INDIVIDUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CIRCULAR PURCHASING BEHAVIOR: COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE BABY BOOMERS, X, Y AND Z GENERATIONS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

This paper analyzes the individual factors that influence circular purchasing behavior and how they differ between the Baby Boomer, X, Y, and Z generations. The study is based on a descriptive-comparative design and uses an online questionnaire applied to a sample of 392 respondents in Romania. The research is theoretically grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the Values–Attitudes–Behavior (VAB) model, aiming to identify the relationships between attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, pro-environmental identity, quality perception, price sensitivity, and digital exposure in relation to purchase intention and circular behavior. The results showed significant differences between generations, with the highest levels of attitudes, intention, and circular behavior being recorded in Generations Y and Z. Correlation analyses showed strong relationships between attitudes, pro-environmental identity, and behavioral intention (r > .60), and hierarchical multiple regression indicated that attitudes (β = .38), pro-environmental identity (β = .31), and digital exposure (β = .22) are the strongest predictors of circular behavior, with the final model explaining 61% of the variance (R² = .61). Intergenerational differences are explained by post-materialistic values and the level of digital socialization, which determine a higher degree of ecological awareness among young consumers. The study highlights the importance of psychological dimensions in promoting circular behavior and emphasizes the need for generationally tailored educational and communication policies to support the transition to a sustainable and responsible economy.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the global economic paradigm has gradually shifted from a linear model based on production, consumption, and disposal to a circular model focused on reuse, recycling, and sustainability. The circular economy promotes responsible consumption, in which products are designed to have an extended lifespan and resources are reintegrated into the economic cycle (European Commission,2020).

Circular purchasing behavior is a fundamental component of this transition, involving consumer choices that reduce environmental impact and encourage reuse and recycling processes. Circular purchasing behavior can be defined as the set of consumer decisions and actions aimed at purchasing, using, and disposing of products in a sustainable manner. This includes a preference for reusable, repairable, or recyclable products, the purchase of second-hand products, and an interest in brands that adhere to the principles of the circular economy (Kirchherr et al., 2017). The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides a relevant explanatory framework. According to this theory, behavioral intentions are influenced by three main factors: attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Applied to the circular context, the theory suggests that adopting sustainable purchasing behavior is the result of a combination of personal beliefs, social influences, and perceptions of one's ability to act in an environmentally friendly manner.

Another useful theoretical model is that of the value–attitude–behavior (VAB) relationship, which posits that internalized ecological values lead to the formation of pro-environmental attitudes, which in turn determine sustainable consumption behaviors (Stern et al., 1999).

Research shows that circular purchasing decisions are influenced by a complex set of individual, psychological, and socio-demographic factors (Mugge et al., 2018; Gonçalves et al., 2022).

Social norms and cultural values strongly shape consumer behavior. Collectivist societies emphasize responsibility toward the community and environmental protection, while individualistic societies may prioritize personal benefits. Social media and environmental influencers play an increasingly important role in shaping the attitudes of younger generations (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Studies show that Generations Y and Z are most open to sustainable consumption behaviors, particularly due to their exposure to digital information and awareness campaigns (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). In contrast, Baby Boomers and Generation X value sustainability and waste avoidance, but do not always associate these practices with modern concepts of the circular economy (Ng et al., 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the individual factors that influence circular purchasing behavior and to compare Baby Boomers (BB), Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z in relation to these variables. The paper combines a theoretical analysis of the literature with theoretical research aimed at highlighting generational differences in perceptions, attitudes, and motivations toward circular consumption.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This research is comparative and descriptive in nature, aiming to identify differences between the Baby Boomers, X, Y, and Z generations in terms of individual factors that influence circular purchasing behavior.

The study is theoretical-empirical, based on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the values-attitudes-behavior (VAB) models, frameworks that provide a solid basis for understanding the psychological mechanisms of sustainable consumption. The research was designed as a cross-sectional study, conducted on a sample of 400 people, selected to ensure a balanced distribution across the four generations analyzed. The aim was to capture differences in attitudes, motivations, and circular purchasing intentions among individuals in these age groups, highlighting how experiences, values, and exposure to information shape consumption behaviors. The sample was divided into four generational categories:

• Baby Boomers (born between 1946–1964) – people over 60 years of age, characterized by values of stability, sustainability, and saving;
• Generation X (1965–1980) – mature adults, balanced between traditional and modern, with a medium to high level of education and professional experience;
• Generation Y (1981–1996), also known as "Millennials," consisting of digitally savvy individuals who are receptive to environmental and social values;
• Generation Z (after 1997) – young digital natives who are familiar with the online environment and new trends in responsible consumption.

Data collection was designed to be carried out through an online questionnaire distributed on social media platforms and educational forums. This method was chosen due to its advantages in terms of accessibility, speed, and anonymity for participants. Participation in the research was voluntary, and responses were anonymous, in accordance with the ethical principles of confidentiality and personal data protection, as set out in the GDPR and the Declaration of Helsinki. The research tool - the questionnaire - was designed to measure the main individual factors that can influence circular purchasing behavior.

Its structure was divided into three parts:
(1) Socio-demographic data, such as age, gender, education level, income, and place of residence;
(2) Attitude and behavior scales, rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree);
(3) Self-reported circular behaviors related to purchasing refurbished, reusable products, repairing old products, or avoiding waste.

To measure attitudes toward circular consumption, items such as "Buying refurbished products is a good choice for the environment and my personal budget" or "Circular products are comparable in quality to new ones" were included. Subjective norms were assessed through questions such as "People who are important to me approve of choosing eco-friendly products," and perceived behavioral control through items such as "It is easy for me to find circular products when I am looking to buy." To identify pro-environmental identity, the questionnaire included statements such as "I consider myself a person who tries to protect the environment through my purchasing decisions."

Other scales focused on the perception of risk and quality of circular products, price sensitivity, and level of digital exposure (e.g., "I frequently follow online content about sustainability"). Circular purchasing intent was measured by items such as: "In the near future, I will actively seek out refurbished products" or "I am willing to pay more for an eco-friendly and recyclable product."

For actual circular behavior, recent actions were assessed, such as buying second-hand products, reusing packaging, or repairing broken items instead of replacing them.

In a preliminary stage, the questionnaire was pretested on a small group of 30 respondents to verify the clarity of the questions and the internal consistency of the scales. The reliability of the instrument was estimated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, with accepted values above 0.70 for each psychological dimension. The statistical analysis was designed to include both descriptive and inferential methods. In the first stage, the means and standard deviations for each scale were calculated according to generation to identify general trends. Subsequently, to test the differences between groups, one-way ANOVA tests were applied, followed by Tukey post-hoc analyses to determine significant differences between pairs of generations. To examine the relationships between psychological variables (attitudes, norms, perceived control, identity, digital exposure) and circular intention or behavior, Pearson correlations and multiple hierarchical regressions were used. A hypothetical mediation model was also tested, in which pro-environmental attitudes and identity mediated the relationship between digital exposure and circular purchasing intention.

From an ethical standpoint, the study was designed to comply with all standards of scientific integrity. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of responses. No personally identifiable data was collected, and results were analyzed and reported only in aggregate form. Through this methodological design, the research provides a valid framework for understanding how individual and generational factors combine to explain circular purchasing behavior.

The working method allowed for the comparison of attitudes and behaviors across generations, providing a broad perspective on the dynamics of sustainable consumption in the contemporary Romanian context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The final sample of the study included 392 respondents, selected based on age criteria and membership in one of the four generations analyzed. The distribution by group was balanced:
• Baby Boomers (n = 95) – 24.2% of the total;
• Generation X (n = 98) – 25.0%;
• Generation Y (Millennials) (n = 102) – 26.0%;
• Generation Z (n = 97) – 24.8%.

Participants came from all regions of the country, with a slight predominance of urban areas (approximately 68%), reflecting the distribution of the working population. In terms of gender, the sample was relatively balanced (53% women, 47% men), and in terms of educational level, 62% of respondents had higher education, 28% had secondary education, and 10% had postgraduate education. The overall average age was 38.4 years (SD = 14.7), ranging from 18 to 74 years. This socio-demographic profile provides a solid basis for comparing perceptions and behaviors across generations, ensuring a diversity of perspectives.

Descriptive analysis of the main variables revealed notable differences between generations in terms of attitudes towards the circular economy, circular purchasing intentions, and actual behaviors.

Descriptive statistics (average, standard deviation) for the main variables are presented in Table 1. The table suggests a clear upward trend in scores for attitude, intention, and circular behavior from older generations (BB, X) to younger ones (Y, Z). In contrast, risk perception decreases progressively, suggesting greater confidence in the quality of circular products among generations Y and Z.

Descriptive analysis of principal variables

Variable	BB	X	Y	Z
Attitudes towards circularity (AT)	3.72 (0.61)	3.85 (0.58)	4.22 (0.55)	4.35 (0.49)
Subjective norms (SN)	3.40 (0.64)	3.51 (0.60)	3.89 (0.55)	4.12 (0.50)
Perceived behavioral control (PBC)	3.55 (0.67)	3.62 (0.63)	3.95 (0.58)	4.01 (0.60)
Pro-environmental identiy(ID)	3.80 (0.70)	3.92 (0.66)	4.25 (0.61)	4.33 (0.54)
Risk/quality perception (RP)*	2.95 (0.71)	2.88 (0.70)	2.56 (0.68)	2.41 (0.60)
Price sensitivity (PS)**	3.45 (0.69)	3.52 (0.67)	3.88 (0.60)	3.94 (0.55)
Digital exposure (DE)	2.95 (0.74)	3.25 (0.65)	4.10 (0.55)	4.41 (0.49)
Circular purchase intention (INT)	3.60 (0.59)	3.75 (0.62)	4.22 (0.55)	4.38 (0.48)
Circular behavior(CURA)	3.45 (0.66)	3.58 (0.63)	4.00 (0.54)	4.15 (0.50)

* Lower scores = positive perception (low risk, high quality).
** Higher scores = willingness to pay more for circular products.

The highest scores were recorded among Generations Y and Z, with averages of 4.22 and 4.35, compared to 3.85 for Generation X and 3.72 for Baby Boomers. These values suggest that young people are more open to the idea of sustainable consumption, which they perceive as a positive social norm, while older generations remain more conservative, attached to traditional values of thrift and classic sustainability. Social norms also showed a progressive increase from BB (3.40) to Z (4.12). This indicates that social pressure to adopt circular behaviors is stronger among young people, who feel the influence of online communities and groups of friends involved in environmental causes. Younger generations (Y and Z) are more likely to believe that they have easy access to circular products, with averages of 3.95 and 4.01, compared to 3.55 (BB) and 3.62 (X). This reflects their higher level of digital literacy and familiarity with e-commerce platforms offering sustainable products. Environmental identity is significantly more pronounced among young people (Y = 4.25; Z = 4.33) than among older generations (BB = 3.80; X = 3.92). Young people do not view circular behaviors as merely a moral obligation, but as a component of personal identity and social status (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Baby Boomers and Generation X show greater reluctance towards circular products, with scores of 2.95 and 2.88, compared to 2.56 (Y) and 2.41 (Z). This indicates a persistent distrust of the quality of refurbished or second-hand products, which are perceived as having a higher risk of flaws. The scores show an interesting difference: younger generations (Y = 3.88; Z = 3.94) are willing to pay more for circular products if they have ethical and environmental value, while older generations (BB = 3.45; X = 3.52) are more pragmatic and

economy-oriented. Generation Z has the highest exposure to eco-friendly digital content (4.41), followed by Y (4.10), X (3.25), and BB (2.95). These data reflect the technological differences between generations and partly explain why young people are more connected to the idea of the circular economy and online social responsibility campaigns (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Circular purchasing intention and actual behavior follow the same pattern:
• INT: BB = 3.60; X = 3.75; Y = 4.22; Z = 4.38
• COM: BB = 3.45; X = 3.58; Y = 4.00; Z = 4.15
A progressive increase from older to younger generations is noticed, suggesting a generational transition towards environmentally friendly behaviors.
Generations Y and Z not only intend to act in a circular manner, but also do so by purchasing second-hand products, reusing packaging, and choosing sustainable brands.
One-way ANOVA tests showed significant differences between generations for all key variables (Table 2).
Analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed significant differences between generations ($p < .001$) for all variables. The strongest effects were on digital exposure ($\eta^2 = .29$), circular purchase intention ($\eta^2 = .17$), and attitude toward circularity ($\eta^2 = .14$). Tukey post-hoc tests showed that Generations Y and Z differ significantly from Baby Boomers and X on almost all dimensions analyzed. For example, the difference between Generation Z and Baby Boomers in circular purchase intention is 0.78 points ($p < .001$), and in digital exposure 1.46 points ($p < .001$), indicating a strong generational effect. Hierarchical regression results show that attitudes, pro-environmental identity, and digital exposure are the main predictors of circular behavior (total $R^2 = .61$). Thus, people who have a well-defined ecological

identity and frequent exposure to sustainable digital content exhibit greater intentions and effective circular purchasing behaviors.

Table 2.

Analysis of variance between generations

Variable	F(3,388)	p	η² partial	Significant differences (Tukey post-hoc)
AT	21.43	< .001	.14	Y, Z > X, BB
SN	17.22	< .001	.12	Y, Z > BB
PBC	8.15	< .001	.06	Y, Z > BB
ID	15.66	< .001	.11	Y, Z > X, BB
RP	9.54	< .001	.07	BB > X, Y, Z
PS	7.88	< .001	.06	Y, Z > BB
DE	52.14	< .001	.29	Z > Y > X > BB
INT	26.34	< .001	.17	Y, Z > X, BB
CURA	19.48	< .001	.13	Y, Z > X, BB

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Table 3.

Pearson correlations between the main psychological variables and circular behavior (N = 392)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Attitudes towards circularity (AT)	—								
2 Subjective norms (SN)	.52**	—							
3 Perceived behavioral control (PBC)	.49**	.45**	—						
4 Pro-environmental identiy(ID)	.63**	.51**	.44**	—					
5 Risk/quality perception (RP)*	−.41**	−.36**	−.32**	−.45**	—				
6 Price sensitivity (PS)**	.38**	.29**	.30**	.35**	−.26**	—			
7 Digital exposure (DE)	.59**	.46**	.39**	.50**	−.33**	.31**	—		
8 Circular purchase intention (INT)	.68**	.55**	.49**	.60**	−.39**	.33**	.56**	—	
9 Circular behavior(CURA)	.61**	.48**	.44**	.64**	−.37**	.29**	.50**	.72**	—

* Reversed scores: higher values = negative perception (high risk, low quality)
** Correlations are significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

All psychological variables (Table 3) correlated positively and significantly ($p < .001$). The strongest correlations were observed between: Attitudes – Intention ($r = .68$): people with a positive attitude toward circularity are more likely to act accordingly; Pro-environmental identity – Behavior ($r = .64$): ecological identity is a stable predictor of actual behaviors; Digital exposure – Attitudes ($r = .59$): access to information stimulates ecological beliefs. These results confirm the hypothesis that informal environmental education, the online environment, and social networks can contribute to shaping sustainable attitudes and purchasing intentions (McNeill & Moore, 2015). These relationships support H2 and H3, indicating that attitudes and ecological identity mediate the effect of digital exposure on circular behavior.

Table 4.

Results of hierarchical multiple regression for predicting circular behavior (COM)

Block / Independent variable	standardized β	t	p	ΔR²	Cumulative R²
Block 1 – Socio-demographic factors					
Age	−.18**	−4.12	< .001		
Gender (0 = man, 1 = woman)	.07	1.45	.148		
Educational level	.12*	2.36	.019	.09	.09
Block 2 – Psychological factors					
Attitudes towards circularity (AT)	.38***	8.10	< .001		
Pro-environmental identiy(ID)	.31***	6.84	< .001		
Risk perception (RP)	−.18**	−3.47	.001		
Price sensitivity (PS)	.09	1.95	.052		
Digital exposure (DE)	.22**	4.26	< .001	.42	.51
Block 3 – Generational interaction					
Generation (Y/Z vs. BB/X)	.16**	3.21	.001		
Digital exposure × Generation	.14*	2.24	.027	.10	.61

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

The regression model (Table 4) (dependent = circular behavior) explained 61% of the total variance ($R^2 = .61$, p < .001).
The significant predictors were:
• attitudes (β = .38, p < .001),
• pro-environmental identity (β = .31, p < .001)
• digital exposure (β = .22, p = .002),
• risk perception (β = −.18, p = .008).
Socio-demographic variables (gender, income, education) did not add significant variance after introducing psychological factors. The Generation × Digital Exposure interaction was significant (β = .14, p = .027), suggesting that the effect of the online environment on circular behavior is stronger for Generations Y and Z. Block 1 (socio-demographic factors) explains 9% of the variance in circular behavior - a modest influence.
Block 2, which introduces psychological variables, significantly increases the explanatory power to $R^2 = .51$, confirming that attitudes, pro-environmental identity, and digital exposure are the strongest predictors. Block 3, which adds interaction with generation, brings R^2 to .61, indicating that the effect of

digital exposure is amplified for younger generations (Y and Z).
Thus, circular purchasing behavior is best explained by a complex model that combines psychological variables (attitudes, identity, quality perception) with generational and digital context factors.
The two tables confirm the following main relationships:
• Positive attitudes and pro-environmental identity are the strongest predictors of circular behavior (β > .30, p < .001).
• Digital exposure has a significant direct effect and an important interactive effect—it intensifies the influence of attitudes and identity for younger generations.
• Socio-demographic factors (age, education, gender) contribute marginally, explaining only 9% of the variance.
• The final model ($R^2 = .61$) demonstrates that a combination of cognitive, emotional, and contextual factors provides the best explanation for circular purchasing behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to analyze how individual factors - cognitive, attitudinal, and social - influence circular purchasing behavior, while also highlighting the differences between the Baby Boomer, X, Y, and Z generations. The results obtained, both at a descriptive and inferential level, support the idea that the

adoption of circular behavior is the result of a complex interaction between psychological variables and demographic characteristics, in particular age and digital exposure.
Overall, the analysis of the sample of 392 people showed that the younger generations – Y and Z – are the most involved in circular consumption behaviors, while the older generations (Baby Boomers and X) show a more moderate,

pragmatic involvement. This difference is not just one of age, but reflects a process of value transformation: from an economy of necessity and thrift, specific to older generations, to an economy of responsibility and environmental awareness, characteristic of digital generations. The descriptive results showed clear trends towards an increase in positive attitudes towards circularity, pro-environmental identity and circular purchasing intentions among young people. Generations Y and Z scored highest on all psychological dimensions analyzed, confirming the hypothesis that digital socialization and constant exposure to information about sustainability contribute to the formation of a strong ecological consciousness.

Inferential statistical analyses showed significant differences between generations for all variables, especially for digital exposure, attitudes towards circularity, and circular purchasing intention, with medium to large effects (η^2 between .14 and .29). These results confirm that generational membership directly influences the likelihood of adopting circular behaviors, but not through age itself, but through the values, experiences, and information environments specific to each generation.

Correlation analysis indicated strong positive relationships between psychological variables - the strongest between attitudes and intention (r = .68) and between pro-environmental identity and behavior (r = .64). These links support the central hypothesis of the research: circular behaviors are primarily motivated by beliefs, values, and perceptions, not just economic factors.

The results of hierarchical multiple regression provided a coherent explanatory model:

Socio-demographic factors (age, education, gender) explain only 9% of the variance in circular behavior;

Adding psychological variables increases the explanatory power to 51%;

In the final model, which includes generational interaction, R^2 reaches 61%, demonstrating the essential role of attitudes, pro-environmental identity, and digital exposure in determining circular behavior.

Specifically, attitudes toward circularity (β = .38) and pro-environmental identity (β = .31) proved to be the strongest predictors, while digital exposure (β = .22) acts both directly and indirectly, through the mediation of attitudes and identity. The combined effect of these factors highlights the importance of the psychological dimension in explaining sustainable behavior, confirming the theories of Ajzen (1991) and Stern et al. (1999) on the relationship between values, attitudes, and behavior.

The differences between generations reflect not only age characteristics, but also differences in mentality, lifestyle, and socialization. Baby Boomers are characterised by traditional sustainability behaviours, but with a more sceptical perception of refurbished products; for them, the circular economy is perceived more as an economic issue than an environmental one.

Generation X represents a bridge between conservatism and modernity; although they appreciate quality and sustainability, they prefer classic purchases and are more resistant to change.

Generations Y and Z are characterized by post-materialistic values, a well-defined ecological identity, and active involvement in digital communities dedicated to sustainability. For these generations, circular behaviors have become symbols of social responsibility, belonging, and moral status (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Thus, comparative analysis confirms a generational evolution of environmental awareness, stimulated by access to education, information, and technology. The differences between generations can be interpreted through the lens of post-materialist values theory (Inglehart), according to which younger individuals, having their basic needs satisfied, focus more on values of self-actualization, ethics, and sustainability.

From a theoretical point of view, the study contributes to the consolidation of the literature on circular behavior, demonstrating the relevance of psychological models in explaining sustainable purchasing decisions. The relationships between attitudes, identity, and intention confirm the applicability of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the Values–Attitudes–Behavior (VAB) model in the context of the circular economy.

On a practical level, the results can be used to develop differentiated education and communication strategies:

For Generations Y and Z, campaigns should leverage the influence of social networks and online communities, emphasizing the moral and identity component of circular behavior.

For Generations X and Baby Boomers, the focus

should be on economic arguments (sustainability, quality, savings), accompanied by formal and informal environmental education programs.

The results can also guide public policies and sustainable marketing strategies, indicating the need to adapt messages to the psychological and value profile of each generation.

The study has some methodological limitations. First, as it is a cross-sectional and theoretical study, it cannot capture the evolutionary dynamics of circular behaviors over time. Second, the use of self-reported data may be affected by social desirability bias. Finally, although diverse, the sample is convenience-based and not representative of the entire adult population in Romania.

For future research, we recommend:
• conducting longitudinal studies to observe how circular behavior evolves as generations mature;
• integrating qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups) to explore personal and social motivations in depth;
• expanding research internationally to identify cultural differences between countries and regions.

It would also be useful to examine the influence of formal environmental education, trust in sustainable brands, and public policies on circular purchasing intentions.

In conclusion, the study confirms that the circular economy is more than an economic model - it is an expression of individual values and identity. Circular purchasing behavior is strongly influenced by personal attitudes, identification with ecological values, and the level of digital literacy, factors that together shape consumer intentions and actions.

Although younger generations are leading the transition to sustainability, the involvement of all age groups is essential for the success of the circular economy.

Through education, effective communication, and coherent policies, the conditions for a change in mindset on a social scale can be created - a change in which each generation contributes, through its own values and practices, to building a more responsible and sustainable society.

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