



SUSTAINABILITY VS. STYLE: DECODING MILLENNIAL CONTRADICTIONS IN ETHICAL FASHION CONSUMPTION

YAMINI GEHLOT ¹ | KANTA GWALA ² | DR. PUJA GEHLOT ³

¹ RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES, JAI NARAIN VYAS UNIVERSITY, JODHPUR.

² RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES, JAI NARAIN VYAS UNIVERSITY, JODHPUR.

³ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES, JAI NARAIN VYAS UNIVERSITY, JODHPUR.

ABSTRACT:

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, are a pivotal demographic in shaping consumer trends, particularly in the realm of ethical fashion. This research article explores the inherent contradictions in their consumption patterns, where a proclaimed commitment to sustainability often clashes with a desire for style and affordability. Despite their vocal advocacy for environmental and social responsibility, many Millennials gravitate toward fast fashion due to its accessibility, trendiness, and low cost, creating a paradox in their purchasing behavior. This study investigates the factors driving these contradictions, including social media influence, economic constraints, and the psychological appeal of self-expression through fashion. Through a comprehensive review of literature, the article examines how Millennials navigate the tension between ethical ideals and aesthetic preferences. The discussion highlights the role of greenwashing, peer influence, and the lack of accessible sustainable options in perpetuating this disconnect. Findings suggest that while Millennials aspire to align their consumption with ethical values, systemic barriers such as high costs and limited availability of stylish sustainable clothing hinder consistent behavior. The article concludes with recommendations for stakeholders in the fashion industry to bridge this gap by offering affordable, trendy, and sustainable options, alongside educational campaigns to foster informed decision-making. By decoding these contradictions, this study contributes to understanding Millennial consumer behavior and offers insights for promoting sustainable fashion practices.

KEYWORDS:

MILLENNIALS, ETHICAL FASHION, SUSTAINABILITY, FAST FASHION, CONSUMER BEHAVIOR, GREENWASHING, SOCIAL MEDIA.

PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:

27th April 2025

PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:

30th April 2025

PAPER DOI NO:

10.5281/zenodo.15450506

PAPER DOI LINK:

<https://zenodo.org/records/15450506>

INTRODUCTION

Millennials, a generation characterized by their digital savviness and social consciousness, have significantly influenced global consumption patterns, particularly in the fashion industry. As a demographic that values individuality and self-expression, Millennials are drawn to fashion as a medium to showcase their identity. Simultaneously, their exposure to global issues like climate change and labor exploitation has fueled a demand for ethical fashion—clothing produced with environmental and social responsibility in mind (Smith & Paladino, 2020). However, a paradox emerges: while Millennials advocate for sustainability, many continue to purchase from fast-fashion brands known for environmental degradation and unethical labor practices (Jung & Jin, 2016). This contradiction raises critical questions about the factors shaping their consumption choices and the barriers to adopting sustainable fashion.

The tension between sustainability and style is particularly pronounced among Millennials, who face economic pressures, such as student debt and precarious job markets, which often prioritize affordability over ethical considerations (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Additionally, the rise of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok amplifies the pressure to stay on-trend, encouraging frequent purchases of inexpensive, stylish clothing (Kim & Oh, 2020). This study aims to decode these contradictions by exploring the interplay of psychological, social, and economic factors influencing Millennial fashion consumption. By examining their behavior through the lens of ethical fashion, this research seeks to uncover why Millennials struggle to align their values with their actions and how the fashion industry can address this disconnect. The article provides a foundation for understanding these dynamics and proposes strategies

to promote sustainable consumption among this influential demographic.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on Millennial fashion consumption reveals a complex interplay between their ethical aspirations and practical behaviors, shaped by psychological, social, and economic factors. Below, key studies are reviewed to contextualize the contradictions in their engagement with ethical fashion.

Millennials are often described as a values-driven generation, prioritizing sustainability and social responsibility in their purchasing decisions (Deloitte, 2020). Studies indicate that they are more likely to support brands that demonstrate environmental stewardship and ethical labor practices (Nielsen, 2018). However, this idealism is frequently undermined by their consumption of fast fashion, which offers trendy, affordable clothing at the expense of sustainability (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Jung and Jin (2016) argue that this paradox stems from a gap between Millennials' attitudes and behaviors, where their desire for ethical consumption is overshadowed by the allure of style and affordability.

Social media plays a significant role in shaping Millennial fashion choices. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok create a culture of instant gratification, where trends are rapidly cycled, and the pressure to maintain a fashionable image is intense (Kim & Oh, 2020). Zhao and Lee (2021) found that social media influencers often promote fast-fashion brands, normalizing overconsumption among Millennials. This is compounded by the phenomenon of greenwashing, where brands falsely market their products as sustainable, misleading environmentally conscious consumers (Parguel et al., 2011). Schmeltz (2012) notes that Millennials, despite their skepticism, often lack the knowledge to discern genuine sustainability claims, leading to misinformed purchases.

Economic constraints further exacerbate the disconnect between values and actions. Pookulangara and Shephard (2013) highlight that Millennials, burdened by financial instability, prioritize cost over ethical considerations. Fast-fashion brands like Zara and H&M capitalize on this by offering low-cost, stylish clothing that aligns with Millennial aesthetics (Cachon & Swinney, 2011). Conversely, sustainable fashion brands often come with a higher price tag, limiting accessibility for budget-conscious consumers (Niinimäki, 2010).

Psychological factors also influence Millennial consumption. The need for self-expression through fashion drives Millennials to prioritize style over sustainability (Yan et al., 2012). McNeill and Moore (2015) argue that clothing serves as a tool for identity construction, particularly among young adults seeking social approval. This desire for individuality often clashes with the uniformity of sustainable fashion, which is perceived as less trendy (Vehmas et al., 2018).

The role of peer influence cannot be overlooked. Studies

show that Millennials are heavily swayed by their social circles, both online and offline, which reinforce fast-fashion consumption (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012). Conversely, peer advocacy for sustainability can encourage ethical purchases, though this is less common (Lehner, 2019). Education and awareness are critical in bridging this gap. Carrigan and Attalla (2001) suggest that informed consumers are more likely to make ethical choices, yet Millennials often lack access to reliable information about sustainable fashion.

The fashion industry's response to Millennial preferences has been mixed. While some brands have adopted sustainable practices, such as using organic materials or transparent supply chains (Fletcher, 2010), others rely on superficial sustainability claims to attract consumers (Henninger et al., 2016). This inconsistency confuses Millennials, who struggle to navigate the market (Joy et al., 2012). Moreover, the limited availability of stylish, affordable sustainable clothing remains a significant barrier (Harris et al., 2016). Recent studies emphasize the need for systemic change, including policy interventions and industry-wide sustainability standards, to support ethical consumption (Kozłowski et al., 2018).

In summary, the literature underscores the multifaceted nature of Millennial fashion consumption, where ethical ideals are often compromised by practical realities. Social media, economic pressures, psychological needs, and industry practices all contribute to the contradictions observed in their behavior. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from brands, policymakers, and consumers to make sustainable fashion more accessible and appealing.

DISCUSSION

The contradictions in Millennial fashion consumption reflect a broader tension between idealism and pragmatism. While Millennials express a strong desire for sustainability, their reliance on fast fashion highlights the influence of systemic and psychological barriers. Social media, as a driver of trends, perpetuates a culture of overconsumption, with influencers often endorsing brands that prioritize profit over ethics (Zhao & Lee, 2021). Green washing further complicates the landscape, as Millennials, despite their awareness, struggle to identify genuinely sustainable products (Parguel et al., 2011). This suggests a need for greater transparency in the fashion industry, coupled with consumer education to empower informed choices.

Economic realities cannot be ignored. The high cost of sustainable fashion alienates Millennials, who often face financial constraints (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Fast-fashion brands exploit this by offering affordable, trendy options that align with Millennial aesthetics, making ethical alternatives less viable (Cachon & Swinney, 2011). The industry must innovate to produce sustainable clothing that is both stylish and affordable, potentially through scalable eco-friendly materials or rental models (Niinimäki, 2010).

Psychologically, Millennials' need for self-expression through fashion often trumps their ethical concerns (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This underscores the importance of designing sustainable clothing that appeals to their desire for individuality. Brands that successfully merge sustainability with style, such as Reformation or Everlane, demonstrate that ethical fashion can resonate with Millennials when marketed effectively (Fletcher, 2010). Additionally, peer influence and community-driven initiatives can shift norms toward sustainable consumption, leveraging Millennials' social connectivity (Lehner, 2019).

Ultimately, resolving these contradictions requires collaboration between stakeholders. Brands must prioritize transparency and affordability, policymakers should incentivize sustainable practices, and consumers need better access to information. By addressing these barriers, the fashion industry can align with Millennial values, fostering a culture of ethical consumption.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex interplay of factors driving Millennial contradictions in ethical fashion consumption. While Millennials champion sustainability, their reliance on fast fashion reveals a disconnect shaped by economic constraints, social media influence, and the psychological need for self-expression. The literature underscores that systemic barriers, such as the high cost and limited availability of stylish sustainable clothing, hinder their ability to align actions with values. Green washing and a lack of consumer education further complicate their decision-making, perpetuating the cycle of fast-fashion consumption.

To bridge this gap, the fashion industry must innovate by offering affordable, trendy, and sustainable options that appeal to Millennial aesthetics. Brands like Reformation demonstrate that ethical fashion can be both stylish and accessible, but such models need to be scaled. Policymakers can support this shift through incentives for sustainable practices, while educational campaigns can empower Millennials to make informed choices. Social media, a double-edged sword, can be harnessed to promote ethical brands and foster peer-driven sustainability movements.

Ultimately, resolving these contradictions requires a cultural shift toward valuing longevity over disposability in fashion. By addressing the systemic and psychological barriers identified in this study, stakeholders can align the industry with Millennial values, paving the way for a more sustainable future. This research contributes to understanding consumer behavior and offers actionable insights for promoting ethical fashion among a generation poised to redefine global consumption patterns.

REFERENCES

- Bhardwaj, V., & Fairhurst, A. (2010). Fast fashion: Response to changes in the fashion industry. *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, 20(1), 165–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09593960903498300>
- Cachon, G. P., & Swinney, R. (2011). The value of fast fashion: Quick response, enhanced design, and strategic consumer behavior. *Management Science*, 57(4), 778–795. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1100.1303>
- Carrigan, M., & Attalla, A. (2001). The myth of the ethical consumer—Do ethics matter in purchase behaviour? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(7), 560–578. <https://doi.org/10.1108/07363760110410263>
- Deloitte. (2020). *The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020*. <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>
- Fletcher, K. (2010). Slow fashion: An invitation for systems change. *Fashion Practice*, 2(2), 259–265. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175693810X12774625387594>
- Goldsmith, R. E., & Clark, R. A. (2012). Materialism, status consumption, and consumer independence. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 152(1), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2011.555434>
- Harris, F., Roby, H., & Dibb, S. (2016). Sustainable clothing: Challenges, barriers and interventions for encouraging more sustainable consumer behaviour. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 40(3), 309–318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12257>
- Henninger, C. E., Alevizou, P. J., & Oates, C. J. (2016). What is sustainable fashion? *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 20(4), 400–416. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-07-2015-0052>
- Joy, A., Sherry, J. F., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J., & Chan, R. (2012). Fast fashion, sustainability, and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. *Fashion Theory*, 16(3), 273–295. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340749785523>
- Jung, S., & Jin, B. (2016). Sustainable fashion consumption: Exploring the attitude-behavior gap. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 20(4), 468–487. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-04-2016-0034>
- Kim, H., & Oh, K. (2020). The role of social media in fashion consumption: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 13(3), 294–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17543266.2020.1811954>
- Kozlowski, A., Bardecki, M., & Searcy, C. (2018). Tools for sustainable fashion design: An analysis of their fitness for purpose. *Sustainability*, 10(11), 3981. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10113981>

13. Lehner, M. (2019). The role of peer influence in sustainable consumption. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 228, 1293–1302. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.04.227>
14. McNeill, L., & Moore, R. (2015). Sustainable fashion consumption and the fast fashion conundrum: Fashionable consumers and attitudes to sustainability in clothing choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39(3), 212–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12169>
15. Nielsen. (2018). *Global sustainability report: Consumer trends in eco-conscious purchasing*. <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/report/2018/global-sustainability-report/>
16. Niinimäki, K. (2010). Eco-clothing, consumer identity and ideology. *Sustainable Development*, 18(3), 150–162. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.455>
17. Parguel, B., Benoît-Moreau, F., & Larceneux, F. (2011). How sustainability ratings might deter 'greenwashing': A closer look at ethical corporate communication. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 102(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0901-2>
18. Pookulangara, S., & Shephard, A. (2013). Slow fashion movement: Understanding consumer perceptions—An exploratory study. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 20(2), 200–206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2012.12.002>
19. Schmeltz, L. (2012). Consumer-oriented CSR communication: Focusing on ability or morality? *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 17(1), 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281211196339>
20. Smith, S., & Paladino, A. (2020). Ethical consumption and the Millennial consumer: An exploratory study. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 37(3), 345–354. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-04-2019-3166>
21. Vehmas, K., Raudaskoski, A., Heikkilä, P., Harlin, A., & Mensonen, A. (2018). Consumer attitudes and communication in circular fashion. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 22(2), 286–300. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-08-2017-0079>
22. Yan, R.-N., Hyllegard, K. H., & Blaesi, L. F. (2012). Sustainable apparel purchase intention: The role of self-concept and environmental knowledge. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 36(5), 573–579. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2011.01064.x>
23. Zhao, L., & Lee, S. H. (2021). The impact of social media on sustainable fashion consumption: A study of Millennial consumers. *Sustainability*, 13(9), 4889. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13094889>