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To cite this article: Siamak Seyfi, C. Michael Hall, Jarkko Saarinen, Mustafeed Zaman & Tan Vo-Thanh (2025) Identifying constraints on Gen Z's path toward ethical tourism consumption and practices, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 33:6, 1216-1234, DOI: [10.1080/09669582.2024.2418967](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.2418967)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.2418967>



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Identifying constraints on Gen Z's path toward ethical tourism consumption and practices

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ABSTRACT

Gen Z's interest in ethical consumption, including tourism, is growing in response to pressing global challenges. However, there is limited research on the constraints tied to the ethical travel decisions of this young cohort of travelers. This qualitative study, grounded in the theory of constraints and ethical consumerism literature, addresses this gap. The findings reveal multi-layered and interrelated constraints categorized as intrapersonal (cognitive dissonance, risk aversion, consumption inertia), interpersonal (green stigma, family dynamics, social comparison), and structural (limited accessibility, financial restrictions). This study extends the theory of constraints by showing that these constraints do not act in isolation but interact dynamically, with intrapersonal constraints often triggering interpersonal and structural ones, while certain barriers reinforce others. Unlike previous research that treats these constraints as independent, our findings reveal their sequential and context-dependent nature, offering new insights into how these constraints interrelate in shaping ethical travel decisions and practices. By highlighting the complexity of ethical decision-making—including conflicting principles, ambiguity, and social influences—this study offers a novel, theoretically-grounded perspective on the constraints faced by Gen Z, often labelled the “greenest” generation. Practically, these findings inform targeted interventions and policy initiatives to enable ethical tourism.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 30 August 2023
Accepted 14 October
2024


KEYWORDS

Ethical consumption;
ethical tourism; ethical
behaviour; Generation Z;
theory of constraints;
behaviour change

Introduction

Ethical consumption, characterized by conscious choices aligned with consumers' ethical and moral values and beliefs, has garnered significant attention in recent decades (Carrington et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). The essence of ethical consumption lies in deliberately selecting goods that are sourced, produced, and distributed in an ethical manner (Carrington et al., 2021).

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2024.2418967>.

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Ethical consumption includes a wide range of behaviours that reflect ethical attitudes and values, including purchasing fair trade products, advocating against modern slavery, supporting workers' rights, promoting animal welfare, and protecting the environment, among others (Carrington et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). As a result, research on ethical consumption has significantly grown in both scale and scope (e.g. Cairns et al., 2022; Djafarova & Foots, 2022), including in tourism studies (e.g. Malone et al., 2014; Seyfi et al., 2023b; Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023; Weeden & Boluk, 2014) and among Gen Z (those born in the mid-1990s and early 2010s) (Seyfi et al., 2023a), the focus of this paper.

Gen Z is the world's largest generational cohort, representing an estimated one-third of the global population and constituting a significantly growing travel market segment (European Travel Commission, 2020). This cohort has expressed increased interest in ethical consumption, driven by factors such as online exposure (Ameen et al., 2023), education, and awareness of societal and environmental issues (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Mandić et al., 2024; Pinho & Gomes, 2023).

While Gen Z claims a strong inclination towards ethical consumption, most prior research is based on self-reported intentions rather than observed behaviour, warranting caution in interpreting these findings. Although their values indicate potential for sustainable and ethical actions (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Mandić et al., 2024), these attitudes do not ensure consistent or actual behaviour (Seyfi et al., 2024). Moreover, despite positive portrayals of Gen Z's alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021), empirical evidence of their concrete support and engagement with specific SDGs remains limited (Seyfi & Hall, 2024). As with other consumers, Gen Z individuals appear to encounter various constraints that impede their full engagement in ethical tourism practices, reflecting Font and McCabe's (2017) argument that, despite expressed intentions, the number of travelers purchasing ethical tourism products remains relatively limited.

Despite the growth in research on ethical consumption in tourism, existing literature primarily focuses on understanding the motivations and intentions behind ethical consumption (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Mandić et al., 2024; Seyfi et al., 2024; Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023). However, a crucial yet understudied aspect is the underlying constraints tied to ethical consumption choices and practices, particularly within the Gen Z cohort. Given these complexities and the significant impact on social, economic, and environmental dynamics, there is an urgent need for more generational studies in this area, as previously called for in the literature (e.g. Fennell, 2008; Seyfi & Hall, 2024; Weeden & Boluk, 2014).

Building on ethical consumerism literature and the theory of constraints, this study examines a sample of Gen Z individuals in France, a developed country, to address these significant gaps. The primary aim is to explore the constraints that Gen Z faces in adopting ethical tourism practices, guided by the central research question: What specific constraints do Gen Z encounter in making ethical tourism choices and adopting such practices? Focusing on a developed country is crucial, as such contexts typically have greater awareness, resources, and infrastructure that support ethical consumption (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Lebrun et al., 2022;). Despite these favorable conditions, barriers persist, revealing the complexities that Gen Z faces even with the advantages of a developed country setting. For instance, prior to COVID-19, French Gen Z was noted as the most pessimistic about the future among their European peers (Gentina, 2019). Gen Z constitutes approximately 12% of the French population and is characterized by high levels of education, social responsibility, environmental consciousness, commitment to assisting others, and readiness to engage in collective action (Gentina, 2019; Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Lebrun et al., 2022;), reflecting their inclination towards collective action and making positive contributions to the world (Euromonitor, 2018). In France, Gen Z matured in the shadow of significant societal challenges including terrorism, economic instability, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Gentina, 2019; Lebrun et al., 2022). It is argued that these issues, along with other global events, have shaped their worldview, building resilience and a

sense of collective responsibility (Rochford, 2018). Studying ethical consumption behaviours can therefore provide novel insights into how societal factors impact ethical tourism practices. Research highlights the importance of cultural studies to understand the motivations and values driving these behaviours (Rettie et al., 2012). Therefore, analysing Gen Z in this context offers a distinct perspective on the challenges encountered in embracing ethical tourism, given their specific socio-cultural context and values amidst substantial political, environmental, and economic change.

The findings of this study are expected to offer in-depth and well-grounded insights into the primary constraints facing Gen Z cohort's ethical tourism consumption. This research therefore extends empirical research on ethical consumption by offering a generational perspective that elucidates the constraints encountered by tourists when making ethical tourism choices.

Literature review

Gen Z and ethical consumption

Generational thinking suggests that a cohort's lifestyle and attitudes are influenced by its expectations, experiences, and history (Strauss & Howe, 2009). Having grown up with the Internet, Gen Z is regarded as the digital and, hence, globally-aware generation (Seemiller & Grace, 2024). Natural disasters, environmental crises like climate change, and social movements are regarded as being key formative events that have shaped Gen Z's pro-environmental views and characteristics (Djafarova & Foots, 2022).

Prior research has argued that younger generations are expressing their political, environmental, and social concerns through their consumption behaviour, investing more in ethical products in general (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). However, it is important to recognize that much of this evidence is based on self-reported intentions rather than observed behaviours (Seyfi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, several studies have found that Gen Z choose more sustainable products than other generations (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Song et al., 2020). Scholz (2019) links this with the finding that environmental pollution is a significant concern of this group. Similarly, Haddouche and Salomone (2018) found that French Gen Z demonstrates a strong sense of environmental responsibility through their environmentally friendly habits, a finding that is consistent with Robinson and Schänzel's (2019), results for Gen Z in New Zealand. Nonetheless, most of the claims and arguments in these studies primarily reflect stated preferences and intentions rather than empirical observations of actual behaviour.

The Gen Z cohort is perceived to place higher value on both individual identity expression and companies with ethical reputations in their consumption practices. In this regard, Song et al. (2020) argue that they exhibit greater receptivity to sustainability-oriented business behaviours and branding compared to other generations. Lin et al. (2022) highlighted eudaimonic pursuits in shaping Gen Z's sustainable tourism consumption, whereas D'Arco et al. (2023) found that Gen Z travelers are more inclined to select sustainable transportation modes over eco-friendly hotels. Studies have also argued that Gen Z demonstrates greater interest in sustainability (e.g. Salinero et al., 2022; Casalegno et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023). However, Qiu et al. (2022) found that, in practice, Gen Z's travel behaviours are often less environmentally responsible than their expressed attitudes or even the behaviours of previous generations. This finding supports Seyfi et al. (2024), who argued that relying heavily on intention-based measures can create an overly optimistic or idealized portrayal of Gen Z's commitment to sustainability, ultimately overlooking the complexities of their actual behaviours and decision-making processes.

Despite extensive research on Gen Z's sustainable behaviour and motivations, much of this work is limited by its reliance on self-reported data, which may not fully reflect actual behaviour (Seyfi et al., 2024). Therefore, there remains a need for a better understanding of the constraints Gen Z faces in translating their ethical values into consumption behaviours. This study aims to

address this gap by examining the challenges and limitations that Gen Z encounters in their efforts to engage in ethical consumption practices.

Theoretical approach: theory of constraints

This study utilizes the Theory of Constraints (TOC) as the foundational framework to examine the constraints experienced by Gen Z in their pursuit of ethical tourism consumption choices and practices. Originally developed within leisure constraints literature (Crawford et al., 1991), this hierarchical framework has evolved to sequentially influence individuals' behaviours and is widely employed in leisure and tourism studies (e.g. Gu & Huang, 2019; Hall & Page, 2014; Hung & Petrick, 2012). The TOC outlines three primary dimensions of constraints that individuals may face when engaging in specific activities. First, *intrapersonal* constraints relate to internal factors intrinsic to an individual, such as personal beliefs, values, and skills, which significantly influence decision-making. Conversely, *interpersonal* constraints involve the impact of external social factors, including societal norms and pressures from peers and family, which may override individual preferences. Third, *structural* constraints include external factors beyond an individual's immediate control, such as environmental conditions, resource availability, or logistical challenges, which can limit access to opportunities and resources (Hall & Page, 2014). Empirical studies support the idea that constraints interact dynamically among these layers (Crawford et al., 1991; Gu & Huang, 2019; Lin et al., 2017). The adoption of the TOC in this study is driven by its applicability to understanding the constraints faced by Gen Z in ethical tourism consumption. TOC therefore offers a structured framework that fits well with the complex nature of the constraints individuals face in their tourism behaviour. By integrating the ethical consumerism lens, we can illuminate the values and motivations underlying ethical choices, while the TOC framework examines the complexities of constraints that hinder these choices.

Constraints toward ethical consumption

Despite the increasing awareness of ethical consumption and its benefits, consumers face various constraints in making ethical consumption choices. This topic has attracted growing academic interest across different sectors, including organic food (Janssen, 2018), fast fashion (Cairns et al., 2022), retail shopping, luxury goods (Chatterjee et al., 2021), and tourism (Del Chiappa & Correia, 2018; Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2017). Existing literature has identified both internal and external barriers to ethical consumption. Internal barriers include psychological factors that prevent people from buying ethical products, such as limited knowledge and awareness (Nandi et al., 2017), a lack of skills to distinguish ethical products (Wojciechowska-Solis & Soroka, 2017), willful ignorance (Chatterjee et al., 2021), egoism or a lack of desire (Shaw et al., 2007), guilt (Chatterjee et al., 2021), scepticism or lack of trust towards green products (Chen et al., 2018), and insufficient commitment (Shaw et al., 2016). External constraints, in contrast, are obstacles that prevent consumers from purchasing ethical products and include price (Janssen, 2018), inadequate availability (Nandi et al., 2017; Wojciechowska-Solis & Soroka, 2017), distance (Nandi et al., 2017), and poor labelling (Pham et al., 2018).

Psychological constraints play a significant role in inhibiting ethical consumption, as they lead consumers to intentionally ignore ethical purchases and question the ethical claims made by businesses, thus negatively impacting their intention to make ethical purchases (Chatterjee et al., 2021). For tourists considering ethical consumption, various constraints may arise, highlighting the need for a thorough evaluation of the factors that impede engagement in ethical tourism consumption. This is consistent with the viewpoint put forth by Juvan and Dolnicar (2016), highlighting the discrepancy between tourists' intentions and their actual behavioural choices. Building upon this notion, although there is a prevailing perception that Gen Z exhibits

a propensity towards ethical consumption, there is a notable dearth of empirical research examining the specific constraints they encounter in practicing ethical consumption.

Research method

Research design and data collection

This study adopts an interpretive approach to facilitate an exploration of the constraints exhibited by a sample of Gen Z individuals in a developed country, France, towards ethical tourism choices and practices. Given the complex and subjective nature of ethical tourism consumption (Weeden & Boluk, 2014), a qualitative exploratory approach was employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Exploratory research is commonly employed when there is limited or no existing literature on a particular topic as it helps develop a deeper understanding of the problem rather than providing conclusive evidence (Stebbins, 2001). The initial participant selection employed a purposive sampling method (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007), chosen to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and insights into ethical consumption behaviours. This approach was crucial for capturing rich, detailed data from those most engaged with the topic, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the findings (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is a strategic approach designed to align the participant selection process with the core aims and context of the study, particularly in qualitative research where depth of insight is prioritized over representativeness (Campbell et al., 2020). This method ensures that the chosen participants are those most likely to provide rich, meaningful, and relevant information, thus effectively addressing the specific questions or issues under investigation. Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling intentionally includes individuals whose experiences and perspectives are critical to understanding the phenomena in question (Campbell et al., 2020). This approach is especially valuable in contexts where particular kinds of participants are likely to hold unique insights, allowing the research to efficiently utilize resources by focusing on information-rich cases (Campbell et al., 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007)

The process began primarily by identifying key individuals through the social media platforms of I-boycott's community and other social media platforms. This community, boasting 136,000 members and 9,300 followers, serves as a significant platform for ethical consumption campaigns in France. Established in 2015 and driven by a team of dedicated volunteers, I-boycott's mission is to democratize ethical consumption practices among citizens, empowering consumers to promote ethical and sustainable practices within the economy. To support this mission, they have developed two digital tools: i-boycott.org, a collaborative platform for boycott campaigns with over 100,000 active users, and BuyOrNot, a mobile app that allows consumers to scan products to gain insights into their societal and health impacts, as well as to check if the product or its company is currently boycotted.

Subsequently, exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling was employed, with these initial participants recommending other individuals relevant to the research topic (Saunders et al., 2018). This approach allowed the study to access a broader network of participants who might not have been initially identified but were still highly relevant to understanding the complexities of ethical consumption within Gen Z. Snowball sampling was particularly effective in capturing a wider range of experiences while maintaining the focus on individuals with significant awareness and interest in sustainability and ethical consumption (Saunders et al., 2018). To reflect diverse perspectives within Gen Z, the study also included participants from two business schools in France. As highlighted by prior research in the context of French Gen Z, this cohort does not have a uniform consumption behaviour, and thus, the inclusion of participants from varied educational backgrounds further contributed to capturing the diversity of perspectives within the generation (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). Two key criteria guided the sampling: age, to ensure all participants were within the Gen Z cohort, and travel

Table 1. Profile of study respondents.

Respondent no	Gender	Age	Education	Estimate number of domestic/international travel per year
PA 1	Male	25	Master student	3
PA 2	Male	21	Bachelor student	1
PA 3	Female	22	Bachelor's degree	4
PA 4	Female	20	Bachelor student	2
PA 5	Male	21	Advanced technician's diploma	4
PA 6	Female	24	Master's degree	5
PA 7	Male	19	Bachelor student	2
PA 8	Female	22	Bachelor's degree	3
PA 9	Male	23	Master student	2
PA 10	Male	20	Bachelor student	3
PA 11	Female	23	Bachelor's degree	1
PA 12	Female	21	Advanced technician's diploma	4
PA 13	Male	22	Bachelor student	2
PA 14	Male	23	Master student	4
PA 15	Male	20	Bachelor student	3
PA 16	Female	24	Master's degree	5
PA 17	Female	21	Bachelor student	2
PA 18	Female	23	Bachelor's degree	3
PA 19	Male	20	Advanced technician's diploma	2
PA 20	Male	24	Bachelor's degree	3
PA 21	Female	19	Bachelor's student	1
PA 22	Male	23	Master student	2
PA 23	Male	23	Master student	2
PA 24	Female	21	Advanced technician's diploma	2
PA 25	Male	24	Bachelor's degree	3
PA 26	Male	24	Bachelor's degree	2
PA 27	Female	23	Master student	1
PA 28	Female	24	Advanced technician's diploma	5
PA 29	Female	23	Bachelor's degree	2

experience—whether alone or with family—to explore different contexts of ethical consumption decisions. After conducting 29 interviews, data saturation was reached. Saturation refers to the point at which no new information or themes emerged, indicating that the sample size was sufficient to comprehensively address the research questions (see [Table 1](#) for the profile of the interviewees).

The interviews utilized questions developed from the literature and the theory of constraints (e.g. Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2017; Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019; Seyfi et al., 2023b; 2024), providing both flexibility and depth in exploring participants' responses. These interview questions aimed to examine the specific constraints and challenges that Gen Z individuals may face when trying to incorporate ethical considerations into their tourism experiences. For instance, participants were asked about their travel experiences and the factors influencing their ethical consumption decisions. They were also encouraged to share any constraints they personally encountered when using ethical products or services during their holidays and describe how these constraints impacted their travel experiences. Verbatim transcripts of each interview were generated immediately afterward for analysis and interpretation purposes.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Mehmetoglu & Altinay, 2006) and involved three key stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding

(see [Appendix 1](#) for data structure). In the first stage, *open coding*, we conducted a line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts to identify initial concepts, referred to as first-order codes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This stage aimed to break down the data into smaller, manageable segments, allowing for an in-depth examination of the content. The goal was to develop a broad set of codes that represented underlying patterns within the data. Essentially, this step involved summarizing and fragmenting the raw data to uncover potential categories that could emerge. For instance, participant statements such as “I often choose cheaper travel options despite wanting to be sustainable” were coded as “financial limitations”, while “I avoid discussing my ethical travel choices to not seem superior” was coded as “fear of judgment”.

After open coding, the second stage, *axial coding*, involved reassembling the fragmented data to create a more coherent structure. This stage focused on exploring how the categories and subcategories identified during open coding related to each other, essentially clustering the first-order codes into more abstract second-order themes based on relationships and patterns within the data. For example, first-order concepts like “fear of judgment”, “social isolation for ethical choices”, and “stigma around avoiding conventional activities” were grouped under the second-order theme “Green stigma”. Similarly, concepts such as “budget over sustainability” and “high cost of eco-options” were combined under the theme “Financial restrictions”. This process helped us organize the data into coherent themes, ultimately highlighting key categories like “Cognitive dissonance”, “Risk aversion”, and “Family dynamics”.

The final stage, *selective coding*, involved integrating and refining the categories to form a central, overarching theory that represents the core phenomenon of the study. In this stage, we selected the core category that organized all other categories, synthesizing our findings into a cohesive narrative. Specifically, we integrated the second-order themes to establish broader aggregate dimensions that aligned with the theoretical framework of the study, effectively capturing the challenges faced by Gen Z in ethical tourism. For instance, the themes “Cognitive dissonance”, “Risk aversion”, and “Consumption inertia” were aggregated under the dimension “Intrapersonal Constraints”. Similarly, “Green stigma”, “Family dynamics”, and “Social comparison” were grouped as “Interpersonal Constraints”, while “Limited accessibility” and “Financial restrictions” were categorized as “Structural Constraints”. Throughout the coding process, the themes were compared against relevant literature to ensure alignment with existing theoretical frameworks. Following Corbin and Strauss (1990), researchers independently reviewed the transcripts, and the emerging themes were cross-validated collectively to ensure consistency and reliability, following the iterative approach recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2011). This ensured a rigorous and credible assessment of data quality.

Findings

The study findings are organized into three major themes that illustrate the constraints Gen Z faces in ethical tourism consumption, as shown in [Figure 1](#). [Appendix 1](#) also offers a detailed data structure, where the data analysis process and the emergence of themes are explained. Additionally, illustrative quotes are provided for each of the aggregate themes and sub-themes.

Intrapersonal constraints

Cognitive dissonance

The findings reveal that cognitive dissonance—where ethical beliefs clash with actual behaviours (Tanford & Montgomery, 2015)—is a prominent intrapersonal constraint for Gen Z in their ethical travel decisions. Participants experienced persistent tension between their desire for ethical travel and the practical, habitual decisions they made, often resulting in feelings of guilt, frustration, and questioning their commitment to ethical values. This dissonance is not an isolated

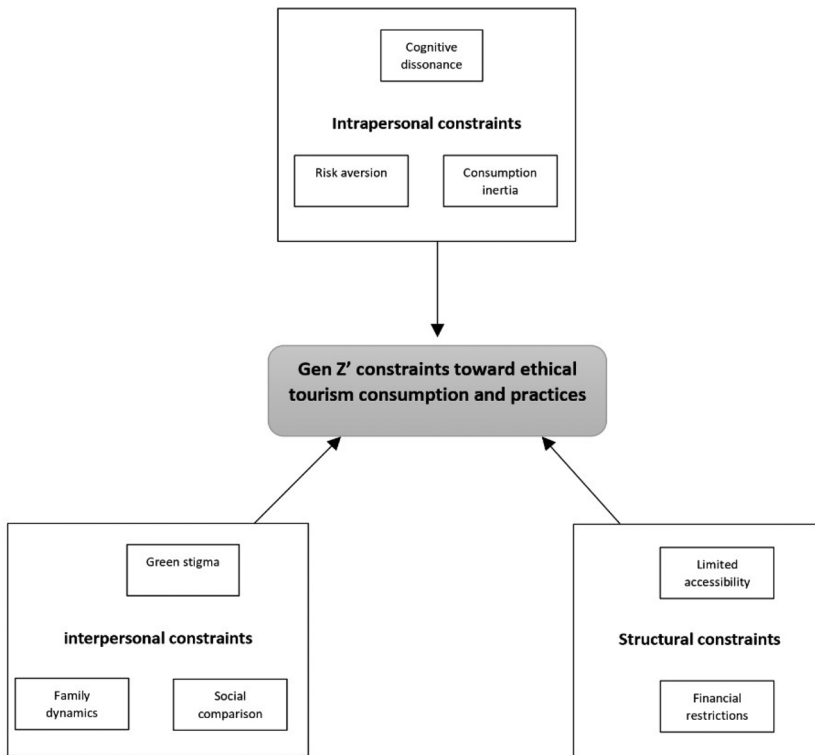


Figure 1. Framework for the constraints pertaining to Gen Z' ethical tourism consumption behaviour and practices

challenge but reflects a broader struggle to align actions with values in a tourism context that emphasizes convenience and comfort (Seyfi & Hall, 2024). *“Every time I book a flight, I feel guilty. I know the impact air travel has on the environment, and I keep telling myself I’ll choose greener options next time. But, I end up choosing flights over trains because they’re faster and sometimes cheaper, even though it goes against my beliefs about protecting the environment”* (PA 8). One emerging pattern is that cognitive dissonance tends to surface more acutely when participants face trade-offs between time, cost, and environmental impact. *“Honestly, I feel a bit hypocritical. I talk a lot about doing what’s right for the planet and making responsible choices, but when it comes to planning a trip, sometimes I just go for the convenient and affordable option. It’s frustrating because it feels like we’re not staying true to ourselves and our values”* (PA 12).

Importantly, cognitive dissonance fluctuates depending on the context: it intensifies in group settings, such as family trips, where individual ethical preferences are compromised for convenience or group cohesion. This indicates a dynamic interaction where ethical intentions are suppressed to maintain social harmony. *“I always advocate for supporting local economies and cultures when traveling. However, whenever I travel with my family, I find myself staying at international hotel chains for the sake of convenience and familiarity. It’s hard because I know what I value, but sometimes convenience wins out over my principles”* (PA 13).

The above findings suggest two key and novel insights: Cognitive dissonance frequently triggers a cycle of rationalization. Participants often justified their decisions with external factors—like time constraints, cost efficiency, or family expectations—that ultimately led to less sustainable choices. The rationalization process illustrates how ethical intentions can be overpowered by practicality, making cognitive dissonance a key psychological and practical barrier often influenced by time limits, money concerns, and social pressures, time, financial constraints, and social dynamics (Tanford & Montgomery, 2015). Additionally, cognitive dissonance frequently

leads to self-justification, with participants constructing rationales to alleviate their psychological discomfort. This self-justification often revolves around the perception of necessity: participants feel pressured to prioritize quicker, cheaper options (e.g. low-cost flights) despite knowing the environmental repercussions.

Risk aversion

Risk aversion also emerged as a significant constraint that closely interacts with cognitive dissonance. Participants frequently expressed concerns about the uncertainty and potential ineffectiveness of ethical tourism options, which discouraged them from trying new, potentially sustainable choices. The fear of “greenwashing”—being misled by exaggerated or false claims about sustainability—was a recurring theme. This concern adds a social dimension to risk aversion, as participants feared both wasting their efforts and the potential embarrassment of being deceived.

“I worry that buying ethical stuff won’t actually change things... What if I pick an eco-friendly resort, and it’s not as green as it claims to be? See, it’s hard to know if we’re making a real impact” (PA 17). Another participant expressed concerns about the effectiveness of volunteer tourism projects, stating: *“I’ve thought about joining volunteer tourism projects, but I’m concerned about the effectiveness and the real impact of these programs. There’s a fear of inadvertently supporting something that might be more harmful than helpful”* (PA 3). This illustrates how perceived ineffectiveness and lack of transparency in ethical initiatives can prevent deeper engagement, with participants fearing they may do more harm than good.

The data reveal a structured pattern in how participants evaluate risk: they initially assess the ethical credentials of products or services, and if doubts arise, they revert to familiar, trusted brands. This pattern indicates that risk aversion is a “first-line” constraint that prevents deeper engagement with ethical options. Interestingly, this risk-aversion does not only pertain to financial or safety concerns but also includes worries about the perceived social consequences of making an “incorrect” ethical choice. Participants’ concerns about “greenwashing” indicate a strong social factor influencing their risk assessments. Moreover, risk aversion appears to influence different types of behaviours differently. For example, participants were more likely to exhibit risk aversion in decisions related to accommodation (e.g. opting for international hotel chains over eco-lodges) than in choices about activities or food consumption, where they felt more comfortable experimenting with local or sustainable options. *“I’m hesitant to book eco-lodges or smaller, local accommodations because I’m not sure if they’ll meet my expectations for comfort and safety. I usually end up choosing well-known hotel chains instead, even though I’d prefer a more authentic, sustainable option”* (PA 2).

This distinction shows that not all ethical tourism decisions are seen as equally risky offering novel insights about the behavioural patterns related to ethical consumer behaviour. Interestingly, risk aversion seems to create the conditions for consumption inertia. By focusing on the risks and uncertainties of making ethical choices, participants justified sticking to familiar, mainstream options. Therefore, risk aversion is not an isolated barrier but is closely linked to reinforcing consumption inertia.

Consumption inertia

Consumption inertia was pervasive, with participants showing a strong tendency to stick to familiar travel behaviour, even when they were aware of ethical alternatives. Characterized by reluctance to change established habits, consumption inertia reflects a broader resistance to adopting new practices, especially when these require significant effort or disrupt routines (Henderson et al., 2021). This constraint appears to interact with both risk aversion and cognitive dissonance, as participants rationalize their inertia by focusing on the risks or challenges of trying something new. A clear hierarchy of constraints emerged: consumption inertia tends to operate as a “default” state when participants feel overwhelmed by cognitive dissonance, or the risks associated with

changing behaviour. For example, one participant explained: *“Even though I know there are greener travel options available, I find myself sticking to the same kind of vacations I’ve always taken. It’s just easier to go with what you know than to try something new and different”* (PA 21).

In contrast to risk aversion, which emerges early in the decision-making process, consumption inertia appears to have a cumulative effect, gradually reinforcing habitual behaviours over time. Even when participants express genuine interest in ethical travel options, they often revert to familiar patterns due to the comfort and ease of established routines. This indicates that the effort required to change existing habits is often perceived as greater than the potential benefits of choosing an ethical alternative, leading participants to default to what they know best. *“I’ve read about the benefits of sustainable tourism, and I really want to support it, but when it comes time to book a trip, I automatically choose the usual travel agents and packages”* (PA 10).

Overall, as the findings demonstrate, intrapersonal constraints—cognitive dissonance, risk aversion, and consumption inertia—do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in a structured, hierarchical manner that influences decision-making processes. Cognitive dissonance typically initiates a chain reaction, creating discomfort that leads participants to rationalize their choices. Risk aversion then acts as an immediate barrier, deterring the exploration of ethical options, particularly in decisions perceived as high-stakes. Finally, consumption inertia reinforces these behaviours over time, reinforcing the status quo through a reliance on familiar patterns. For example, feelings of guilt about flying often triggered rationalizations focused on convenience and cost, leading participants to justify their behaviour by highlighting the risks or ineffectiveness of greener alternatives. This, in turn, strengthened consumption inertia, ensuring that they continued with their established travel habits. The data suggest that these constraints are both sequential and reinforcing. Cognitive dissonance leads to risk aversion, which then contributes to consumption inertia, together forming a significant barrier to adopting ethical tourism practices. Understanding how these constraints interact offers a deeper perspective on why Gen Z, despite their claimed ethical attitudes, struggles to translate these values into consistent actions. This interconnected analysis reveals opportunities for targeted interventions that can simultaneously address multiple constraints. For instance, by reducing perceived risks and simplifying the adoption of new behaviours, thereby breaking the cycle of inertia.

Interpersonal constraints

Green stigma

Green stigma emerged as a significant interpersonal constraint affecting Gen Z’s ethical tourism behaviour. Unlike intrapersonal constraints, which arise from internal struggles, green stigma is shaped by social interactions and external perceptions. It refers to the negative judgments or exclusion faced by individuals who deviate from mainstream tourism behaviour in favor of more ethical choices. This stigma is influenced by societal norms that often view ethical practices as overly moralistic or impractical (Tan et al., 2016). Participants frequently described how choosing ethical tourism could lead to social alienation or ridicule. *“In my circle, there’s definitely a stigma around not participating in the usual tourist activities. If you say you’re skipping a popular attraction for ethical reasons, people assume you’re judgmental or think you’re better than them”* (PA 14). This sentiment highlights how group norms can create a negative perception of ethical behaviour, discouraging participants from acting in alignment with their values due to fear of being seen as “different” or “self-righteous”.

Familial expectations also reinforced green stigma, with participants reporting skepticism from family members regarding the practicality and cost of ethical choices. *“My family doesn’t understand why I pay extra for sustainable travel options. They see it as a waste and often question my decisions, which can be pretty discouraging”* (PA 19). This familial resistance added an additional layer of discouragement, particularly when participants’ ethical values clashed with the economic priorities of older family members.

Additionally, the fear of being perceived as morally superior or judgmental was a common concern that prevented participants from openly discussing their ethical travel behaviours. *“People think ethical travelers are always judging others, and it makes me hesitate to talk about my own ethical choices. I don’t want to seem like I’m bragging or acting superior. I just want to do my part without being seen as self-righteous”* (PA 6). This illustrates that even when participants are committed to sustainability, they may choose to remain silent about their actions to avoid negative social judgments, leading to a sense of isolation rather than empowerment.

The findings suggest that green stigma is highly context-dependent, varying in intensity based on the social environment. In close family groups, where traditional travel habits are very strong, the stigma was more noticeable. Conversely, participants who traveled with environmentally conscious peers experienced less judgment, suggesting that the acceptance of ethical behaviour is significantly influenced by the social pressures of the traveler’s immediate group. The hierarchical nature of this constraint means that the need for social acceptance often outweighs ethical considerations, especially when traveling with others who are less concerned about sustainability.

Family dynamics

Family dynamics emerged as another key interpersonal constraint that affected Gen Z’s ability to adopt ethical tourism behaviours. Family influence simultaneously shaped and limited participants’ travel decisions, with family members—especially older generations—prioritizing cost, convenience, and familiarity over sustainability. This often placed Gen Z in a position where they felt unable to fully act on their ethical preferences, as family priorities overrode their individual values. *“My parents always prioritize budget over anything else when we plan family trips. Even though I try to suggest more sustainable options, they often dismiss them as too expensive or unnecessary. It’s frustrating because I want to travel more responsibly”* (PA 1). These justifications reflect a broader reluctance to change established family travel habits, which are deeply rooted in notions of convenience and affordability. In this context, consumption inertia (as noted in the intrapersonal constraints section) is reinforced by family expectations, making it even harder to switch to ethical travel habits.

The negotiation between personal values and family preferences often resulted in frustration and a sense of helplessness among participants. Ethical travel choices were usually seen as less important when they were thought to disrupt the overall trip experience.

“My sister and I are really into sustainable travel, but our parents are set in their ways. They prefer the convenience of all-inclusive resorts” (PA 26). Moreover, participants described family travel as a setting where ethical considerations were often seen as an inconvenience rather than an essential factor. *“Whenever I bring up the idea of staying at an eco-lodge or visiting less-known destinations to help spread tourism income, my family worries about safety and amenities. They support ethical concepts in theory but are hesitant when it actually comes to our trips”* (PA 2).

Social comparison

Social comparison, particularly influenced by the visibility of social media and peers’ travel choices, emerged as a powerful constraint on Gen Z’s ethical tourism behaviour. The findings reveal that participants frequently compared their travel behaviour to those of friends, influencers, and broader social networks, creating tension between their ethical intentions and the desire for social validation. This pressure to conform to more glamorous or luxurious travel choices often outweighed sustainable considerations, particularly in a digital age where travel experiences are constantly shared and evaluated online (Ameen et al., 2023).

The fear of missing out (FOMO) was a recurrent theme, with many participants describing how seeing others’ travels on social media exacerbated their sense of inadequacy when opting for less extravagant but more sustainable experiences. *“On social media, everyone is posting about*

their trips to major tourist destinations. It makes it hard to decide to go somewhere less known or to engage in activities that are better for the environment but might not be as popular among my peers" (PA 5). For many participants, the visible nature of social media intensified this pressure. *"It's tough when you see influencers traveling to exotic locations and staying at luxury hotels. It makes you question whether choosing more responsible travel options will provide the same level of enjoyment or social recognition"* (PA 14). A clear pattern that emerged from the data is the trade-off participants often faced between ethical considerations and the need for social approval. *"Most of my friends go on these luxurious, often not-so-sustainable vacations. When I share that I'm planning a stay at a sustainable hostel or engaging in a low-impact travel experience, it sometimes feels like my choices are less desirable"* (PA 18). This indicates how ethical choices, while personally rewarding, are often seen as less attractive compared to the more mainstream, luxury-focused travel experiences popular among peers. Social dynamics often outweighed participants' sustainability goals, especially when they worried about being socially isolated or viewed as making less "exciting" choices.

Interestingly, the influence of social comparison appears to vary across different types of travel decisions. Participants reported feeling particularly pressured when it came to high-visibility aspects of travel, such as accommodation or destination choice. For example, the choice between a luxury hotel and an eco-lodge was often influenced by how participants believed their decision would be perceived by their social network. As one participant put it: *"I've skipped some eco-tours and opted for more traditional experiences because I didn't want to miss out on what my friends were doing. You know, it's that 'fear of missing out' thing"* (PA 4). This highlights the role of FOMO in reinforcing mainstream, less sustainable travel decisions. However, participants indicated feeling less pressured in lower-visibility areas, such as their choice of local activities or dining options. This suggests that while social comparison has a strong influence on highly visible aspects of travel, there are opportunities for ethical behaviour in areas that are less likely to be judged by others.

Overall, as the findings demonstrated, the interpersonal constraints of green stigma, family dynamics, and social comparison do not operate independently; instead, they interact in ways that reinforce each other, creating a layered and complex barrier to ethical tourism practices for Gen Z. Green stigma often makes people feel isolated or judged when they choose to act differently from the norm. This feeling is even stronger in family settings, where older generations might discourage ethical choices because they prefer convenience. This makes the stigma worse and adds to the difficulty of changing old habits. Family dynamics further interact with social comparison pressures, as participants try to balance their family's preferences with their desire to fit in with social standards they see on platforms like Instagram. The interaction between these constraints is not uniform but rather hierarchical, with the dominance of one constraint over another depending on the social context. For example, green stigma and family dynamics are more likely to influence group travel decisions, while social comparison becomes more important for individual decisions that are highly visible online. Understanding the interactions among these interpersonal constraints reveals that they are sequential and reinforcing. Green stigma leads participants to suppress ethical behaviour to maintain social harmony, while family dynamics and social comparison further reinforce mainstream choices over time.

Structural constraints

Limited accessibility

Limited accessibility emerged as a significant structural constraint preventing Gen Z from consistently making ethical tourism choices. This constraint reflects the gap between participants' ethical intentions and the practical difficulties of accessing ethical options. The data suggest

that this barrier often operates at the earliest stages of decision-making, acting as an early obstacle for participants trying to match their travel choices with their values. A clear pattern across the interviews is that participants initially express strong motivation to make ethical choices, but this motivation is often weakened by the limited availability or visibility of sustainable options. *"I try to be conscious of ethical choices when I travel, but it's not always easy. Sometimes, I can't find a hotel that's eco-friendly or a restaurant that follows green practices. It's unfortunate that not all places offer these options for tourists"* (PA 3). In some cases, the challenge lies in the poor marketing or visibility of these options, as expressed by another participant: *"It feels like there's a gap between the availability and the marketing of these [sustainable travel] options"* (PA 8).

Moreover, the geographical context plays a critical role in shaping this constraint. Participants traveling to remote or less developed areas reported specific difficulties in finding ethical options, especially regarding public transportation and sustainable accommodations. *"I had planned to use public transportation during my vacation, but it turned out to be quite challenging. When you travel to remote places and small villages, it's really tough to come across any public transportation options. ...it's just not practical to rely on them"* (PA 7). The issue of carbon offsetting provides yet another example of how limited accessibility plays out in different travel behaviours. While some participants expressed interest in carbon offsetting, they reported that few airlines offer such programs, making it difficult to incorporate this ethical choice into their travel plans: *"Carbon offsetting schemes are only offered by a few airlines"* (PA 10).

Financial restrictions

Financial constraints are another significant structural barrier for Gen Z, operating at multiple points throughout the decision-making process. The data reveal that budget limitations often override participants' ethical intentions, especially when the cost difference between regular and eco-friendly options is substantial. One recurring pattern is that participants initially aspire to make ethical travel choices but feel forced to prioritize affordability. As one participant expressed, *"Sometimes the cost difference between a regular hotel and an eco-friendly one can be the deciding factor"* (PA 9). This sentiment was echoed by several other participants who reported that, despite their desire to support sustainable tourism, their budgets simply did not allow for it. This tension between ethical intentions and financial feasibility creates a constant struggle, where financial limitations often outweigh ethical intentions. This constraint often becomes more significant when participants are faced with expensive eco-friendly options, such as eco-lodges or volunteer tourism programs. While participants showed interest in these experiences, many found them too expensive, especially for students or young professionals with tight budgets. *"I've looked into volunteer tourism or eco-tours, but they often come with a high price tag. It's tough when you're a student and every dollar counts"* (PA 4).

Interestingly, participants often justify their financial decisions by framing them as necessary compromises. This justification process suggests that financial restrictions serve as a rationalization for making less ethical choices. *"Even if there's a more ethical choice, if it's not economically feasible, I just can't justify it"* (PA 24). Overall, financial limitations are not just a separate barrier; they are closely linked to other challenges like limited accessibility, creating a chain reaction that affects many travel choices. Participants often deal with a complex decision-making process, where budgetary concerns combine with accessibility problems, making it harder for them to focus on sustainability in their travel plans.

Discussion, conclusion and implications

This study employed the theory of constraints framework to examine the constraints preventing Gen Z from actively embracing ethical consumption behaviours in their travel decisions and

practices. While previous research has often portrayed this generation as the “greenest” cohort (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Pinho & Gomes, 2023), our findings challenge this perception by uncovering the complexities and contradictions in Gen Z’s actual behavior. Specifically, despite their strong ethical attitudes, Gen Z’s commitment to maintaining current travel habits poses significant obstacles to adopting ethical travel behaviors, highlighting both psychological and behavioral barriers to change (Huang et al., 2021). This aligns with prior arguments suggesting that activities centered around enjoyment, such as vacations, may lead to diminished ethical behavior (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2017; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016). However, our study adds a novel perspective to this argument by showing that it is not only the focus on enjoyment that impedes ethical actions but also the influence of ingrained habits and the perceived effort involved in making ethical choices during hedonistic contexts such as travel. This builds on Albrecht et al.’s (2024) findings, which emphasized the role of effort and habit in ethical behavior without specifically considering generational complexities, as observed with Gen Z.

Our study provides new insights into the role of risk and trust in shaping Gen Z’s ethical choices. While previous research has identified distrust in certification systems as a significant constraint (Luchs et al., 2010; Pham et al., 2019), we extend this understanding by highlighting Gen Z’s specific skepticism towards the transparency of ethical claims. Unlike older generations with more generalized distrust, Gen Z exhibits heightened skepticism about the credibility of businesses’ environmental claims, adding a generational dimension to existing theories of consumer trust.

This generational skepticism suggests that addressing trust issues for Gen Z requires more than certification—it demands authentic and transparent actions from businesses to demonstrate their ethical practices. Moreover, our findings contribute significantly to the understanding of consumption inertia and its impact on ethical behaviour (Del Chiappa & Correia, 2018). This study offers a fresh perspective by emphasizing how inertia manifests specifically in Gen Z’s travel decisions and how Gen Z’s inertia is not merely a lack of information or awareness, but the result of a complex interaction between desire for ethical behaviour and practical constraints, such as convenience, habit, and risk aversion. Moreover, our findings significantly enhance the understanding of consumption inertia and its impact on ethical behavior. This study provides a fresh perspective by illustrating how inertia specifically manifests in Gen Z’s travel decisions, showing that, unlike what was suggested in prior research (Del Chiappa & Correia, 2018), their inertia is not merely a consequence of lacking information or awareness. Instead, it stems from a complex interaction between their desire to behave ethically and practical constraints, including convenience, ingrained habits, and risk aversion.

Finally, unlike previous research that considers these constraints as separate, this study reveals their interconnected and hierarchical effects on ethical consumption, demonstrating their sequential and context-dependent nature. Gen Z’s challenge in aligning their values with travel behaviors begins with intrapersonal constraints, where internal conflicts like cognitive dissonance, risk aversion, and consumption inertia create an initial barrier. These internal struggles make it easier for Gen Z to justify sticking to familiar but less ethical choices, particularly when ethical options are perceived as risky or inconvenient. Once intrapersonal barriers are established, interpersonal constraints—such as green stigma, family expectations, and social comparisons—add external complexity. Even if internal conflicts are overcome, social dynamics often push individuals back to more familiar behaviors, whether due to group norms, family pressures, or fear of social isolation. For example, concerns about fitting in or not appearing judgmental can make travelers abandon their ethical intentions. Structural constraints represent the final layer, limiting choices regardless of personal motivation. Factors like limited availability and high costs of sustainable options can prevent ethical behavior, even for those who have managed to overcome both internal and social barriers. This sequence forms a multi-layered barrier system that makes ethical decision-making particularly challenging. Moreover, these constraints do not act independently but reinforce each other in a continuous cycle. Intrapersonal conflicts often lead to

rationalizations that highlight structural barriers, such as financial limitations, which in turn increase interpersonal pressure and makes it easier to stick with the usual choices. Structural constraints, like limited accessibility, not only limit practical options but also reinforce mainstream, socially accepted behaviors.

Moreover, the interaction among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints varies depending on the specific context and type of decision, which offers new insights into how these constraints interrelate in shaping ethical travel decisions and practices. For high-stakes decisions, such as choosing accommodation or transportation, structural and interpersonal constraints tend to dominate. In these scenarios, cost, accessibility, and family expectations frequently override ethical intentions, as participants prioritize practicality and convenience. For lower-stakes decisions, such as selecting activities or dining options, intrapersonal factors like cognitive dissonance and consumption inertia play a more prominent role, as participants may initially express willingness to explore ethical choices but ultimately revert to familiar habits due to the effort required. Additionally, interpersonal and structural constraints have a heightened influence in collective travel situations. For example, when traveling with family, the preferences of older family members often dominate due to financial considerations and concerns about safety and comfort. In such cases, even if the individual's intrapersonal desire for ethical travel is strong, the combined pressure from structural and interpersonal barriers tends to determine the outcome.

Overall, to the best of our knowledge, this study represents the first empirical research that explores the constraints associated with adopting ethical tourism behaviours and practices through the lens of the theory of constraints. By applying this theoretical framework to the context of ethical tourism consumption, our research explores the complex nature of these constraints, moving beyond simplistic dichotomies and binary categorizations. While cognitive decision-making theories (e.g. theory of planned behaviour, norm activation model; goal-framing theory, attribution theory, social dilemma theory) have been leveraged in previous tourism research (e.g. Djafarova & Fouts, 2022), they have limitations when attempting to elucidate the constraints that affect ethical tourism consumption. Moreover, given the complexity inherent in ethical decision-making, which involves confronting conflicting principles, ambiguity, and the social context of ethical choice (Albrecht et al., 2024; Weeden & Boluk, 2014), these cognitive theories might not adequately explain the complexity of the process, especially considering how information and communication technologies affect ethical consumption practices, as well as the external constraints and the influence of family and society. To address these challenges, this study adopts the theory of constraints, going beyond traditional cognitive theories to understand the barriers related to ethical tourism choices.

The insights from this research have several implications for tourism destinations and businesses. Given the importance of Gen Z for the sustainability of the tourism sector, we propose a set of impactful interventions based on the identified constraints in this study. First, to address financial barriers while promoting ethical tourism, we suggest innovative pricing models instead of traditional discounts. For example, a "Pay What You Can" scheme during off-peak times or "Ethical Tourism Vouchers" offering discounts on ethical travel experiences could better fit Gen Z's budget constraints. These approaches, similar to student discounts, make ethical choices more affordable and could help build lasting connections between destinations, tourism businesses, and consumers. Second, to reduce cognitive dissonance and increase trust, tourism operators should invest in interactive tools that allow users to explore the ethical credentials of tourism offerings in-depth. For example, an online "Ethics Dashboard" could provide real-time information on the environmental impact, safety standards, and community benefits of various tourism options. This interactive approach can make ethical information more engaging and understandable for Gen Z particularly as the information may help build transparency and trust. Similarly, Gen Z oriented platforms that enable sharing of ethical travel experiences may prove beneficial. These platforms could feature user-generated content,

reviews, and social validation to reinforce positive perceptions of ethical tourism. A successful example of this is “TripAdvisor’s Green Choice”, where users can highlight eco-friendly options and share their experiences.

To address negative perceptions associated with ethical tourism—such as being seen as less enjoyable or overly serious—marketing strategies should reposition ethical tourism as a fashionable and desirable choice. As the findings of this study showed, peer groups and social norms have a big impact on Gen Z’s consumption decisions. A relatively obvious, although nevertheless important approach, is that collaborative marketing campaigns should be developed with influential figures and brands that resonate with Gen Z. For instance, partnering with popular content creators or social media influencers who genuinely advocate for ethical values can enhance the appeal of ethical tourism. Creating “Ethical Travel Challenges,” where influencers share their experiences and encourage followers to join in, can boost engagement and help make ethical practices more common in peer groups. Additionally, targeting campaigns at Gen Z’s parents and older family members may also be effective in some cases.

Finally, understanding the hierarchical and interrelated nature of these constraints reveals opportunities for targeted interventions. Effective strategies must simultaneously address multiple layers of barriers rather than focusing on just one aspect. For example, reducing financial barriers through subsidies or incentives could alleviate both structural and interpersonal constraints, making it easier for participants to justify ethical choices to themselves and to their families. Likewise, increasing the visibility and availability of affordable ethical options could help mitigate accessibility issues and reduce the need for individuals to justify falling back on mainstream behaviours. Promoting positive social stories about ethical tourism can help reduce the impact of green stigma and social comparison pressures, creating a more supportive environment for making sustainable choices.

Future research directions and limitations

This study has several limitations that present opportunities for future research. Firstly, the research was conducted in a single Global North country, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other regions and cultural milieus. Future studies should examine the perspectives of Gen Z across diverse countries and cultural settings, particularly in emerging economies. This is vital because cultural norms and attitudes can significantly shape Gen Z’s consumption practices, influencing aspects such as family dynamics, personal consumption patterns, and the perceived ethical appropriateness of certain choices (Sudbury Riley et al., 2012). Secondly, the use of purposive sampling to target individuals relevant to the research objectives means caution is needed when applying the findings to a wider population or drawing broad conclusions based solely on this study’s sample. Future research should include a more diverse and representative group to better understand the different views of French Gen Z. Employing quantitative methods and exploring various segments of Gen Z, including those less engaged with ethical consumption, could provide a broader understanding of ethical behaviours. Thirdly, since the constraints to ethical consumption identified in this study are contextual and subjective, future studies could explore the interrelationships and synergies among these constraints, particularly in specific tourism contexts, products, or services. Understanding how different constraints interact and shape consumer decisions can offer insights for developing effective strategies to promote ethical consumption. Finally, future studies could investigate how the ethical consumption constraints faced by Gen Z differ from those experienced by Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. Such comparative research could reveal generational differences in ethical tourism behaviours, and sheds light on whether Gen Z’s unique socio-cultural and digital context elevates or mitigates these constraints relative to older generations. This would enrich the understanding of ethical tourism consumption across age groups.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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