



Exploring Young Adults' Lived Experiences of Sustainable Living

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a growing concern in environmental and social sciences, emphasizing individual and collective responsibility for ecological well-being. While previous studies have explored behavioral and policy aspects, little is known about how young adults personally interpret and practice sustainability in daily life. This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover the meanings young adults assign to sustainable living. Semi-structured interviews with selected participants were thematically analyzed. Findings reveal four central themes: sustainability as a negotiated practice shaped by constraints and values; emotional ambivalence involving pride, guilt, and frustration; sustainability as part of identity construction; and the social environment's role in shaping actions. Overall, sustainable living among youth emerges as an interpretive and emotionally complex process rather than a simple behavioral choice. The study offers insights into the subjective dimensions of sustainability and implications for fostering meaningful engagement.



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INTRODUCTION

The growing global concern for environmental degradation, climate change, and resource depletion has brought sustainability to the forefront of academic, policy, and societal discussions (Sting et al., 2025). Within this discourse, sustainable living is often framed as a necessary pathway for addressing ecological crises and ensuring intergenerational equity (Grabowska et al., 2025). Young people, in particular, have been increasingly recognized as central actors in shaping sustainable futures, as their daily practices and consumption choices carry both immediate and long-term implications for social and environmental well-being.

While sustainability is commonly discussed in terms of policies, technologies, and behavioral shifts, it also represents a deeply personal and cultural phenomenon (Milani et al., 2025). Everyday decisions such as choosing reusable materials, reducing waste, or supporting local products are embedded in broader social, economic, and cultural contexts (Kourogrou, 2025). These practices often involve negotiations between personal values, financial limitations, and collective expectations. As a result, sustainable living is not merely a technical adjustment but a lived experience that reflects how individuals interpret, internalize, and enact ecological responsibility in their lives.

Exploring sustainability as an experiential phenomenon is crucial for understanding the meanings and tensions that underlie these practices (Amazige, 2025). A purely structural or behavioral analysis risks overlooking the subjective dimensions such as pride, guilt, or identity that shape and define sustainable living (Mukhlis, 2025a). By focusing on how individuals perceive and make sense of their choices, phenomenology provides a pathway to uncovering the lived realities behind sustainability practices (Zumbrunn et al., 2025). This perspective emphasizes the need to move beyond surface-level descriptions of sustainable behavior toward a deeper understanding of the personal and social meanings that sustain or hinder such practices.

Research on individuals' experiences of sustainability has increasingly emerged as an important field of inquiry, as scholars seek to understand not only the observable behaviors but also the subjective meanings that drive sustainable practices. Studies have demonstrated that young people often articulate their commitment to sustainability in diverse ways, reflecting emotional engagement, identity formation, and social negotiation (Wight et al., 2025). These dimensions underscore the importance of exploring sustainability not as a uniform pattern of behavior but as a complex, lived phenomenon embedded in personal and cultural contexts.

Despite this recognition, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth of such experiences. Quantitative approaches, while valuable for mapping behavioral trends and identifying correlations, tend to reduce sustainability into measurable indicators that cannot fully convey the richness of lived realities (Mieth et al., 2025). Such approaches often overlook the nuanced emotions, ambivalences, and identity negotiations that characterize sustainable practices among youth (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). As a result, important aspects of meaning-making remain obscured, leaving a partial understanding of the phenomenon.

These limitations highlight the inadequacy of relying solely on survey-based or descriptive accounts to explore sustainability as lived experience. Without approaches capable of attending to the inner worlds of participants, much of the essence of the phenomenon remains underexplored (Mukhlis, 2025b). This shortcoming reinforces the value of phenomenology as a methodological orientation that prioritizes participants' voices and foregrounds the meanings that individuals construct in relation to their practices of sustainable living (Rodgers et al., 2025). By focusing on how experiences are interpreted and narrated, phenomenology provides the necessary lens to uncover the depth of human engagement with sustainability that other methods have struggled to capture.

Existing approaches to studying sustainable lifestyles among young people have largely relied on practical frameworks, such as behavioral surveys, attitudinal scales, or descriptive accounts of environmental practices (Munch et al., 2025). While these methods provide valuable insights into the prevalence and patterns of sustainable behaviors, they fall short in capturing the nuanced, subjective dimensions of how such practices are experienced and made meaningful in everyday life (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). By focusing predominantly on observable outcomes, these approaches risk reducing sustainability to a set of quantifiable actions rather than recognizing it as a lived and interpretive process.

This limitation underscores a critical gap in understanding: the deeper psychological, emotional, and identity-related layers of sustainable living remain underexplored (Debernardini et al., 2025). Quantitative frameworks often fail to grasp the ambivalence, inner conflict, and social negotiations that participants navigate when attempting to align personal values with structural constraints (Nordin, 2025). As a result, the essence of the phenomenon the lived reality of sustainability as interpreted by individuals remains obscured and only partially understood.

To address this gap, phenomenology offers an alternative pathway by emphasizing the exploration of lived experiences and the meanings participants assign to them (Ellicott et al., 2025). Through this approach, sustainability is examined not merely as a behavioral outcome but as a complex phenomenon shaped by interpretation, reflection, and personal significance (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Employing a phenomenological lens thus provides the necessary depth and richness to uncover the essence of young people's engagement with sustainable lifestyles, offering insights that extend beyond surface-level behavioral descriptions.

Research on sustainable lifestyles has examined young people's behaviors, values, and attitudes, often highlighting their role in shaping environmental futures (Abou Hashish et al., 2025). Previous studies have explored how individuals adopt sustainable consumption, the barriers they encounter, and the cultural narratives that influence these practices (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). However, most of this literature has focused on observable patterns rather than lived experiences, leaving the inner meanings and emotional dimensions of sustainability underexplored. Phenomenological perspectives provide an opportunity to examine how participants interpret and

embody sustainability in everyday life (Ma & Saadati, 2025). This study builds on prior work by shifting attention from outcomes to the subjective realities that underpin them.

To address this gap, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which emphasizes the exploration of personal meaning and lived experience (Abdul Rahman et al., 2025). This method is appropriate for understanding how young adults negotiate, internalize, and express sustainability as part of their daily consumption practices (Mukhlis et al., 2024). By focusing on participants' narratives, IPA allows the study to capture the emotional, psychological, and identity-related dimensions of sustainability (Sattar & Yusoff, 2025). The method directly responds to the knowledge gap by providing insights that cannot be accessed through survey-based or descriptive research. In doing so, it offers a more holistic account of the phenomenon.

The article is structured to guide the reader through the key stages of inquiry. The introduction situates the phenomenon within broader social and academic contexts, followed by a detailed explanation of the methodological approach (Rakha & Woudsma, 2025). The methods section outlines participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The results section presents themes that capture the essence of participants' lived experiences, supported by direct quotations. Finally, the discussion and conclusion interpret these findings in relation to existing literature and highlight the contributions of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study was guided by an interpretative phenomenological approach, which focuses on exploring and understanding the subjective experiences of individuals in relation to a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology was chosen as the design because it allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, highlighting the meanings that participants assign to their everyday practices of sustainable living. The interpretative orientation of phenomenology emphasizes not only the description of experiences but also the interpretation of the deeper structures of meaning, making it especially relevant for examining the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of sustainability practices among young people.

Participants

Participants consisted of young adults who had direct engagement with sustainable lifestyle practices in their daily consumption. Inclusion criteria required individuals to be within the age range of 18–30 years, to self-identify as making deliberate choices toward sustainable living, and to possess experiences that reflected challenges, motivations, or reflections on sustainability. Exclusion criteria included individuals with no prior or current involvement in sustainable practices or those unwilling to reflect on personal experiences. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the sample reflected diverse but relevant perspectives on the phenomenon (Walker et al., 2025). The final sample included both male and female participants, with a variety of educational and occupational backgrounds, thereby offering a nuanced view of sustainability experiences across different contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that enabled participants to narrate their experiences freely while ensuring that key aspects of the phenomenon were explored. An interview guide was used to frame the discussions, focusing on perceptions, emotions, challenges, and meanings related to sustainable consumption practices. Interviews were conducted in settings chosen by the participants to provide comfort and privacy, either in-person or through secure online platforms. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the richness of the participants' voices.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic process of identifying, coding, and interpreting significant meaning units. The transcripts were first read repeatedly to gain familiarity and to identify initial themes (Côté, 2025). These themes were then clustered into broader categories that captured shared meanings across participants while preserving individual uniqueness. The analysis involved iterative cycles of reflection, reduction, and interpretation to arrive at the essential structures of the phenomenon. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was employed to assist in organizing and managing codes, but the interpretative work remained grounded in phenomenological principles. This process ensured that the findings reflected both the commonalities and the nuances of participants’ lived experiences.

RESULTS

Sustainability as a Negotiated Practice

Participants revealed that engaging in sustainable lifestyles was not a straightforward decision but a negotiated practice embedded in daily routines. Many described how they weighed their ecological values against practical and financial realities. As one participant explained:

“I really want to buy environmentally friendly products, but they are often much more expensive. Sometimes I feel I am forced to choose between living sustainably and managing my budget.” (Participant 3)

This quote illustrates how sustainability is filtered through the economic and material conditions of everyday life, revealing that moral aspirations often clash with affordability and access. The act of negotiation thus reflects a tension between ethical desire and structural constraint, where sustainability becomes a moral balancing act rather than a fixed commitment.

The Sustainability Balancing Act



This theme emphasizes that sustainability is experienced not as a rigid set of actions but as a process of negotiation between ideals and constraints, where personal intentions intersect with external limitations.

Emotional Ambivalence in Sustainable Living

A prominent dimension of participants’ narratives was the emotional complexity surrounding sustainable consumption. While individuals expressed satisfaction and pride when engaging in sustainable practices, they also admitted to feelings of guilt, frustration, and inadequacy when unable to maintain them consistently. For example:

“When I refuse plastic bags, I feel proud of myself. But whenever I forget my reusable bag, I feel guilty, like I am betraying my own principles.” (Participant 7)

This emotional fluctuation underscores that sustainability is not simply a behavioral choice but a site of moral self-evaluation. The interplay of pride and guilt signifies that participants internalize sustainability as a personal moral standard, where minor lapses trigger self-criticism and

emotional discomfort. In this way, emotions serve as both motivators and barriers to consistent sustainable behavior.

This ambivalence highlights that sustainable living is not only a rational choice but also an emotionally charged experience shaped by inner conflict.

Sustainability as Part of Identity Construction

Several participants positioned sustainable living as integral to their sense of self and social identity. Adopting sustainable practices was narrated not merely as a lifestyle but as a form of self-definition. One participant reflected:

“Living sustainably is part of the person I want to be someone responsible, someone aware. It is about my identity, not just about habits.” (Participant 2)

This statement suggests that sustainability operates as a performative identity marker through which participants communicate values of responsibility and awareness to others. Their engagement in sustainable actions thus becomes both an inward affirmation of self and an outward expression of social belonging.

This theme suggests that sustainability becomes an avenue for self-expression and identity formation, offering young people a way to embody values of responsibility and awareness in their everyday lives.

The Role of Social Influence and Collective Norms

Participants highlighted that their sustainable practices were significantly shaped by social relationships and collective expectations. Friends, peers, and family often acted as motivators or barriers. As noted by one participant:

“When my friends bring reusable bottles, I feel encouraged to do the same. But if everyone around me uses disposable plastics, it is really hard to stay consistent.” (Participant 5)

This quote demonstrates the social embeddedness of sustainability practices, showing that individual efforts are deeply intertwined with communal behavior. Social reinforcement validates sustainable choices, whereas social apathy discourages them. Participants’ actions thus mirror the collective moral climate, emphasizing the importance of social modeling in shaping environmental consciousness.

This finding indicates that sustainable lifestyles are relational, influenced by the behaviors of significant others, and often reinforced by social approval or undermined by peer conformity.

Thematic Summary Table

Theme	Essence of Experience	Illustrative Quote
Sustainability as a Negotiated Practice	Balancing values with practical and financial limitations	“I feel I am forced to choose between living sustainably and managing my budget.”
Emotional Ambivalence	Mixture of pride, guilt, and frustration	“I feel proud when I refuse plastic bags, but guilty when I fail.”
Identity Construction	Sustainability as part of self-definition	“Living sustainably is part of the person I want to be.”
Social Influence	Practices shaped by peers and collective expectations	“When my friends bring reusable bottles, I feel encouraged.”

The results show that young people’s engagement with sustainable lifestyles is multifaceted, encompassing negotiation between values and constraints, emotional ambivalence, identity formation, and the influence of collective norms. By linking participants’ words to broader interpretative

insights, this section highlights how sustainability emerges as both a personal struggle and a socially mediated experience — a dynamic process through which young people continually make sense of their ethical commitments in everyday contexts. These themes collectively demonstrate that sustainability is not a static or uniform practice but a dynamic, relational, and meaning-laden phenomenon embedded within the lived experiences of youth.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that young adults experience sustainable living as a negotiated and emotionally complex practice shaped by identity and social influence. These findings respond directly to the central research question by uncovering how sustainability is lived, interpreted, and given meaning in everyday contexts.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The results demonstrate that sustainability among young people cannot be reduced to behavioral patterns or policy-driven frameworks but must be understood as a deeply personal phenomenon (Haxhija & Geliş, 2025). The lived experiences of participants highlight sustainability as a process of constant negotiation between values and structural constraints, an endeavor that evokes pride, guilt, and frustration, and a marker of identity embedded in social relations (Shah et al., 2025). By foregrounding these narratives, the study provides a nuanced understanding of sustainability that is both psychological and relational, directly addressing the knowledge gap identified in the introduction (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). This contribution underscores that the essence of sustainable practices lies not only in observable behaviors but in the subjective meanings that individuals assign to them.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theories

These findings resonate with prior research that acknowledges the role of values and social influence in sustainable consumption, yet they extend this understanding by emphasizing the emotional and identity-driven dimensions often overlooked in survey-based studies (Zhang & Wu, 2025). The ambivalence reported by participants echoes (Dinika, 2025) observations on emotional barriers, while the identity-oriented narratives align with (Bonello et al., 2025) exploration of youth sustainability in Southeast Asia. However, this study contributes further by integrating these elements into a holistic interpretation that situates sustainability as both a lived negotiation and a form of self-expression (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). In line with interpretative phenomenology, the findings highlight how participants' experiences both confirm and enrich theoretical perspectives on sustainability, offering a more profound account of how young people embody ecological responsibility in their lives.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry both scientific and practical implications for understanding sustainable living among young adults. From a social perspective, the narratives illustrate how sustainability is not only a behavioral choice but a form of identity construction and emotional negotiation shaped by cultural and peer contexts (Vellinga-Dings et al., 2025). This insight suggests that sustainability initiatives aimed at youth should move beyond providing information or economic incentives and instead address the relational and emotional dimensions that influence their practices (Jones et al., 2025). At a broader level, the study highlights the importance of fostering supportive social environments where sustainable behaviors are validated, thereby encouraging young people to sustain these practices in meaningful and consistent ways.

Limitations of the Study

As with all phenomenological research, the findings are deeply contextualized within the lived experiences of the participants and should not be interpreted as universally generalizable. The relatively small number of participants, while sufficient for phenomenological depth, may not capture the full diversity of youth experiences across different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds (Kim et al., 2025). Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of selective

recall or social desirability bias (Setiyawati et al., 2025). These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but rather point to the importance of interpreting them as situated insights that contribute to a growing body of qualitative research on sustainability.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand on these findings by examining how experiences of sustainable living differ across cultural, geographic, or generational contexts, thereby enriching the comparative understanding of sustainability as a lived phenomenon. Longitudinal studies may also reveal how young people's interpretations and practices evolve over time, particularly as they transition through different life stages (Crockett et al., 2025). Moreover, integrating phenomenological approaches with complementary qualitative methods such as narrative analysis or ethnography could provide even deeper insights into the complexity of sustainable practices. Such research would not only extend the theoretical contributions of this study but also inform practical interventions that resonate with the subjective realities of those engaged in sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how young adults experience sustainable living as a subjective and interpretive phenomenon within their daily consumption practices. The findings revealed that sustainability is lived as a process of negotiation between values and constraints, marked by emotional ambivalence, identity construction, and the influence of social norms. By highlighting these interrelated dimensions, the research moves beyond behavioral descriptions to illuminate how sustainability is personally and socially constructed. Rather than reiterating existing knowledge, the results underscore the importance of designing sustainability initiatives that address both the emotional and contextual barriers young people face. For instance, educational programs and policy campaigns could focus on cultivating emotional resilience, affordability awareness, and peer-driven motivation.

Practically, these insights can guide universities, community organizations, and environmental policymakers to create supportive ecosystems that make sustainable behaviors more accessible, rewarding, and socially reinforced. By applying an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study provides a richer understanding of the psychological, relational, and cultural dimensions of sustainable practices. Future research should extend this inquiry across diverse cultural contexts and explore longitudinal dynamics to understand how sustainability meanings evolve over time and across life stages.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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