



Fashioning Sustainability: The Role of Attitude–Behaviour Gap in Millennial Consumer Choices

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Abstract

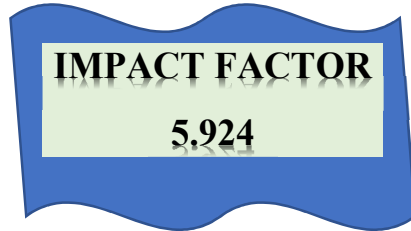
In an era where environmental concerns dominate global discourse, the fashion industry stands out as a significant contributor to pollution, waste, and resource depletion. Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, are a pivotal demographic in consumer markets, often expressing strong support for sustainability yet frequently failing to align their purchasing behaviours with these attitudes. This research article explores the attitude–behaviour gap in millennial consumer choices within sustainable fashion, investigating why positive environmental intentions do not always translate into eco-friendly purchases. Drawing on psychological frameworks like the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Value-Belief-Norm theory, the study examines barriers such as high costs, limited accessibility, scepticism toward green claims, and the allure of fast fashion trends. It also identifies drivers that could bridge this gap, including improved information quality, social media influence, and innovative models like clothing rentals or second-hand markets. Through a comprehensive literature review of 20 studies, consistent patterns emerge: millennials show high awareness of sustainability issues but are deterred by perceived inconveniences and economic constraints. For instance, qualitative analyses indicate that while many



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millennials prioritize ethical production, their purchasing habits often favour affordable, trendy items from mass retailers. Quantitative data further highlights that knowledge gaps and mistrust in branding widen the disconnect. The discussion interprets these insights, suggesting the gap is not only individual but systemic, influenced by industry practices and cultural norms. The article concludes that closing this gap requires multifaceted interventions, from policy changes to educational campaigns. Suggestions include empowering consumers through transparent labelling, leveraging digital platforms for awareness, and encouraging brands to prioritize durability over disposability. By addressing these elements, the fashion sector can foster genuine sustainable consumption among millennials, yielding significant environmental benefits. This work illuminates the complexities of consumer psychology and offers practical pathways for a greener future in fashion.

Keywords: Sustainability, Attitude–Behaviour Gap, Millennials, Sustainable Fashion, Consumer Choices, Environmental Awareness, Fast Fashion.

Introduction

Imagine a millennial scrolling through Instagram, liking posts about ocean plastic pollution and pledging to buy only eco-friendly clothes. A week later, they're at a mall, grabbing a cheap, trendy top from a fast-fashion retailer. This scenario captures the attitude–behaviour gap, where good intentions clash with real-world actions. In sustainable fashion, this gap is stark among millennials, a generation shaped by climate change awareness and social media activism but also tempted by affordable, disposable clothing. As the fashion industry generates 10% of global carbon emissions



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and massive water usage, understanding why millennials' actions don't match their values is critical for driving change.

Millennials, roughly 72 million strong in the U.S., hold significant purchasing power, projected to spend \$2.5 trillion annually by 2030. Surveys show 73% are willing to pay more for sustainable products, yet only 20–30% consistently choose eco-friendly fashion (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This discrepancy, rooted in psychological, economic, and social factors, aligns with the attitude–behaviour gap concept from social psychology, where external constraints or internal conflicts hinder action. In fashion, this appears as enthusiasm for sustainability tempered by budget constraints or trend-driven impulses. For instance, Henninger et al. (2016) note that high costs and limited availability deter sustainable purchases despite positive attitudes. Greenwashing—brands exaggerating eco-credentials—further fuels scepticism, complicating choices (Busalim et al., 2022). Social influences, including peer pressure and social media, can amplify sustainable choices or reinforce fast fashion conformity.

Millennials' economic realities, shaped by recessions and student debt, often prioritize affordability over ethics. The fashion industry's linear model—produce, use, discard—generates 92 million tons of textile waste yearly. If millennials, as trendsetters, can align their actions with values, they could drive a shift toward circular economies like upcycling. This article unpacks these dynamics through a literature review, discussion, and actionable suggestions to empower consumer choices that align with a healthier planet.

Review of Literature

The attitude–behaviour gap in sustainable fashion has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly among millennials, who exhibit high environmental consciousness but inconsistent purchasing habits. Busalim et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review of 217 articles, identifying barriers like high prices, scepticism, and lack of knowledge, with drivers including quality



garments and social media awareness, though environmental concerns often play a secondary role. Similarly, Schiaroli et al., (2024) emphasizes that clear, appealing information across buying stages can bridge the gap, with age-specific preferences shaping channel choices.

Manley et al. (2023) explore millennial and Gen Z motivations, finding social media and environmental concerns drive support for sustainable practices, but convenience hinders purchases. Jacobs et al. (2018) assess mediating factors in South African millennials, noting that self-transcendence values influence behaviour more than attitudes, with durability and environmental concerns key, yet no direct attitude–action link exists. Li et al. (2024) use text mining from e-commerce reviews, revealing higher perceived quality and value for sustainable items, urging brands to emphasize eco-materials.

McNeill and Moore (2015) highlight the persistent gap, with consumers valuing sustainability but prioritizing price, suggesting marketers address risk aversion. Wang et al. (2024) apply an extended Value-Belief-Norm theory in China, showing personal norms, social norms, and recycling trust predict sustainable intentions, though moderation effects are limited. Young consumers' views on government policies, as noted by Michel et al. (2022), call for interventions like fast fashion taxes to encourage greener choices.

Stankevičiūtė and Jarmalavičiūtė (2025) compare women's perspectives, finding price often trumps ethics, especially for students, with second-hand shopping helping but not fully closing the gap. Testa et al. (2015) confirm eco-labels' effectiveness when trust is high, while Johnstone and Lindh (2022) note influencers' role in promoting sustainable behaviour, provided authenticity is maintained.

Gwozdz et al. (2017) identify consumer segments with varying behavioural patterns, emphasizing knowledge and accessibility. Williams and Hodges (2022) pinpoint information deficits and costs as barriers, advocating education. Djafarova and Foots (2022) apply the Theory of Planned



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Behaviour, highlighting perceived control issues. Park and Lin (2020) show match-up ads boost sustainable brand appeal, mediated by attitudes. Kant et al. (2024) highlight how sustainable techno-marketing strategies, including green marketing and digital campaigns, enhance MSME growth, addressing consumer scepticism and promoting eco-friendly choices. This supports the article's exploration of systemic barriers like greenwashing and the role of social media in bridging the attitude-behaviour gap in sustainable fashion.

Social media's influence, per Johnstone and Lindh (2022), underscores authenticity's role in overcoming scepticism. (Ries & Rese, 2025) stresses knowledge's impact on closing the gap, while Zaremohzzabieh et al. (2021) find consumer attitudes mediate green purchase intentions. White et al. (2019) explore risk aversion in green consumption, applicable to fashion's perceived risks. Young et al. (2010) note knowledge moderates' intentions, urging better retail integration. These studies collectively highlight a multifaceted gap driven by informational, economic, and psychological barriers, calling for integrated solutions to align millennial attitudes with behaviours.

Discussion

The literature reveals that the attitude-behaviour gap in millennial sustainable fashion choices is a complex interplay of individual and systemic factors. Millennials genuinely value sustainability, with studies like Jacobs et al. (2018) showing self-transcendence driving eco-intentions. Yet, economic realities—sustainable items costing 20–50% more—often lead to fast fashion purchases (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This isn't hypocrisy but a response to systemic barriers like price and availability.

Knowledge gaps exacerbate the issue. Busalim et al. (2022) note that while millennials are aware of fashion's environmental toll, specifics on sustainable practices are lacking, leading to scepticism fuelled by greenwashing. Social media, a double-edged sword, spreads awareness but also



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promotes trendy, disposable fashion, creating cognitive dissonance (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022). Psychologically, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, as applied by Djafarova and Foots (2022), shows low perceived control due to limited access to sustainable options, hindering action.

Economic constraints, tied to millennials' financial precarity, make affordability critical (Williams & Hodges, 2022). Emerging solutions like rental services or second-hand platforms like Vinted show promise, particularly among women and urban consumers (Stankevičiūtė & Jarmalavičiūtė, 2025). Culturally, fast fashion ties to identity and social signalling, where trendiness often outweighs ethics.

Bridging this gap demands collective action. Brands must enhance transparency, as Testa et al. (2015) suggest, using clear labelling to build trust. Governments could incentivize eco-options through subsidies, while education campaigns can clarify sustainable choices (Ries, T., & Rese, A., 2025). Reframing sustainability as convenient and trendy, perhaps via influencer partnerships, could shift behaviours. By addressing these barriers, the industry can align millennial values with actions, turning potential into progress.

Conclusion

The attitude-behaviour gap in millennial fashion choices reflects a broader tension between values and practical realities. Millennials care deeply about sustainability, yet high costs, limited access, and greenwashing scepticism derail their intentions (Busalim et al., 2022). This matters because their purchasing power—\$2.5 trillion projected by 2030—can reshape the fashion industry's environmental footprint, which includes 92 million tons of annual textile waste (McNeill & Moore, 2015). If unaddressed, the gap perpetuates a cycle of overconsumption and waste.

Hope lies in actionable solutions. Studies like Ries, T., & Rese, A. (2025) show that clear information shrinks the gap, while platforms like TikTok can normalize sustainable swaps



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(Johnstone & Lindh, 2022). Innovative models—rentals, upcycling—make eco-choices accessible without sacrificing style (Stankevičiūtė & Jarmalavičiūtė, 2025). Brands that prioritize transparency and durability, as Li et al. (2024) advocate, can win loyalty, shifting markets toward circularity.

This isn't just about individual choices; it's about systemic change. Policymakers, brands, and educators must collaborate to make sustainability the default, not a luxury. Millennials, as trendsetters, can lead this shift, influencing younger generations. By aligning actions with values, they can transform fashion from a polluter to a force for good, proving that style and stewardship can coexist.

Suggestions

To bridge the attitude-behaviour gap, practical steps are essential. First, enhance education through social media campaigns—short, engaging videos on platforms like TikTok explaining eco-labels and greenwashing, tailored to millennials' digital habits (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022). Integrate sustainability into school curricula and workplace training, teaching how to identify ethical fashion (Williams & Hodges, 2022).

Retailers should make sustainable options affordable and accessible. Governments could offer subsidies or tax breaks for eco-brands, lowering prices to compete with fast fashion (Michel et al., 2022). Promote apps like Good on You for ethical brand ratings, easing decision-making. Expand rental services and second-hand platforms like Vinted through partnerships or social media challenges, appealing to budget-conscious millennials (Stankevičiūtė & Jarmalavičiūtė, 2025).

Brands must prioritize transparency—QR codes on tags linking to supply chain details build trust (Testa et al., 2015). Partner with authentic influencers to counter scepticism, as Johnstone and Lindh (2022) suggest. Focus on durable, high-quality designs marketed as cost-effective long-term



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investments (Li et al., 2024). Loyalty programs or trade-in discounts can incentivize repeat eco-purchases.

Policy interventions, like mandatory sustainability reporting or fast fashion ad bans, could shift market dynamics (Michel et al., 2022). Community initiatives—swap meets, repair workshops—build sustainable habits and social bonds. For millennials, encourage small steps: wardrobe audits, “no-buy” months, or joining #SustainableStyle challenges, with apps tracking environmental impact to reinforce behaviour.

Ongoing research should evaluate these interventions’ effectiveness through longitudinal studies. By combining education, accessibility, transparency, and incentives, the fashion industry can make sustainable choices easy and appealing, aligning millennial actions with their values for a greener future.

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