gained a cool-factor edge. Google searches for “hydration” have doubled since 2015, and water has surpassed coffee, soft drinks, and other beverages to become the most popular beverage in America since 2016. The trend gained significant momentum in 2013 when the "Take a shot of water every couple of hours to make sure you're healthy and hydrated" challenge was launched on Tumblr. Since then, numerous celebrities and influencers have further popularized the trend by sharing their water intake habits and the importance of hydration as an all-purpose beauty elixir. The trend further exploded in 2020 with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, water was presented and celebrated as a hand for the virus pathology. Consequently, staying hydrated became essential, with plastic-free refillable water bottles joining the ranks of indispensable items that consumers cannot leave their homes without.

More recently, the plastic-free refillable water bottle industry has further expanded, capitalizing on the emerging phenomenon of smart packaging. Recognizing the potential of this new packaging frontier, plastic-free refillable water bottle producers have introduced smart bottles as a complement to their traditional offerings. These advanced bottles not only allow Millennials and Gen Z to fulfill their desire to reduce plastic waste but also to cater to their need for tracking their hydration. That since these bottles are plastic-free and able to send personalized reminders to drink regularly, monitor hydration levels, and track daily water intake while autonomously infusing water with vitamins.

Considering that the plastic-free refillable water bottle industry is the fastest-growing market within the plastic-free packaging market and represents a segment at the crossroad

between the trendiest lifestyle interests of Millennials and Gen Z, which influence their consumption choices, we set our data collection within young consumers’ social media conversations on the plastic-free refillable bottle and smart bottle adoption as a compelling research context where discussions on sustainable consumption can be observed.

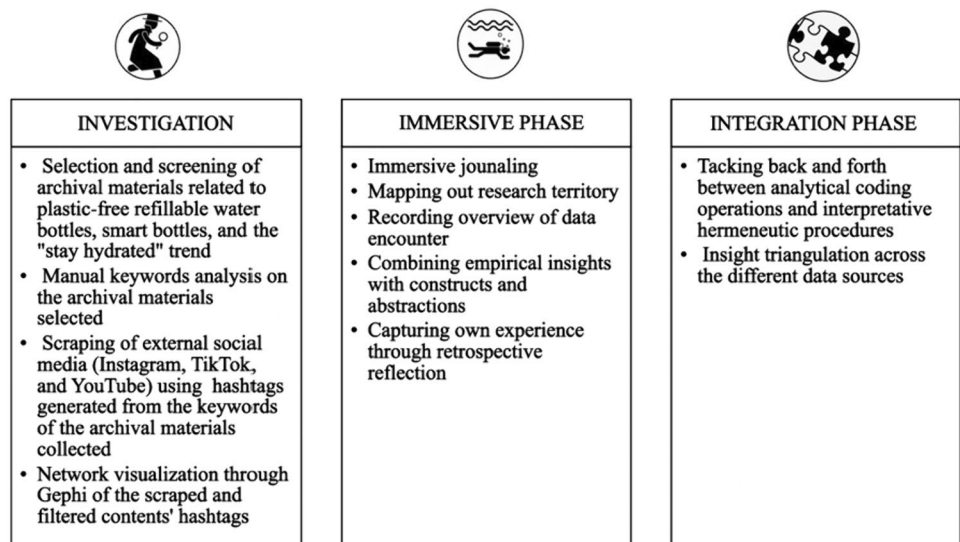
Research Design

We conducted a netnography following the guidelines and procedures that Kozinets (2020) theorized for social media qualitative research. We searched, identified, captured, and interpreted the plethora of discursive practices and conversations generated on the web around plastic-free refillable water bottles and smart bottles. Adopting a netnographic glance provided a deep and situated cultural understanding (Kozinets et al. 2018) of the complex system of themes, imagery, vocabularies, rhetoric, and meanings that consumers associate with plastic-free refillable bottles and smart solutions. Therefore, netnography allowed us to naturalistically observe how Millennials and Gen Z express their favor and support for sustainable brands and identify the specific motivations that they prioritize when discussing and framing their sustainable consumption choices.

Our netnography was conducted from April to June 2023 and included an investigative phase complemented by an immersive and data integration phase (Kozinets 2020) (see Fig. 1).

We started with the investigative phase, during which we retrieved archival materials and social media data published from February 2020 (COVID-19 diffusion) to April 2023. For our archival analysis, we gathered news, media articles, and reports related to plastic-free refillable water bottles, smart bottles, and the “stay hydrated” trend. The

Fig. 1 Netnographic research phases and operations



social media investigation was directed toward Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, as these platforms were indicated by Statista in 2023 as the most commonly used networking website by Millennials and Gen Z. Furthermore, we specifically selected these platforms for their audio-visual focus and extensive use of searchable hashtags, rendering them broad repositories of retrievable data (Kozinets et al. 2017). Additionally, TikTok was selected for its emphasis on community building among users (Boffone 2022), making it a valuable source to understand how motivations and priorities are framed, negotiated, and assembled in community content. The data collection on these three platforms began with a general group of hashtags generated through the support of Semrush and Hashtag Generator software, which run on the most recurrent keywords of the archival materials collected (i.e., #waterbottle, #smartbottle, #hydrate). We employed these initial broad hashtags to scrape the social media posts falling under their domains. The scraping was conducted through Apify, configured to collect Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube posts—including graphics, photographs, stories, and videos as well as their relative metadata (comprising copy and hashtags), and comments. We filtered the scraped posts and comments considering only those in English and those relating to plastic-free refillable bottles and smart bottles. This filtering process generated a dataset of 318 posts (inclusive of metadata) and 3.111 comments (see Table 1).

In order to gain an initial understanding of the themes and webs of significance among them that are featured in the discursive practices and conversations around plastic-free refillable water bottles and smart bottles, we visualized the network of the hashtags contained in the scraped and filtered posts and comments through Gephi (Bastian et al. 2009). Gephi is a visualization and exploration software that offers network visualizations. We specifically performed a co-hashtag analysis on our dataset (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016) to gain insights into the conceptual associations that emerge naturally from the hashtags of the posts and comments retrieved from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

Gephi also supported us in the analysis of the social structure of the network of conversations (Caliandro and Gandini 2017) deploying around plastic-free refillable water bottles and smart bottles and in the identification of the existence of social formations definable as communities (i.e., #EcoWarrior, Outdoor Travelers, Neo-Moms, and #bethatgirl in our findings).

Subsequently, we scouted and picked the most relevant posts and comments of our dataset generated in those communities. We selected these sources on Kozinets' (2020) recommended criteria that highlight the relevance of the social media content in relation to the research questions; the regularity of updates and the recency of the activities produced; the dynamism of the interactivity generated around

Table 1 The composition of our netnographic dataset

Type of data	Research context	Investigated online materials	Investigated online comments
Archival materials	Web news, articles, interviews, blog articles, reports (i.e. Forbes, the-Guardian.com, NYtimes.com, Huffpost.com, newyorker.com, goodfood.com, spectator.com, Fortune.com)	24	–
Social media content adopted for Gephi	Social media personal profiles	86 Instagram photographs 7 Instagram graphics 4 Instagram stories 185 TikTok videos 36 YouTube videos	3111 related comments
Social media communities	#EcoWarrior	17 Instagram photographs 2 Instagram graphics 6 Instagram stories 11 TikTok videos	80 related comments
	Outdoor Travelers	32 TikTok videos	41 related comments
	Neo-Moms	28 Instagram photographs 11 TikTok videos 13 YouTube videos	369 related comments
	#bethatgirl	16 Instagram photographs 2 Instagram graphics 5 Instagram stories 14 TikTok videos	668 related comments
Total of social media posts and comments considered for the network visualization analysis performed through Gephi		3429	
Total of online traces considered for the netnographic analysis of the communities		1339	



the created content; and the diversity and the richness of ideas and viewpoints exchanged.

We screenshotted and scraped both user-generated posts and comments selected from our investigated social media field sites. In compliance with the deontological ethical procedures of netnography (Kozinets 2020, p. 169), users' names on social media posts and comments have been obscured.

In the immersive phase, each of the researchers wrote an immersion journal that resulted overall in a written narrative of 23.611 words. Immersion journals allowed us to map out our research territory, record overviews and details of our encounter with data, integrate our insights coming from the empirical dataset with extant constructs and abstractions, and capture our own experiences with introspective reflection (Kozinets 2020, p. 284). Following these operations, we constantly moved back and forth between context and data to complement insights based on immediate revelations with retrospective sensemaking (Gambetti 2021, p. 306). In the integration phase, we select, reconnected, and save social media graphics, photographs, stories, videos, as well as relative metadata and comments. Overall, the final dataset we considered for the analysis of the communities consists of approximately 1.339 online traces, inclusive of 157 social media posts, 1158 comments, and 24 archival materials (see Table 1).

Finally, we performed data integration through a combination of deductive and inductive analysis as well as through the ongoing interpretation of emergent cultural insights. Our interpretation process was interactive, iterative, and aimed at generating a hermeneutic circle of understanding where each portion of the data was interpreted in relation to the

developing sense of the whole (Thompson et al. 1994). The interpretation was enriched by triangulating our insights across different data sources to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the analysis (Cho and Trent 2006).

Findings

Visualizing the Network and the Dominant Themes in Young Consumers' Conversations

The network visualization performed in Gephi maps the structure of the conversations in our dataset, by identifying the dominant themes in Millennials' and Gen Z's discussions about plastic-free refillable water bottles and smart bottles and the interplays among those themes in the form of groups of hashtags that are likely to appear together.

Gephi identified a network of 113 unique hashtags, each representing a node, interconnected by 121 edges. We partitioned this network, through the application of the modularity mode, to identify clusters of nodes. The visualization of the clusters' network is based on modularity scores and displays the aggregations of clusters of hashtags that are more likely to come together with each other (Caliandro and Gandini 2017, p. 180). We specifically set the resolution of modularity to 1.0. in order to obtain a visualization of the dominant clusters of hashtags within the network.

Figure 2 presents the comprehensive network of hashtags and interplays among them, partitioned into the thematic clusters that emerged from our network visualization.

The central node #waterbottle fosters seven external relations, which split the network of the conversations into three

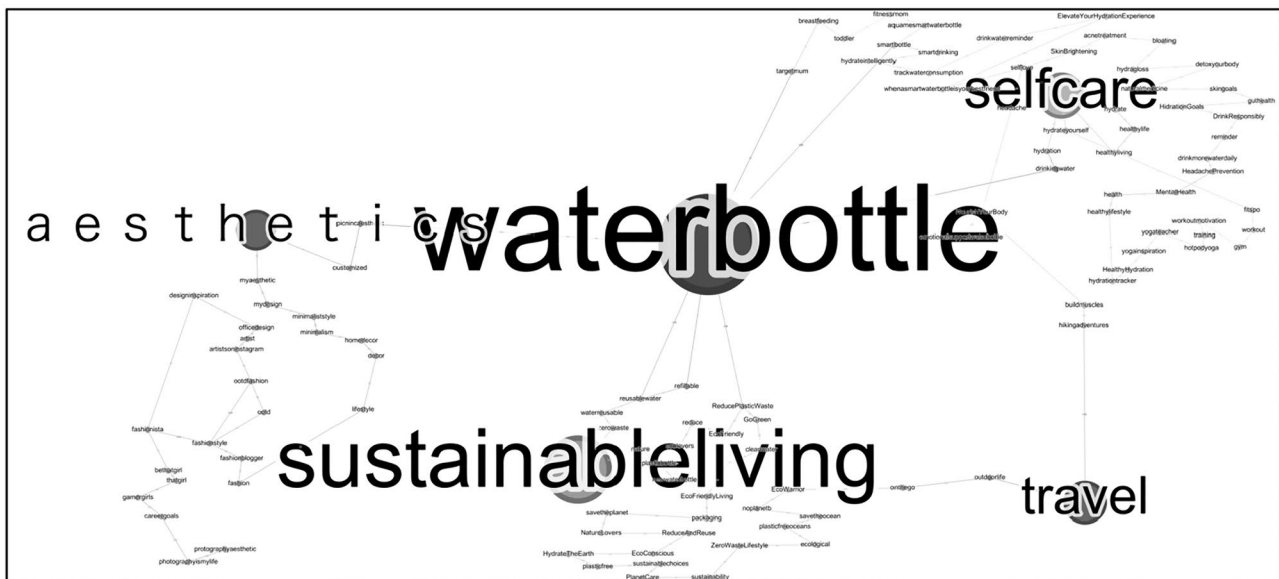


Fig. 2 Network visualization of Millennials' and Gen Z's conversations about plastic-free refillable water bottles



main thematic clusters: (1) #sustainableliving; (2) #selfcare, which incorporates in its sub-network the hashtags #smartbottle and #hydrate; and (3) #aesthetics. The node named #travel cannot be considered a fourth thematic cluster in the network, since the hashtag remains conversationally isolated at the crossroad between the #sustainableliving and #selfcare clusters and it does not generate a sub-network of nodes.

The first thematic cluster deploys around the theme of #sustainableliving as the predominant hashtag, reporting the highest number of occurrences after #waterbottle (51%) (percentage of the hashtag occurrences in posts and comments included in the analysis) and a degree centrality of 0,016. The degree of centrality measures the number of incoming or outgoing (or both) relationships from a node, depending on the orientation of a relationship projection (Estrada and Örjan 2008).

Looking at the sub-network of the hashtags that are likely to be the most frequently associated with #sustainableliving conversations, this cluster unveils that Millennials and Gen Z conceptualize sustainability commitment as a profound dedication to safeguarding and taking care of the planet (see hashtags as #PlanetCare, #savetheocean, and #plasticfreeoceans in Fig. 3). This commitment is framed through semantic associations with hashtags that use imperative verbs (i.e., #ReducePlasticWaste; #reduce, #GoGreen) to point at sustainable living as an active daily effort to transform our habits.

At a closer analysis, this proactive commitment is associated with two complementary sub-networks of hashtags: on the one hand, hashtags that emphasize positive pro-environmental behaviors (i.e., #HydrateTheEarth,

#EcofriendlyLiving); on the other hand, hashtags related to avoidance behaviors that push young consumers toward more conscientious choices aimed at the reduction of waste. Within avoidance-related conversations, we found also networks of hashtags focused on resource conservation through the selection of plastic-free, refillable, and reusable packaging solutions (see such hashtags as #refillable, #packaging, #ReduceAndReuse, #reusablewater).

While in the first cluster, the act of care embraces the environment and the planet, in the second cluster, caring is primarily an act of nourishment for the self. In this cluster, #selfcare is the predominant node, accounting for 47% of occurrences but having the highest degree centrality (0,041) in the network after #waterbottle (0,057).

The analysis of the sub-network of the hashtags most frequently associated with the primary node #selfcare reveals that young consumers discuss the act of caring as an active and holistic engagement toward one's physical and emotional health (see hashtags like #healthylifestyle; #MentalHealth; #NourishYourBody in Fig. 4) and as a continuous process of workout and training (#workoutmotivation; #training; #yogainspiration). Within this sub-network, looking after yourself is understood as keeping your body clean and detoxed (hashtags like #detoxyourbody; #HeadachePrevention; #ElevateYourHydrationExperience): numerous hashtags are focused on purifying practices that young consumers are discussing to keep their body and mind healthy (#skingoals; #acnetreatment; #drinkmorewaterdaily) and to monitor their health status (#hydrationtracker; #trackwaterconsumption). Within this sub-network, water and the process of hydration are often labeled as a natural

Fig. 3 Zoom-in on the #sustainableliving sub-network of hashtags

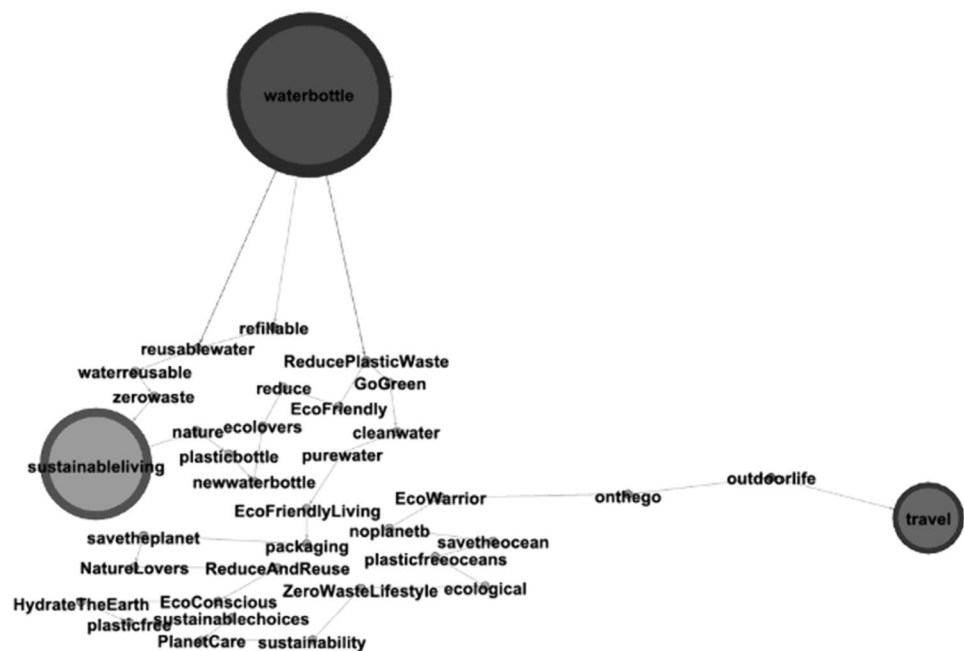
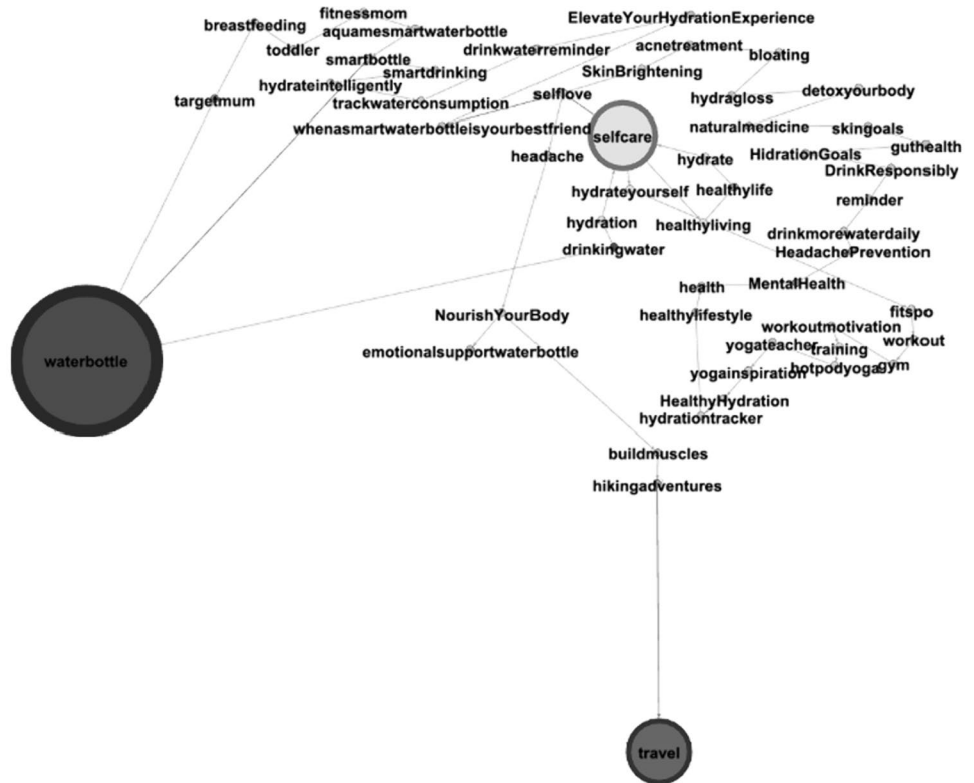


Fig. 4 Zoom-in on the #selfcare sub-network of hashtags

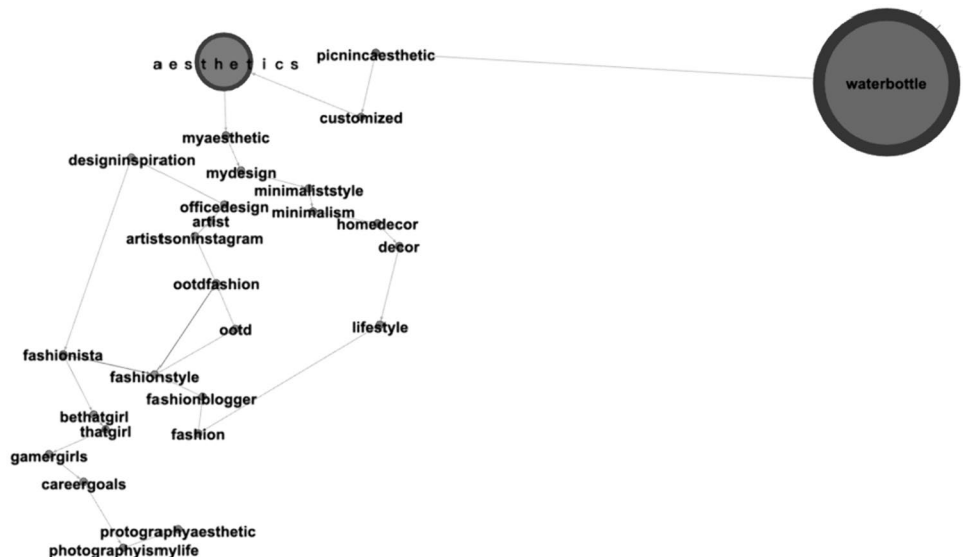


cure (#naturalmedicine; #SkinBrightening; #hydrategloss; #emotionalsupportwaterbottle).

Finally, in the third cluster, the predominant hashtag is #aesthetics with 37% of occurrences and a degree centrality of 0.016. Within this sub-network of hashtags, the theme of aesthetics is discussed as an act of self-expression and customization achieved through the creation of one's own design and personalization (see hashtags like #mydesign;

#customized; #myaesthetic in Fig. 5). The popularity of these hashtags highlights how Millennials and Gen Z conceive aesthetics as a way to construct and display their unique identities. Within this sub-network, hashtags are focused on proactive actions that suggest young consumers as empowered and capable creators of their own style (see such hashtags as #fashionblogger; #ootd, which refers to the ability to design outfits; #photographyaesthetic). While in

Fig. 5 Zoom-in on the #aesthetics sub-network of hashtags



the first cluster, care is directed toward the environment and in the second toward the self, in this last cluster, curation is about creating an inspiring and neat context for living and working (see hashtags like #homedecor; #officedesign; #designinspiration; #minimalism). This sub-network of hashtags highlights Millennials' and Gen Z's preference for a minimalist aesthetic (see #minimaliststyle; #minimalism), a taste regime that resonates with the adoption of a sustainable lifestyle highlighted in the first cluster, and the appreciation for the purification practices emerged in the second cluster.

Delving Deeper into the Social Structure and the Micro-cultures of the Network

Our network visualization allowed us to analyze also the social structure of the conversations that were deployed around the hashtag #waterbottle. Within the three thematic clusters (#sustainableliving; #selfcare; #aesthetics) that we identified, different social formations definable as communities were detected. More specifically, the network visualization brought out specific hashtags or groups of hashtags (namely #EcoWarrior; #travel, #hikingadventures, #outdoorlife, #ontheego; #targetmum, #breastfeeding, #fitnessmom, #toddler; #bethatgirl) that led to the identification of four distinct communities. Each of these communities is nested in one of the three sub-networks of conversations that we illustrated in our previous paragraph: in the #sustainableliving sub-network we found two communities (1) #EcoWarrior and (2) Outdoor Travelers, who are positioned also at the crossroad with the #selfcare sub-network; (3) Neo-Moms in the #selfcare; and (4) #bethatgirl in the #aesthetics.

Through a netnographic investigation, we delved deeper into each community to better analyze and understand how Millennials and Gen Z discuss and frame their sustainable choices and their support for sustainable brands and products. In the following paragraphs, we analyze in depth the main motivations that each community put forth in social media conversations when discussing sustainable behaviors.

Based on our analyses, we identified four key motivations that each community prioritizes in their conversations that are (1) transforming; (2) finding a mate; (3) staying healthy; and (4) pacifying. These motivations represent the different ways in which sustainable choices are framed in young consumers' social media conversations included in our study.

Transforming

The #EcoWarrior community sees themselves as brave defenders of nature and ecologists who prioritize the well-being of our planet in their lifestyle choices. Supporting the environmental cause is at the center of their conversations. This community actively floods social media with inspiring

discourse and calls upon their fellows to join the environmental battle by becoming activists of the “eco-mission,” a term that frequently appears in threads of conversations. According to the #EcoWarrior community, every individual has an inherent eco-mission during his/her lifetime that involves the responsibility to protect and preserve the planet. In their posts, Eco Warriors are very specific and detailed in describing how to fulfill the eco-mission and in reporting the impact that our daily consumption choices have on the planet. For this community, a crucial starting point in furthering this mission is to “*reduce the consumption of single-use plastic*” by “*getting rid of single use plastic bags,*” “*filtering water*” or consuming “*water in boxes like milk cartons*” as emerges from different Instagram comments. The #EcoWarrior community keenly recognizes the environmental consequences stemming from inadequate plastic recycling, to the extent that they feel the urge to educate and sensitize the rest of the population to transform their behaviors and habits: “*people need to be educated to carry a reusable bottle filled at home. Then water fountains should be available in public places. In parts of the world where the water is unreliable it can be boiled or filtered. But all of this need education.*”

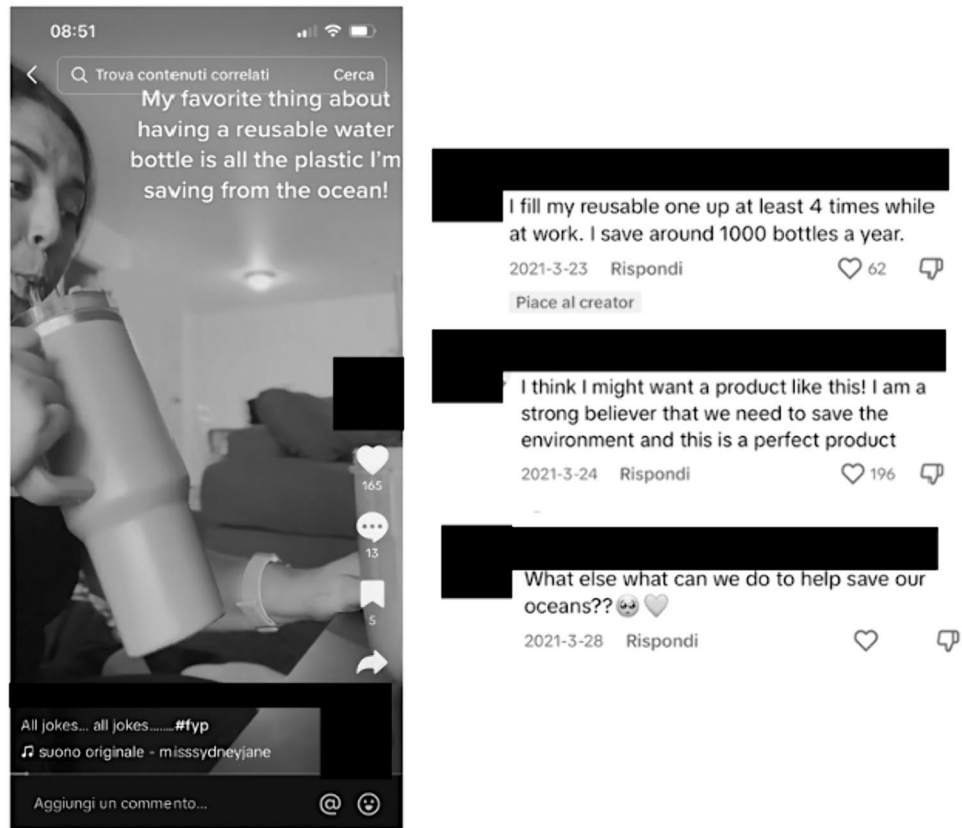
“Save” is the most recurrent word that appears in their social media posts, and their narratives powerfully convey the urgency to take action toward the eco-mission. The TikTok post in Fig. 6 offers a compelling representation of Eco Warriors' efforts to trigger transformative consumption behaviors. A community member proudly shares her personal metrics, demonstrating that by refilling her plastic-free refillable water bottle one to four times daily, she has prevented the production of 1.000 plastic water bottles in a year. Another member continues the thread of discussion with a call to action that exhorts others to do more together for nature preservation.

In this community, sustainable lifestyle choices are then understood as a collective commitment that starts with the individual's effort to change one's lifestyle and to share and discuss information, facts, and calls that can inspire others to participate in this transformative process.

In the pursuit of their eco-mission, Eco Warriors highly value durability in discussing the features of those products that the community elects as their brands of choice. They commonly praise and express love for the brand Yeti, which, thanks to the durability of its products, plays a pivotal role in the community's mission by preventing the need for frequent replacements, thereby contributing to the #EcoWarrior community's intent of mitigating overconsumption and waste. In a TikTok video, an #EcoWarrior shares her personal five-year experience with a Yeti bottle, recounting how it “*remarkably remained intact throughout the years,*” effectively dissuading her from purchasing new bottles. The video culminates with an exhortation from the #EcoWarrior to her



Fig. 6 Eco Warriors educating fellows to transform their consumer behaviors



community, urging others to prioritize durable products to minimize waste and mitigate environmentally harmful production practices. This call to action reverberates through the comments section of the video as other fellow #EcoWarriors share their own enduring relationships with their reliable Yeti products. These comments further amplify the resounding call to prefer those brands that offer durable products, fortifying the community's commitment to educating others toward more conscientious behaviors and habits.

Finding a Mate

The community of Outdoor Travelers is positioned at the crossroad between the #sustainableliving and the #selfcare clusters in our network visualization. As supporters of sustainable lifestyle choices, Outdoor Travelers are constantly seeking solutions that can help them maintain an eco-conscious lifestyle even when they embark on their outdoor adventures far away from home. Plastic-free travel solutions are often referred to as “travel essential” in road trip preparation advice.

Outdoor Travelers embrace plastic-free packaging not only to preserve the planet from plastic production but also to safeguard their personal well-being. They recognize that plastic bottles can leach harmful particles into the soil and water sources they consume, posing a threat to their overall

health. Consequently, when discussing brand choices, they focus on those brands that have not only eliminated the use of non-recyclable plastics but have also introduced filtering systems. The TikTok video in Fig. 7 features an influencer with extensive experience as an Outdoor Traveler, who illustrates the filtering capabilities of LifeStraw plastic-free refillable water bottles to reassure the community about the effectiveness of the product in removing potential contaminants, including plastic particles that may be present in public water sources.

At a closer analysis of social media discussions, plastic-free solutions are essential not only because they contribute to the preservation of the planet and personal well-being, but mostly because they feed travelers' sense of safety. In fact, refillable water bottles are here understood not only as a functional consumption choice that serves the environmentalist cause (like in the case of the #EcoWarrior community) but they become the embodiment of travelers' best mates during their solo adventure. Plastic-free refillable water bottles or smart bottles are staying by consumers' sides throughout their days, and this constant presence offers them profound emotional comfort. The post and comments in Fig. 8 highlight that Outdoor Travelers tend to develop a strong reliance and dependency on their refillable bottles over their repeated use during different adventures, to the extent that they get emotionally attached to their travel



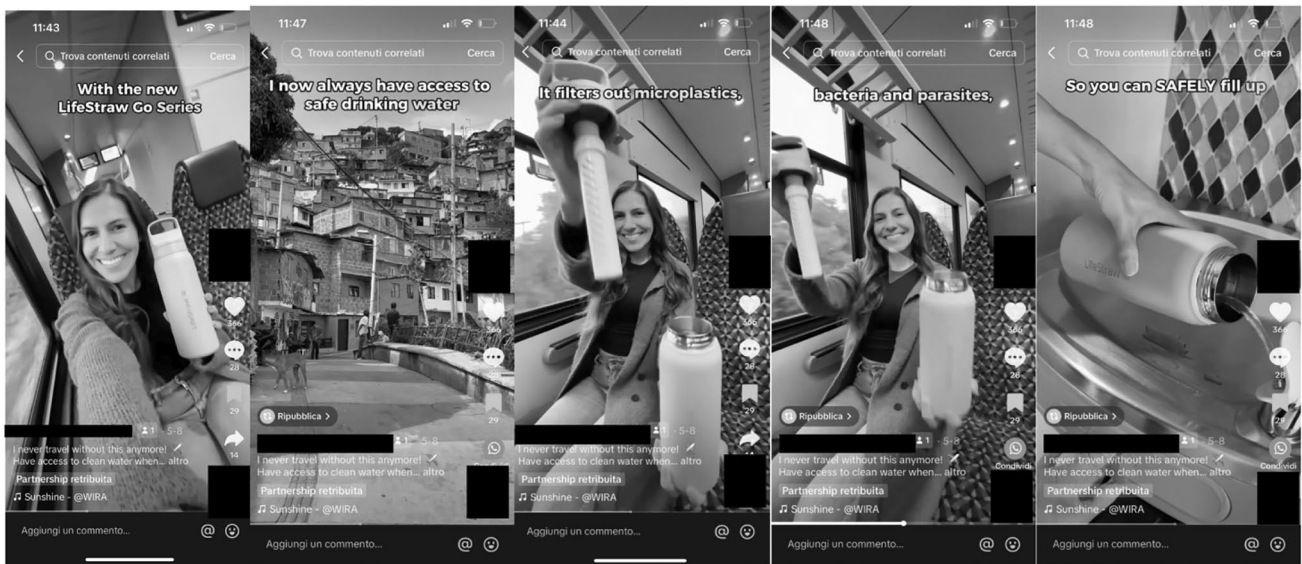


Fig. 7 Outdoor Traveler influencer presenting built-in filtration systems

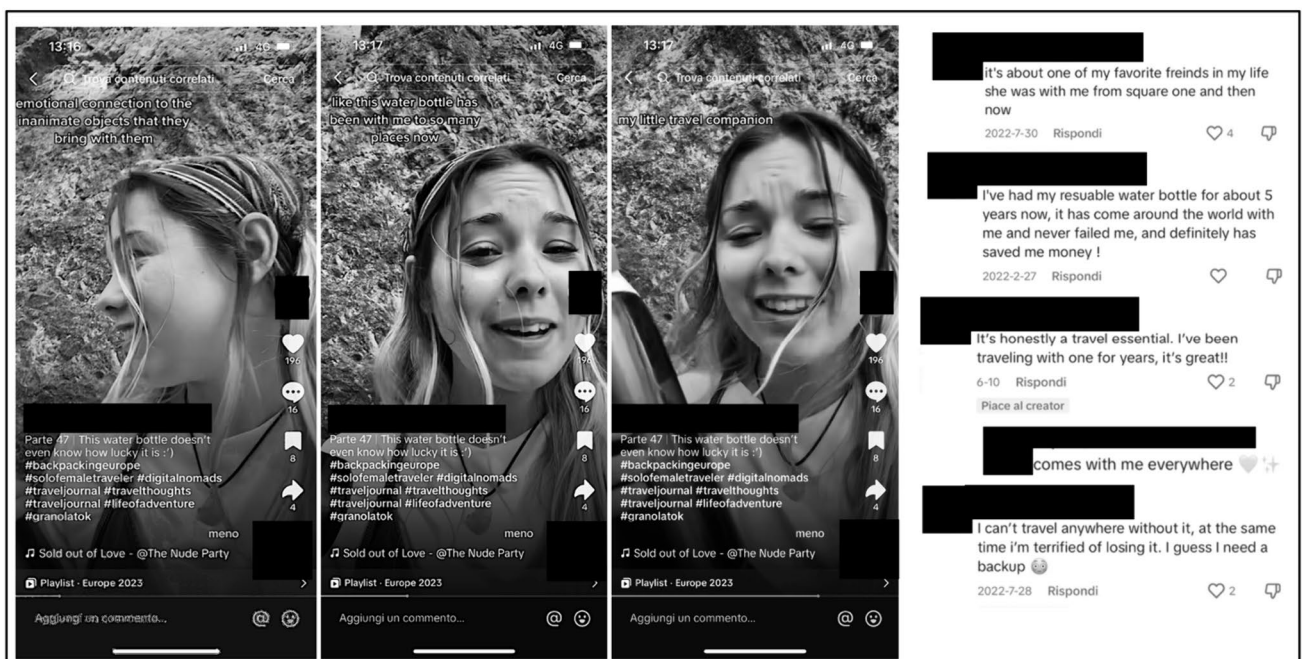


Fig. 8 Plastic-free refillable water bottle as Outdoor Travelers' cherished mate

essentials with whom they “*can’t travel anywhere without.*” Outdoor Travelers explicitly describe their refillable bottles as the perfect “*travel companion,*” more than an object as “*one of [their] favorite friends*” with whom they have built an “*emotional connection*” across the “*so many places*” they have been “*so lucky to visit*” together. The anthropomorphization of consumption objects as companions occurs typically when individuals experience loneliness due to the

absence of social connections, like during solo travels, in which people are deprived of their stable relations with their close ones. In these situations, people tend to view and treat objects as peers to attain a sense of familiarity, emotional comfort, and pleasantness from the relationship with them (Epley et al. 2007).

The emotional bond and sense of companionship that travelers gain from the relationship with their refillable



bottles become evident when they discuss the loss of these cherished objects. The conversations in Fig. 9 capture the range of emotions that Outdoor Travelers go through in the aftermath of such a loss, resembling the stages of grief: sadness ("crying", "I sobbed, "this hurts my soul"), depression ("depressive state," "I think about her all the time," "I still think of her daily," "broken"), and a feeling of personal identity loss ("haven't been the same since"). Figure 9 also shows how fellow consumers offer comforting words of empathy and support, using those consoling phrases commonly employed in times of loss, such as "I feel your pain," "I am so sorry," and "I just want to give you the biggest hug." This is the typical emotional response that consumers show when they react to the involuntary loss of their possessions as they experience a sentiment similar to grief when they lose a possession they perceive as emotionally irreplaceable (Delorme et al. 2005). That since individuals attribute personal meaning to their possessions, much like they do to human friendships.

Staying Healthy

In contrast to the Outdoor Travelers' community, which frames plastic-free refillable water bottles as trustworthy travel mates that are the custodians of travelers' safety, we observed that the Neo-Moms' community mainly relies on smart refillable bottles to monitor and improve their physical well-being, especially during the postpartum phase. Neo-Moms are young women who are encountering new physical needs during and after pregnancy. For instance, while nursing their babies, Neo-Moms need to increase their water intake to compensate for the extra water that is used by their bodies to make milk. However, in their new busy schedule, in which they look after and raise their kids, they

often overlook the importance of maintaining an adequate level of hydration. The Instagram and TikTok threads in Fig. 10 show how Neo-Moms discuss their struggle to stay hydrated, and they recognize smart water bottles as the ideal solution to stay balanced and healthy (see "it's helping you with your water intake," "nursing takes a lot out of you so important to hydrate"). Specifically, the reminder feature of smart water bottles effectively aids Neo-Moms in consuming sufficient water throughout the day, fostering their hydration practices, and nurturing their overall health.

Figure 10 also highlights that the Neo-Moms community has a deep appreciation for product aesthetics when making purchasing decisions. Color is the feature that captures their attention the most. Neo-Moms are keen on buying the same refillable bottles in different color versions (as seen for example in the comment "I ordered the cream but forever waiting for this color to come back in stock"). While this celebration of overconsumption is not a cue for sustainable lifestyle choices, a closer analysis of the discussions within this community reveals that the visual appeal of these objects goes beyond mere aesthetics. Their attractive design serves as a visual motivator that inspires and encourages these young women to drink more water. Instagram and YouTube are flooded with narratives and comments like "I find that a cute water bottle helps me drink more." "Cute" is a recurrent attribute in Neo-Moms' conversations, where "cute" means having an aesthetically pleasing color that makes the product attractive to the eyes. In terms of brand choices, this community gravitates toward those brands, like Owala and the smart brand HydrateSpark, as they offer according to Neo-Moms the widest range of color options (such comments as "Owala colorways are the best. I'm obsessed," "HydrateSpark bottle colors are amazing, there is always a new tone to buy" are often recurrent in Instagram and YouTube).

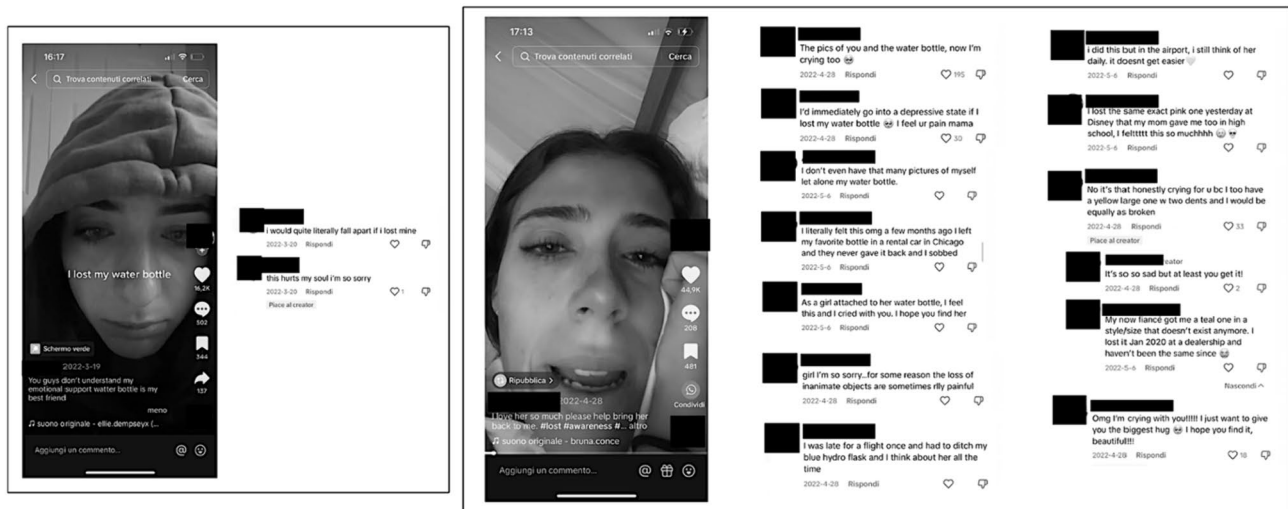


Fig. 9 Outdoor Travelers experiencing grief for the loss of their plastic-free refillable water bottles



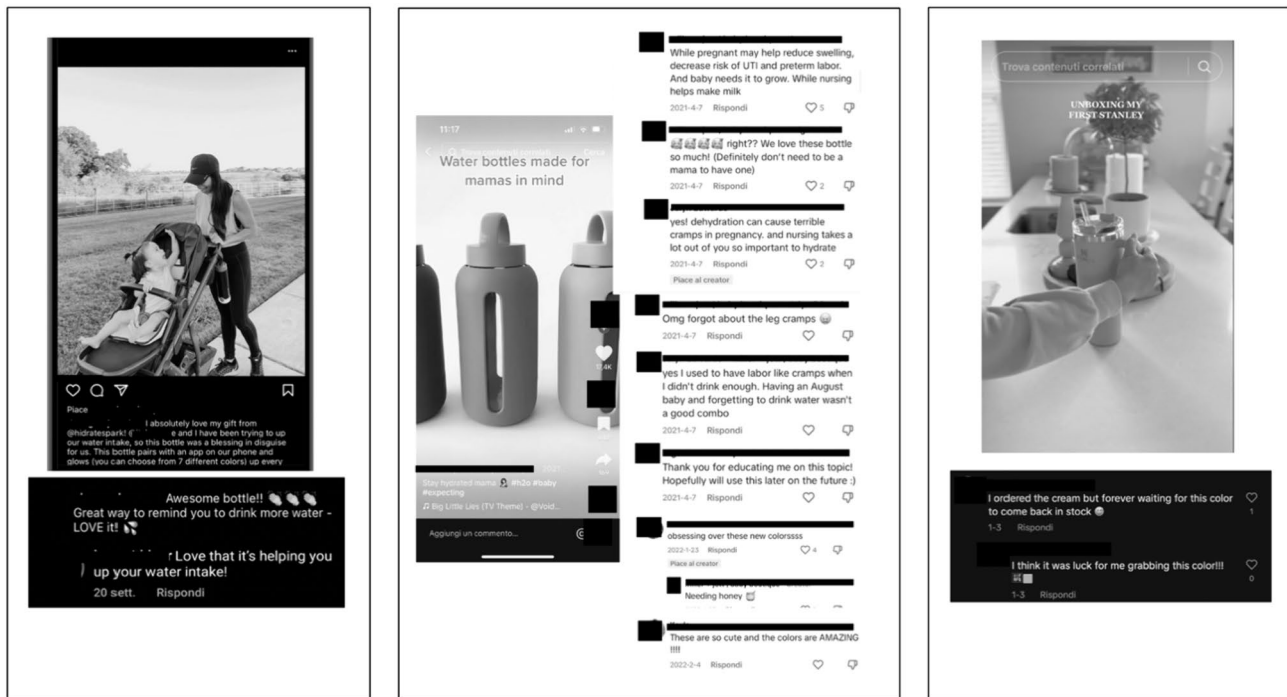


Fig. 10 Neo-Mom's use of colorful refillable bottle to stay healthy and hydrated

Pacifying

While Neo-Moms are predominantly a community that deploys around the topic of #selfcare in which the aesthetic drivers represent an eye-awaking motivating factor to stay healthy and hydrated, the interest in aesthetics is magnified in the #bethatgirl community. This community refers to young women who share a (supposedly) healthy and extremely aesthetic lifestyle on social media to promote self-confidence in other women (Sargent 2021). Their aesthetics centers around the principles of minimalism, tidiness, and a preference for neutral colors, which serve as guiding rules influencing all their consumption choices, also when it comes to selecting plastic-free refillable water bottles. For these young consumers, plastic-free refillable water bottles are not just functional items as they are perceived as an extension of their identity (Belk 1988; 2013). This is vividly portrayed in Fig. 11, where members of the community create the neologism "*That Bottle*" as a cultural derivative stemming from the name of the community itself. As an extension of the self, these objects must embody and express the refined aesthetics that define the taste regime of the #bethatgirl's community. Plastic-free refillable water bottles' aesthetics must align with both the outfit choices and the house decor of the #bethatgirl's aesthetic repertoire (Fig. 11). In the last TikTok frame on the right side of the post, the cream-colored bottle seamlessly complements the soft tones of the chair and the agenda in the workspace,

while harmonizing with the light color palette of the desk and computer. This coordination exemplifies the #neutraesthetic and #neutralstyle (see the hashtags in Fig. 11) that this member of the #bethatgirl community embraces, ensuring a visually cohesive and harmonious environment.

The community of the #bethatgirl consistently demonstrates a preference for those brands that can meet their very specific aesthetic inclination: Stanley Cup and Lululemon effectively cater to the community's desire for minimalistic designs by offering a wide selection of pastel, neutral, and soft color range. These young women often discuss on social media comments about color palette tones like "*cream*," "*sonic white*," "*mist pink*," and other light colors "*that are so amazing*" and "*torn*" consumers between impossible choices.

Beyond this aesthetic motivation, this community, similarly to Outdoor Travelers, adopts plastic-free refillable water bottles for the emotional support (see hashtags #emotional-supportwaterbottle in Figs. 11 and 12) they provide amidst their demanding and highly stressful daily routines during which they confess to "*carry water bottles everywhere*" and "*sticking around*" them all throughout the day (Fig. 12). In their narratives and conversations, these young women celebrate their attachment to refillable bottles as they allow them to store water, which these young women view as a calming elixir to drink when they feel stressed out or nervous. The inclusion of a reusable straw in the plastic-free refillable water bottle expands the emotional value garnered



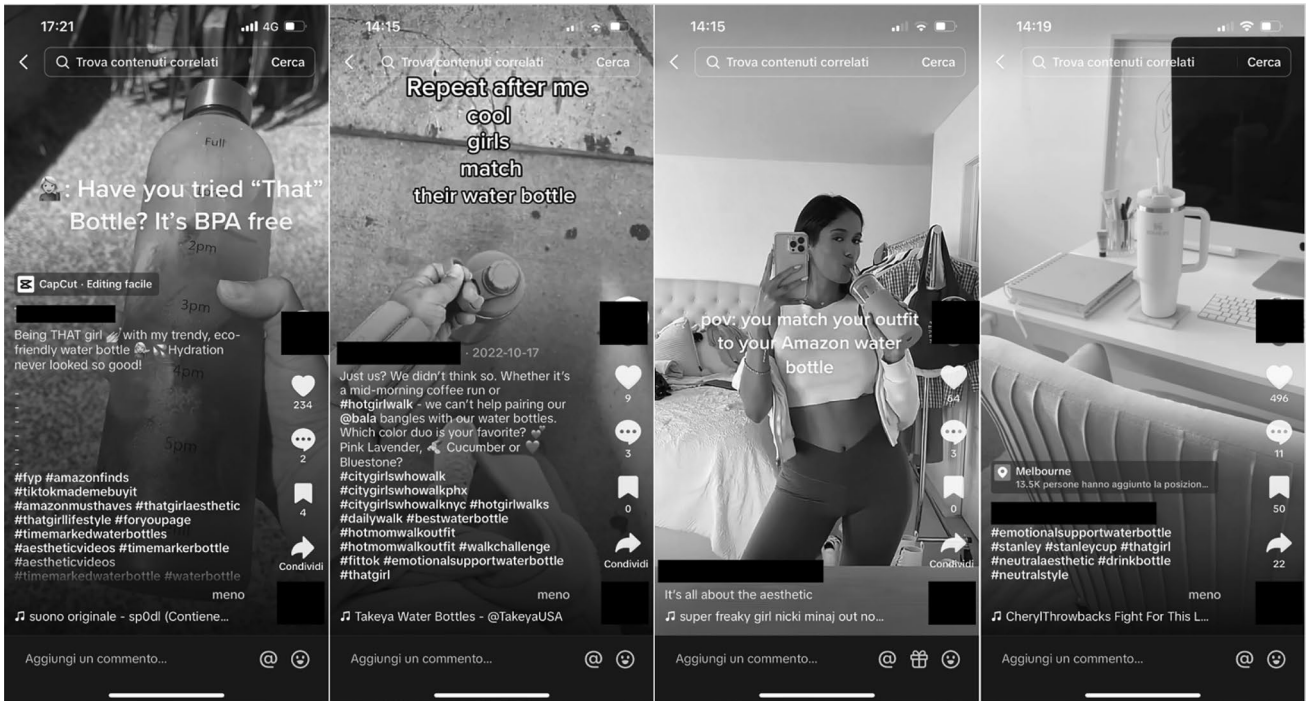


Fig. 11 Plastic-free refillable water bottles seamlessly integrating with the outfit and the office decor aesthetic of a #bethatgirl community member



Fig. 12 Plastic-free refillable water bottles as pacifying devices



as the act of sipping becomes a stress-relieving mechanism that evokes a comforting sense of nurturing, reminiscent of their childhood. As a result, these young women rely on their plastic-free refillable water bottles as “*adult pacifiers*” that work as a source of calmness and comfort. In the graphic of Fig. 12, a #bethatgirl hyperbolically plays with the familiar gesture of the consumer carrying their bottle. This time, the bottle itself assumes a larger, supportive role, cradling a smaller consumer around, who smiles since she has found solace and sanctuary from stress and anxiety.

Such an emotional support-based interpretation of plastic-free refillable water bottles resonates with Winnicott’s (1951) definition of a pacifier: an object that children form emotional attachments to, as they provide a sense of security and comfort. These objects typically possess tactile qualities and are portable enough to be carried across various contexts (Lehman et al. 1992). They also involve specific behavioral patterns, such as sipping. Plastic-free refillable water bottles fit into this definition for #bethatgirls, who address these bottles with terms typically associated with childhood reassuring objects, such as “*grown-up baby bottles*” and “*the security blanket*” (see Fig. 12).

Discussion: Self-Care as the Key Priority in Young Consumers’ Conversations

Our findings highlight that sustainable product and brand choices, like the decision to avoid single-use plastic and opt for plastic-free refillable water bottles, are capable of triggering a thick network of conversations that branches out into different conversational sub-networks (#sustainableliving; #selfcare; #aesthetics), also generative of social formations

(the communities in our findings, #EcoWarrior; Outdoor Travelers, Neo-Moms; #bethatgirl).

Figure 13 summarizes the dominant thematic clusters, the main social aggregations, and the related motivations and priorities that those communities discuss in framing their decisions to go plastic-free and opt for refillable bottles. Conversations concerning sustainable choices harbor diverse meanings and interpretations that converge on the concept of self-care. Self-care emerges as the most relevant topic in the conversations that we analyzed. More specifically, although #sustainableliving represents the most recurrent hashtags, #selfcare possesses a higher degree centrality in the conversational network, meaning that care represents a core topic and relational node around which most of the conversations revolve. In fact, the notion of self-care constitutes a key common theme across all the sub-networks of conversations that we found in our network visualization. Care is understood and discussed at three levels: as care for the environment; for the nourishment of the self; and for the design and organization of the living space. Despite differences in the focal object toward which the act of care can be directed (the planet, the body, or the living space) across all the three sub-networks, it is understood as a proactive effort toward which individuals are expected to take actions. Imperative and active verbs are recurrent hashtags and key terms in conversations, pointing at sustainable choices framed as an individual active commitment. That resonates with those perspectives that are dominant in business-related disciplines like marketing, in which responsibility is viewed in terms of consumers expressing their ethical and moral agendas through individual choices and marketplace behavior (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Castaldo et al. 2009; Lin and Chang 2012; Olsen et al. 2014) that can minimize impacts and consequences. Sustainable

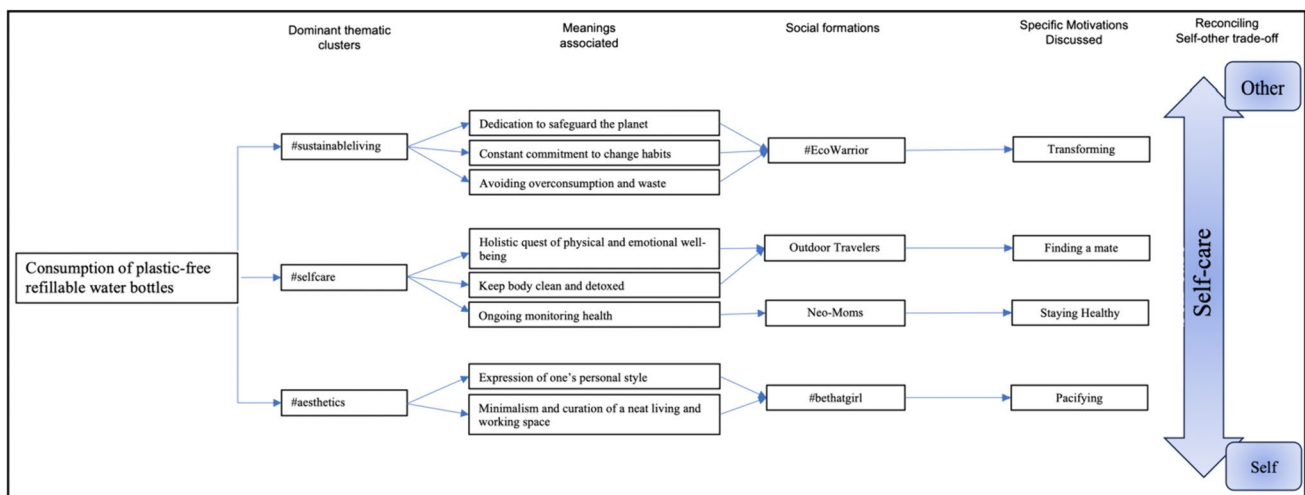


Fig. 13 Constellation of themes, meanings, and motivations that young consumers prioritize in discussing their sustainable consumption



consumers are fundamentally people that take actions and abstention (Carrington et al. 2021) through forms of consumption or anti-consumption that actualize care.

Based on our findings, the act of caring is commonly framed as an individual purification process in which young consumers discuss and share practices that allow them to keep themselves clean, healthy, and safe from physical, emotional, and environmental standpoints. In contrast with most of the literature on sustainable consumption, in which sustainable consumer behaviors are depicted as abstract and uncertain, especially concerning the consequences of their outcomes, which are often perceived as distant from the individual and not immediate (Reczek et al. 2018; White et al. 2019), our findings reveal the meaningfulness of sustainable actions for the individual in the form of a holistic quest toward one's well-being. Our findings challenge the self-other trade-off typical of the literature on sustainable consumption, according to which consumers usually perceive sustainable actions as costly to the self as they imply increased efforts and putting aside wants that are relevant to the self to prioritize what is outside of the self like others, the environment, and future generations (White et al. 2019). In contrast with that, especially after the pandemic, young consumers embraced more responsible consumption behaviors that are compatible with personal and societal well-being and that are driven by self-care attention, responsibility, and lifestyle maintenance (Amatulli et al. 2023). While engaging in sustainable consumption involves personal sacrifices, previous literature suggests that these sacrifices can have a self-relevant positive repercussion that can outweigh the costs of sustainable action (White et al. 2019), especially when those actions are publicly shown and communicated (Griskevicius et al. 2010; Green and Peloza 2014) and thus contribute to signal the consumer as a committed and altruistic individual. Overall, our analysis highlights not only that Millennials and Gen Z are not discussing sustainable consumption as a sacrifice, but also that they are interpreting their sustainable consumption choices as a way of reconciling the self-other trade-off by prioritizing self-care, given the centrality of the hashtag #selfcare in generating social aggregations around the discussion of sustainable living. In their conversations, sustainable living does not come at some cost to the self, instead it offers holistic opportunities to better look after the self in connection with the others.

As for the depth-analysis of the social formations that we detected in our dataset, the various communities identified prioritize diverse yet complementary motivations in discussing their sustainable consumption choices, through which they express different dimensions and forms of self-care. Apart from those social collectives that are more "loud and integralist" in claiming their commitment to sustainable living (like #EcoWarrior with their sustainable mission), all other communities tend to take sustainability for

granted, as if sustainable choices are practices and experiences embedded as a common and natural behavior in young consumers' daily routines. Sustainability-related hashtags are in fact very recurrent; however, they are not as socially intensive from the conversational standpoint as self-care-related hashtags are.

In discussing the specific motivations that drive them to embrace and choose plastic-free sustainable brands ("Specific motivations discussed" in Fig. 13), young consumers oscillate between a blend of functional and aesthetic attributes that transform plastic-free refillable water bottles into an ally that empowers them in taking care of themselves. As young consumers feel increasingly responsible for their actions, in their conversations they tend to praise those products and brands that can assist them in making more responsible choices. Consumers with their plastic-free refillable bottles and especially with smart bottles create new "capable ethical consumer hybrids" (Fuentes and Sörum 2019) that can enable more virtuous behaviors.

Managerial Implications and Limitations

In light of that, as an implication for marketing, product design acquires paramount importance as product attributes and functionalities can shape and reinforce certain behaviors transforming how consumers think and act toward sustainability, while pleasing their quest for holistic self-care. Our study suggests that in order to keep their promise as sustainable brands relevant in the eyes of young consumers, brands should continuously work on product feature innovations (for example, the pacifier straw that helps consumers to regress to the careless time of their childhood; eye-pleasing and awakening wide color ranges; filtering systems that feed consumer sense of safety) that can meet consumers' need for emotional relief and support.

As an additional implication, we observed that Millennials and Gen Z tend to express their support for those sustainable brands that present "safe" and "cute" product offerings. In our netnographic analysis, these two attributes recur consistently across the conversations of all the communities that we identified (apart from cute for #EcoWarrior), highlighting that young consumers are interpreting sustainability as an act of pleasing their personal emotional health that will also do good for the planet. Cute gives consumer goods warm and cheerful qualities, makes products attractive, and offers consumers "a kind of cultural decoy, a soothing distraction from a world whose boundaries and problems are becoming more complex by the day" (Granot et al. 2014, p. 82). In a moment of history in which young generations feels burdened and are aware of the impact of their consumption behaviors, cute products offer an escape to consumers, who can still do their part in trying to save the planet as expected but are relieved and pacified by the cuteness of their choices.



Finally, our analysis suggested that if sustainable brands want to construct their promise through a more dialogic process in which different consumer collectives can interact with various components of the brand and its offering contributing to shape how commitment to sustainability is understood and enacted, they should start to delve deeper into the themes and priorities that capture the interest of consumers' networks of sociality. In our paper, we offered a methodological blueprint to help researchers and marketers gain a deeper understanding of the conversational dynamics that inform consumers' sustainable brand choices. Netnography combined with network visualization analysis allows a profound situated immersion in the micro-cultures and identities that are in action in framing consumers' decisions. Netnography made it also possible to uncover how certain topics, meanings, hashtags, and images get prioritized in conversations and therefore to dynamically identify the attributes that should be incorporated into the dialogical construction and negotiation of the brand promise and should lead product offering configuration. Additionally, netnography allowed us to collect, interpret, and integrate data across a variety of social media platforms and communities in which the focal topics in our analyses are discussed, making it possible for us to gain a more thorough comprehension of what Millennials and Gen Z associate with sustainable brand choices in their conversations.

In terms of limitations, although our study is highly situated in the context of social media conversations related to plastic-free refillable water bottles, we think that the insights that we gained about how Millennials and Gen Z relate sustainability discourses primarily to self-care can be extended to other realms of sustainable living and consumption. Similar dialogic dynamics can be observed, for example, in conversations related to fashion and beauty consumption decisions that can represent contexts in which this study can be extended in the future. In general, with our world becoming increasingly turbulent, fraught with economic instability, political unrest, and pressing environmental concerns, we should probably expect young adults to increasingly feel the need to look after themselves and, in turn, to look for brands and products that can support them in their quest for holistic self-care and well-being.

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Data availability Not applicable

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Angela A. Beccanulli, PhD is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. She was a visiting scholar at USI – Università della Svizzera Italiana. Her research is embedded in Consumer Culture Theory, Technosociality, and Smart Tourism. She is interested in object-consumer relationships, technology and consumption specifically in tourism, and cultural branding. She teaches brand communication, corporate communication, consumer behavior and the semantic web.

Silvia Biraghi, Ph.D is Senior Assistant Professor at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. She was a visiting scholar at Boston University Department of Mass Communication, Advertising and PR, and at the Medill School, Northwestern University. She is an interpretive scholar, specialized in netnographic inquiry. Her research interests are usually context-driven and fueled by a deep curiosity for emerging phenomena within consumer collectives and the intricate dynamics of interaction between consumers and brands, which contribute to the formation of innovative connections, transformations, and projects. Her passion lies in the realms of branding, consumer culture, and technology-mediated consumption. She has published in journals such as *Marketing Theory*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Futures*, and *Management Decision*.

