**Transforming the Fashion Industry through Millennials: An Analysis of Millennials’ Consumer Behavior in Relation to Sustainable Fashion**

by

Yuna Song

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Program on the Global Environment

University of Chicago

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Spring 2019

**Table of Contents**

1. **Abstract**
2. **Introduction**
3. **Background**
4. **Literature Review**
5. **Methodology**
   1. **Data Sampling**
   2. **Data Collection**
6. **Results**
   1. **Consumer Behavior**
   2. **Environmental Consciousness**
   3. **Experience with Sustainable Fashion**
7. **Discussion**
8. **Conclusion**
9. **Abstract**

There is a demonstrated discrepancy between consumers’ environmental consciousness and actual purchasing behaviors in relation to clothing consumption. To better understand this phenomenon and identify the challenges that millennials face in their experience with sustainable fashion brands, a study involving qualitative interviews was conducted to gather in-depth data on the firsthand experiences of the participants, fifteen current or recently graduated University of Chicago students at the time of the interviews. Through data analysis and abductive reasoning, six key themes were identified across the interviews, which altogether provided a more holistic overview of millennials’ clothing consumption. Lastly, the qualitative data informed the researcher in generating insight regarding potential ways in which sustainable fashion could more successfully target millennials, including improved marketing strategies, education, and universal certification labels.

1. **Introduction**

*“If we do not embed culture into sustainability, and, vice versa, embed sustainability into culture, we are unlikely ever to be able to create a new model of real prosperity.”* – *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook* by Sandy Black[[1]](#footnote-1)

The fashion industry, in essence, thrives upon its foundational characteristic of constant change. Each day, brands and celebrities showcase a dazzling display of fresh, off-the-rack styles to an ever-hungry and insatiable global audience that is more than willing to consumer incessantly in order to remain relevant. However, behind the curtain of glamor and luxury of this $2.4 trillion business, there exists an opaque, darker world of dangerous environmental consequences and human rights issues.[[2]](#footnote-2) Employing more than 1.8 million people in the United States alone, the apparel industry’s global success is heavily dependent upon the continual stream of newly manufactured clothing – more than 80 billion pieces of new clothes each year, a 400 percent increase from two decades ago.[[3]](#footnote-3) While the average American disposes of approximately 82 pounds of garment waste per year, an amount that has doubled in the past twenty years, a miniscule 0.1 percent of collected secondhand clothing is recycled into reusable fiber.[[4]](#footnote-4) Consumers’ perception and treatment of clothing as an easily acquired and disposable commodity has resulted in severe environmental impact on a global scale, from toxic chemicals used in textile dyeing to water pollution from polyester washing.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Aside from the fast fashion industry’s ravaging of natural resources, the industry perpetuates the ongoing cycle of an inhumane and inexcusable labor system from a humanitarian and social aspect. A tragedy in 2013 brought to light the harsh and complicated reality behind a clothing label that simply reads “Made in Bangladesh.” Considered the worst garment-factory accident in history, the Rana Plaza building collapse resulted in the death of 1,135 people.[[6]](#footnote-6) At the time of the incident, the plaza consisted of five garment factories that outsourced goods to major retailers in Europe and North America. The destruction of Rana Plaza is attributed to a combination of poor construction, an illegal building infrastructure, and the amount of industrial equipment which far surpassed safety standards.[[7]](#footnote-7) While this incident sparked public outrage worldwide and a flurry of action from the Bangladeshi government to improve safety measures and address workers’ rights, six years later in 2019, there still remains much work to be done for garment workers worldwide.

The great disconnect between consumers in first-world nations and garment workers in developing countries is bridged on rare occasions, most visibly when a shocking tragedy occurs and gains traction on media. In 2014, hundreds of thousands of garment workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia protested on the streets to demand an increase in wages, from US $100 to $160 per month.[[8]](#footnote-8) Protesters, a group comprised of workers and activists, were met with armed police and military forces who opened fire, resulting in the deaths of four people and many more injuries. This outrageous and unnecessary violence is a consequence of the clash of interests between the government and its people; the Cambodian government is desperate for the business that foreign retailers bring to its economy and, consequently, suppresses the cries of workers in fear that these corporations might relocate once labor costs increase.[[9]](#footnote-9) The fast fashion industry is able to continue and thrive in our current society, largely due to its ultimate goal of producing maximum profits for big businesses with little regard for the closely interconnected human rights violations.

In the United States, where access to the Internet is common, the majority of people are easily exposed to information about international problems such as climate change and environmental pollution. Consequently, people are becoming increasingly cognizant of the environmental impact of fast fashion and express the need for change in this area. The common preconception is that a lack of knowledge is the most significant factor resulting in a consumer’s unsustainable choices. However, studies show that environmental concern, more often that not, does not translate directly into more sustainable consumer choices and behaviors. A previous study showed that while the majority of consumers exhibited a positive attitude towards purchasing organic food products (67%), a mere four percent of these consumers actually bought organic products.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similarly, another study showed that “even consumers with the highest level of environmental consciousness do not always purchase green products,” and that consumer behavior is a complex decision that incorporates a variety of additional factors separate from environmental concern.[[11]](#footnote-11)

A thorough understanding of consumer behaviors and the complex, multifarious factors that simultaneously affect individual and group purchases is imperative in developing adequate strategies to combat the negative environmental and social impacts of fast fashion. In order to better understand and analyze the discrepancy between consumers’ values and actual purchasing behaviors, the current research will focus specifically on the fashion choices of the current millennial population. The millennial population is defined by the Pew Research Center as those born between the years of 1981 and 1996.[[12]](#footnote-12) In 2017, millennials in the U.S. alone spent approximately $200 billion.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition to their massive purchasing power, millennials are characterized by their constant connectivity and their on-demand dependence on the Internet as their primary source of information.[[14]](#footnote-14) Furthermore, studies show that a significant percentage of millennials are conscious of environmental issues and place value on sustainability. 66 percent of global millennials are willing to spend more on brands that are sustainable, while 60 percent of millennials express interest in sustainable clothing.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Their great purchasing power and consequently the enormous amount of waste they produce, in conjunction with their demonstrated interest in sustainability make millennials an invaluable target audience through which a transition towards a more sustainable fashion culture could be cultivated. Fast fashion is neither sustainable nor ethical, and consumers must be aware of the true cost behind the low price tags that large brands offer and the violations imposed on both people and the environment that are supported with each purchase. This current research seeks to better understand the gap between millennial consumers’ values and actions in terms of their garment purchases through qualitative interviews and analyses, the results of which could offer valuable information to sustainable fashion brands on how to better target consumers to make action-oriented sustainable fashion choices.

1. **Background**

While clothes have been a necessity for people since early civilization, the unprecedented revolution of the garment industry took place less than a century ago.[[16]](#footnote-16) The mechanical, mass production of clothing in sweatshops in developing countries, which are then imported and sold at ridiculously low prices in stores across the United States, is a relatively new but widespread practice. What came to be called “fast fashion” expanded at an explosive rate with the onset of globalization and the resulting trade agreements that were sanctioned between developed and developing countries.

Today, a consumer can effortlessly purchase a T-shirt for less than the price of his or her lunch. This phenomenon is too good to be true because, in fact, it is too good to be true. A close examination of the way in which garment production in America (and, consequently, not America) reveals just how much has changed drastically over the course of several decades reveals the outstanding offences that the fast fashion industry imposes onto both people and the environment. As a consumer of fast fashion, one unknowingly participates and financially supports this multi-trillion dollar industry, which provides neither sustainable nor ethical treatment of its laborers and natural resources.

In stark contrast to the disposability and short-lived life cycle of today’s fast fashion apparel, throughout most of human history, “clothing production was in essence ecologically sustainable.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Garment production has a rich history, with the earliest forms of the cultivation of clothing fibers dating back to between 8,000 and 2,000 BCE, concurrent with the emergence of early cereal-based agriculture.[[18]](#footnote-18) For most of human history prior to the Industrial Revolution, garment production was a laborious craft that involved a high level of skill and artisanship; thus, individuals had only a few garments in their possession at a time. Different regions across the globe were heavily affected by the surrounding natural environment and the culture of the community, which were reflected in the unique types and production methods involved in the making of people’s identifiable garments. Today’s universally shared technique of mass production in garment factories using mechanized devices is a legacy spread by Western nations stemming from the message of globalization and capitalism.

The Industrial Revolution can be credited as the massive turning point in the way clothes came to be manufactured today. The critical shift from handicraft tools to mechanized devices beginning in the 1780s allowed exponential increases in productivity while decreasing the need for skilled artisans and the number of laborers required to meet supply demand.[[19]](#footnote-19) From the era of the Industrial Revolution arose the factory-based system of provision, a model of production with the exclusive goal of maximizing profit while simultaneously minimizing cost. The minimization of these costs to increase profit margins was achieved at the expense of factory workers in ways such as increasing the length of the working day or by cutting salaries.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Prior to industrialization, clothes were considerably more costly than they are today. The average person in the eighteenth century owned a wardrobe sizably smaller than one in the twenty-first century, despite spending a larger portion of household expenses on garments.[[21]](#footnote-21) Clothes were considered to be much more valuable to their owner, both monetarily and emotionally, and were often altered and cared for in order to prolong their life cycles. The twentieth century can be attributed to the domination of ready-to-wear clothing in a woman’s wardrobe. A newfound dependence on artificially-produced fibers in textile production allowed prices to drop steadily while simultaneously quickening the turnover rate of fashion trends.[[22]](#footnote-22) The 1960s are recognized as the decade that saw the most marked spread of disposable fashion. The post-World War II economic revival coupled with the freedom to release a long-suppressed desire for new clothes resulted in a number of short-lived and disposable fashion trends. Clothes were increasingly manufactured with the intention of serving as temporary and immediate gratification. For example, paper clothes experienced a surge of popularity during this time. In 1966, Scott Paper Company retailed paper dresses, “typically made from a variety of nonwoven fibers … quite literally, intended to be thrown away after being worn one or two times.” Marketing these expendable dresses at the low price of $1.25, Scott sold more than 500,000 copies in just a few months.[[23]](#footnote-23) As post-war consumerism rose to unprecedented levels, U.S. domestic retailers began looking for ways to further decrease manufacturing costs while increasing production rates to meet consumer demands. The twentieth century is associated with the domination of ready-to-wear clothing in a woman’s wardrobe.

While the American garment industry has come depend overwhelmingly on overseas labor to meet domestic demands, the dominant globalization of labor provision is a recent development. Between the years of 1997 and 2007, apparel manufacturing was named as one of the fastest-dying industries in America, with a loss of almost 650,000 domestic apparel jobs.[[24]](#footnote-24) In a race to extract the maximum amount of labor for the minimum cost, the American fashion industry, at the time centered in New York City, began to branch out into surrounding states in the West Coast and the South for lower-priced labor as early as the 1930s and 1940s.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, even more affordable domestic labor prices paled in comparison to the shockingly cheap labor that could be purchased overseas. While a garment worker in New York with a higher level of skill would be paid between $12 to $15 an hour, Bangladeshi garment workers, even with a raise in minimum wage, are only required to be paid for operating sewing machines for $43 an entire month.[[26]](#footnote-26) American garment workers are paid more than four times as much as Chinese garment workers, eleven times Dominican garment workers, and 38 times Bangladeshi garment workers.[[27]](#footnote-27) Statistics from the Public Radio International (PRI) show the outrageous disparity between the earnings of garment workers in different countries, a situation that has not improved much in the past decades despite increased international attention. In 2017, the minimum monthly wage for garment workers in the United States was $1,864, while Bangladesh was $197.[[28]](#footnote-28)

A series of international trade agreements from the past twenty-five years removed responsibilities and restrictions from American fashion industries on utilizing domestic labor and enabled them to move the vast majority of their manufacturing into developing countries. The North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993, which removed duties on exports to Mexico, resulted in the relocation of factories to Mexico and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs in the Los Angeles garment industry in just the following year.[[29]](#footnote-29) In 1994, the Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA), which limited the scope of clothing exports from developing countries into industrialized ones, was ruled out by the World Trade Organization as being “unfair” for developed countries. As a result, Chinese exports to the U.S. increased by a shocking 1,500 percent in cotton trousers alone, while 16,000 jobs in the American textile industry were lost in 2005, the year the MFA officially expired.[[30]](#footnote-30)

However, a series of tragic incidents including the Rana Plaza building collapse and the 2012 Pakistan factory fires drew international attention to the implications of the fast fashion industry and provoked consumers to question the ethical repercussions of their fashion choices and search for more conscious alternatives. The consumer demand for alternatives to the fast fashion industry, the industry’s negative impact on garment workers worldwide, and a surge in environmental awareness helped to galvanize the sustainable fashion movement. Slow fashion, the designing, creating, and buying garments for high quality and longevity, is gaining both interest and momentum from a small but steadily increasing following of conscious consumers.[[31]](#footnote-31) This alternative to fast fashion emphasizes the use of local operations, boosting smaller economies, and less carbon output.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Sustainable fashion advocates for the search and innovation of producing and using garments in a sustainable manner, both environmentally and socio-economically. Because there exists such a large variety of opportunities to actuate change in the fashion industry, it is difficult to strictly define and categorize the influence of this movement. As author Marie O’Mahony states, “We must address everything from the source of the raw material through design, production, use and reuse of materials and products.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Sustainable fashion has the potential to influence how garments are made and used throughout the entire life cycle of a garment, from the initial stage of production to the post-purchase treatment of clothes by consumers themselves.

A garment that is considered holistically “sustainable” implies that it was produced consciously, both environmentally and ethically. This definition includes that garment workers in developing countries such as Bangladesh and Cambodia are being paid a livable wage and safe working conditions. It can also signify that clothing companies are changing their production patterns to incorporate a more efficient and careful use of natural resource through conscious decisions regarding raw materials and energy sources.[[34]](#footnote-34) Companies continue to expand their own definitions of slow fashion by implementing new strategies, such as implementing a collection and recycling program at off-line storefronts, and manufacturing fabrics using unconventional materials such as hemp and recycled water bottles.[[35]](#footnote-35) In the post-purchase stage, consumers themselves can have a significant impact on the amount of pollution they generate from their personal use of clothes. Washing and drying a five-kilogram load of laundry every two days for a whole year generates approximately 440 kilograms of carbon dioxide.[[36]](#footnote-36) Purchasing a fewer number of clothes that are made to last longer, or buying from secondhand stores are only a few of the numerous ways for one to shift one’s attitude towards clothes to reflect awareness on fast fashion’s impact on people and the environment.

While clothing brands and textile technology may develop more sustainable alternatives for the fashion industry, it is ultimately up to the consumer to choose what they support through their purchases. Increasing consumer demand for more choices in sustainable fashion, and demonstrating preference for ethical and transparent garment production methods are ways through which big brands with great influence can be pressured and motivated to prioritize sustainability more in their operations framework and practices.

Two distinct challenges that the current slow fashion market struggles with are the issues of price and style. As high-end sustainable fashion designer Stella McCartney states, “People don’t get that “direct connection” with clothing that they do with organic food.”[[37]](#footnote-37) As a result, the comparatively high price of sustainable garments, compared to mass-produced products, can be a major deterrent for customers. However, as sustainable fashion brand Cri de Coeur states, “the price tags aren’t come up with arbitrarily… every step of the production process adds its own cost to the bottom line.”[[38]](#footnote-38) It is high time for consumers to reflect on their fundamental perspective towards and relationship with clothing. Buying fewer items of better quality and investing in timeless pieces that are not “in” one day and “out” the other, all the while knowing where and how such clothes were manufactured are what the fashion choices of a sustainable, conscious consumer would ideally look like. In addition, generating higher demand for ethical and environmentally-friendly garments would be a step towards expanding the market for sustainable clothes, and potentially lowering the cost of slow fashion as more brands and factories collaborate to reduce the environmental impact of the fashion industry.

Reader at the London College of Fashion, Pamela Church Gibson states that during a meeting, when asked about sustainable fashion, an influential fashion blogger stated guiltily that “I’m afraid I don’t find sustainable fashion very interesting,” compared to her usual palette of extraordinary, creative designs.[[39]](#footnote-39) In order to expand the patronage of sustainable fashion, widening the stylistic aspect and its target population is a significant issue that must be addressed. An effective approach to overcoming this challenge would be to venture marketing strategies towards younger and popular celebrities to convince them of the importance of sustainable fashion and extend an invitation to recruit them towards supporting this cause. Taking the message directly to the influencers that initiate fashion trends could potentially start a chain of reactions in audiences internationally, with proper usage of social media platforms. In terms of style itself, collaborations between creative sustainable fashion designers and big brands, such as the “Stella McCartney for H&M” collection for the season of Autumn 2005, have proven to be greatly successful, while providing a platform for experimentation of new styles with sustainable textiles and methods.

1. **Literature Review**

This section will synthesize the currently existing literature on consumer behavior in relation to environmentally sustainable apparel, in order to identify the gap that the present research seeks to address, and how it aims to provide a valuable contribution to the topic of sustainable fashion. For the purposes of this research, the terms “sustainable fashion” and “eco-fashion” are used interchangeably. Due to the lack of a universally implemented standard, sustainable fashion is defined and interpreted in a number of ways. This research primarily focuses on investigating ways to improve millennials’ experience with sustainable fashion brands and, as a result, examines in most detail the variables and circumstances surrounding the purchasing of already-made and sustainable apparel. For the purposes of the current study, which seeks to explore the impact, or lack thereof, of eco-consciousness on consumers’ behaviors, the definition of sustainability in the apparel industry mainly addresses environmental sustainability, separate from ethical considerations, a topic of great importance and deserving of a distinct system of research.

While ethically-made clothing is a crucial component of a healthy and sustainable system, However, the environmental impact of post-production and post-purchase processes are of equal, if not greater significance. For example, Napper and Thompson’s (2016) experiment demonstrated that an average washing load (6kg) of polyester would potentially release 496,030 microfibers, while the same mass of Acrylic would release 728,789, concluding that the washing of apparel is a significant contributor to microplastic environmental pollution.[[40]](#footnote-40) An accurate and holistic representation of sustainable fashion cannot overlook the substantial importance of environmentally conscious care of clothing. Consequently, this research’s definition of sustainable fashion is guided by Davies’ (2015) interpretation, broadly encompassing both the producer and the consumer’s interactions with apparel, which are interconnected to the overarching objective of furthering environmental sustainability while including and acknowledging the importance of production, consumption, and care.[[41]](#footnote-41)

More recently, there have been an increase in the number of studies, although still few, conducted on the topic of environmental awareness of consumers and their actual purchasing behaviors. Padel and Foster (2005) found that price, albeit a significant barrier in customers’ consumption of organic food products, is “but only one factor in the complex decision-making process that underlies purchasing decisions,” identifying additional variables such as people’s perceptions of “value for money,” altruistic values, and political motives.[[42]](#footnote-42) Joshi and Rahman’s (2015) literary analysis identified two major determinants of eco-conscious purchase behaviors to be a consumer’s environmental concern and the product’s functional attributes.[[43]](#footnote-43) Hanks *et al.*’s (2008) study involving a survey of 435 college undergraduates focused on evaluating the attitudes of millennials towards sustainable consumer products, such as cellphones and laptops.[[44]](#footnote-44) The results further confirmed that a high level of awareness of environmental conditions did not directly result in changed behaviors as a consumer; furthermore, and more surprisingly, one’s socioeconomic status did not heavily affect one’s decision to choose an option that was more beneficial to the environment, but had higher costs. Surface-level indicators including the reported awareness of environmental issues and socio-economic status are only a fraction of the equation, and researchers must look beyond these external factors to better understand the discrepancy between consumers’ words and actions. Lastly, Bamberg (2003) attempted to empirically explain the weak direct relationship between general environmental concern and specific environmental behaviors, arguing that without situation-specific understanding, general concern is irrelevant and has no effect on one’s intention or behavior towards more sustainable choices.[[45]](#footnote-45)

A common theme expressed throughout the existing research was that while the majority of consumers expressed a positive attitude towards environmental conservation in conjunction with environmental concern, more often than not these perspectives did not translate into significantly more eco-conscious consumer choices. This phenomenon has been demonstrated to be a persistent trend, in accordance with the Pew Research Center’s most recent findings in 2016 that 75% of U.S. adults are self-reportedly “particularly concerned about helping the environment as they go about their daily lives”; however, only 20% of U.S. adults state that they in actuality practice behaviors that benefit the environment regularly.[[46]](#footnote-46) Joshi and Rahman (2015) label this seemingly counterintuitive disconnect between awareness and action as a ‘green purchasing inconsistency’ or ‘green attitude behavior gap.’[[47]](#footnote-47) These findings further illustrate the complexity of consumer behavior and the difficulty of predicting people’s actions based on their self-professed values. Consequently, due to the complex nature of consumer behavior, linear connections and generalized predictions between consumers’ characteristics and their purchasing behaviors have proven to be inadequate in producing an accurate understanding of people’s clothing consumption.

There is a gap in the existing literature regarding the topic of consumers’ engagement, and more specifically, millennials’ experience with sustainable fashion, despite the apparel industry’s substantive contributions to environmental degradation. With the annual expenditure of millennial consumers in the U.S. projected to spend $1.4 trillion in the year 2020 alone, approximately 30 percent of total expected retail expenditure that year, millennials will continue to become increasingly more responsible for a considerable portion of the overall consumption of consumer goods.[[48]](#footnote-48) In 2018, 76.8 million millennials in the United States were identified as social media users.[[49]](#footnote-49) Millennials’ massive purchasing power and high dependence on social media make millennials an invaluable and easily accessible target for sustainable fashion brands to market themselves to. However, there is scarce prior research conducted that specifically seeks to address the millennial population’s experience with eco-fashion. Feng, et al. (2012) found that within their target population of undergraduate college students, those with greater environmental knowledge specific to apparel exhibited greater environmental concern and, consequently, environmentally responsible apparel consumption.[[50]](#footnote-50) In addition, Hiller (2010) identified a number of barriers that consumers (in general, and not specifically millennials) expressed that hindered them from acquiring more sustainably-made apparel, which included preexisting knowledge and attitudes about eco-conscious apparel, availability of such apparel, personal economic resources, retail environments, and societal norms.[[51]](#footnote-51) Lastly, Hill and Lee’s research (2012) addressed how Generation Y, which the researchers define as those aged 18-35 in 2012, expressed a misunderstanding of the distinctions between sustainability and environmental concern, and mainly focused on investigating participants’ knowledge and sentiment towards sustainability and environmental issues.[[52]](#footnote-52)

This research seeks to contribute to filling the gap in the existing literature regarding the understanding of millennials’ consumer behavior in relation to sustainable clothing consumption. Building upon the existing studies and the insight they provide, this research will adopt an in-depth, qualitative approach to identifying the challenges that millennials face in purchasing from environmentally conscious brands, which the author believes will result in informative insight for sustainable fashion brands to market more successfully to a population with significant purchasing power and the potential to generate large impact in terms of shifting the consumer demands of the garment industry.

1. **Methodology**
2. **Data Sampling**

To investigate the consumer behaviors of the millennial population and to identify the barriers they experience in making sustainable fashion choices, a qualitative study was conducted in the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. In total, fifteen individuals participated in one-on-one interviews that ranged from thirty to fifty minutes. The sample of fifteen participants consisted of six males and nine females aging between nineteen to thirty years old, and ranging from freshman undergraduates to second-year Master’s degree students. All participants were either current students at the University of Chicago, or were recent graduates of the College at the time of the interview. All data was collected in person and were digitally recorded with the consent of the participant.

The small sample size of the research represents the limitations of time and resources allotted, and the researcher’s realistic expectations for the number of in-depth interviews that could feasibly be conducted during the research period. However, this study addresses a very particular aspect of the sustainable fashion industry, specifically the millennial population’s experience with it, an area of research that, as previously discussed in the “Literature Review” section, has great potential in expanding the sustainable apparel market and one that is currently lacking in academic research. This study’s intention is to conduct a qualitative investigation on the firsthand experience of a select millennial population. As such, the quality and validity of the data is not undermined by the number of participants. Before conducting any of the actual interviews, this research was confirmed by the University of Chicago’s Social and Behavioral Sciences IRB office and the research’s B.A. advisor that the project meets all of the requirements exempting it from a review through the office and from IRB approval.

1. **Data Collection**

Participants were drawn based most importantly on whether they were members of the millennial population, defined by the Pew Research Center as: “Anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 23 to 38 in 2019).” [[53]](#footnote-53) Additionally, participants were selected based on their availability to participate in an in-depth interview and to reflect varying degrees of environmental awareness in order to best represent a diverse range of perspectives. Four students were members of the University of Chicago’s environmental sustainability RSO (Recognized Student Organization), and three students had expressed verbally their interest in sustainable fashion, prior to the study. The remaining eight students were selected without a preconceived bias, mainly based on whether they were a part of the millennial generation, their availability, and willingness to be interviewed. The purpose of drawing approximately half of the participants from those who, prior to the study, demonstrated environmental awareness, and the remaining half from individuals who expressed no particular environmental interest was to gain a better understanding of the general millennial population and their consumer behaviors, rather than focusing on a specific population with previously demonstrated interest in this topic. Table 1 is a summary of the background information and characteristics for each interviewee, focusing on their age and academic background.

**Table 1** Characteristics of research participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ID# | Gender | Age | Year of Study | Education | Area of Study | Hometown |
| F1 | F | 20 | 2 | Bachelor's | Biology, Public Policy | Suburban |
| F2 | F | 19 | 2 | Bachelor's | Chemistry | Urban |
| F3 | F | 24 | Graduated | Graduate | Teaching | Suburban |
| F4 | F | 21 | 3 | Bachelor's | Biochemistry | Suburban |
| F5 | F | 21 | 3 | Bachelor's | Music, Anthropology, Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies | Suburban |
| F6 | F | 21 | 3 | Bachelor's | Biochemistry, Chemistry | Suburban |
| F7 | F | 20 | 3 | Bachelor's | Molecular Engineering, Biology | Urban |
| F8 | F | 21 | 4 | Bachelor's | Economics | Suburban |
| F9 | F | 23 | Graduated | Bachelor's | Public Policy | Suburban |
| M1 | M | 23 | 2 | Graduate | Public Policy | Suburban |
| M2 | M | 22 | 4 | Bachelor's | Environmental Studies, Public Policy | Suburban |
| M3 | M | 21 | 3 | Bachelor's | English | Rural |
| M4 | M | 30 | 2 | Graduate | Public Policy | Suburban |
| M5 | M | 21 | 3 | Bachelor's | Economics | Urban/Suburban |
| M6 | M | 19 | 1 | Bachelor's | Undecided | Suburban |

The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide reviewed by the research’s advisor and preceptor, consisting of a set of foundational questions that were asked to each interviewee. The questions were open-ended, asking each interviewee to describe and reflect on their own personal experience, starting from general consumer behaviors to specific experience with sustainable fashion brands (See Appendix I for the interview guide). The interview questions were organized to investigate three main categories: consumer behavior, environmental awareness, and experience with sustainable fashion.

1. **Results**

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed in full by the author. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times to ensure that they accurately represented the actual audio content of the interviews. Themes were identified through abductive reasoning, a systematic approach to results in which the most logical explanation is inferred in order to explain a set of observations during research.[[54]](#footnote-54) This method of analyzation was considered to be appropriate and applicable in relation to the nature of the data collected. Abductive reasoning allows the researcher to form the most logical hypothesis through inference using the data collected. The author acknowledges that despite the efforts to diversify the participants in terms of background and experience with the topic of research, due to the small sample size, the perspectives of the students may not be a comprehensive representation of the target population. However, for the purpose of this analysis, which is to form heuristic explanations to better understand the consumer behaviors of millennials, abductive reasoning is an appropriate tool through which valuable and rational explanations are formed using the data collected through the qualitative interviews.

The process of data analyzation was guided by the research methods of Mueller and Abrutyn (2016)[[55]](#footnote-55), who used abductive reasoning to conduct an in-depth, qualitative case study using transcripts from interviews and focus group meetings. For the purposes of this research, a close reading of the transcripts was conducted in which participants’ answers were analyzed according to how the interview questions were grouped, in terms of key ideas and topics, leading to the identification of six major themes. The following section is organized according to the three subsections of interview questions (Consumer behavior, environmental consciousness, and experience with sustainable fashion) and the respondents’ associated answers. Within these categories, the information is further categorized according to the six major themes identified and study’s findings pertaining to each topic. The contents of the responses was coded according to the distinct categories of answers given, and in applicable cases, was quantified in terms of the frequency of each answer. The author then selected the most relevant question(s) concerning each theme and organized the participants’ answers in a visually accessible table and/or graph. Any notable or unusual comments made by the participants were flagged and highlighted for further observation by the author. Finally, to protect the identity and privacy of the participants of the research, each individual was assigned a letter and number. The letter signifies the gender of the individual for the purposes of referring to his or her answers throughout this section. Refer to Table 1 for a summary of the characteristics of the research participants.

1. **Consumer Behavior**
2. *Attitude versus action toward sustainability*

When asked whether participants were either “greatly concerned/moderately concerned/slightly concerned/not concerned” about the environment, all of the participants stated that they were either greatly concerned (seven participants) or moderately concerned (eight participants). Not a single participant stated either “slightly concerned” or “not concerned,” expressing a shared and comprehensively positive attitude towards environmental conservation (See Figure 1 for a summary of the results of participants’ environmental concern). However, multiple participants such as F8 supplemented their response with qualifying statements concerning their actual behaviors. Participant F8, after stating that she would consider herself moderately concerned about the environment, stated: “Intellectually I am moderately concerned, and then functionally, slightly to not concerned.” This statement resonates with F8’s response when she was asked to identify, if any, what environmentally conscious behaviors or habits that she practiced other than recycling (whether or not she recycled was a question asked previously, and to which F8 confirmed positively). The respondent was able to identify only one behavior, which was utilizing reusable coffee filters rather than single-use disposable ones – however, it is important to note that instead of stating the behavior, she asked the question: “Does using a reusable coffee filter count?”, implying that environmental sustainability was not the original, primary motive for this action.

M1, who replied that he was “greatly concerned,” was asked to elaborate whether his environmental concern translated into any environmentally conscious practices or behaviors, he stated: “No, because I’m limited to what I can do. I don’t think I produce enough waste to make a difference in scaling down.” This discrepancy between one’s environmentally-oriented values and actions aligns with the existing literature and Joshi and Rahman’s (2015) research on consumers’ green attitude behavior gap.[[56]](#footnote-56)

**Figure 1** Summary of participants’ concern about the environment

1. *Consumers’ perception of sustainability as a secondary benefit*

A recurring theme across the interviews was the recognition that the participants’ desire to promote sustainability and decrease their environmental footprint was not the primary motivator of the action, but a secondary benefit that accompanied their chosen behaviors. For example, when M4, who expressed moderate concern for the environment, was asked to describe any behaviors or choices of his own that he perceived as sustainable, he stated that he tried to take public transportation over ride-share applications, specifically Uber, and that the latter option resulted in higher carbon emissions. However, M4 continued by stating that in the circumstances where the price of traveling via Uber would be equal to utilizing public transportation, he would *always* choose Uber. The prioritization of minimizing costs over decreasing environmental impact was expressed in other consumer behaviors as well. For example, M5 stated bringing reusable bags to the grocery store instead of purchasing plastic bags as an activity he perceived as environmentally conscious. However, he elaborated by stating that this was a choice made due to the citywide tax implemented on plastic bags, a tax of seven cents per bag. Other participants expressed similar thought processes in which the first and foremost motivation was to decrease costs, which took precedence over environmental concern in additional scenarios such as turning off the lights when leaving a room, taking shorter showers, and doing laundry less frequently.

1. **Environmental Consciousness**
2. *Environmental consciousness as a clothing consumer*

When participants were asked to recall the most recent article of clothing that they purchased and what factors they considered in making that purchase, the top three influences that were mentioned across the participants were the following: price (eleven participants), style (nine), and quality (four). Sustainability was cited by only two participants. Such results are seemingly contradictory to the participants’ answers to a question asked later during the interview: “Do you consider sustainability when purchasing clothing?” A total of six participants answered “yes” to this question, a greater number from the aforementioned open-ended question (Refer to Figure 2 for a summary of participants’ experience with sustainable fashion). This incongruity in students’ responses raises the question of whether the students’ self-professed level of environmental consciousness when making a clothing purchase is affected by preconditioning the participant to think about sustainability while asking the question. The fact that less students voluntarily stated sustainability to be a factor they considered when purchasing apparel, than when asked directly whether or not they considered the environment when buying clothes, can be seen as an illustration of the phenomenon of green purchasing inconsistency.[[57]](#footnote-57)

**Figure 2** Summary of participants’ experience with sustainable fashion

An interesting opinion that was voiced by a participant, M6, was his perception that the apparel business was not an industry that contributed majorly to environmental degradation. Despite the fact that fashion is one of the most resource-intensive and simultaneously wasteful industries, with approximately three-fifths of all clothing produced being disposed in incinerators or landfills within a year of manufacture,[[58]](#footnote-58) multiple participants expressed that fashion was not something they primarily considered when thinking about environmental issues. It is interesting to note that M6 was a student who expressed significant environmental interest and the intention to pursue a career in environmental conservation, and had extensive background knowledge concerning environmentalism and types of pollution. However, in discussing sustainable fashion, he emphasized multiple times that he had a lack of interest in fashion and clothing in general, and that he very rarely bought clothing. When asked to elaborate on his perception of the fashion industry’s environmental impact, M6 stated:

*“I think there are more significant ways* (that harm the environment). *I mean, sure, any place that you can limit helps, but it isn’t really a big focus for me. Typically, when I’m thinking about environmentalism, I’m thinking about the industrial sector. Fashion doesn’t really come to mind.”*

Participant M4 stated that he had a moderate level of concern for the environment and demonstrated detailed knowledge about the recycling policy in the city of Chicago. However, similar to M6, throughout the interview M4 emphasized multiple times that he did not buy clothes very often and did not feel “the need to look good every single day.” In response to the question of whether he would be interested in learning more about sustainable fashion, M4 admitted:

*“If I saw an article online that says ‘How you can shop more environmentally conscious,’ I don’t know if I would click on that article. I think part of the reason is that I don’t buy a lot of clothes, and I think I would assume that shopping ‘environmentally,’ if you will, would be more expensive. And right now as a student, I’m not in a place in my life where I want to be paying thirty percent more for a pair of jeans.”*

1. *The Effect of Education and Policy on Sustainable Behaviors*

An interesting pattern that emerged when participants were asked where they first learned to recycle was that each individual could very clearly recall when and in what setting he or she was initially educated on proper recycling methods. Six students stated that they first learned how to recycle at home, while the remaining nine students stated that they learned this information at school. Furthermore, several of the participants could confidently remember significantly specific details about the learning experience, despite it having occurred, in most cases, more than a decade ago. Participant F4 stated with conviction that in kindergarten, a group of people dressed up as pack rats came to her school to educate the class on recycling instructions. Similarly, M6 said: “I have a very distinct memory of a fourth-grade recycling song,” spontaneously proceeded to sing a portion of the song, and then continued: “We always had recycling bins, but I don’t know if I used them before that.” Student F9 was also able to remember her first experience with recycling, stating: “I think my first real memory is in school, when they taught us about recycling, like ‘Paper goes in the recycling.’ Probably first grade, six or seven years old. Minnesota is super good at recycling.” Remarkably, most participants were also able to identify specifically what age and what grade they were at the time of being educated on recycling. The clarity with which participants were able to recall their learning experience, and the lasting impact it had made on students more than a decade afterwards suggests the effectiveness of early education on children concerning sustainable lifestyle habits.

Another recurring finding was the impact of governmental policy and regulations on consumer behaviors within participant households. Participant F9 recalled that in 2008 when former President Barack Obama was newly elected, the Obama Administration implemented a stimulus package for energy efficient washing machines in the form of financial incentives through a consumer rebates program.[[59]](#footnote-59) As a result, F9’s mother purchased an energy efficient washing machine and dryer, using the subsidy provided through the incentive initiative. F9 stated that it was through this event that she became aware that the process of caring for clothes was one accompanied by significant environmental impact. Similarly, multiple participants stated that they brought reusable bags to the grocery store instead of purchasing single-use plastic bags, and further supplemented their answer by stating that they started this changed behavior due to Chicago’s citywide tax on plastic bags. The potential of enforcing regulations and collective standards within the fashion industry will be elaborated upon in the “Discussion” section, in relation to participants stating that some form of a universal standard or regulation for what defines “sustainable fashion” would encourage them to purchase from sustainable fashion brands.

1. **Experience with Sustainable Fashion**
2. *Millennials’ experience, or lack thereof, with sustainable fashion*

When asked what they thought defined sustainable fashion, participants gave a wide variety of answers. Participants’ definitions touched upon multiple facets of the clothing industry, such as resource extraction, clothing manufacture, marketing, export and distribution, and finally, disposal. Three of the themes that were mentioned by more than one participant were: resource consciousness, durability of clothing, and repurposing materials. However, individual participants varied greatly in terms of the detail, specificity, and thoroughness of their answers. Furthermore, from the wide range of answers given, with focuses on a number of different topics, it seemed as though the majority of students did not have a clearly defined vision as to how sustainability in the current fashion industry was practiced, but more of a vague idea of what it could potentially be.

For example, two answers that included specific details and addressed multiple processes of the industry were:

*“Finding raw materials that are more sustainably sourced or produced, being socially responsible as a company and paying workers well, being environmentally conscious of how your clothing might be disposed of or recycled throughout after you have sold it, taking responsibility about your products.”* – F2

*“If the clothing industry could do a better job of making people aware of the whole waste problem, I think that's what can help consumers change the most. Because on the company's front they can do a better job like producing it in terms of minimizing water and like what it's made of and stuff … Right now companies see it as them just getting it to the consumers’ hands, but not facilitating the process afterwards and I think that’s really important. I've seen some companies like H&M has like a clothing recycling thing. Especially giving them* (consumers) *a means with direct tangible actions to follow up, and incentives. I think also clothing recycling … So repurposing it into a new shirt that can be used again … Or like for insulation for houses. I see that as an even further step than just thrifting.”* – F1

In contrast, two examples of answers that were presented with lesser detail and accuracy were:

*“It’d be like backwards planning, from what we need to do to not hurt ourselves in the future, and then we need to do that.”* – M4

*“Instead of burning whatever they are burning, they could use wind power to power whatever, like knitting needles? I don’t know. Also, sourcing closer to them* (clothing companies)*.”* – M1

Out of the total fifteen participants, eight students stated that they had previous experience with purchasing sustainably-made clothing, while six stated that they did not, and one person stated that he did not know as he was not sure what counted as sustainable clothing (Refer to Figure 2 for a summary of participants’ experience with sustainable fashion). Each participant that stated they had prior experience with purchasing an eco-fashion item were then asked in more detail about their experience with that item. All of the eight participants who confirmed that they had previously bought sustainable apparel answered positively when asked whether they would buy sustainable clothing again. However, multiple participants voiced their hesitancy concerning such purchases due to higher costs. For example, F9 stated that she did not think the price she paid was worth what she bought, and had not actually bought anything from that same sustainable fashion brand since the purchase in question: “I wish I could say yes, but I haven’t bought anything from Reformation (a sustainable fashion brand) since, which probably shows that I think I paid too much.”

Similarly, F1 stated that between the time of purchase, which was made online, and receiving the item for which she had saved up for months, she was worried that what she would end up receiving would not be worth the price she had paid. This commonly expressed reservation concerning the financial burden that millennials face in their experience with sustainable fashion highlights a key challenge that they as consumers face in increasing patronage of eco-fashion, which is further discussed in greater detail in the next section for theme six: *Barriers millennials face in purchasing sustainably-made clothing.*

1. *Barriers millennials face in purchasing sustainably-made clothing*

A variety of challenges in buying sustainably-made clothing were identified through in-depth and open-ended conversations concerning the participants’ firsthand experiences regarding this topic. A commonly voiced barrier was the higher costs associated with sustainable brands, compared to those of similar articles of clothing from fast fashion companies. Multiple students emphasized that this was a significant difficulty, particularly in relation to their current position as college students with very limited or no set income. For instance, F1 stated: “Cost – I think about how in the future, when I do have like enough income to buy whatever I want to, I’d definitely spend more of it on places like these (sustainable fashion brands).” Similarly, M4 stated that he would buy exclusively from environmentally conscious clothing brands if the clothes were the same price as those that were not made sustainably.

Another challenge that participants identified was their lack of knowledge concerning sustainable fashion. Students expressed that they were lacking in knowledge of what specific aspects were factored into the price of eco-fashion and that without this information, they were not strongly motivated to spend more money on an item that they could purchase in the same style for a lesser price. More generally, students expressed confusion surrounding the definition of sustainability within the fashion industry. Participant M2 stated: “I just generally know that there are things in the process (of the fashion industry) that are not good, like washing and dyeing, but that’s very fuzzy and definitely is not on par with my knowledge of other environmental issues.” Similarly, M6 stated that he would most likely be unwilling to pay more for a sustainable article of clothing versus one from a fast fashion brand, explaining: “I’m not exactly sure what sustainable means for the fashion industry, so I’m not sure what the difference in cost to the environment would be, one versus the other.”

Some participants admitted that they were not inclined to purchase from sustainable fashion brands due to their preexisting familiarity with and loyalty to fast fashion brands. As participant F5 explained, “I think especially for me, there’s just like a few companies who monopolize my clothing consumption… and they’re such fast fashion companies that they have no incentive to do eco-fashion.” Likewise, M5 stated that “Unless a company that they (consumers) are loyal to starts being sustainable, people just figure out what they want and stay with it.” Some consumers who had past experience with fast fashion brands and depended on them to deliver a certain style that they are looking for were more likely to continue purchasing from these companies rather than seek out and utilize other brands, regardless of their sustainability, and run the risk of an item not fulfilling their needs and expectations. Furthermore, the participants, including F4, expressed that they had a perception that sustainable fashion brands would not meet their fashion needs, especially at this current stage in their lives. Participant F4 explained, “When you are in college, you’re probably not looking at professional wear, or stuff you want to have for the rest of your life. You’re more interested in trends or trying out new things.” In addition, F5 harbored a preexisting assumption that sustainable fashion brands tended to carry a limited variety of clothing in regards to style: “I would be worried whether brands that have eco-fashion would carry the kind of sportswear kind of style that I like to wear. Especially when I think of like hemp things… like long skirts, or uncomfortable tunics.”

Participant F9, along with others, discussed the lack of explicit marketing of current sustainable fashion brands in promoting their environmental mission as a barrier in supporting environmentally conscious labels. She stated that in her personal experience while shopping for clothes, to find out whether a brand was sustainable or not, she herself would have to search online for that information, which is something that she admitted she did not think many other consumers would do in a similar situation. As someone who had minimal prior experience with sustainable fashion, participant M4 recalled that when he would see an advertisement proclaiming that something is made with organic cotton, he did not naturally make the connection between this message and environmental sustainability. He professed that this sort of generalized advertising that did not directly specify how the actions of the brand generate positive environmental impact was confusing, and that he instead understood it to signify that the brand was implying simply better quality and comfort. M4 explained further, stating:

*“That presentation to me is not effective because I’m like, ah, whatever. I wonder if instead it was framed as like this is one hundred percent organic, which means there’s no pesticides and herbicides in the water system and all of the farmers are paid a living wage… I think that would be more appealing.”*

Similarly, participants attributed the lack of explicit marketing strategies as a reason for their dearth of knowledge on existing sustainable fashion brand names and where to find them. For example, F8 explained how she knew of only a very small number of eco-fashion companies:

*“I don’t think they are explicit enough. The fact that I can only name two to three companies – there are definitely more out there, and I think that’s a shame. Maybe Everlane and Patagonia* (brands promoting environmental sustainability) *are a little extra, but you have to be that extra in order to be heard and to be seen. I’m wondering – where are the other ones? Why do I have to scroll down online to fine a very small blurb that this is local and responsible?”*

Interrelated to students’ impression that brands were not outspoken enough about the ways in which they differentiated themselves from fast fashion companies, students reported being confused as to what it exactly meant for an apparel company to label itself as “sustainable.” The lack of a universally implemented standard on what constitutes the definition of a sustainable fashion brand consequently led some students to feel skepticism towards the actual impact and the accountability of the commitments of these companies. As a result, students were less inclined to financially invest in and support an organization that they were unsure of what exactly it was doing in the name of environmentalism. Expanding upon her previous statement that there was not a reliable standard that she could trust when differentiating between apparel brands, F9 emphasized her skepticism:

*“I don’t trust large companies, anything that works for profit. Anyone can claim something is sustainable and there are no standards. And as millennials get more and more into this sort of thing* (sustainable fashion)*, all they* (companies) *are going to do is brand stuff as sustainable and saving the environment – so to have some sort of actual standard backing it is needed.”*

The last barrier identified in making sustainable fashion choices was the fact that most sustainable fashion brands were based exclusively online and did not have an offline retail store. The lack of physical retail locations presented two difficulties for the participants: first, consumers expressed the difficulty of not being able to try clothes on before deciding to purchase them, especially when the financial investment would be significant; second, the extra process of having to order online and the time it took for the item to physically arrive impeded customers from choosing eco-fashion labels when they needed a piece of clothing as soon as possible. Participant F3 elaborated, stating that:

*“If I needed something quick, I’m just going to get the thing. There’s not many (sustainable brands) I know… with stores. If I’m going to buy something that I need right now, I don’t know where I could go to get sustainable clothing… A lot of the companies I know of, I don’t know where their storefronts are.”*

Similarly, F2 admitted that lack of physical access to sustainable fashion brands was a difficulty that she personally experienced, despite online availability:

*“I guess everything is online, but that goes back to not being able to try things on. A store would help. It would change from ‘I am definitely not buying this because it’s way too expensive and I don’t know if it will fit’ to ‘Let me try this on, and if I really like it, maybe I’ll buy it.’”*

1. **Discussion**

Through data collection and analysis, six key themes were identified related to the topics of participants’ consumer behavior, environmental sustainability, and participants’ experience with sustainable fashion: attitude versus action towards sustainability, sustainability as a secondary benefit, environmental consciousness as a clothing consumer, effect of education and policy on sustainable behaviors, millennials’ experience, or lack thereof, with sustainable fashion, and barriers millennials face in purchasing sustainably-made clothing. Synthesizing the results, this section further discusses the author’s insight related to the research’s objective to identify and better understand the difficulties that millennials face in being more environmentally conscious in their clothing consumption. Furthermore, this section highlights potential areas of improvement and applicable recommendations within the current sustainable fashion field to propose ideas in overcoming current constraints and limitations, drawing upon the suggestions and experiences of the students themselves.

*Insights on Sustainable Fashion Brands and Marketing Strategy*

The findings imply that from the target population, millennials that are current or recently graduated college students at the University of Chicago at the time of the interview, participants are positively inclined towards environmentalism and self-reportedly harbor a significant level of environmental concern. However, the data collected showed that despite their demonstrated concern for environmental issues, some students expressed a lack of interest in the specific field of sustainable fashion. The participants’ apathy towards sustainable fashion could be attributed to the possibility that there may exist a connection between an individual’s interest in fashion and frequency in clothing purchases, and the individual’s perception of the significance of the fast fashion industry’s environmental impact. The present study’s findings support existing research implying that general environmental concern of an individual reflects a combination of different environmental issues, and is not indicative of environmental concern for all specific problems (applied in this case, to the impact of the apparel industry).[[60]](#footnote-60) While future research on a larger scale would have to be conducted, this could provide valuable insight into identifying the challenges of increasing consumer awareness on this issue to an expanded general audience who may demonstrate a lack of prior interest in this field. Marketers would benefit in utilizing this information to identify areas of improvement to more effectively attract consumers to support their organization; more specifically, to ensure that their campaign strategy encompasses the following three qualities: specificity, explicitness, and reliability.

A potential way to increase interest regarding eco-fashion for consumers who are committed to a level of environmental consciousness, but express apathy towards sustainable fashion, would be for brands to shift their marketing strategies to be more specific about the causes they support and how their organization forwards those greater goals. For example, participant F5’s suggested an advertisement stating that “50% of the price of this goes directly to, for example, the Flint water crisis” would provide extra incentive to purchase from a company; similarly, M4 stated that if brands were to define certain claims, such as “100% organic” to represent specific requirements such as “there’s no pesticides and herbicides in the water system, and all of the farmers are paid a living wage,” he would feel more inclined to purchase from these brands. Drawing clear and specialized connections between the commitments of eco-fashion companies and how they contribute to mitigating more general and well-known environmental problems, such as climate change and water pollution, may influence consumers without prior knowledge or interest on sustainable fashion to regard this field with greater importance.

However, a successful method of consumer outreach must ensure that these specific and detailed connections are explicitly marketed to consumers. As participant F9 stated: “I think a big sign is what millennials need”, and as F4 remarked: “When I’m shopping, I don’t really come across stores that are like ‘We sell sustainable clothes,’” eco-fashion brands could benefit from more pronounced and outgoing advertising methods in relation to their sustainability goals. Rather than customers having to conduct their own separate research on whether a certain brand is environmentally conscious or not, presenting the company’s eco-fashion mission at the very forefront of a brand’s advertisement campaign and online and/or offline presence would be helpful in influencing consumers that are lukewarm towards the fashion industry in general, to make more informed choices and to regard their clothing purchases as decisions with the potential to generate positive or negative environmental impact. As illustrated by M4’s answer in response to the question of whether he thought sustainable fashion brands were making an environmental impact: “No. Because I can’t name any (eco-fashion brands)”, particularly for consumers who are unfamiliar with eco-fashion, it is important to expand people’s working knowledge of companies that produce sustainably-made apparel. Ideally, a consumer would be able to identify a specific brand or organization to fulfill his or her fashion needs for a particular style or article of clothing desired, through a sustainably-made alternative to fast fashion.

*Insights on Sustainable Fashion through Education and Policy*

The present study provides insight as to how sustainable practices regarding apparel consumption and care can gain more widespread traction and support through education and policy. Referring to the remarkable clarity with which participants were able to remember how and when they were initially taught about recycling, the long-term impact that early education has on students to develop environmentally conscious lifestyle practices presents the possibility of implementing a similar framework for education on eco-conscious clothing care, an area with significant potential to decrease resource consumption and pollution.[[61]](#footnote-61) A possible field of future research would be in assessing the effectiveness of implementing early education aiming to decrease one’s environmental footprint through more sustainable methods when caring for clothes. The findings suggest that there is potential for influencing people’s behaviors towards more sustainable lifestyle habits at an early age, which could be applied in developing educational programs that focus on teaching children about the basics of washing, mending, and recycling clothing while minimizing environmental impact, with proper consideration of what age level would be most appropriate and effective for when this schooling would occur. For example, while teaching clothing mending techniques may be more effective when taught at a higher grade level, basic ways in which one can minimize pollution while washing clothes, such as simply selecting the “cold wash” option and hanging clothes to dry rather than using the dryer machine, could be successfully taught to a younger audience. While it is difficult to effectively track and implement education that occurs at home, the author believes that incorporating a curriculum with a specialized purpose throughout public school settings could be significantly influential.

Furthermore, a universal and unambiguous definition of sustainable fashion that is confirmed and reviewed by nonpartisan governmental and non-governmental entities would be helpful in gaining the trust and loyalty of skeptical consumers. Similar to multiple participants who voiced that there was a lack of a dependable, easily recognizable certification for sustainable fashion, F9 stated:

*“I am a big fan of those organic labels, those fair trade labels, and having universal standards that people can trust… having some sort of respective label like that in the fashion industry… I don’t trust large companies, anything that works for profit. Anyone can claim something is sustainable and there are no standards. And as millennials get more and more into this sort of thing, all they* (companies) *are going to do is brand stuff as sustainable and saving the environment sort of thing. So, to have some sort of actual standard backing it is needed.”*

Unfortunately, there seems to be an underlying level of distrust and skepticism towards fashion brands that market themselves outwardly as “sustainable”, which conflicts with the participants’ responses that they desire more explicit marketing for these brands. As such, marketing strategies would benefit from a two-pronged approach that balances both clear marketing and a dependable, third-party certification process that establishes trust between the brand and the consumer. A standard and comprehensive definition of sustainable fashion would require the inclusion of multiple stages of the complex process of garment production, such as resource extraction, manufacture, production, and distribution. This standardization of requirements also presents the opportunity for communication and agreement between fashion brands and policymakers, and potentially for the formation of a network of organizations dedicated towards the common goal of environmental sustainability, which would significantly increase the leverage that sustainable fashion brands have in terms of impacting the practices and processes of the apparel industry at large.

1. **Conclusion**

As Elizabeth L. Cline, author of *Overdressed: the Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, states: “There are no such built-in physiological or psychological limits to how much clothing we will buy.”[[62]](#footnote-62) The universal need and insatiable desire for apparel fuels the current fast fashion industry and finances the continuation of the ongoing vicious cycle of the industry’s unsustainable systems at the expense of environmental degradation. However, with consumers’ growing environmental awareness, resulting in a growing demand for sustainably-made apparel, the field of sustainable fashion is a growing market with great potential for further expansion.

The current research sought to fill the gap in existing literature pertaining to better understanding the barriers that the millennial population face in purchasing from environmentally sustainable apparel brands. Based on the qualitative data collected from the interviews, five major challenges were identified: higher costs, lack of knowledge, preference for familiar brands, lack of offline storefronts, and not explicit enough marketing. In terms of consumer behavior, participants demonstrated a discrepancy between their self-proclaimed environmental awareness and their actual behaviors. In addition, multiple consumers viewed sustainability as a secondary benefit, rather than a primary motivator, in actions that produced an environmental benefit. A notable, albeit unexpected finding was the remarkable clarity with which the participants were able to recall the circumstances of their first introduction to recycling methods, which highlighted an area of potential future research in the effectiveness of early education on decreasing environmental impact through conscious care of clothing.

In the case of millennials’ experience with sustainable fashion, while approximately half of the participants had previously purchased from sustainable fashion brands, multiple respondents voiced their confusion as to what constituted an item of clothing that was “sustainable.” Marketers would benefit in developing a more explicit and specific campaign strategy that detailed particular connections between a consumer’s purchase and the goals or projects it supports. Additionally, results showed that participants were skeptical towards sustainable fashion brands being able to fulfill their needs as a millennial consumer, in terms of budget, style, and convenience.

Consumer behavior is a complex system that is influenced by a number of variables, both external and internal. As illustrated by M1’s comment: “If I had more income, I would consider it. Also, I would have to know. I don’t think they advertise it. And even if they did advertise it, I would have to believe them,” a consumer’s decision for an article of clothing relies upon multiple variables that are interconnected with each other. However, this allows for the potential of multiple entry points for entities such as sustainable fashion brands and policymakers to generate significant impact upon the attitudes and behaviors of consumers. Through a strategic combination of information, marketing, and trust between sustainable fashion brands and millennials, there exists great potential for growth in terms of not only expanding the current market’s supply and demand for sustainably-made apparel, but also, from a wider perspective, transforming the apparel industry’s values and goals through the massive purchasing power of the millennial generation.

**APPENDIX**

1. **Interview Guide**

**Background**

* How old are you? Where are you from? (Urban/rural/suburban) Where did you go to high school?
* What year are you? What are you studying? Do you have any thoughts about what you might want to pursue after college?
* Do you keep up with the news?
  + If YES: What are some topics that interest you?

**Consumer Behavior**

* What were the last 3 things that you bought/spent money on?
  + Where did you buy them?
  + Why did you decide to buy them?
  + What were some of the factors that you considered when buying those specific items?
    - What was the most important factor that you considered when making the purchase?
      * The least?
* When was the last time you bought an article of clothing?
  + What was the article of clothing and what was it for?
  + Where did you buy it?
  + Was it an impromptu or planned purchase?
  + What were some of the factors that you considered when buying those specific items?
    - What was the most important factor that you considered when making the purchase?
      * The least?
  + How did you feel about the price of the clothing you purchased?
  + What were the most and least important factors when you made your purchase?

**Environmental Consciousness**

* Do you ever think about environmental sustainability?
  + If so, about how many times in one week would you say you think about environmental sustainability?
* How would you define sustainability?
* Do you recycle?
  + If so – where did you learn how to recycle?
* Other than recycling, do you practice any other environmentally conscious habits/practices?
  + If so – where did you learn about these practices?
* Growing up, did your family recycle?
  + Growing up, did your family practice any other environmentally conscious habits/practices?
* Would you say that you are: not concerned/slightly concerned/moderately concerned/greatly concerned about the environment?
* What part of environmental issues is the most concerning to you?
* What do you think is the most harmful to the environment?
* What are your thoughts on the apparel industry in relation to the environment?
  + What do you think is the most harmful aspect of the apparel industry?

**Experience with Sustainable Fashion**

* Do you think about the environment when purchasing clothes?
  + Do you think about the environment when caring for your clothes? Washing your clothes?
  + What do you do with clothing that you no longer wear?
  + How about when purchasing your clothes?
* What do you think sustainability in the fashion industry looks like?
  + What do you think sustainable clothing is?
* Do you think fashion can be sustainable?
* Are you familiar with the term “eco-fashion” or sustainable fashion?
  + If so, what does it mean?
  + If not, would you be interested in learning more?
* Have you ever purchased an article of sustainable clothing?
  + If so, what was it, when did you buy it, and where did you buy it?
    - How long have you had it?
    - What has your experience wearing it been?
    - What prompted you to make the purchase?
    - Would you purchase sustainable clothing again?
  + If not, why not?
    - Did you know sustainable clothing brands existed?
    - What are barriers or challenges in buying sustainable fashion?
      * What would encourage you to buy sustainable clothing?
* How much do you think an ordinary, plain, white T-Shirt costs?
  + How much would a sustainably-made T-shirt in the same design and appearance cost?
    - Which one would you buy?
    - If sustainable T-shirt: Why? What makes it worth the price difference?
    - If not ordinary T-shirt: Why?
* Are you familiar with any sustainable apparel brands?
  + What are they?
  + How did you learn about them?
  + How did you learn that they were sustainable?
  + What is your opinion on them?
  + Do you think they are making an impact?
  + Do you buy products from them?

1. Black, Sandy. *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook*. Thames & Hudson, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amed, I., Berg, A., Brantberg, L., & Hedrich, S. (n.d.). The state of fashion. Retrieved from https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-state-of-fashion [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Morgan, Andrew. *The True Cost*. 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wicker, Alden. “The Earth Is Covered in the Waste of Your Old Clothes.” *Newsweek*, 16 Mar. 2017, www.newsweek.com/2016/09/09/old-clothes-fashion-waste-crisis-494824.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Amed, I., Berg, A., Brantberg, L., & Hedrich, S. (n.d.). The state of fashion. Retrieved from https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-state-of-fashion [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dhaka, Reuters in. “Rana Plaza Collapse: 38 Charged with Murder over Garment Factory Disaster.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 18 July 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Westerman, Ashley. “4 Years After Rana Plaza Tragedy, What's Changed For Bangladeshi Garment Workers?” *NPR*, NPR, 30 Apr. 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mezzadri, Alessandra. “Cambodian Sweatshop Protests Reveal the Blood on Our Clothes.”*The Conversation*, 8 Mar. 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Morgan, Andrew. *The True Cost*. 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hughner, R. S., McDonagh, P., Prothero, A., Shultz, C. J., & Stanton, J. (2007). Who are organic food consumers? A compilation and review of why people purchase organic food. *Journal of consumer behaviour*, *6*(2 3), 94-110 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rokka, J., & Uusitalo, L. (2008). Preference for green packaging in consumer product choices–Do consumer’s care? *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 32*(5), 516-525. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. NW, 1615 L. St, Suite 800Washington, and DC 20036USA202-419-4300 | Main202-857-8562 | Fax202-419-4372 | Media Inquiries. “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins.” *Pew Research Center* (blog). Accessed April 12, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Schroeder, Jules. “How To Tap Into The Millennial $200 Billion Buying Power With Social Media.” Forbes. Accessed December 10, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/julesschroeder/2017/10/31/how-to-tap-into-the-millennial-200-billion-buying-power-with-social-media/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hanks, Kristin & Odom, William & Roedl, David & Blevis, Eli. (2008). Sustainable millennials: Attitudes towards sustainability and the material effects of interactive technologies. Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings. 333-342. 10.1145/1357054.1357111. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Op-Ed | Millennials Say They Care About Sustainability. So, Why Don’t They Shop This Way?” The Business of Fashion, April 21, 2018. <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/op-ed-millennials-say-they-care-about-sustainability-so-why-dont-they-dont-shop-this-way>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Ready-to-Wear: A Short History of the Garment Industry.” Bellatory. Accessed April 12, 2019. <https://bellatory.com/fashion-industry/Ready-to-Wear-A-Short-History-of-the-Garment-Industry>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Brooks, Andrew. *Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes*. London, UK: Zed Books Ltd., 2015. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/11240431>. Pg. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., pg. 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., pg. 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., pg. 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “Sustainable Fashion: Jennifer Farley Gordon, Colleen Hill: 9780857851857: Amazon.Com: Books.” Accessed October 31, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. “Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion: Elizabeth L. Cline: 8601400313541: Amazon.Com: Books.” Pg. 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., pg. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., pg. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., pg. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lu, S. (2018, March 05). Wage Level for Garment Workers in the World (updated in 2017). Retrieved from https://shenglufashion.com/2018/03/04/wage-level-for-garment-workers-in-the-world-updated-in-2017/ [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion: Elizabeth L. Cline: 8601400313541: Amazon.Com: Books.” Pg. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., pg. 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “Analysis | Passport.” Accessed October 31, 2018. [http://www.portal.euromonitor.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/portal/analysis/tab#](http://www.portal.euromonitor.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/portal/analysis/tab). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., pg. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Black, Sandy. *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook*. Thames & Hudson, 2012., pg 307 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE FASHION?” Accessed December 12, 2018. <http://www.greenstrategy.se/sustainable-fashion/what-is-sustainable-fashion/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. “The Damage I Cause When I Wash My Clothes.” *The Swatch Book*, 16 July 2015, theswatchbook.offsetwarehouse.com/2015/07/16/environmental-impact-of-the-washing-machine/. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Morgan, Andrew. *The True Cost*. 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Chua, Jasmin Malik. “Why Is Eco Fashion So Expensive?” *TreeHugger*, Treehugger, 5 Feb. 2018, www.treehugger.com/style/why-is-eco-fashion-so-expensive.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Black, Sandy. *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook*. Thames & Hudson, 2012., pg 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Napper, Imogen E., and Richard C. Thompson. “Release of Synthetic Microplastic Plastic Fibres from Domestic Washing Machines: Effects of Fabric Type and Washing Conditions.” *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 112, no. 1–2 (November 15, 2016): 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2016.09.025>. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Davies, Iain. (2015). The values and motivations behind sustainable fashion consumption. Journal of Consumer Behaviour. 15. 10.1002/cb.1559. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Padel, S., & Foster, C. (2005). Exploring the gap between attitudes and behaviour: Understanding why consumers buy or do not buy organic food. British food journal, 107(8), 606-625. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Joshi, Yatish, and Zillur Rahman. “Factors Affecting Green Purchase Behaviour and Future Research Directions.” *International Strategic Management Review* 3, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 128–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ism.2015.04.001>. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Hanks, Kristin, William Odom, David Roedl, and Eli Blevis. “Sustainable Millennials: Attitudes towards Sustainability and the Material Effects of Interactive Technologies,” 333–42, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1357054.1357111>. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Bamberg, Sebastian. “How Does Environmental Concern Influence Specific Environmentally Related Behaviors? A New Answer to an Old Question.” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(02)00078-6>. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. “How Americans View Environmental Issues.” *Pew Research Center*. Accessed April 3, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/20/for-earth-day-heres-how-americans-view-environmental-issues/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Joshi, Yatish, and Zillur Rahman. “Factors Affecting Green Purchase Behaviour and Future Research Directions.” *International Strategic Management Review* 3, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 128–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ism.2015.04.001>. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. “Annual Expenditure of U.S. Millennials, 2013 | Statistic.” Statista. Accessed April 11, 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/283261/annual-expenditure-of-us-millennials/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. “U.S. Millennials: Social Network Users 2012-2018 | Statistic.” Statista. Accessed April 8, 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/372650/us-millennial-social-network-users/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Feng, Ruoyu; Sadachar, Amrut; and Karpova, Elena E., "Sustainable Apparel Consumption Behavior among U.S. Students" (2012). Apparel, Events and Hospitality Management Conference Proceedings and Presentations. 1. http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/aeshm\_conf/1 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Hiller, Kim. (2010). Internal and external barriers to eco‐conscious apparel acquisition. International Journal of Consumer Studies. 34. 279 - 286. 10.1111/j.1470-6431.2010.00865.x. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. [Jessica Hill](https://www.emeraldinsight.com/author/Hill%2C+Jessica), [Hyun‐Hwa Lee](https://www.emeraldinsight.com/author/Lee%2C+Hyun-Hwa), (2012) "Young Generation Y consumers’ perceptions of sustainability in the apparel industry", Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal, Vol. 16 Issue: 4, pp.477-491, <https://doi.org/10.1108/13612021211265863> [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. NW, 1615 L. St, Suite 800Washington, and DC 20036USA202-419-4300 | Main202-857-8562 | Fax202-419-4372 | Media Inquiries. “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins.” *Pew Research Center* (blog). Accessed March 30, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. “Abductive Reasoning - New World Encyclopedia.” Accessed April 5, 2019. <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Abductive_reasoning>. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Mueller, A. S., & Abrutyn, S. (2016). Adolescents under Pressure: A New Durkheimian Framework for Understanding Adolescent Suicide in a Cohesive Community. American Sociological Review, 81(5), 877–899. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122416663464> [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Joshi, Yatish, and Zillur Rahman. “Factors Affecting Green Purchase Behaviour and Future Research Directions.” *International Strategic Management Review* 3, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 128–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ism.2015.04.001>. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Joshi, Yatish, and Zillur Rahman. “Factors Affecting Green Purchase Behaviour and Future Research Directions.” *International Strategic Management Review* 3, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 128–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ism.2015.04.001>. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. “Style That’s Sustainable: A New Fast-Fashion Formula | McKinsey.” Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/style-thats-sustainable-a-new-fast-fashion-formula>. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. “Obama’s Stimulus Package to Provide Rebates for Energy-Efficient Appliances.” Electrolux Group. Accessed April 4, 2019. <https://www.electroluxgroup.com:443/en/obamas-stimulus-package-to-provide-rebates-for-energy-efficient-appliances-2004/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Mainieri, Tina, Elaine G. Barnett, Trisha R. Valdero, John B. Unipan, and Stuart Oskamp. “Green Buying: The Influence of Environmental Concern on Consumer Behavior.” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 137, no. 2 (April 1997): 189–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224549709595430>. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Napper, Imogen E., and Richard C. Thompson. “Release of Synthetic Microplastic Plastic Fibres from Domestic Washing Machines: Effects of Fabric Type and Washing Conditions.” *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 112, no. 1–2 (November 15, 2016): 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2016.09.025>. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. “Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion: Elizabeth L. Cline: 8601400313541: Amazon.Com: Books.” Pg. 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)