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Understanding Gen Z Consumers: A Typology of (Un)sustainable Purchases

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z represents an important and environmentally conscious consumer group. Yet their environmental psychological pre-dispositions often fail to translate into consistent sustainable purchases. Extending neutralization theory, this study examines the psychological mechanisms Gen Z consumers use to rationalize their (un)sustainable actions. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, we identify the relevance of four established neutralization techniques, along with two novel additions: denial of efficacy and denial of proximity. We further introduce a new consumer typology, categorizing Gen Z as Disengaged, Moderates, and Advocates. The three groups differ in terms of the neutralization techniques employed to justify (un)sustainable purchases. The typology offers actionable insights for marketers and policymakers, enabling more effective message framing and the design of interventions that foster sustainable consumption within a prominent consumer group.

1 | Introduction

The 21st century is increasingly defined by escalating environmental crises, including air pollution, biodiversity loss, and extreme weather events. The World Economic Forum (Fleming 2020) warns that by 2070, up to three billion people may inhabit regions with climate conditions comparable to those of the Sahara Desert. In response, sustainable consumption emerged as a crucial strategy, placing consumers at the forefront, to mitigate environmental degradation (UN 2015; SDG 12). Central to this shift is the rise in sustainable products such as energy-efficient appliances, organic foods, and eco-friendly fashion.

Within this evolving landscape, Generation Z (Gen Z), born 1997–2012 (Dimock 2019) is pivotal to reshaping consumption patterns. According to generational cohort theory (Mannheim 1952), the social, political, economic and cultural environments, people grow up in, shape their values, expectations, beliefs and behaviors. Raised in a hyper-connected world with vast exposure to environmental challenges, and growing purchasing power, Gen Z is uniquely positioned to drive transformative change in sustainable consumption (Tyson et al. 2021). Despite Gen Z's apparent environmental consciousness (Spearman and Loose 2023), a paradox persists (Seyfi et al. 2025b). Younger generations often behave less sustainably (Casalegno et al. 2022; Karunasena et al. 2021; Lisboa et al. 2022; Pinho and Gomes 2024). To rationalize this discrepancy, existing literature identifies factors such as unsustainable packaging (Lisboa et al. 2022), cognitive dissonance arising from guilt, social comparison, risk aversion, limited accessibility, and financial constraints (Seyfi et al. 2025a). However, the psychological mechanisms explaining why Gen Z fails to consistently translate environmental predispositions such as values, attitudes, and knowledge (Hosany et al. 2022) into sustainable purchases remain unexplored.

Accordingly, this study applies Neutralization Theory (Sykes and Matza 1957), which explores psychological techniques consumers utilize to rationalize non-conforming (unsustainable) behaviors. The objectives of this paper are to (i) extend neutralization theory to provide a better understanding of Gen Z (un)sustainable

purchases, reconciling the inconsistency between attitudes and behaviors, and (ii) develop a typology of Gen Z consumers. The contributions to the literature are threefold. First, addressing recent calls (e.g., Seyfi et al. 2025a,b), our study builds on an evolving line of research (e.g., Casalegno et al. 2022; Pinho and Gomes 2024; Seyfi et al. 2025a,b) and explains how Gen Z is less sustainable. Gen Z represents a significant market in size, influence, with generally positive, environmental psychological pre-dispositions (e.g., Borah et al. 2024).

Second, we extend neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957). To date, prior studies have applied neutralization theory in various settings (e.g., Harris and Dumas 2009; Hwang et al. 2016; Muposhi et al. 2021), and across consumer groups (e.g., Bettany and Kerrane 2016). Our research establishes that Gen Z's (un)sustainable purchases can be explained through four existing techniques: denial of responsibility, condemning the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties and metaphor of the ledger. We identify two novel techniques applicable to the cohort and (un)sustainable purchases: denial of efficacy—the inability to engage with sustainability, and denial of proximity—psychological, temporal and geographical distance.

Third, we propose a novel consumer typology, to capture nuances in Gen Z's sustainable purchases. In assessing how and to what extent (high/low), Gen Z consumers adopt each neutralization technique, three consumer groups emerge: Disengaged, Moderates, and Advocates. The Disengaged display very low, with Moderates, and Advocates demonstrating progressively higher sustainable purchases. Our typology aligns with emerging research identifying sustainable consumer groups (e.g., Ross and Milne 2021; Fechner et al. 2025); offering valuable insights for marketers and policymakers in designing targeted, environmentally friendly interventions for Gen Z.

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | Attitude-Behavior Gap

Prior research investigates various aspects of Gen Z and sustainability, including environmental travel behavior (Mandić et al. 2024), green purchasing decisions (Lopes et al. 2024), food waste (Karunasena et al. 2021), pro-environmental behavior (Sudbury Riley et al. 2012) and willingness to pay more for green products (Gomes et al. 2023). Gen Z often expresses a strong desire to endorse responsible companies and authentic brands that connect with them, to enhance their experiences. A World Economic Forum survey identified that 70% of Gen Zs are extremely or very worried about climate change (Buchholz 2022). The cohort is keen to incorporate sustainability in their day-to-day, often seeking products/services promoting social responsibility and supporting local communities (Djafarova and Foots 2022). Gen Zs typically display positive environmental psychological pre-dispositions valuing affordability, quality, loyalty and availability of green products.

Gen Z's positive psychological pre-dispositions towards the environment do not necessarily translate into sustainable behaviors. Pinho and Gomes (2024) note that Gen Z adopt fewer sustainable behaviors, with little or no participation in actions relating to environmental protection. For Casalegno et al. (2022), age is positively related to green purchase behaviors. Typically, older consumers display a higher propensity for green purchases, are more likely to reuse and recycle products (Sidique et al. 2010) and waste less food (Karunasena et al. 2021). Academic literature (e.g., Lisboa et al. 2022; Seyfi et al. 2025b) and industry sources (e.g., Spearman and Loose 2023) confirm the attitude-behavior gap among Gen Z.

The attitude-behavior gap describes the inconsistency between an individual's expressed attitudes and actual behaviors (e.g., Carrington et al. 2010; Shaw et al. 2016). Research (see Appendix S1) generally attributed the attitude-behavior gap to internal psychological factors and externalities, including social influences (e.g., Moraes et al. 2011), insufficient information (Wiederhold and Martinez 2018), conflicting priorities (Luchs et al. 2010), convenience (Young et al. 2010), and economic constraints (Gleim et al. 2013). Financial constraints are notably impactful among younger individuals, as they lack disposable income and are more acutely exposed to economic pressures (Dimitrova et al. 2021). Contradictions between pro-environmental psychological pre-dispositions and actual behaviors give rise to substantial cognitive dissonance, leading to the use of various cognitive strategies to mitigate these effects (Seyfi et al. 2025a).

2.2 | Neutralization Theory

Neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957) provides a valuable lens for understanding how individuals reconcile dissonance in sustainable consumption. The concept of neutralization, introduced by Sykes and Matza (1957) in their work on juvenile delinquency, suggests that individuals develop certain psychological strategies to disregard internalized social expectations, allowing them to engage in actions typically considered improper while avoiding negative self-critique. The use of neutralization enables people to engage in deviant behavior while simultaneously framing actions as "acceptable" or even "proper." Individuals acknowledge the contradictions in their behaviors, potentially leading to future breaches through weakening moral standards. Sykes and Matza (1957) delineated five primary neutralization techniques (see Table 1).

Over the years, the application of neutralization theory broadened beyond the field of criminology. Novel neutralization techniques emerged in various contexts. Table 2 provides a summary the various contexts neutralization theory has been applied, along with the key techniques identified in each case.

Neutralization theory has been applied in the context of breaking lock down rules at Covid-19 (Harris 2022), alcohol consumption, (Piacentini et al. 2012), fair trade (Chatzidakis et al. 2007), shop lifting, CD copying (Chatzidakis et al. 2004), across consumer groups (e.g., Bettany and Kerrane 2016) and geographies (e.g., Koay 2018; Zhou et al. 2022). Research also generated insights into the timing of neutralization (pre-, post-event) (e.g., Harris and Dumas 2009). In the consumer context, neutralization techniques may be applied proactively to enable nonethical purchases, or retrospectively to manage cognitive dissonance. Studies also identify the relevance of multiple neutralization techniques, as consumers rationalize their

TABLE 1 | Five core neutralization techniques.

Technique	Brief description
1. Denial of Responsibility	Individuals attribute norm-violating behavior to external circumstances beyond their control, dismissing personal responsibility.
2. Denial of Injury	Justifying misconduct through absence of damage. People acknowledge their actions but reject condemnation on the basis that no harm was done.
3. Denial of Victim	Transgressors admit to causing harm but argue for its fairness. They portray the victim as the true offender, framing their actions as justified revenge.
4. Condemning the Condemners	By accusing their critics of engaging in similar behavior, individuals shift focus onto others and minimize their own accountability.
5. Appeal to Higher Loyalties	Individuals claim they serve a greater purpose which takes precedence over other moral considerations.

behaviors. Examples include metaphor of the ledger, where individuals balance negative actions against positive ones, arguing that good deeds compensate for misconduct (e.g., Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2014); claim of relative acceptability, where people compare their actions to the worse behaviors of others, making their own transgressions seem less problematic or more acceptable (Uba and Chatzidakis 2016).

Despite the wide application of neutralization theory (see Table 2), to our knowledge, no research investigates how and to what extent Gen Z, as a consumer group, rationalizes (un) sustainable purchases. For example, Gruber and Schlegelmilch (2014) study neutralization in the context of sustainability without specific reference to any generational cohort. Odou and Bonnin (2014) examined illegal downloading behaviors, rather than sustainable purchases per se, with younger consumers. Gen Z's lifelong exposure to globalization, public environmental discourse, online engagement and unique external pressures could lead them to apply neutralization techniques in distinct ways.

As a maturing generation and growing economic power, with a collective income projected to surpass that of millennials by 2031 (Bank of America Private Bank 2020), building a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying their engagement (or lack thereof) with sustainable purchases is vital. In addition, Gen Z as a large consumer group, constituting between 25% and 30% of national and global populations, with high receptivity for sustainability (Yardi 2025), can influence older and younger generations' consumption (see Hosany et al. 2022). Recognizing the importance of Gen Z and sustainable purchases, our study investigates how this consumer group rationalizes their (un)sustainable purchases through the application of neutralization theory and builds a consumer typology.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Data Collection

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate to gain insights into why Gen Z consumers do not translate their environmental predispositions into purchases. Qualitative methods can be remarkably effective in tackling real-world, societal problems or grand challenges (Fischer and Guzel 2023) such as environmental sustainability. Qualitative research enables the refinements of existing, and generation of new concepts, through the iterative processes of comparing, contrasting and categorizing (Aspers and Corte 2019), thus enhancing validity and depth of understanding.

Semi-structured depth interviews were chosen as they provide a versatile method for researchers to document dynamic perspectives of reality, by learning through participants' own verbal accounts (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). Applying McCracken (1988) funnel approach, interviews (see guide in Appendix S2) began with fairly general questions around what green purchases meant, the frequency of, and reasons that influence purchases. Interview questions were broadly structured around the foundational neutralization techniques, and deliberately flexible, to enable exploration of emergent themes and issues (Arsel 2017). The interview guide facilitated data collection, analysis and interpretation, ensuring reliability and validity (Golafshani 2003).

Participants meeting the eligibility criteria (Gen Z) were recruited through personal contacts, followed by snowballing, with the aim of achieving a rich and diverse data set (Eisenhardt 1989). The study excluded Gen Z under 18 years, due to ethical concerns surrounding heightened vulnerability of children (Hosany et al. 2022). Addressing potential social desirability bias, particularly relevant in environmental behavior research (Zhu et al. 2024), the non-judgemental interview environment was carefully maintained to encourage genuine responses.

Participants were briefed about the research in the information sheet and provided informed consent before taking part. Data were collected to the point of saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The final sample consisted of 25 participants. Appendix S3 summarizes the profile of our participants, including exemplars of their involvement in sustainable purchases. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews, lasting up to 68 min, were recorded and transcribed to ease analysis. The data collection process generated 194 pages of single space transcription, adding up to just under 98000 words.

TABLE 2 | Application of neutralization theory.

Selected studies	Contexts	Method	Techniques applied	Key findings
Harris and Daunt (2011)	Rented goods, services, space, labor, expertise; retailing; shared environments	Qualitative (interviews)	Of five core techniques, no evidence of "Denial of responsibility;" evidence of justification by comparison, metaphor of the ledger, relative acceptability	Five forms of deviant consumer behavior identified: property abuse, verbal abuse, negative word of mouth post service, dishonest actions, sexual exploitation.
Strutton et al. (1997)	Retailing, US	Quantitative (experiments)	Five core techniques	Younger generations are more likely to rationalize behaviors compared to parents.
Chatzidakis et al. (2007)	Fair trade, UK	Qualitative (interviews)	Five core techniques	Neutralization explains attitude-behavior gaps in consumers' fair-trade purchase.
Moufahim and Chatzidakis (2012)	Politics, Belgium	Secondary data (publications, web sites),	Five core techniques	Delineates how racism and xenophobia are framed and normalized to dissociate politics from ethics and be less problematic
Koay (2018)	Counterfeit luxury goods, Malaysia	Quantitative (survey)	Five core techniques	Denial of responsibility and victim, lead to more purchases; denial of injury, appeal to higher loyalties, condemnation of condemners do not impact purchase intent.
Harris and Dumas (2009)	Online behavior (peer to peer activities such as digital piracy)	Qualitative (Interviews)	Of five core techniques, no evidence of "Condemning the condemners;" evidence of claim of normality; claim of relative acceptability; justification by comparison	File-sharers often utilize multiple neutralization techniques to pre, or post, justify their activities.
Zhou et al. (2022)	Misrepresent personal information (MPI), China	Experiment	Denial of injury, denial of responsibility, defense of necessity, metaphor of the ledger, avoidance of greater harm selected given the study's context	Neutralization positively associates with intention to MPI; extraversion negatively moderates the relationships neutralization and MPI; neuroticism positively moderates relationship between neutralization and MPI.
Piacentini et al. (2012)	Alcohol consumption, UK	Qualitative (focus groups/interviews)	Heavy drinkers: Denial of injury, responsibility; appeals to higher loyalties; justifications by comparison, postponement Abstainers: Acknowledge responsibility; injury; refer to priority; discounting condemners, resist negative labeling	Heavy drinkers employ neutralization to justify negative impacts of their actions; abstainers and near-abstainers use counter-neutralization to reinforce lifestyles.
Coşkun and Filimonau (2021)	Food waste	Mixed (survey, depth interviews)	Denial of responsibility, injury, appeal to higher loyalties	Denial of responsibility and appeal to higher loyalties predict wasteful behavior.
Hwang et al. (2016)	Flaming (negative online behaviors)	Quantitative (survey)	Five core techniques and metaphor of ledger, defense of necessity	Acceptability of neutralization techniques influences flaming.

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Selected studies	Contexts	Method	Techniques applied	Key findings
Dootson et al. (2016)	Deviant consumer behavior, Australia	Qualitative (interviews, card sort activity)	Five core techniques, except appeal to higher loyalties; claim of entitlement, justification by comparison, denial of punishment	Specific neutralization techniques influence the threshold of individuals' deviance.
Bettany and Kerrane (2016)	Children GPS Trackers	Netnography	Five core techniques and gateway exception, demotion	Parent adopters of trackers rationalize use of the technology to re-afford positive agency.
Ritch and Brownlie (2016)	Green mothering, UK	Qualitative (interviews)	Appeal to a higher loyalty and evidence	Forms of neutralization reinforce green mothering identity claims.
Gruber and Schlegelmilch (2014)	Sustainability, Austria	Qualitative (interviews, focus group)	Five core techniques, except denial of victim, plus defense of necessity, metaphor of ledger, entitlement, relative acceptability, individuality, justification by comparison	Neutralization strategies are used differently by different consumer groups to legitimize inconsistencies between norm-conforming attitudes and actual behavior.
Odou and Bonnin (2014)	Illegal downloads, 15–24 years	Qualitative (interviews)	Denial of responsibility, pragmatic and ideological neutralization	Consumers articulate defensive strategies to accept internal contradiction.
Chatzidakis et al. (2004)	Recycling, shop lifting, CD copies, sweatshop clothes	Qualitative (interviews)	Five core techniques and interaction between them	Neutralization techniques apply differently across ethical contexts and vary based on individuals.
Muposhi et al. (2021)	Fashion designer, South Africa	Quantitative (survey)	Denial of injury, appeal to higher loyalties and external locus of control	Three main techniques influence designers' negative attitudes towards fashion.
Dootson et al. (2018)	Deviant consumer behavior	Conceptual	Any neutralization technique which can be used to minimize cognitive dissonance	Proposes tactics to reduce effects of neutralization on deviant behavior.
Ertz et al. (2018)	Community based platforms (CBPs), Canada	Mixed (content analysis, survey)	5 core techniques and invocation of normalcy	To justify controversial CBPs, supporters and users utilize neutralization and non-neutralization techniques.
McKercher et al. (2008)	Contested tourism sites	Qualitative (weblogs)	Denial of victim, claim of entitlement, appeal to higher loyalty	Climbers who neutralize and may be open to message framing for behavioral change.
Johnstone and Tan (2015)	Green purchase, New Zealand	Qualitative (focus groups)	Denial of responsibility, injury, appeal to higher loyalties, and two new techniques: sense of self and attachment to brand	Identifies two new neutralization techniques
Harris (2022)	Lockdown rule breaking-Covid19, UK	Qualitative (interviews)	Denial of deviance and denial of responsibility	Two main forms of neutralization explain why citizens deviate from lock down rules
Garas et al. (2023)	Counterfeit cloth, accessories, Egypt	Quantitative (survey)	Denial of victim, injury, condemning the condemners	Neutralization impact attitudes towards counterfeits and purchase intentions.

3.2 | Data Analysis

Thematic coding (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to analyze data. During the first phase, interviews were reviewed independently by both researchers to familiarize with the data. Next, we identified participants' involvement in sustainability, neutralization techniques in use, their prevalence and context. Then, we categorized the extent each informant applied neutralization techniques (low/high). Finally, participants were grouped to develop a new typology. Data were triangulated (Denzin 1978) across participants and neutralization techniques in use. Our method enabled participants to recount stories, bringing to life their own, original perspectives (Patton 1990) relevant to sustainable purchases and enabled the identification of novel neutralization techniques.

4 | Findings

The interviews disclose a range of interrelated factors, in addition to previously established ones (e.g., price sensitivity, perceived inconvenience) that consumers utilize to rationalize unsustainable purchases. Notably, our research uncovered novel themes that distinguish how Gen Z consumers are not homogeneous in justifying their (un)sustainable actions through neutralization, resulting in different levels of engagement with purchases.

4.1 | Neutralization Techniques

Similar to earlier studies showing the relevance of core neutralization techniques (e.g., Harris and Dumas 2009; Harris and Daunt 2011; Coşkun and Filimonau 2021), our findings reveal evidence of: *Denial of Responsibility, Condemning the Condemners, Appeal to Higher Loyalties and Metaphor of the Ledger.* We identify two novel techniques: *Denial of Efficacy* and *Denial of Proximity*. Participants applied neutralization techniques to various degrees (high/low).

4.1.1 | Denial of Responsibility

Participants rationalized (un)sustainable purchases by referring to circumstances beyond their own individual control. Gen Z consumers deny responsibilisation (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019), with engaging in sustainable purchases, not viewed as not an obligation. For example, Martin discusses how sustainability "*doesn't occur to us as an obligation that we have. Not even necessarily that I think I've spent particularly much time thinking about it, or that many people around me have spent that much time thinking about it, but we just don't feel like it's an obligation for us.*" They discuss how they lack the psychological or physical resources, such as money or time to think carefully about actions before purchases, favoring convenience and anticipating do more at later stages (e.g., disposal) of the consumer decision journey. Most participants discussed the predominant roles and responsibilities of other entities, such as governments, rather than consumers, in advancing environmental sustainability.

Very few participants admit individual responsibility, acknowledging that they, (see Phipps et al. 2013), together with critical

stakeholders, hold important obligations towards sustainability. For 22-year-old Magnus, who previously completed an internship with an oil company, everyone is accountable: "*I think all three [governments, corporations, consumers] bear the same amount of responsibility when it comes to addressing our climate needs.*" According to Magnus, if individuals do not change, there will be no motivation for businesses.

4.1.2 | Condemning the Condemners

Participants further justified unsustainable purchases by alluding to the fact that other parties engage in similar or worse behaviors, thus diverting attention and reducing accountability (see Garas et al. 2023). In most cases, participants condemn others, directly attributing blame to profit and non-profit institutions. The cohort is keen on brand authenticity (Södergren 2021), arguing that it will be in businesses' best interests in terms of sales and profitability, to use green marketing as a new scheme, but provided unsustainable options, limiting reuse, and requiring consumers to come back for repeat purchases. As Joseph argues: "*it is not in the interest of companies to make a product that's so good that you only buy it once and never have to buy it again.*" Additionally, informants were knowledgeable on how entire supply chains needed to be sustainable, from raw material sourcing, through production processes, disposal and recycling of empty packaging. They condemned governments on insufficient regulations regarding safe energy emissions. In very few cases, participants discussed how they, versus other key players, held some personal accountability, condemning the condemners to a lower degree. As Tanya explains "*some fast fashion brands do try and make a point about climate change.*"

4.1.3 | Appeal to Higher Loyalties

Gen Z consumers further justified varying levels of (un)sustainable actions by claiming interests over multiple, other causes, typically societal occurrences, that they viewed more meaningful than preserving the environment (see also Muposhi et al. 2021). Participants expressed interests to critical events such as wars, health inequalities stemming from Covid-19, and cost-of-living crises. In demonstrating a strong appeal to such higher loyalties, participants discuss the greater, collective challenges and priorities they focus upon. Martin reflects on the multiple, concurrent and sometimes sequential crises (see Hosany and Hamilton 2023), his generational cohort experienced: "*with the cost-of-living crisis, [life] is getting tougher. With Covid, it's [sustainable purchases] not the top of my priority. The top of people my age's priority is to get money, get to uni, not be in too much debt by the end, to try and get work ….*" The price and accessibility of sustainable products were widely noted as critical factors (Devinney et al. 2010). In contrast, other participants assigned lower priorities to broader challenges, considering, that environmental sustainability remains crucial. Rita, who works as a trainee on sustainable projects and is very active on climate justice initiatives elaborates on how her cohort, had a role to play, to keep matters under control. Rita believes that she can "*do a lot on the side to mitigate any mishaps, whether it*

be flights or … types of products that I consume, even though I try to be very conscious of those."

4.1.4 | Metaphor of the Ledger

Our research indicates that Gen Z consumers justify (un)sustainable purchases by referring to other eco-friendly actions. We discerned a notable divide among participants in terms of how "*Metaphor of the Ledger*" was utilized. Some participants applied the technique drawing on their involvement in areas such as climate activism to maintain a positive environmental self-image. Rita elaborates: "*I mitigate that [actions] with the work that I do with my environmental activism, with being involved and engaged very actively with policy negotiation spaces and pushing for a change in the system and the status quo.*" Other participants rationalized occasional unsustainable purchases by revealing how they try to minimize overall consumption and avoid buying when possible. Consumers, like Tanya, engage with compensatory efforts. She narrates how she trade-offs some of her unavoidable, unsustainable actions: "*even though I'm getting a plane to another country, I do try and recycle stuff and shop sustainably, use public transport.*" Alternatively, participants substantiate their unsustainable actions by referring to how hard it can be to change ingrained and interacting practices (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). Aneta acknowledges: "*living completely waste free and perfectly green is hard … you have to change every element of your life. And I'm very aware of the difficulty of doing that. Changing all your shopping habits, all your eating habits, all your energy consumption is hard.*"

4.1.5 | Denial of Efficacy

In addition to the four core techniques, participants rationalized their unsustainable behaviors by arguing that individual actions are futile or inconsequential in addressing broader environmental issues. In this form of denial, individuals acknowledge their personal agency but downplay or dismiss their capabilities and effectiveness of their contributions in creating meaningful change (Bandura 1986). Two levels were noted. Participants with a high denial, consider that no matter what they do, at an individual level, will be trivial and insufficient to fix things. Gen Z consumers felt detached, powerless and unable to make meaningful contributions to the environment, compared to policy makers, industry and regulatory bodies. Joe argues that even if: "*Everybody's got a bamboo toothbrush, fundamentally, the ship's still going to hit that iceberg.*" Given the challenges involved in implementing and visualizing substantial environmental changes, it was very easy to feel demotivated. By contrast, other participants believe that they can influence change in the form of collectives (Schutte and Bhullar 2017). Nadia for example, admits that "*the little things you can do are beneficial. Maybe even if it's not as beneficial as not taking a private jet, it still is good to know that you're trying to do the best that you can for the environment. And knowing that if everybody is doing these little things, they will have a knock-on effect.*" Gen Z considered themselves effective in pursuing environmental activism, which could be as important as purchases.

4.1.6 | Denial of Proximity

Many participants expressed a sense of detachment from environmental issues, perceiving them as distant or abstract. For some participants, geographical, psychological and temporal distance (see also White et al. 2019; Salnikova et al. 2022) led to a diminished sense of urgency and personal relevance. Student Peter, who lives in the city and flies long-haul regularly to meet his girlfriend and family, reflects on his lack of proximity from environmental issues. Given that consequences are not immediately visible, Peter argues: "*We don't feel so closely and directly morally [psychological] attached. So it's hard to say. You don't actually see it [time and geography]. I mean, you might believe it, but in the end, your life moves on, regardless.*" For others, despite understanding the immediacy of their actions, they are unable to act. For instance, Laura, who works in publishing, and recently transitioned away from a plants-based diet, discusses how she does not view environmental sustainability as urgent [time]: "there is this, like, chronological logic of, Oh, I can't see it, so it's not happening … *it's incredibly urgent, but I often find it difficult to act on that urgency, which I think is a problem.*" Other participants felt immediately connected, a sense of urgency, and demonstrated concerns to act sustainably (Gillani et al. 2021). They were consciously aware [psychological] of the larger manufacturing systems, checked trade trademarks, country of origin [geographical], ensuring as few contradictions as possible, and acknowledging challenges involved. As Rita discusses "*I don't think we're limited in our power. I think we have a lot of power to make changes. I think many people who care about environmental issues are united on that front.*"

4.2 | Consumer Typology

In overlaying the extent to which each neutralization technique was mostly applied by our participants, (high, low, and mixed in some cases), three consumer types emerged. Each differed on five of the six neutralization techniques, with most participants rated high on "condemning the condemners." The three distinct consumer types labeled: Disengaged, Moderates, and Advocates, demonstrated varying levels of engagement with (un)sustainable purchases. Figure 1 presents the spread of neutralization techniques and how they link to each consumer profile.

4.2.1 | Disengaged

Most disengaged consumers undertake little to no sustainable purchases. They viewed green initiatives through a lens of suspicion, as purely profit-oriented and not always visible through marketing communications. Convenience and pricing (see also Eckhardt et al. 2010) were important considerations for the Disengaged.

"*Denial of Responsibility*" emerged as a commonly utilized technique among this group. They attributed non-sustainable choices to external factors, including availability, or absence of clear information to determine which purchases would be more sustainable. Participants indicated their actions would be ultimately futile, contrasting the inadequacy of individual
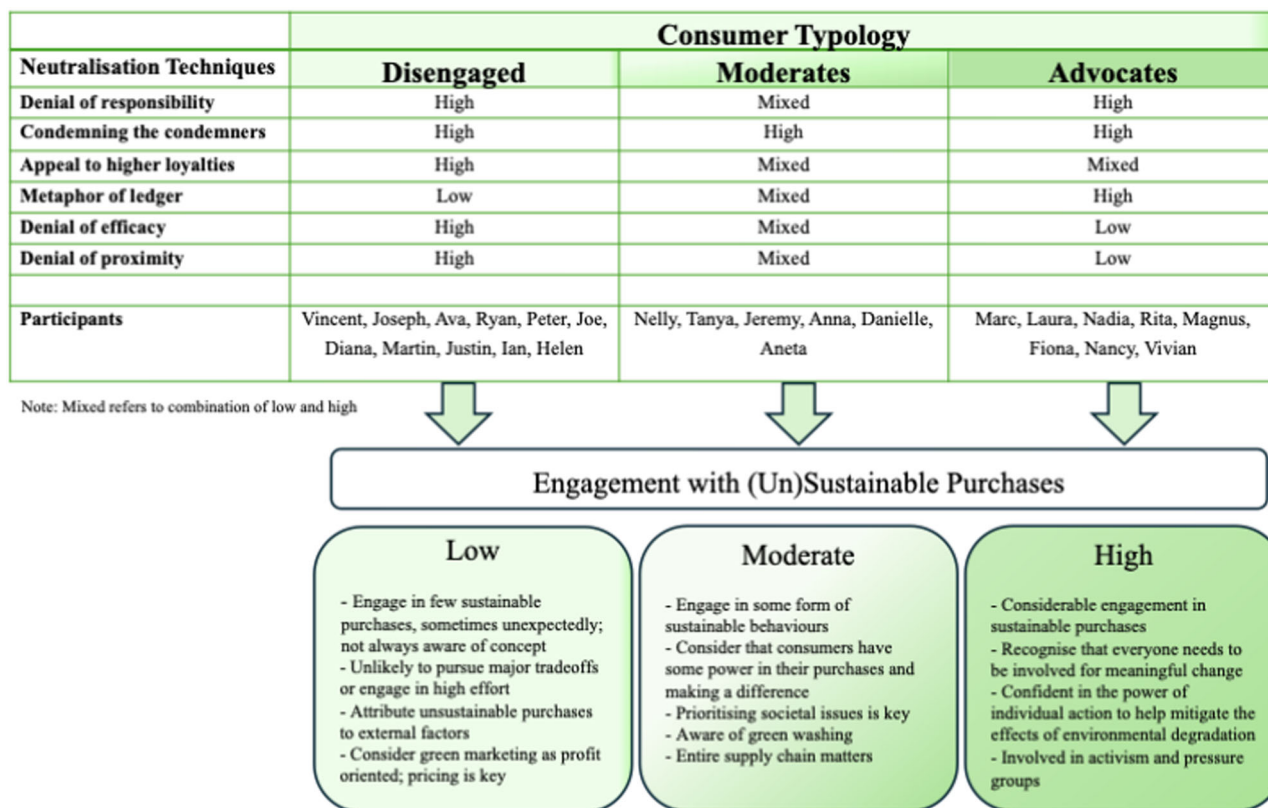
FIGURE 1 | Consumer typology.

consumption with larger offenders such as private jet users or heavily polluting industries. Disengaged consumers often applied *"Appeal to Higher Loyalties"* to justify their lack of pro-environmental behaviors, prioritizing concerns such as career development, other pressing social and global issues like homelessness and conflict. Notably, this group disputed that multiple social issues could be addressed simultaneously. *"Metaphor of the Ledger"* was embraced to a lower extent as the group undertakes minimal trade-offs in their daily activities to prioritize sustainability.

"Denial of Efficacy" manifested as another key technique employed by this group. The Disengaged did not feel that they could influence market actors or state policies, justifying continued unsustainable purchases. They expected clear guidance, limited effort, and did not consider themselves responsible to seek out information on greener alternatives. The Disengaged often utilized *"Denial of Proximity"* to justify inaction by distancing themselves from the immediate consequences of environmental degradation. As they had not personally experienced the effects of climate change, the group perceived it was difficult to empathize with, or act on issues they do not directly see or feel.

4.2.2 | Moderates

Moderates utilized neutralization techniques to justify occasional unsustainable habits. They generally remained receptive to the idea that public and private entities, like policy makers and corporates held power versus individuals (*Denial of*

Responsibility). Moderates expressed some understanding around sustainability, often struggling to articulate more complex interconnections and placing these issues within broader contexts. They expressed varying degrees of anxiety about environmental degradation, prioritizing other societal issues when deemed more immediate and pressing (*Appeal to Higher Loyalties*).

"Metaphor of the Ledger" was used to manage contradictions, drawing on environmental behaviors in certain areas to counterbalance unsustainable actions. Moderates justified choosing cheaper, less sustainable options where financial pressures arise, but made green choices where possible. They often invoked *"Denial of Efficacy"* to rationalize unsustainable choices when cost, convenience and peer-pressure took precedence. They compared with worse offenders like major corporations, or individuals with large carbon footprints, to mitigate feelings of guilt when engaging in occasional unsustainable purchases. Some Moderates felt a large impact could be achieved through individual choice, acknowledging that consumers hold power through their purchases and could be leveraged to incentivise positive change in business practices.

"*Denial of Proximity*" was generally elicited as Moderates rationalized how they were less compelled to make sustainable purchases due to perceiving environmental issues as relatively abstract and far-removed from their daily lives. They felt that institutional actors would need to play a substantive role in addressing environmental issues, considering the scope of their individual potentials as relatively small. Moderates expressed skepticism towards sustainable purchases, by referring to

greenwashing. They were receptive to sustainable products playing an important role in improving environmental outcomes.

4.2.3 | Advocates

Advocates exhibited a more critical stance towards green marketing claims and consumerism in addressing environmental degradation, often seeing it as a way for companies to profit from environmentally conscious individuals rather than driving real systemic change.

Like the Disengaged, Advocates displayed a high level of *Denial of Responsibility*. They also deflected accountability towards institutional actors but acknowledged that meaningful change could be accomplished through synergies with all stakeholders. Advocates often invoked the technique "*Appeal to Higher Loyalties*" to shift responsibility towards other, more substantial priorities. This consumer group further utilized "*Metaphor the Ledger*" to rationalize (un)sustainable purchases, drawing on their involvement in areas such as climate activism to maintain a positive environmental self-image.

Unique to Advocates, "*Denial of Efficacy*" and "*Denial of Proximity*" were utilized to reject imperatives placed on individuals to engage with green consumption choices to a lower extent. Contrary to the Disengaged, who considered individual purchases as mostly inconsequential, Advocates generally did not feel entirely powerless. By taking a role in organizing at the community level, through activism and pressure groups, participants maintained a sense of power. Advocates tend to push for governmental incentives to make green products more affordable. They actively seek accessible, sustainable alternatives, such as second-hand shops and refilling stations, rather than simply paying a premium for eco-friendly options.

5 | Theoretical Implications

Environmental sustainability is central to consumer lives and society (UN 2015). Recent occurrences like floods, high temperatures and wildfires depict the research relevance of the topic. Gen Z as a sizeable generation (Yardi 2025), responsible to educate and socialize younger and older cohorts, has an important role in preserving a better world. Prior studies identify the generally positive, environmental, psychological predispositions of Gen Z towards sustainable purchases (e.g., Borah et al. 2024), but with limited actual actions (e.g., Husson 2023). Research also expresses concern over the paradox between Gen Z's attitudes and sustainable behaviors (e.g., Seyfi et al. 2025b), with studies (e.g., Casalegno et al. 2022; Karunasena et al. 2021) demonstrating how Gen Z is less sustainable versus older generations.

Our study extends theorizations on the attitude-behavior gap (Carrington et al. 2010; Shaw et al. 2016), neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957), Gen Z and purchases of (un)sustainable products. We apply neutralization theory to understand how Gen Z minimizes cognitive dissonance by rationalizing (un)sustainable consumption. To date, neutralization theory has been applied in the fields of fair trade (Chatzidakis

et al. 2007), alcohol drinking (Piacentini et al. 2012), politics (Moufahim and Chatzidakis 2012), across various consumer groups (e.g., Bettany and Kerrane 2016), with various techniques manifesting in each context (see Table 2).

Drawing on a sample of Gen Z consumers, our study identifies the relevance of six dimensions of neutralization theory in the domain of (un)sustainable purchases. These constitute a mix of core techniques (Sykes and Matza 1957): denial of responsibility, condemning the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties, alongside metaphor of the ledger (e.g., Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2014), which emerged over time. Gen Z consumers deny personal responsibility, shifting accountability to governments, corporations, condemning such entities as initiators of the environmental crisis, who did not pursue viable solutions and constructive dialogs earlier on. Gen Z situate themselves as working towards a better life, in response to other, ongoing major crises (e.g., cost-of-living). Their approach revolves around substituting environmentally detrimental practices with positive, proactive measures for a better future, while recognizing challenges involved with daily, interdependent practices (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021).

Our study established limited evidence of two foundational techniques: denial of injury (no harm done) and denial of victim (actions framed as justified revenge), leading to their exclusion in further theorization. Through these omissions, we acknowledge that the younger generation does not associate with the full extent of environmental harm done. As Gen Z has had limited roles and involvement with past occurrences leading to environmental damage, revenge is not deemed necessary.

By contrast, we identify two novel neutralization techniques (see Kaptein and Van Helvoort 2019 for a recent review on neutralization techniques). Our research recognizes Denial of Efficacy and Denial of Proximity as salient for Gen Z as they rationalize (un)sustainable purchases. Gen Z consumers do not always perceive themselves as possessing the requisite expertise, agency (Phipps et al. 2013) and ability (Bandura 1986) to contribute in meaningful ways to sustainability challenges. They also often see themselves as geographically, psychologically and temporally detached (see also Gillani et al. 2021; Salnikova et al. 2022; White et al. 2019) from the crisis, overlooking, and remaining insulated of the short- and long-term implications of their daily actions.

Our study further illustrates the nuances around how Gen Z applies each neutralization technique. Assigning low/high criteria to each dimension, across participants, we develop a novel typology and identify three consumer groups: the Disengaged, Moderates, and Advocates (see Figure 1), each differing in their engagement with (un)sustainable purchases. Our typology represents a first step towards understanding the varying degrees to which Gen Z consumers reconcile their psychological predispositions with actual purchase, thus elucidating some of the underlying tensions on the attitude—behavior gap (see Seyfi et al. 2025b).

Gen Z typically believes that ultimate responsibility for sustainable purchases lies with other entities. Our three consumer groups consistently condemn all parties responsible for and

contributing to non-sustainable purchases to a higher degree, while remaining particularly attuned to brands' authenticity, and scrutinizing actions versus claims (Södergren 2021). Disengaged consumers also tend to appeal to higher loyalties/causes such as wars which are prevalent in the world, requiring immediate attention, versus Advocates who believe they can act on sustainability concurrently, given all other important causes. The Disengaged consider themselves highly detached from the immediate environmental consequences of their actions and do not feel obligated to compensate in other ways, versus Moderates and the Disengaged. As they exhibit lower Denial of Efficacy, Advocates actively pursue activism. In establishing the relevance of four existing and two novel neutralization techniques, manifested at lower/higher levels, our work reinforces the unique differences of Gen Z in pursuing sustainability.

6 | Practical Implications

Gen Z consumers typically display positive environmental psychological pre-dispositions (e.g., Lopes et al. 2024), with lower sustainable purchases (e.g., Lisboa et al. 2022). In this context, the application of neutralization techniques provides a meaningful mechanism to understand the generational cohort. With high levels of denial of (personal) responsibility and condemning the condemners (government, businesses, celebrities, brands) across most consumers, practical recommendations on a general Gen Z scale could involve sensitizing critical stakeholders on the impact of their actions and establish ways to optimize such influence. As the cohort looks up to celebrities and influencers on multiple fronts (e.g., fashion, food, vacations), influencer and celebrity actions can be exploited via social media to promote sustainable choices (e.g., sustainable fashion, green food options, reducing trips through maximizing on virtual communication tools). Other technologies can be leveraged via the platform economy (e.g., Vinted) to maximize access, promote sharing, reduce wastage and consumer costs. Governments and other policy bodies may promote sustainable actions by making green choices more accessible and lower prices. For instance, they may provide incentives, offering better opportunities for local farmers to sell their products, attach more financial measures (e.g., higher taxes) to non-sustainable options, incentivise green purchases and set interventions in place to counter greenwashing. Government should also integrate environmental sustainability in school curriculums, as compulsory requirements to embed responsibilisation (Giesler and Veresiu 2014) from an early age, despite the limited duration of the school day and staff shortages.

As our study identifies a consumer typology, we propose additional, targeted, and actionable interventions acknowledging the diversity of responses within the three segments. We propose that marketers should develop an understanding around how their brands generate and maintain conversations with relevant segment(s) around sustainable purchases to maintain authenticity (Södergren 2021). Subsequently, brands need to frame consumer messages (e.g., advertising, tag lines) to improve visibility in the market. As Advocates are more receptive to embracing sustainable purchases, brands can trial innovations on this segment. Alternatively, lower prices and convenience may be better suited to Moderates and the Disengaged. Greater awareness of the benefits of sustainable choices may be beneficial for the Disengaged. Table 3 summarizes the practical implications for each consumer group.

7 | Areas for Future Research

This paper applies and extends neutralization theory using a sample of Gen Z consumers. As of 2025, the Gen Z cohort incorporates young people over 13 years. Given that we focus on Gen Z aged between 18 and 26 years, one limitation of our work is that children under 18 are not included. Even if our work is consistent with other studies (e.g., Karunasena et al. 2021; Seyfi et al. 2025a), future research should incorporate younger consumers for a more comprehensive understanding. In studying

TABLE 3 | Selected interventions for each consumer group.

Consumer group	Selected interventions
Disengaged	▪ Educate consumers on the importance of sustainability, encourage them towards sustainable purchases while balancing other priorities such as budgets
	▪ Make sustainable options convenient and affordable for consumers to access
	▪ Provide clear communication to consumers through packaging, advertising, social media, in store communication etc, around how offerings (products, raw materials and sourcing) are genuinely sustainable that is, avoid green washing
Moderates	▪ Avoid excess packaging, and use message framing in Marketing Communications to demonstrate and provide authentic, sustainable offerings
	▪ Improve access, performance and affordability of sustainable options
	▪ Empower consumers on how to cut waste, save and manage other priorities
Advocates	▪ Facilitate activism and related movements by Gen Z
	▪ Utilize Advocates as brand ambassadors to showcase their practices, guide and inform others
	▪ Enhance transparency around ethical supply chain processes and products to help consumers make informed decisions
	▪ Support consumers in handling sustainability as they navigate important life events

children, researchers should consider the methodological and ethical challenges involved, such as lower and constantly evolving cognitive capacities. Although efforts were taken to mitigate preconceptions and bias, the nature of interviews could have encouraged some degree of social desirability bias, such as over-reporting environmental predispositions and purchases. Future studies could consider alternative methods including vignettes, photo elicitation and interactive materials to stimulate younger minds. In ensuring participants' physical and emotional well-being (see Hosany et al. 2022), consent should be acquired from parents and children before data collection. Another limitation is that participants in our study were highly educated. Although consistent with the general demographics of Gen Zs (Yardi 2025), future research should consider collecting data from participants with different regional and educational backgrounds to uncover alternative consumer types and use of neutralization techniques.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.