

Assessing the Sustainable Fashion Avoidance Among Millennial Shoppers: Special Reference to Colombo District, Sri Lanka

Prathibha Madubhashani, Shanika Hansini Rathnasiri, Mihiri Buddika* and Shashini Kaushalya Bulumulla

Department of Marketing Management, Faculty of Management Studies,
Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka,
mihiri840@gmail.com

Abstract - The fashion industry significantly contributes to the global economy but remains the second largest polluter in the world, impacting pollution, carbon emissions, and resource depletion. Despite millennials stated environmental concerns, there remains a significant attitude-behaviour gap, as consumer adoption of sustainable fashion is limited. Therefore, this study investigates the determinants of sustainable fashion avoidance intentions among millennial shoppers in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka. Current research adopts a deductive research approach to examine the applicability of an extended Brand Avoidance Model in understanding consumers' sustainable fashion avoidance intention. Purposive sampling was adopted to distribute a structured, self-administered questionnaire to 384 millennial shoppers in the Colombo district. Multiple regression analysis was conducted using SPSS 21 software to examine the hypotheses of the study. The results revealed that ideological incompatibility is the most significant factor which impacts sustainable fashion avoidance intentions among millennials. Despite this, in the district of Colombo in Sri Lanka, millennials' intention to avoid sustainable fashion is also significantly influenced by materialism, unmet expectations, and symbolic incongruence. By improving product quality, matching products with customer values, and raising awareness through effective education, marketing managers may get beyond significant obstacles to sustainable fashion. Ensuring affordability and creating trust through transparency will motivate customers to make sustainable decisions. Finally, policymakers can help these initiatives by imposing rigorous rules on sustainability claims and rewarding ethical fashion companies.

Keywords: Avoidance intention, Brand Avoidance Model, Millennial shoppers, Sustainable fashion

I. INTRODUCTION

The world is moving towards sustainability by identifying that it plays a crucial role in people's quality of life and balanced ecosystems (Khalil et al., 2022). Establishing a healthy relationship with customers and the environment is vital in the commercial sector while conserving resources for future generations (Prathibhani & Lakshika, 2023). Among different sectors, the fashion industry is a major contributor to environmental degradation and is among the most polluting sectors of the global economy (Bhullar, 2021). The fashion industry makes textile waste, around 92 million tonnes every year, and about 85% of it ends up in landfills (Igini, 2024). The Washington Post has pointed out that about 85% of textiles are disposed of, and less than 1% of clothing materials are taken into recycling (Chiu, 2025). It has been identified that washing certain types of clothing releases hundreds of plastic microfibers into water systems (McFall-Johnsen, 2020). Due to its scale, the fashion sector is responsible for 20% of industrial water pollution and up to 10% of carbon emissions (Rathinamoorthy, 2019; Niinimäki et al., 2020).

To address this problem, a new concept called sustainable fashion (slow fashion) has arisen (Bentahar & Benzidia, 2018) with a new consumer market (Nawrocki, 2024). Even though research on sustainable fashion is still in its early stage, consumers are willing to

choose ethical forms of fashion consumption (Carrington, 2020; Kong et al., 2021). Young consumers have positive attitudes towards sustainable fashion, but they frequently fail to purchase (Williams & Hodges, 2022). Similarly, although previous research focused on identifying the factors that lead millennials to avoid fast fashion, some studies have identified, millennial consumers do not prioritize sustainability (Iran et al., 2019) and prefer fast fashion over sustainable fashion (Rolling & Sadachar, 2018; Pencarelli et al., 2020). It is identified that a noticeable attitude-behaviour gap continues, where consumers who speak about sustainability often do not practice their principles and practice in sustainable fashion purchases, despite the expanding selection of sustainable fashion options (Jacobs et al., 2018). As a result, consumers' actual purchase habits for sustainable fashion remain relatively low.

In Sri Lanka, the ethical fashion sector reports that consumer patterns are gradually shifting, with people becoming more aware of sustainable living (SLYCAN Trust, 2022). Nevertheless, there are nine massive landfill sites in Colombo, Sri Lanka, piled with waste garments. Despite being the nation's largest business and contributing 50% of its GDP, Sri Lanka's apparel industry generates 10,000 tons of textile waste annually. The rapid growth of Sri Lanka's fashion sector causes pollution with environmental threats at every stage of the textile life cycle (Prathibhani & Lakshika, 2023; Rathnasiri et al., 2024). By investigating the sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennial shoppers in Colombo, Sri Lanka, this study seeks to bridge the attitude-behaviour gap regarding sustainable fashion avoidance by providing a vital contribution to the existing literature. By looking at these variables, the study aims to advance the understanding of avoidance intention of consumers and provide insights for organizations, policy makers and experts in the apparel industry with practical guidance on enhancing the efficient production and consumption of sustainable fashion. Accordingly, researchers developed research objectives as follows.

1. To investigate the impact of ideological incompatibility on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennial shoppers in Colombo district, Sri Lanka.
2. To investigate the impact of unmet expectations on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennial shoppers in Colombo district, Sri Lanka.
3. To investigate the impact of symbolic incongruence on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennial shoppers in Colombo district, Sri Lanka.
4. To investigate the impact of materialism on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennial shoppers in Colombo district, Sri Lanka.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Background

The marketing literature has demonstrated that knowing what customers do not prefer is as significant as understanding their needs (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). The researchers were able to identify two theoretical frameworks used to study the avoidance intention, namely Personality Trait Theory, developed by Allport in 1961 and the Brand Avoidance Model (BAM) developed by Lee et al. in 2009. In previous studies, Kim et al. (2012), Knittel et al. (2016), and Yoon et al. (2020) used the BAM to determine how consumers perceived fast fashion. Lee et al. (2009) defined brand avoidance as a form of consumer activism where customers refuse to purchase particular brands. The BAM identifies three variables that drive brand avoidance intentions, namely ideological incompatibility,

symbolic incongruence, and unmet expectations (Lee et al., 2009). This study examines the determinants of millennials' intention to avoid sustainable fashion while expanding the original BAM, including the variable materialism. Since millennials have shown stronger materialistic tendencies than any other consumer group, materialism is a significant variable in studying this phenomenon (Eastman & Liu, 2012; Colucci & Scarpi, 2013).

B. Empirical Background

1) Sustainable Fashion Avoidance Intention:

How much consumers want to avoid purchasing sustainable fashion products is shown by their plan not to buy them (Shen et al., 2014). Consumers' acceptance of sustainable products remains unknown. Prior literature has shown that although millennials are environmentally conscious, they are reluctant to purchase sustainable products (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018). When a sustainable product comes with a premium price tag, consumers hesitate to purchase it (Hiller Connell, 2010; Shen et al., 2014). The hardness of finding the products affects the low interest in sustainable products (Joy et al., 2012). Especially when millennial consumers doubt the meaning of sustainability, they try to skip purchases (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). Trends and social norms directly influence on avoidance of sustainable fashion due to limited variations, and they are less applicable in societies where fast fashion is common (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007). Millennials who focus on fast fashion and upcoming trends directly avoid the consumption of sustainable products (Kim and Park, 2020). Further, the adoption of alternatives (Kim & Park, 2020), lack of awareness (Beckham & Voyer, 2014) and a low level of trust regarding the certification of sustainable products lead to avoidance behaviour of the customer (Brun et al., 2020).

2) Ideological Incompatibility:

Ideological incompatibilities can be identified as a combination of socioeconomic and political views, which leads to purchasing choices of consumers (Lee et al., 2009). With regards to the millennials' perception towards sustainable fashion, mixed findings could be identified from earlier studies (Rolling & Sad-Char, 2018; Pencarelli et al., 2020). Consumers have considered sustainable fashion as a form of green capitalism (Casella et al., 2017). Millennial consumers struggle to balance social norms with their own beliefs. They believe that sustainable brands are used for financial gain (Cruz et al., 2020). Due to the diversity of sustainable values and commercialization of sustainability, it is difficult to identify products which are genuinely ethical (Peattie and Crane, 2005). The main reasons for sustainable fashion avoidance include, most consumers consider sustainable products as luxury goods (Thøgersen, 2010), they have an uncertain image of sustainable labels and certifications and organizations that practice sustainability ignore cultural differences (Harrison et al., 2005). Sri Lankan consumers consider sustainable fashion is Western concept with different from economic and cultural norms (Ranasinghe and Perera, 2019). These insights led to the formulation of the following hypothesis,

H₁: Ideological incompatibility has an impact on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among Millennial shoppers in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka

3) Unmet Expectations:

Customers are willing to stay with the brands that satisfy their needs and refuse brands which do not satisfy their needs (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). Unmet expectations arise when brands fail to fulfil the promises they have made, and post-purchase dissonance (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Lee & Conroy, 2009). Millennials use trendy clothes to express

themselves, and they believe sustainable fashion does not meet their requirements (Colucci & Scarpi, 2013; McNeill & Venter, 2019; Samala & Singh, 2019) and ignore "too green" fashion products (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Sri Lankan consumers face this unmet expectation scenario when the price of the sustainable fashion products is not as reasonable as they expected to pay. Having a limited selection caused unmet expectations. Specifically, when the perceived quality does not match the actual quality of the product, it causes unmet expectations and ultimately results in dissatisfaction (Dissanayake & Sinha, 2015). These insights led to the formulation of the following hypothesis,

H₂: Unmet Expectations have an impact on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among Millennial shoppers in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka.

4) Symbolic Incongruence:

Products with negative symbolic values are ignored by consumers (Hogg et al., 2009). The avoidance behaviour is caused by the symbolic mismatch between the consumer and the brand (Lee et al., 2009). Researchers have identified that consumers are not only prioritizing self-identified products that are consistent with a positive symbolic value, but they tend to ignore products with negative symbolic values (Banister & Hogg, 2004). Consumers avoid companies that reduce their self-identity but would like to stay with companies that support enhancing their self-identity (Rahman et al., 2020). When the brand image does not match the expectation of the customer, it leads to a symbolic incongruence (Banister & Hogg, 2004). Symbolic incongruence consists of two aspects, including inauthenticity and authenticity (Lee et al., 2009). Deindividuation occurs when the brand image does not fit with the self-image of the customer, and they disconnect with their own identity (Kim et al., 2012). This disconnection leads customers to not consider the brand when making purchase decisions (Lee et al., 2009). Millennial customers are more focused on fashion brands that enhance their self-identity and status (Iran et al., 2019; Vuong & Nguyen, 2018). In Sri Lanka, consumers see high fashion as important and expensive brands. Their perception is that eco-friendly and local brands are not in the luxury category. Hence, there is a mismatch in how sustainable products are viewed by the Sri Lankan consumer (Jayasinghe & Rathnayake, 2020). These insights led to the formulation of the following hypothesis,

H₃: Symbolic incongruence has an impact on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among Millennial shoppers in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka.

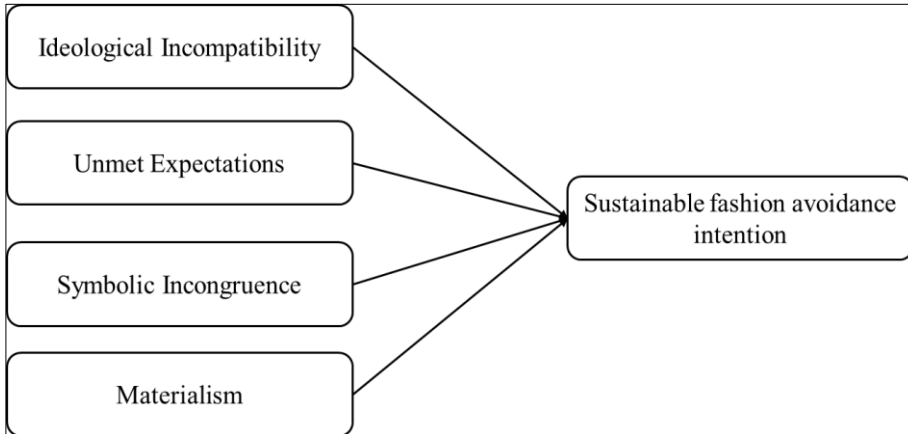
5) Materialism:

Materialism is about how much priority people place on things like material goods. It affects diverse contexts of people's decisions and actions (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Researchers have identified that millennials have high levels of consumption (Eastman & Liu, 2012; Johnstone & Lindh, 2022), reasoning that they have been raised in an environment that values materialism (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003). Millennials often purchase fast fashion for quick satisfaction (Richins, 1994; Eastman & Liu, 2012). This trend towards materialism drives customers away from sustainability, which prioritizes minimalism (Gentina et al., 2016). Materialistic people focus on their status and moving towards trendy products, which makes it hard for them to adopt sustainable products (Gilovich et al., 2015). People who prioritize materialism place less importance towards sustainable brands (Tsai, 2005). Furthermore, materialistic people think that sustainable fashion creates conflict for their lifestyle (Gentina et al., 2016). Sri Lankan context, customers are more materialistic and focus on fashion trends over sustainability (Perera & Silva, 2021). These insights led to the formulation of the following hypothesis,

H₄: Symbolic incongruence has an impact on sustainable fashion avoidance intention among Millennial shoppers in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka

Based on the above-formulated hypotheses, the conceptual framework of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Source: Adapted from Muposhi and Chuchu (2021).

III. METHODOLOGY

Utilising positivist research philosophy, combining with the deductive research approach, this study employed survey methodology. Researchers have conducted data in with minimal inference in a non-contrived setting. The study was categorised as cross-sectional. Previously developed questionnaire has been utilised for the data collection through an online questionnaire. To ensure the questionnaire reached the most appropriate sample, the researchers added three filtering questions at the beginning. As a result, questionnaire was distributed among millennial shoppers who have an intention to ignore sustainable fashion. Sustainable fashion avoidance intention was measured using a previously developed measurement scale, which was adapted from Muposhi & Chuchu (2021). The five-point Likert scale in the questionnaire represents the level of agreement among respondents. Before distributing, it was pre-tested with experts and ensure its validity.

Since the population is unknown, researchers followed a purposive sampling method. Sustainable fashion is a relatively new concept in Sri Lanka, and there is a lack of statistical data and information available regarding its avoidance in the Colombo district. There is no credible source providing who are the millennials in Colombo district that have avoidance intention towards sustainable fashion products in the area. To address this, the researcher examined previous literature on factors influencing sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennial consumers in recent years. Most researchers have utilized a sample size of 360 – 430 fashion consumers in their studies related to sustainable fashion. Sustainable fashion is a novelty trend in Sri Lanka, particularly among millennials. Moreover, a sample size calculator was used to determine the appropriate sample size for this study, indicating that 384 respondents would be suitable. Consequently, this study focuses on 384 millennial shoppers born between 1981 and 1996 who live in the Colombo district and have an intention to avoid sustainable fashion.

Inferential statistics are used to investigate the hypothesis that was developed in the study, while descriptive statistics are used to numerically characterize variables (Sekaran, 2016). While Pearson's correlation coefficient and regression analysis are elaborated under inferential statistics and mean and standard deviation are elaborated under descriptive analysis. IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software would be used to analyze the factors influencing sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennial shoppers. Therefore, Utilising IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software, multiple regression analysis was used to test the proposed hypothesis.

IV.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before conducting the data analysis, missing values and outliers' treatment were carefully examined. Although no major outliers were detected, several missing values were identified and appropriately addressed using SPSS software. According to demographic analysis, respondents identified 63.82% as female and 36.18% as male. Among the 293 respondents, the majority (65.19%) were between the ages of 27–30, 18.09% aged 31–34, and 9.22% each in the 35–38 and 39–43 age categories. Furthermore, 46.76% of participants were employed in the corporate sector, 31.40% in the government sector, 15.36% were students, 4.10% were self-employed, and 2.39% were unemployed. Regarding monthly income, the largest group (43.34%) earned between LKR 30,001–60,000, and only 0.68% earned above LKR 120,000.

In order to guarantee the study's robustness and reliability, descriptive statistics and inferential statistical techniques, including regression analysis, were conducted. In addition, the reliability and validity analysis were assured and presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Reliability of Variables

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Ideological incompatibility	4	.913
Symbolic Incongruence	4	.895
Unmet Expectations	4	.906
Materialism	5	.891
Sustainable Fashion Avoidance Intention	4	.896

Source: Survey Data 2024.

A. Reliability and Validity

The Cronbach Alpha value assesses the variables' reliability and ensures the measurement's consistency. Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.70 or higher is acceptable, whereas a value of 0.60 or lower denotes poor dependability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). As highlighted in Table 1, all of the independent and dependent variables exhibit Cronbach's Alpha values greater than 0.7. As a result, all of the variables can be considered reliable.

B. Validity Analysis

To ensure the validity of the current research, the researcher conducted content validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. To check the validity of the content of this study, the researcher obtained opinions from subject experts related to the indicators. Table 2 represents the results of the sample adequacy, convergent and discriminant validity analyses.

Table 2. Validity Analysis

Variables	KMO Value	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)	Fornell-Larcker Criteria
Ideological incompatibility	.854	0.000	0.794	0.869	0.891
Symbolic Incongruence	.815	0.000	0.761	0.874	0.872
Unmet Expectations	.853	0.000	0.782	0.877	0.884
Materialism	.881	0.000	0.836	0.876	0.914
Sustainable Fashion Avoidance Intention	.842	0.000	0.826	0.872	0.909

Source: Survey data (2024).

To demonstrate convergent validity, Bartlett's test significance level must be less than 0.05, and the KMO test result must be more than 0.5. Additionally, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value must be above 0.5. This means that composite reliability (CR) should be greater than 0.7, and the construction should explain at least 50% of the variance in the items that comprise the construction. Consequently, the anticipated level has been reached. It demonstrates the convergent validity of each construct.

Considering the discriminant validity, Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) explained that the Fornell-Larcker criterion is a popular technique for verifying the discriminant validity of measurement models. It involves using each construct's square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to calculate the correlation between them. Therefore, discriminant validity is proven in the current study when each construct's square root of AVE is greater than its correlations with other elements.

C. Analysis of Inferential Statistics

Inferential statistics generalize the sample findings to the population and examine the hypothesis's acceptance and rejection (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The researcher computed multiple linear regression and correlation analyses to analyze inferential statistics.

Table 3. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
4	0.921 ^a	0.847	0.845

Source: Survey data (2024).

Based on Table 3, the adjusted R-squared value is 0.845, and it can be summarized that 84.5% of sustainable fashion avoidance intention variations can be explained by ideological incompatibility, symbolic incongruence, unmet expectations, and materialism. However, it emphasizes that 15.5% variations of the sustainable fashion avoidance intention can be explained by the other variables that have not been considered in the current study.

Table 4. Coefficient Measurements

Variable	Unstandardized Beta Coefficients	Sig.
Ideological Incompatibility	.286	.000
Symbolic Incongruence	.270	.000
Unmet Expectations	.223	.000
Materialism	.218	.000

Source: Survey data (2024).

According to Table 4, ideological incompatibility is the most influential factor in sustainable fashion avoidance intention, with the highest positive beta value being 0.286 and 0.000 p-values. Symbolic incongruence influences sustainable fashion avoidance with a 0.270 beta value and 0.000 p-values. Unmet expectations influence sustainable fashion avoidance intention with a 0.223 beta value and of 0.000 the p-value. Furthermore, materialism influences sustainable fashion avoidance with a 0.218 beta value and 0.000 p-value. According to this result, ideological incompatibility, symbolic incongruence, unmet expectations, and materialism positively contribute to the intention to avoid sustainable fashion.

D. Discussion

This research results show that consumers avoid sustainable fashion when they perceive a disconnect between ideological incompatibility and their values. Birtwistle and Moore (2007) further confirm this result, emphasizing that values must connect with consumer beliefs. Similarly, Haws et al. (2014) stressed that ideological misalignment can lead to negative perceptions and avoidance behaviour. As a result, ideological incompatibility was identified as the most significant factor in avoiding sustainable fashion intention among millennial customers in the Colombo district of Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, unmet expectations are the second most influential factor in avoiding sustainable fashion. Because most customers prioritize quality, style, and trendiness and fail to do so, people feel dissatisfaction. Armstrong et al. (2015) and Joergens (2006) further revealed that if aesthetics and novelty attributes generate unmet expectations, it

will lead to avoidance behaviour. Valour et al. (2022) further found that a lack of satisfaction with product attributes leads to reduced engagement with sustainable fashion. As a result, these results proved that Colombo district Millennials take into account the influence of unmet expectations on their desire to avoid sustainable fashion.

Moreover, through this study, researchers identified that symbolic incongruence also significantly influences sustainable fashion avoidance intention. Because if consumers' identity or self-expression doesn't match sustainable fashion, they tend to avoid it. This result was further confirmed by McQueens et al. (2023), who explored that fashion choices often serve symbolic purposes and that sustainable items may be less fashionable. Kozlowski et al. (2019) further argued that a lack of personalization and cultural matching in sustainable fashion limits its appeal. Finally, materialism also plays a significant role in sustainable fashion avoidance. Consumers who follow trends and maintain high-value status are more likely to consume and reject sustainable options. Yoon et al. (2020) and Eastman and Liu (2012) found that materialistic people prefer fast fashion to receive prestige from society. Further confirming, Hennigs et al. (2013) concluded that sustainable fashion often lacks the luxury appeal valued by materialistic consumers. As a result, the current study proved the role of materialism in influencing sustainable fashion avoidance behaviour among millennials in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A. Conclusion

The study findings highlight a critical gap between millennials' environmental awareness and purchase behaviour, leading to sustainable fashion avoidance. As a result, the current study investigated the determinants of sustainable fashion avoidance intentions among millennial shoppers in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka. Therefore, the conceptual framework was developed using highlighted gaps in existing literature. It focused on four independent variables: unmet expectations, ideological incompatibility, symbolic incongruence, and materialism, and their influence on the dependent variable of sustainable fashion avoidance intention. Furthermore, this study employed purposive sampling to collect data from 293 millennial shoppers in the Colombo district who indicated their intention to avoid sustainable fashion, and the SPSS software was used to analyze the data. Finally, the study employed correlation and multiple regression analyses to examine the relationship between variables. As a result, the current study proved that unmet expectations, ideological incompatibility, symbolic incongruence, and materialism significantly influence sustainable fashion avoidance intention in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka, among millennial shoppers.

B. Theoretical Implications

In the current study, the researchers applied the Brand Avoidance Model (BAM) to understand the determinants of sustainable fashion avoidance intention among millennials in the Colombo district. BAM focuses on unmet expectations, symbolic incongruence, and ideological incompatibility, and the researchers expand the original BAM model, incorporating materialism into the conceptual framework of the study based on the extensive literature review carried out. The current findings show the ongoing applicability of the BAM in sustainable fashion avoidance and explain a fresh perspective on how materialism impacts avoidance behaviours.

The theoretical foundations of this study are essential for future scholars because they contribute for learn about consumer behaviour in market marketplace of sustainable

fashion. More research can use this paradigm to gain better knowledge on sustainable fashion avoidance by looking at new variables or applying them to different geographical locations and demographics.

C. Managerial Implications

The current study provides significant managerial implications for improving sustainable fashion. Since the ideological incompatibility proved a major obstacle to sustainable fashion avoidance, current sustainable fashion might not align with millennials' values, cultural norms, or self-identity. Therefore, marketers and brand managers must align social ideals, local identity, and lifestyle goals to reframe sustainable fashion. Furthermore, companies should express the consumer's individualism without harming their environmental concerns, and marketing should highlight modern fashion preferences. Therefore, more value-focused and culturally blended brand stories are needed for sustainable fashion.

Furthermore, unmet expectations, symbolic incongruence, and materialism explain the importance of product and communication strategies to avoid unfavorable impressions of sustainable fashion. According to the study results, millennials prioritize performance, style, quality, aesthetics, and product ranges towards sustainable fashion; sustainable fashion companies should focus on this. Since the majority of consumers are price-sensitive, they prefer sustainable fashion that is more accessible and provides value-driven promotions or competitive pricing for them. Moreover, consumers prioritize materialism, so sustainable firms should look for ways to incorporate trendiness, exclusivity, and social recognition in their products.

A key challenge for sustainable fashion is consumer mistrust of fashion brands due to "greenwashing," where brands falsely claim to be environmentally friendly. To address this, designers and brands should create transparent eco-labels that clearly communicate the environmental benefits of their products. This transparency can help build consumer trust and reduce skepticism about the true sustainability of these products.

Marketing managers can take more measures to promote the adoption of sustainable fashion in addition to these. For example, they can work on creating more affordable sustainable fashion options, as cost is a key factor that drives consumers toward fast fashion. By offering a range of price points, sustainable fashion can reach a wider audience. Marketers could also highlight the sustainability of sustainable fashion and its long-term value. Finally, sustainable fashion must promote awareness and adopt sustainable practices, targeting social status and fashion identity.

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