Article

Sustainable fashion: Insights into Australian millennials' purchasing decisions

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Abstract: This empirical study investigates the factors influencing Australian millennial consumers' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors towards sustainable apparel. The study deploys a qualitative research method exploring millennials traits such as purchasing habits, social and sustainable knowledge, and perception of labels within the Australian context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Australian millennial participants. Key factors identified include product likeability, price, sustainable preferences, sustainability knowledge, and trust in the brand. The findings reveal that while millennials prioritize fashion and comfort, a significant sub-group is motivated by ethical concerns and sustainability knowledge. However, the study also highlights the pervasive skepticism towards brand claims, driven by fears of greenwashing, and the critical role of education in fostering sustainable practices. Despite a growing awareness of environmental and social impacts, practical considerations such as price and quality often dominate purchasing decisions. The study underscores the importance of transparency and detailed communication from brands, as well as the need for government initiatives to educate consumers and regulate sustainability claims. These insights are crucial for developing effective marketing strategies and fostering a genuine commitment to sustainability in the fashion industry.

Keywords: sustainable fashion; millennial consumers; greenwashing; sustainability knowledge; consumer behavior; Australia

1. Introduction

The global relevance of the apparel industry is increasing as consumers use fashion to express themselves. This reflects their cultural and social preferences, as well as the evolving trends and aesthetics. [1]. The term 'Fast Fashion' has been used to describe how an industry that traditionally designed four collections yearly launches a new collection every week, and therefore, garment production has grown exponentially since 2000, resulting in 87% of the garments being discarded after one use [2,3]. Another peculiarity of this supply chain is that each production phase can be carried out in different companies and countries, making the garment more efficient at an economic-business level but with a higher cost regarding natural resources and environmental impact. The same garment may have traveled between several countries and continents before consumption [4].

During the transition of the traditional textile industry to fast fashion, the main concerns of companies and clothing brands were economic efficiency, quick production, cost reduction, customer satisfaction, maximizing economic profit, and industry growth [5]. Historically, none of the resulting problems, such as waste, emissions, water usage, pollution, and social impact, have been considered when

designing this globally efficient industry from a business perspective [6]. Currently, efforts are being made to implement sustainable practices, but the effectiveness of these actions is slow due to the continued growth of consumption, which requires an increase in production quantity. Redirecting the fashion industry towards a fully circular and sustainable model is an ambitious challenge [7].

Defining sustainability holistically is complex and subjective to the context of the products being made. Experts and organizations often emphasize local production and sourcing, while customers prioritize the use of environmentally friendly materials [8]. The following section provides the theoretical underpinning of this study.

2. Theoretical framework

Social identity theory and theory of planned behavior

To understand the sustainable clothing purchasing behavior of millennial consumers in Australia, this study employs a dual theoretical framework that combines Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

SIT, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, focuses on how individuals define themselves through their memberships in various social groups and how these identities influence their behavior. At the core of SIT is the concept of social categorization, where individuals naturally classify themselves and others into groups based on characteristics such as nationality, gender, or shared interests [9]. In the context of sustainable clothing, millennials may identify with groups that prioritize eco-consciousness, ethical fashion, or environmental activism.

This categorization leads to social identification, wherein individuals derive their self-concept and self-esteem from their affiliations with these groups [10]. For millennials, being part of a sustainable fashion community or aligning with eco-friendly brands can deeply enhance their self-image. The notion of belonging to a "conscious consumer" group not only fosters a sense of community but also elevates their personal worth.

Moreover, social comparison plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Millennials may assess their eco-friendly choices against those of their peers or other generational cohorts. Positive comparisons can reinforce their commitment to sustainable behavior, encouraging them to adopt practices that align with their identified group's values.

Additionally, the pursuit of positive distinctiveness is significant. Individuals often strive to bolster their self-esteem by emphasizing the unique qualities of their group [11]. Millennials who prioritize sustainable fashion may accentuate their distinctive values and contributions, thereby solidifying their commitment to eco-consciousness and fostering a strong identity tied to sustainability.

Building upon the insights gained from SIT, this study further incorporates the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), introduced by Ajzen [12]. TPB posits that an individual's intention to perform a specific behavior is influenced by three fundamental components.

First, there is attitude, which refers to the overall evaluation of the behavior—whether it is perceived as favorable or unfavorable. In the context of sustainable clothing, a positive attitude toward sustainable fashion is likely to encourage consumers to make sustainable purchases.

Second, subjective norms reflect the social pressures that influence an individual's decisions. It encompasses perceptions of how significant others—friends, family, and peers—view sustainable clothing choices. If millennials perceive that their social circle values sustainable apparel purchases, they are more inclined to adopt similar behaviors.

The third component is perceived behavioral control (PBC), which captures an individual's belief in their ability to perform the behavior. This includes internal factors, such as knowledge and skills, as well as external factors like the availability and accessibility of sustainable clothing options. A consumer's confidence in their ability to find and purchase sustainable garments plays a critical role in their decision-making process [13].

By integrating SIT and the TPB, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the factors that influence the sustainable clothing purchasing behavior of millennial consumers in Australia. The primary research question guiding this investigation is: What factors shape Australian millennials' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors regarding sustainable apparel?

To explore this further, the study poses a sub-question: How do Australian millennial consumers' knowledge of apparel sustainability, attitudes towards production practices, perceptions of environmental and social labels, purchase intentions, social norms, and beliefs about their relationship with nature influence their behaviors towards sustainable apparel?

3. Literature review

3.1. Sustainable fashion industry

The current apparel industry faces a dual challenge: on one hand, overproduction driven by sales forecasts, and on the other, a fast fashion model that promotes excessive consumption and a throwaway culture. Sustainable fashion aims to address these issues by advocating for environmentally friendly and ethically produced garments, incorporating practices that encompass both new and reused clothing [14].

Sustainable fashion refers to fashion products that are created and consumed in a way that can be sustained environmentally, socially, and economically, while also considering the well-being of the people involved in the production process. It encompasses various practices aimed at reducing the negative environmental and social impacts of the fashion industry, including the use of sustainable materials, ethical labor practices, and circular business models [14,15].

The concept of sustainable fashion is closely linked to socially responsible business practices, highlighting innovative processes and production methods that align with consumer desires and psychological needs [16]. Research indicates that sustainable practices within businesses tend to prioritize ecological dimensions over social innovations, with examples including eco-design in product development and cleaner production techniques for waste management [17]. Many developed nations rely on importing textiles from developing countries, necessitating compliance with local regulations that require suppliers to adhere to sustainability standards and engage in green supply chain management. This approach can provide a foundational strategy

for developing countries striving to enhance their sustainability and competitiveness [18].

However, numerous barriers hinder the adoption of sustainable practices among businesses. These include internal challenges such as organizational structure and resource limitations, as well as external factors like competition, regulatory constraints, knowledge gaps, and motivational issues [19]. A significant obstacle is the absence of clear government regulations, which leaves companies without adequate guidance for implementing greener initiatives [20]. Historically, governments have played a crucial role as a regulatory force in promoting social sustainability [21].

Despite ongoing efforts to integrate sustainable practices, many companies neglect to take responsibility for the future recycling of their products, resulting in limited incentives to develop genuinely circular designs [22]. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) remains largely voluntary, and complexities in tracing garments impede advancements in circular design. The remanufacturing process is labor-intensive and often lacks standardization, while recycling is infrequent due to the complex material compositions used in garments [23]. To foster reuse, there is a growing need to design textiles that enhance durability and service life [24]. Yet, tensions persist between creating long-lasting designs and meeting the demands of rapidly changing industry trends [25].

The future of sustainable fashion is likely to be shaped by increasing consumer demand for eco-friendly practices and transparency from brands. Circular business models, such as resale, rental, and refurbishment, are expected to become mainstream, driven by the need to reduce waste and promote resource efficiency [26]. Innovations in sustainable materials and collaborative efforts among brands, governments, and consumers will be crucial in advancing the industry's sustainability goals [27]. As awareness grows, the fashion industry must prioritize sustainability, transparency, and accountability to minimize its environmental impact and pave the way for a more responsible future [14].

3.2. Australian consumers

The introduction of slow fashion culture in Australia has been inconsistent, primarily due to low engagement arising from both a lack of interest and insufficient knowledge about the topic. The widespread appeal of fast fashion—marked by low prices and emotional shopping behaviors—has further contributed to a slow shift in purchasing patterns [28]. To effectively tackle the challenges facing the industry, it is crucial to enhance public understanding of circularity in fashion [29]. Recent research [30] has identified that young Australians, aged 18–34, were more likely to buy second-hand, repair, resell, or share clothes. However, the practices of reuse and recycling within the Australian fashion sector remain under-researched, particularly regarding the factors that lead consumers to opt for second-hand purchases over new clothing [31].

Consumers are increasingly prioritizing attributes associated with circularity, such as the use of recycled or recyclable materials, durability, and repairability. Common disposal practices include donating to charity or giving garments to family

and friends [30]. Those more inclined to donate their clothing also tend to support charitable organizations [32]. Clothing recycling can significantly help mitigate apparel waste, especially among consumers who form a stronger emotional attachment to their clothing [33]. Notably, future recyclability is often viewed as a more important characteristic than the recycled content of the garment itself [29].

Given these dynamics, it becomes essential to explore the characteristics and behaviors of sustainable consumers, as their preferences and choices play a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of the fashion industry in Australia.

3.3. Sustainable consumers

While consumers are increasingly educated and responsible when purchasing sustainable garments, many remain skeptical of greenwashing [34]. Even loyal customers of ethical products often struggle to distinguish between genuine sustainable practices and misleading claims from certain companies, underscoring the need for government policies to ensure the accuracy of sustainability claims [35]. The more informed customers are about sustainability, the more likely they are to make responsible purchasing decisions. This has led companies to view sustainability as a crucial marketing variable to meet consumer expectations [36]. Eco-labeling has emerged as an effective tool for conveying sustainability information, with 107 recognized eco-labels worldwide, tailored to various regions [37].

When considering high-end purchases, the sustainability attribute often evokes a sense of "feel-good" satisfaction in consumers, enhancing brand image and boosting sales [38]. A textile company's green reputation, built through sustainable practices and social equity, tends to make customers more inclined to buy from brands known for their commitment to sustainability [39]. Between 2016 and 2020, the most frequently used terms on social media related to sustainability in the apparel industry were "eco-friendly," "ethical," and "recycle," highlighting consumer interests and perceptions [40]. Marketing strategies emphasizing the sustainable and ethical attributes of garments, along with the promotion of reduction, reuse, and recycling, contribute to the perception of high-quality brands that produce durable products, ultimately leading to reduced consumption and waste [41].

However, consumers often struggle to recognize sustainable marketing practices as a pervasive influence in their purchasing decisions [42]. Even though sustainable brands engage in global marketing campaigns, consumers exhibiting sustainable behaviors are less likely to be swayed by these initiatives, maintaining consistent sustainable purchasing habits throughout the year [43]. This temporary relationship with garments leads to the disposal of perfectly usable clothing, emphasizing the need for a shift towards investing in higher-quality items that last longer and can be repaired [44].

Despite growing consumer knowledge about sustainability, other factors such as financial constraints, challenges in researching specific sustainable products, and personal perceptions can hinder sustainable purchasing choices [45,46]. The pioneers of sustainable fashion often practice buying fewer, higher-quality garments, opting out of the fast fashion cycle, purchasing second-hand items, or upgrading their existing clothing. These key practices focus more on personal style rather than following

fashion trends [47]. These considerations are particularly relevant for millennial consumers, who are increasingly navigating the complexities of sustainability in their purchasing decisions while balancing personal style and financial realities. The following section discusses millennial consumers in greater detail, examining their unique motivations and behaviors related to sustainable fashion.

3.4. Millennial consumers

Millennial consumers are increasingly inclined to value sustainable choices and possess a general understanding of the fast fashion landscape. However, their primary focus often lies in achieving a work-life balance and managing family responsibilities, with an emphasis on savings and financial stability [48]. Additionally, millennials tend to have established brand knowledge and preconceived images that influence their purchasing decisions [49].

Research indicates that factors such as employment status and income significantly affect attitudes toward sustainable choices [50]. While some millennials may lack a clear understanding of the ethical implications of their purchases, others show little interest in valuing ethically produced products. Consequently, marketers must tailor their campaigns to address the diverse segments within the millennial demographic, crafting messages that resonate with varying levels of sustainability awareness and commitment to ethical consumerism [51]. The sustainable fashion industry has begun to direct its marketing efforts toward this group, emphasizing greener initiatives while also recognizing the need for ongoing education and awareness [52].

Overall, there is currently limited research on the behavior of millennial consumers in Australia, particularly regarding their attitudes toward sustainable apparel choices and their understanding of sustainability-related information in the local market. This study aims to explore these issues through a qualitative approach, seeking to understand the motivations behind millennials' decisions to buy or not to buy sustainable apparel when needed. Additionally, the research will examine their perceptions and concerns about the environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry over the past few decades. The methodology of this empirical study is explained in the following section.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

This study utilizes a qualitative interview method to explore the research questions. Jang et al. [53] emphasize that expert, one-on-one, in-depth interviews aim to understand the relevant social environment and the intricacies of participants' experiences. The exploratory approach of semi-structured interviews was chosen for several reasons.

Firstly, semi-structured interviews allow for a thorough exploration of real-life insights. By focusing on participants' personal experiences, this method captures how they perceive their social environment and understand their realities [54].

Secondly, the informal conversational tone of semi-structured interviews fosters a more intimate dialogue, encouraging participants to share authentic responses and opinions. The goal during these interviews is to elicit detailed insights, inspirations, and viewpoints [55].

Lastly, this approach facilitates the differentiation of diverse consumer profiles based on various factors. By engaging in direct, one-on-one conversations, the qualitative method reveals the complex and varied nature of consumers' psyches [56]. This comprehensive understanding is essential for addressing the study's research questions effectively.

4.2. Participants

The research comprises 20 interviews with millennial consumers in Australia, specifically targeting individuals who are either interested in sustainable fashion or have experience purchasing sustainable products. Millennials, defined as those born between 1981 and 1996, are the focus of this study. Data collection ceased after conducting 20 interviews due to reaching theoretical saturation, where no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews [57,58]. This approach ensures that the data collected is comprehensive and representative of the key factors influencing sustainable clothing purchasing behavior within this demographic.

Participants are selected based on varying levels of awareness and attitudes toward sustainability, with a balanced representation of genders, consisting of 50% male and 50% female participants. All interviewees are Australian citizens residing within Australia. Each participant works full-time, with three individuals employed in the fashion industry in diverse roles, including Product Manager, Sales, and Modeling. The academic backgrounds of the participants vary. This diversity in employment and education ensures a wide range of perspectives and insights during the interviews (see Appendix A for demographic characteristics of participants).

4.3. Measures

This study was informed by questions adapted from the research of Byrd and Su [59], which examines consumer behavior regarding environmental, sustainable, and socially responsible apparel (see Appendix B for a list of questions). This established framework provides a robust foundation for the investigation, ensuring that the questions posed during the interviews are both reliable and relevant. Key topics include:

- Purchasing socially or environmentally responsible products.
- Consumer knowledge of apparel sustainability.
- Attitudes toward apparel production.
- Perceptions of apparel labeling.
- Views on environmental and social labels on apparel products.
- Purchase intentions regarding environmentally and socially responsible apparel.
- Influence of social norms on purchasing decisions for responsible apparel.
- Beliefs about the relationship with nature (man-nature orientation).

4.4. Procedures

The snowball sampling method was used to reach a variety of existing participants for this study [60]. Candidates were contacted individually via email or phone to set a specific interview time. Potential participants receive an interview protocol before the interviews. The length of the one-to-one interviews ranged between 30 min and 90 min; they followed the same structure of open-ended questions, and they were all audio-recorded for further analysis [61]. The study employed a thematic analysis of the interview data as suggested by Braun and Clarke [62]. For familiarization, the researchers reviewed the transcripts against the recordings and read and reread paper copies of each transcript. The initial analysis of the interview data utilized an open coding system, involving rigorous line-by-line examination of transcripts to identify codes, whereby key words, phrases, and sentences from the transcripts were highlighted [63,64]. This process provided clarity on the factors influencing sustainable clothing purchasing behavior among Australian millennials. The focus was then on identifying core ideas and concepts related to sustainable preferences, knowledge, and trust in brands.

To ensure the reliability of coding and to prevent any bias, the coding process was conducted independently by the researchers. Codes and quotes were compared across interviews and grouped into broader categories of data (e.g., 'sustainability knowledge', 'purchase intentions of sustainable apparel'). The categories were built and modified based on extensive discussion among the authors and the discovery of additional information that supported or countered the initial categorization. Preliminary findings were discussed among all authors, leading to revisions. Further revisions and prioritizations were made based on the findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing sustainable fashion choices among millennials. The findings are presented thematically in the following sections.

5. Findings and discussion

Findings reveal that factors influencing Australian millennial consumers' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors towards sustainable apparel are product likeability, price, sustainable preferences, sustainability knowledge, and their trust in the brand.

The need to look fashionable and feel good on the outside is a priority for most millennials. Perceived image guides their purchasing habits, motivated by hedonistic needs. Only a subgroup of the interviewees appreciated the sustainable range of available options and decided to choose those products due to their aligned appreciation and behavior regarding attitude towards sustainability [65]. The following section discusses factors influencing sustainable choices.

5.1. Knowledge in sustainable apparel

Regardless of the consumer's level of awareness of what constitutes sustainable apparel, respondents expressed significant concern about ethical and sustainability issues in the fashion industry and their potential impact on the environment. For instance, participant P16 noted, "Waste has the biggest environmental impact. The fast

fashion model promotes seasonal, cheap clothes that don't last very long and end up in landfills."

This aligns with findings from Pereira et al. [66], which indicate that consumers are increasingly aware of and concerned about sustainability in fashion. Participant P10 echoed this sentiment, stating, "The emissions caused by transporting a package to your front door are not good."

These findings demonstrate that consumers are worried about the consequences of the current fashion industry, characterized by mass production and heightened consumption. Crommentuijn-Marsh et al. [67] support this view, emphasizing the severe risk posed to the planet's environment. A particular concern involves the overexploitation of resources by both developed and developing nations in unsustainable ways. To foster responsible practices, apparel businesses could focus on minimizing packaging and transportation, adapting production to ethical standards, and ensuring transparency regarding their environmental and social practices [68].

The interview participants demonstrated a correlation between their knowledge of sustainability and their willingness to make ethical purchases. Education emerged as a crucial factor in raising awareness about sustainable issues and fostering informed discussions. Participant P11 shared, "In university, we had to choose a project; I had chosen textiles for its waste issue," indicating a proactive approach to learning about sustainability.

Thus, an individual's level of knowledge and awareness regarding sustainability is heavily influenced by their educational background. Both education and social interactions play vital roles in shaping consumer awareness of sustainable fashion. Additionally, the cultural environment can significantly impact eco-literacy [69].

However, general assumptions persist among Australian millennial fashion consumers. According to Zhang et al. [50], these consumers often overestimate their understanding of sustainability issues within the clothing industry, driven by an excessive sense of confidence. Furthermore, sustainable consumers tend to assume that the broader population shares a similar level of knowledge and awareness about sustainability. This belief can create a misleading sense of community and global responsibility, as highlighted by P1's concern: "Everybody that I talk to would know that things are cheaper for a reason." This eludes to a specific attitude of millennials' towards the production of apparel. Linking these findings to the TPB, it becomes evident that the perceived behavioral control, influenced by knowledge and awareness, impacts millennials' intentions to purchase sustainable apparel.

5.2. Attitudes towards apparel production

General skepticism toward brand claims is on the rise, particularly among consumers interested in sustainable products. This skepticism stems from concerns that brands may engage in greenwashing—making misleading claims about their sustainability efforts to boost sales. Such fears hinder the introduction of genuinely sustainable products in the market. As participant P4 expressed, "When you look at buying different pieces of clothing, you see that some brands might be doing sustainable practices well, but they also engage in many other practices that are problematic. So now I just take it with a pinch of salt; I'm very hesitant. I believe they

are trying to do something good, but unfortunately, many of those times, they are just greenwashing." For consumers motivated to purchase sustainable products, the detection of greenwashing can significantly reduce their willingness to buy. Once trust is compromised, it is challenging for brands to restore their reputation.

To mitigate this distrust, companies must prioritize transparency and clearly communicate their sustainability practices. As noted by Blas Riesgo et al. [70], consumers increasingly expect brands to share detailed information about their ethical claims. Participant P14 highlighted the ambiguity often associated with such transparency efforts: "You might walk into a store with a campaign that explains where things come from, but it is still ambiguous. Even then, it might show people in a country with a lower socioeconomic status looking happy while picking cotton or making the garment, so it's hard to understand. It's all marketing, right? Marketing is there to manipulate, to make you buy something."

The current lack of trust in apparel brands' ethical claims presents a significant challenge for consumers seeking sustainable options. Many apparel companies are reluctant to fully disclose their sustainable practices, even those considered reliable. Jestratijevic et al. [71] found that, despite some efforts toward transparency, few brands achieve complete openness about their processes. Increasing green initiatives and enhancing transparency are essential for building consumer trust in sustainable fashion. Companies need to ensure their marketing campaigns are detailed and provide evidence of their ethical principles to effectively engage customers and foster a genuine commitment to sustainability [72]. This skepticism towards brand claims can be linked to the SIT, where millennials' identification with eco-conscious groups make them more critical of brands' sustainability claims, as they strive to maintain their group's positive distinctiveness.

5.3. Perceptions of labeling

A customer's perception of sustainable claims on apparel labels can significantly vary based on their level of awareness regarding sustainability. Generally, individuals with higher knowledge and a predisposition to consume sustainably are more skeptical of such claims, often requiring tangible proof before placing their trust in them. Conversely, consumers who are less engaged with sustainability issues tend to trust these claims more readily, assuming they are backed by regulatory oversight. This difference in perspective is illustrated by two participants in the study. Participant P15 stated, "I think marketing can manipulate labels for sales. Companies are manipulating that, so that is why I try to do a Google search and label search before making a purchase." This reflects the behavior of consumers actively involved in sustainable practices. In contrast, P8 expressed a more trusting viewpoint: "I would assume that there would be laws around ethical and sustainable claims, where you cannot lie about those things. I would believe sustainable claims in labels."

Consumers who are more aware of sustainability tend to be more sensitive to the unethical practices of brands attempting to greenwash their image through sustainability-based messaging. As noted by Díaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al. [73], these consumers are often more skeptical of such claims. On the other hand, customers with limited knowledge of sustainability are more likely to accept green claims at face

value. This lack of understanding, coupled with the complexity of the market, can lead consumers to inadvertently support brands that engage in greenwashing [74]. Therefore, labeling and certifications are crucial in purchase intentions. The varying perceptions of labeling among consumers highlight the importance of perceived behavioral control in the TPB, where consumers' confidence in their ability to discern genuine sustainable claims influences their purchasing decisions.

5.4. Purchase intentions towards sustainable apparel

The results of this study highlight that price is a crucial factor when consumers decide to purchase sustainably. Many individuals find it difficult to afford ethically made, new items and opt for second-hand garments instead. These findings are in line with Payne et al. [30], who found that the main reason Australians purchase second-hand clothing is cost-effectiveness, showing that financial considerations around consumption are significant. This choice also provides respondents in this study with a sense of accomplishment by not contributing additional new items to the market. Participant P18 explains, "Initially, I started purchasing second-hand items because of the pricing. Then, after learning about how and why they are priced that way, where they come from, and what goes on behind the scenes, I began my op-shopping journey."

This indicates that millennial consumers are price-sensitive; many new sustainable products may be financially out of reach for various reasons. Buying second-hand allows them to fulfill their sustainable purchasing desires without exceeding their budgets. Second-hand fashion has emerged as an accessible alternative to traditional retail, effectively addressing the need for sustainable consumption [75].

Although consumers appreciate the sustainable practices of the products they buy, their final purchasing decisions are primarily influenced by price. As P13, who works in the fashion industry, notes, "From my experience in the industry, I've seen that customers are happy that clothes are sustainable, but they do not want to pay more for them." While there is a generally positive attitude toward sustainable fashion, this sentiment does not always translate into sustainable purchasing behavior, as other factors—such as price, quality, value, style, convenience, and materials—take precedence [76].

A genuine interest in fashion and sustainability motivates consumers to research brands that meet their fashion needs and ethical preferences. Participant P17 shares her perspective: "Maybe because I have done more research, I've discovered many smaller brands made in Melbourne that I like. There are more brands promoting sustainability, making it easier to buy." Consumers with a strong interest in fashion are more likely to engage with circular practices, as these values resonate with their sustainable beliefs [77]. Therefore, education is vital in facilitating a transition to a circular economy, as the industry will follow consumer preferences [78]. A sustainable customer is often both fashion-conscious and eager to explore brands that align with their principles.

Durability is viewed as a key sustainable quality in clothing purchases. Informed consumers are willing to pay a higher price for high-quality products. Participant P2 reflects on his journey: "For example, I used to buy $5 t-shirts from Target, and now

I am willing to pay $60 to $70 for a good t-shirt made in Australia." This compromise among Australian millennial consumers aligns with their willingness to invest more in products that last longer. Research indicates that environmentally conscious consumers are generally willing to pay around 20% more for sustainable products [79].

Quality and durability remain primary considerations when purchasing apparel. Participant P6 articulates this sentiment: "The country of origin is not important to me; it doesn't affect my purchasing decision. What matters is the tactile experience—if the fabric is good quality, if it stretches, or if it will fade." Comfort and quality are paramount for consumers when selecting clothing, and durability is a crucial factor in textile studies [80].

Consumers predisposed to purchasing sustainable products also seek practical processes and a satisfactory buying experience. Practicality should be a priority when designing the customer experience. P3 shares, "I can wait longer for a sustainable product, but convenience is still important—shopping convenience." Literature supports the idea that a practical and efficient shopping experience increases the likelihood of purchasing sustainable fashion. Companies can enhance their appeal by focusing on practicality [81]. However, the effort required to obtain a sustainable product often contrasts with the convenience of traditional options, which are typically cheaper and more accessible.

The market for recycled clothing is vast and holds significant growth potential as consumers become more informed about these practices. Participant P5 considers recycled apparel an automatic choice if the product meets his criteria: "Yes, I favor recycled products, especially if they contain 50% recycled polyester. I will take their word for it." For him, recycled materials in apparel are perceived as valuable. Attributes related to circularity enhance a product's appeal, increasing the likelihood of consumer choice [29].

There is a clear distinction between the attitudes of potential sustainable consumers and those who actively choose sustainable options, which could also be dependent on social norms. The influence of social norms on sustainable purchasing behavior can be linked to the TPB, where subjective norms play a critical role in shaping consumers' intentions and actions.

5.5. Influence of social norms

Participants in this study recognized the significant impact that the environment and digital platforms have on their perceptions and purchasing decisions, often viewing this influence negatively as it shapes their preferences unconsciously. Participant P20 notes, "Celebrities have a significant impact. Influencers and social media have the biggest impact on me, unfortunately."

Customers are increasingly aware of the repercussions that digital campaigns and influencers have on fashion buyers. Fashion marketing is heavily influenced by celebrities and influencers, with consumer desires and product demand directly shaped by their support and aspirational marketing strategies [82].

Social norms and online platforms subtly impact consumer behavior, often without their conscious realization. Participant P9 expresses concern about the extent of this influence, stating, "I probably think social media and my social environment

do not influence my purchasing habits, but they probably do affect my buying decisions more than I realize." Research indicates that social norms are reliable predictors of intentions and behaviors regarding organic cotton clothing consumption [83].

When creating sustainable collections, clothing design must be prioritized. Consumers who may not have strong sustainable preferences can still be drawn to ethical brands if they find the garments appealing. Participant P7 emphasizes this point: "What does a sustainable company need to do? They need to make me look good in their clothes." This highlights the necessity for sustainable brands to compete effectively with other fashion companies to capture consumers' attention. To facilitate a transition toward circular and sustainable clothing design, it is essential for brands to engage with customers to gain valuable insights. Design teams should foster a collaborative relationship with manufacturers, acting as partners rather than merely client-supplier entities [84]. This means having the responsibility not only to understand the impact of production but also to take responsibility for nature. The role of social norms in influencing sustainable fashion choices underscores the importance of leveraging social identity and peer influence in marketing strategies to promote sustainable behaviors.

5.6. Beliefs in their relationship with nature

Many millennials have embarked on a journey to understand how the fast fashion industry impacts the planet and have adjusted their behavior patterns accordingly. During her self-learning period, participant P19 transitioned from fast fashion to a sustainable lifestyle, stating, "When I was younger, I used to consume a lot more, but now, how many clothes I buy is one of the most important things to me. I mostly shop for second-hand clothing; I look for basics that will last from season to season. It is important to me that I am not buying something I will wear once and then send straight to landfill."

Buying sustainably fosters a sense of community and enhances self-image, reinforcing beliefs in circular consumption. When individuals identify as environmentally conscious consumers, this often translates into a greater willingness to purchase sustainable products [85]. Common practices among early adopters of sustainable fashion consumption include buying fewer, higher-quality garments, exiting the retail market, purchasing exclusively second-hand items, and sewing or upgrading their clothing. These key practices focus on personal style rather than fleeting fashion trends [47].

Customers who are more aware and feel responsible for their relationship with nature tend to choose second-hand shopping and the longevity of the products they acquire to collaborate with the planet long-term and respect its regenerative process. We can see this attitude reflected in P12, when she states, "To be honest, I do not shop very much for clothing; I try to reuse the clothes I have. I do a little online shopping. Otherwise, I do vintage shopping." Second-hand or opportunity shopping is one of the most contemplated ways to follow sustainable habits by Australian millennial consumers, as it is considered good for the planet and does not require an elevated budget. Therefore, it is not surprising that Payne et al. [30] found that 18% of

Australians most recent purchases were second-hand clothing, significantly higher compared to some European countries [86], where second-hand consumption represents a minority of clothing acquisition overall (5% in Italy and 13% in Denmark). The purchase and use of second-hand clothing provides a sense of accomplishment to the consumer, as they feel they are 'recycling' [67]. The strong connection between millennials' environmental consciousness and their sustainable purchasing behaviors highlights the role of social identity in shaping their consumption patterns.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the general awareness of the environmental and social impacts of the apparel industry is growing, yet this awareness does not always translate into the adoption of sustainable fashion practices. The results indicate that while Australian millennial consumers are somewhat mindful of social and environmental issues within the apparel sector, their knowledge remains limited. Participants express positive feelings towards sustainable consumption, but they are also skeptical about companies' intentions, often questioning the accuracy and transparency of sustainable claims.

Despite these positive sentiments, practical considerations such as price, quality, materials, convenience, value, and style play a crucial role in the decision-making process, complicating the introduction of sustainable products into the market. The findings reveal that consumers who are most knowledgeable about social and environmental issues also tend to distrust sustainable claims and the transparency of companies. Even though their concerns are valid, many individuals do not believe in the efficacy of their actions or trust the intentions of the industry. Millennials view second-hand shopping, longevity in product use, recycling, and conscious purchasing as their primary means of contributing to sustainable practices.

This study offers practical insights for companies looking to develop effective marketing strategies, product campaigns, and labeling designs that provide transparent information about production processes, material origins, and working conditions. Additionally, it highlights the need for government initiatives aimed at educating future generations to better identify and trust sustainable practices. Increased regulations and education are essential for fostering public trust in social and environmental claims, thereby encouraging more sustainable consumption. The gap between fast fashion prices and those of sustainable alternatives is a significant barrier to sustainable consumption. Therefore, providing grants to support companies in adopting sustainable practices is a critical step toward ensuring the success of circularity in the industry [30].

In context to the theoretical framework, this study examines the application of SIT and TPB to understand the sustainable clothing purchasing behavior of Australian millennials. By combining SIT and TPB, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between social identity and individual intentions in shaping sustainable purchasing behavior. The findings suggest that promoting sustainable fashion requires building strong eco-conscious communities and enhancing consumers' perceived control through accessible and transparent information. Government initiatives aimed

at educating consumers and regulating sustainability claims can further support the adoption of sustainable behaviors.

7. Limitations and implications for future research

In conducting this study, several limitations became evident, highlighting the need for future research to adopt a more comprehensive approach. One significant limitation is the small sample size of 20 interviews, which may not provide a fully representative picture of the broader population's attitudes and behaviors towards sustainability. This sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings and underscores the necessity for more extensive data collection in future studies. The current investigation, while insightful, did not sufficiently cover the diverse geographies within Australia. This oversight potentially left gaps in understanding how regional differences shape consumer attitudes and behaviors towards sustainability. Additionally, the study's sample may not have been fully representative of all age groups, which could skew the findings and overlook generational variations in sustainable consumption patterns. Future research should incorporate a larger sample size and utilize surveys to provide a broader and more diverse dataset, offering deeper insights into the sustainable fashion choices of Australian millennials.

Moreover, the population interviewed was relatively narrow, potentially excluding various perspectives that are crucial for a holistic understanding. This limitation is particularly significant when considering different socio-economic levels. The study may not have adequately captured whether individuals with varying financial capabilities are indeed making sustainable purchasing decisions. Specifically, it remains unclear if those who can afford sustainable options are consistently choosing them.

Recognizing these limitations, future research should aim to delve deeper into these areas. A more detailed exploration of different Australian geographies is essential to accurately compare regional differences. By conducting in-depth studies across various regions, researchers can gain a nuanced understanding of how location influences consumer attitudes and behaviors towards sustainability [30].

Furthermore, future studies should aim to widen the population interviewed to include diverse socio-economic levels [87]. By incorporating a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, researchers can better understand the extent to which financial capability influences the purchase of sustainable clothing. This inclusive approach will offer a more comprehensive view of consumer behavior and motivations.

Incorporating qualitative methods, such as focus groups, can also enrich future research. These methods will allow for the collection of a wider array of perspectives, providing deeper insights into consumer motivations and the barriers they face in adopting sustainable practices.

Addressing these limitations in future research will open new avenues for further studies. The findings will provide companies with valuable insights to better inform their customers about sustainable practices, enhancing their marketing strategies and building consumer trust. Additionally, the research can assist the Australian government in developing more effective education and regulation policies related to sustainability. By understanding the diverse factors that influence sustainable

consumption, policymakers can create targeted initiatives to promote and support sustainable practices across different segments of the population.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, VAG, SI and CSLT; methodology, CSLT and SI; software, VAG; validation, VAG, SI and CSLT; formal analysis, VAG and CSLT; investigation, VAG; resources, CSLT and SI; data curation, CSLT and SI; writing—original draft preparation, VAG; writing—review and editing, SI and CSLT; supervision, SI and CSLT; project administration, SI and CSLT. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Demographics of the interview participants.

Respondent	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Job Type	Marital Status
Participant 1	34	Male	High School	Media	Full time	De Facto
Participant 2	27	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Education	Full time	De Facto
Participant 3	41	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Lawyer	Full time	De Facto
Participant 4	29	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Digital Marketing	Full time	Never Married
Participant 5	39	Male	Master's Degree	Tech and Public Service	Full time	Never Married
Participant 6	33	Male	High School	Entertainment Industry	Casual	Never Married
Participant 7	37	Male	Cert III	Student	Full time	De Facto
Participant 8	31	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Business Solutions Specialist	Full time	Never Married
Participant 9	37	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Entertainment Industry	Self Employed	De Facto
Participant 10	34	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Manufacturing	Full time	De Facto
Participant 11	33	Female	Associate degree	Digital Designer	Full time	De Facto
Participant 12	36	Female	Post Grad Degree	Teacher/Artist	Self Employed	Never Married
Participant 13	33	Female	Advanced Diploma	Retail Buying	Full time	Never Married
Participant 14	29	Female	Master's Degree	Public Servant	Full time	De Facto
Participant 15	33	Female	High School	Education	Full time	De Facto
Participant 16	38	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Public Relations	Full time	De Facto
Participant 17	33	Female	Master's Degree	Health	Full time	De Facto
Participant 18	27	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Retail Assistant	Part Time	Never Married
Participant 19	29	Female	Cert III	Brand Manager	Full time	De Facto
Participant 20	36	Female	Master's Degree	Real Estate	Full time	Married

Appendix B

Interview questions

Part 1: Level of consumer apparel sustainability knowledge.

- What are the most important social equality issues in the apparel industry?
- What are the most important child labor issues in the clothing industry?
- What environmental impact is the apparel business creating?
- Can you name environmentally friendly clothing brands?
- What is sustainability in clothing for you?
- Where is your knowledge about it acquired?
- What do you think the general public knows about sustainability in clothing?
- Do you think you know more than the average person? Why?

Part 2: Consumer's attitudes towards apparel production.

- What do you think a fair wage in clothing production should cover?
- What are your concerns about issues affecting workers in the clothing production industry?
- What actions, as an individual, do you think have the power to improve workers in the clothing production industry?
- What are your concerns about the impact that clothing can have on the environment?
- What actions, as an individual, do you think have the power to improve the environment through clothing consumption?

Part 3: Consumer's perceptions of apparel labelling.

- Should labels include instructions for garment use?
- What instructions for garment use labels should include?
- Are labels good enough? Explain why you think they are or aren't useful.
- What label information do you read before purchase?
- What countries of origin do you normally find in your clothes? Is that information useful for you?
- What improvements would you add to a label to be easier to understand?

Part 4: Consumer's perceptions of environmental and/or social labels on apparel products.

- Do you believe the environmental and/or social claims in labels? Why?
- What sustainable information should a label include to be trusted?
- What sustainable information should a label include to be understood?
- What sustainable information should a label include to make you purchase the product?

Part 5: Consumer's purchase intentions towards environmentally and/or socially responsible apparel products.

- How long ago did you start to purchase social and/or environmentally responsible products?
- Why did you start to purchase social and/or environmentally responsible products?
- What increased price percentage are you willing to pay to purchase social and/or environmentally responsible products?
- How far out of your way would you go to purchase social and/or environmentally responsible products?
- Which of these claims would make you purchase and why?
(1) "Environmentally Friendly"
(2) "100% Cotton"
(3) "Ethically Sourced"
(4) "Recycled"
(5) "Made in Australia"
(6) "Organic"

Part 6: Effects of social norms on the consumer's decision to purchase apparel from environmentally and/or socially responsible apparel products.

- Do you think any of the following sources have influenced you to purchase social and/or environmental responsible brands? Why?

(1) "Social Media"
(2) "Family"
(3) "Friends"
(4) "Co-workers"
(5) "Celebrities"

- In what way do you think you can be influenced to buy social and/or environmentally responsible products?

Part 7: Consumer's beliefs in their relationship with nature (man-nature orientation).

- Why should we maintain harmony with nature?
- Which natural resources should humans be allowed to use?
- Do you think humans are part of nature? Or are they detached from it? Why?
- In what way do humans need to understand better the ways of nature and act accordingly?