

Examining Millennial Perspectives on Corporate Social Responsibility in the United Kingdom Fast Fashion

Ola Sunday Ogunkolade¹

¹ Department of Business Management, Newcastle College University, Newcastle, United Kingdom

Corresponding author*

**Ola Sunday
Ogunkolade**

Department of Business
Management, Newcastle
College University, Newcastle,
United Kingdom.
Email:

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ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is growing as firms must address sustainability challenges. However, engaging key consumer groups like millennials is necessary to make an influence. Millennials are more aware of CSR, yet limiting conceptualizations assume consistency. Therefore, this paper investigates millennial fashion consumer relationships with corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in the United Kingdom's fast fashion context. The quantitative, cross-sectional study examined CSR awareness, buying intent, loyalty, and emphasis areas in 102 different UK millennials aged 18–38. Non-probability sampling was utilized for social media recruitment. Hypothesis testing was possible with descriptive, correlational, regression, and dominance analysis. Findings show that Minimal variability was found between retailers' CSR perceptions. However, CSR attitudes significantly predicted key outcomes like purchase intent and loyalty, explaining over 49% of variance. Interestingly, supply chain ethics upholding labor rights emerged as the most influential CSR area over environmental factors. Reliance on self-reports, absence of qualitative data, and lack of probability sampling constrain generalizability and explanatory power are limitations of the work. Advancing contextualized understanding that warrants incorporating mixed methods and critical paradigms that analyze identity plurality and systemic contradictions is recommended. Rather than exaggerating consumer "choice," solutions that should enable joint structural and individual action

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has gained substantial traction amid growing societal expectations for companies to address environmental, social and ethical issues within their business practices. However, realising meaningful impact requires engaging vital consumer groups. As the largest generational cohort wielding over £200 billion in spending power, millennial consumers have become pivotal catalysts for responsible brands (Smith, 2010; Whelan & Fink, 2016) Compared to previous generations, millennials display heightened consciousness regarding labor exploitation, climate change, and sustainability challenges associated with globalised production systems (Zarwi et al., 2022). For instance, surveys indicate that 73% of millennials are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly or ethically produced goods, providing incentives for fashion firms' CSR commitments (NIQ, 2018). However, current academic comprehension of diverse millennials' awareness, interpretations and responses to corporate sustainability initiatives remains limited in concerning ways. Extant literature focused on apparel retail contexts relies heavily on student samples centered around privileged Western perspectives (Lu et al., 2013; Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016). Such narrow conceptualisations ignore marginalised voices and fail to capture identity-based, socio-cultural variations within the cohort. As Rudolph et al. (2020) argue, prevailing approaches presume all millennials share uniform social concerns and behaviors regardless of systemic inequities tied to race, class, gender, disability or sexual orientation. Problematically, the erasure of intersectionality obscures contingencies



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in access, salience and skepticism shaping CSR connections. This paper aims to address underexplored consumer angles by investigating three key research questions regarding millennials and fast fashion CSR:

RQ1. What awareness and perceptual patterns characterize millennials' consciousness of fashion retailers' CSR agendas and activities?

RQ2. How and to what extent do apparel CSR perceptions influence important millennial consumer behavioral outcomes including purchase intent and brand loyalty?

RQ3. Which spheres of CSR focus such as environment, community relations or labor rights do millennials view as most important when evaluating fashion brands' responsible positioning and impacts?

The study also aims to test the following hypothesis:

H1: UK millennial consumers have greater awareness and positive perceptions of H&M's CSR initiatives compared to Primark and ASOS.

Examining these questions through an inclusive empirical study can provide more critically informed, nuanced insights to advance theory and practice. The results have the potential to enhance scholarly understanding of millennials as diverse individuals negotiating intricate connections between brands and consumers that are influenced by systemic power and ethical interpretations (Ortiz-Pimentel et al., 2020). Culturally broad data and segmentation can help fashion companies and marketers better execute CSR programs that resonate with a varied range of emerging generational consumers. All things considered, encouraging diverse research that questions stereotypes holds hope for progress toward a real ethical revolution in the clothing sector. Three main contributions are the focus of this paper. First off, research exposes underreported variables, conflicts, and variances related to social settings, which helps challenge stereotypes of millennials as being universally pro-corporate social responsibility. Secondly, the explanation of consumers' ethical buying ambitions in the face of contextual restrictions is provided by validating and refuting prevalent cognitive theories. Lastly, contrasts between the effects of several CSR emphasis areas clarify the goals for reforming the fashion sector, with a focus on the experiences of marginalized stakeholders rather than presumptions. This important consumer-grounded viewpoint can address structural obstacles to sustainability while enhancing responsiveness to consumer values.

Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been utilised to investigate the relationships among customer knowledge, perceptions, and actions concerning corporate social responsibility (CSR) endeavours. The prevalent viewpoints narrowly concentrate on how psychological characteristics of the individual influence CSR processing and moral decision-making. For example, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) shown in Figure 1 suggests that in order to determine ethical consumption intents and behaviours, consumer attitudes toward sustainability interact with subjective standards and perceived behavioural control (Dean et al., 2008). Based on TPB, Tarkiainen & Sundqvist, (2009) found attitudes towards apparel companies' CSR and subjective norms predicted sustainable purchase intentions. However, such cognitive models concentrating on internal factors like information processing are limited in accounting for external societal drivers that configure consumer spaces for action. As Auger and Devinney (2007) critically

highlight, the overreliance on attitude-behavior models obscures the complex, context-dependent nature of ethical consumption.

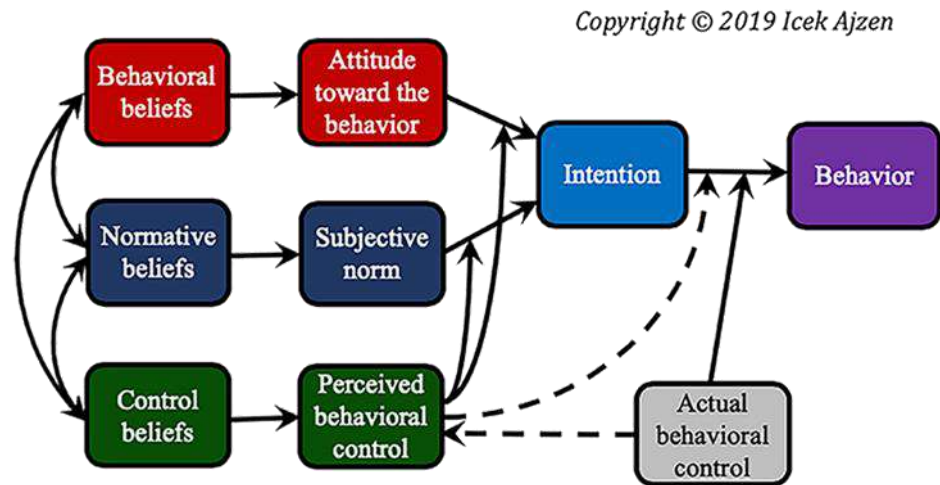


Figure 1. Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991)

Bridging paradigms, this paper adapts the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework alongside critical theory lenses. The S-O-R model represented in Figure 2 conceptualizes CSR information and activities as stimuli that influence cognitive and affective reactions, shaping attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Du et al., 2007). This lens enriches internal decision-making perspectives by incorporating the role of external sociocultural forces in shaping interpretations of CSR communications. However, S-O-R remains limited as a deterministic model fixated on individual consumer responses. Critical theory perspectives contend that prevalent discourses obscure institutional drivers of unsustainability while assigning ethical responsibility wholly to consumers (Öberseder et al., 2014). As Banerjee (2008) argues, corporate CSR rhetoric promotes the illusion that purchase decisions can rectify systemic injustices when production logics generating ecological crises remain unquestioned. Hence, this study adapts the S-O-R model while analyzing how contexts of identity, power and privilege intersect with cognitive processes to explain consumers' aspirational yet constrained ethical agency.

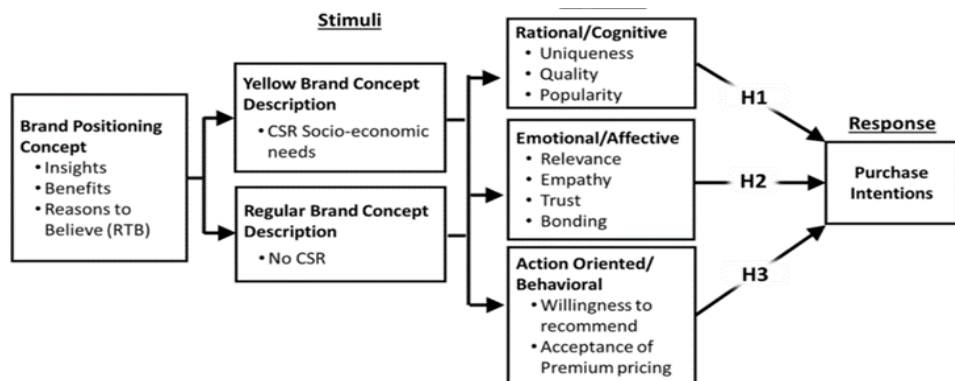


Figure 2. Stimulus-organism-response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974)

Critical theory application reveals how institutional expansions of fast fashion regimes that

are damaging yet very profitable, and that are based on the exploitation of cheap labour worldwide, are hidden under the prevailing emphasis on consumer education and nudging (Leticia Gabriela Galatti, 2022). Governments continue to subsidise this status quo, allowing businesses to avoid accountability and leaving it up to consumers to make sense of the contradictions by engaging in ethical purchasing. But because these sovereign spaces are dependent on excess income, they are inaccessible to underprivileged millennials who must overcome austerity constraints and institutional injustices. Analyzing consumption patterns critically would highlight difficult trade-offs between practical concerns and moral goals based on social positions. In order to advance theoretical understanding, it is necessary to analyse the ways in which complicated clothing CSR connections are shaped by the interactions between internal decision drives, identities, rhetoric, and systemic contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey-based research design to investigate relationships between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer behavior among millennial fashion shoppers. Aligning with the deductive hypothesis-testing purpose, a self-administered online questionnaire enabled large-scale data collection for statistical modelling of CSR impacts proposed by existing literature. As Ponterotto (2005) notes, the quantitative approach aligned with the researcher's positivist orientation prioritising objective measurement generalisability over constructivist idiographic meaning. However, critical scholars argue such designs privilege detached theory testing over participatory transformation (Lather, 1989). Integrating qualitative dialogues with marginalised communities could enrich future investigations.

Sample

The target population encompassed millennials in the United Kingdom aged 18 to 38 years old. Non-probability quota and convenience sampling was utilised given prohibitive costs and absence of probability sampling frames for this cohort (Bryman, 2016). Participants were recruited by placing advertisements on social media platforms popular among millennial demographic groups such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The advertisements invited millennials to partake voluntarily in the research study through a linked online survey. A diverse sample of 102 millennials was ultimately obtained over a 6-week timeline from July to September 2023. While probability methods would have increased generalisability, resource constraints necessitated pragmatic non-probability techniques (Bartlett et al., 2001). However, the recruitment of an inclusive, demographically varied sample of millennials for hypothesis testing enabled valuable theory advancement.

Instrumentation

A structured self-completion questionnaire was developed as the measurement instrument based on established scales from prior academic studies demonstrating strong reliability and validity in apparel research contexts. The survey comprised Likert-scale measures of the independent variables regarding consciousness of and favorability towards Primark, H&M and ASOS's CSR initiatives. Outcome variables including purchase intent and brand loyalty were adapted from scales validated by Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher (2016) and Hubacek et al. (2011). Pre-testing and piloting refined the survey

to optimise coherence. However, the lack of open-ended qualitative items or observational triangulation represents a methodological limitation necessitating future mixed-methods enrichment.

Analytic Strategy

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 26 software. Descriptive statistics enabled sample profiling. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha tested internal consistency for each multi-item scale as shown in table 1. Correlational analysis examined CSR perception interrelationships with purchase intent and loyalty. Hypothesis testing involved multiple regression modelling to assess the predictive capacity of CSR attitudes on behavioral outcomes when controlling for sociodemographic factors. Testing for assumption violations guided valid explanatory inferences (Field, 2013). Dominance analysis supplemented regressions to determine the relative importance of diverse CSR focus areas. However, the reliance on cross-sectional self-reports raises validity concerns which longitudinal tracking of actual behaviors could address. Critical scholars also contend such descriptive models promote acontextual reductionism when consumption constraints warrant examination (Auger & Devinney, 2007). Qualitative mapping of identity struggles would illuminate tensions between ethical aspirations and pragmatic barriers.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

| Scale | Cronbach's Alpha | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items | N of Items |
|-----------------------------|------------------|--|------------|
| Consumer Perceptions of CSR | 0.963 | 0.963 | 5 |
| Purchase Intention | 0.966 | 0.966 | 7 |
| Brand Loyalty | 0.971 | 0.971 | 7 |

Ethics

The research design obtained university ethics approval prioritising informed consent, anonymity through secure data handling, confidentiality and voluntary participation without coercion. As part of the ethical reflexivity process, the researcher acknowledges the privilege embedded within academic extraction of knowledge and need for community participatory paradigms.

Results and Discussion

Millennial CSR Perceptions

Quantitative analyses revealed minimal variations between apparel retailers regarding consumer awareness and perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The results showed that the CSR factor did not significantly influence participants' perceptions, as evidenced by the statistical test Pillai's Trace ($p > 0.05$). Mauchly's Test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was met for the CSR factor. However, tests of within-subjects effects showed that CSR significantly impacted consumer perceptions after

applying the Greenhouse-Geisser correction ($p < 0.05$). ANOVA findings revealed no considerable brand differences, contrasting assumptions that market leaders have stronger attribution from CSR efforts. However, mean ratings demonstrated moderately positive consumer consciousness toward CSR across a value fashion chain (Primark), fast fashion leader (H&M), and online-first brand (ASOS). This implies CSR currently neither meaningfully advantages market leaders nor hampers lagging brands.

Table 2: Repeated measures ANOVA multivariate tests

| Effect | | Value | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. |
|--------|--------------------|-------|-------|---------------|----------|------|
| CSR | Pillai's Trace | .051 | 2.702 | 2.000 | 100.000 | .072 |
| | Wilks' Lambda | .949 | 2.702 | 2.000 | 100.000 | .072 |
| | Hotelling's Trace | .054 | 2.702 | 2.000 | 100.000 | .072 |
| | Roy's Largest Root | .054 | 2.702 | 2.000 | 100.000 | .072 |

Table 3: Awareness and Perceptions of CSR Initiatives

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|-------------------------------------|-----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|----------|
| Consumer Perceptions of CSR Primark | 102 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.0627 | 1.24725 | 1.556 |
| Consumer Perceptions of CSR H&M | 102 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.9275 | 1.15348 | 1.331 |
| Consumer Perceptions of CSR ASOS | 102 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.8745 | 1.12185 | 1.259 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 102 | | | | | |

According to institutional theory, managerial conformity to socio-political expectations rationalizes legitimacy (Deegan, 2002). The lack of reputational hierarchies implies CSR adoption has potentially become an industry-level 'hygiene' factor amid growing stakeholder pressures. Nonetheless, modest scores indicate room for development as opposed to saturation. Prior research indicates that, in comparison to electronics, clothes CSR knowledge is still low, implying that fashion lags behind in terms of transparency (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). Additionally, detractors contend that corporate disclosures only create identities of "responsibility" that are detached from unsustainable practises (Boiral, 2013). It might be necessary to shift from performative CSR signalling to changing the underlying business models and institutions that support waste in order to bring about meaningful change.

The lack of variance, however, probably partly reflects growing scepticism among millennials in the UK, overriding the literature-proposed cognitive signalling effects. Mistrust has grown as a result of highly visible failures to develop ethical supply chains despite well-publicized CSR messages, particularly for well-known incumbents like H&M.

(M. Taplin, 2014). Other studies also show a significant degree of mistrust about CSR messages, which our additional data with few brands actively investigating their claims confirmed (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). A critical analysis of the results reveals intricate legitimacy factors related to context and identity. It is important to investigate marginalisation and heterogeneity. Explanations could be improved by using structural equation modeling that takes into account latent variables like media exposures.

CSR Impacts on Purchase and Loyalty

Regressions validated positive relationships proposed in literature between favorable CSR perceptions and key commercial outcomes including millennials' purchase intent and attitudinal brand loyalty across all apparel retailers. As Table 4 shows, 55.4% of the variability in purchase intentions was attributable to CSR attitudes, aligning with theory of planned behavior predictions of strong links (Dean et al., 2008). Additionally, 49.2% of variance in brand loyalty was explained by CSR favorability evaluations as per Table 5, reinforcing identity frameworks emphasizing emotional connections (Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013).

Table 4: Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate | Durbin-Watson |
|----------|------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | .744 | .554 | .541 | .81 | 1.89 |

Table 5: Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate | Durbin-Watson |
|----------|------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | .702 | .492 | .477 | .90151 | 1.771 |

The strong predictive power supports studies on planned behavior and identity frameworks, showing CSR shapes consumer-brand identification and behavioral preferences (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Dean et al., 2008). This reinforces arguments on integrating social responsibility within branding and business strategies. However, variations in effects magnitudes merit examination. The online native brand ASOS exhibited the greatest lift in purchase intent and loyalty based on CSR favorability perceptions. Purposive integration of sustainability into ASOS's platform functioning and brand identity appears to have an impact on millennials, making it a digital disruptor. This strengthens claims that, when positioned genuinely, strategic CSR-brand alignment amplifies behavioral impacts (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

Nonetheless, a few issues merit consideration. First of all, there are validity concerns when self-reported purchase intentions are used in place of observation. Extensive research on intention-behavior gaps indicates that relying too much on moral self-concepts runs the risk of distorting reality, which is full of difficult practical tradeoffs related to social (Auger & Devinney, 2007). According to critical thinkers, these disparities arise because consuming is a social construct rather than a personal decision. Secondly, the large variance explained may be due to social desirability biases, which cause respondents to overstate their virtuous desires in response to survey circumstances. Despite ethical

messages, buried contradictions between the use of fast fashion and its effects on the climate probably still exist. The positivist modelling method runs the risk of making consumers more responsible and decontextualized than organisations that uphold harmful systems.

CSR Focus Area Importance

Modeling various CSR focus areas' relative impacts on purchase intent revealed unexpected yet contextually understandable findings. Dominance analysis of Table 6 indicated positive supply chain ethics upholding labor rights most strongly predicted apparel buying intentions instead of environmental sustainability. This deviates from portions of literature on the primacy of "green" CSR (Tian et al., 2011). However, apparel production practices characterized by sweatshop conditions and livelihood precarity explain UK millennials' prioritization of social equity initiatives over recycled materials usage or lower emissions. Academics have argued human rights in global supply chains represent the most urgent moral issues facing fashion (Jung & Jin, 2014). Critically reflecting structurally, fast fashion regimes premised on disposability and constant novelty rely on abundant cheap labor without employment security – a contradiction unlikely resolved solely through consumer circularity or market mechanisms (Leticia Gabriela Galatti, 2022). However, interpreting self-reported behavioral intentions warrants caution given validity gaps. Partnering with brands to track sales against CSR messaging would strengthen claims.

Table 6: Dominance scores

| CSR Area | Dominance Score |
|---|-----------------|
| Environmental Sustainability | 0.0898 |
| Community Involvement and Philanthropy | 0.1094 |
| Ethical Sourcing and Fair-Trade Practices | 0.1247 |
| Transparency in Reporting CSR Efforts | 0.1177 |
| Positive Impact on Employees and Working Conditions | 0.1207 |

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Contributions

Three main theoretical contributions are made by the findings. First off, the signalling theory's presumptions that well-known companies have an inherent cognitive advantage when it comes to imputed social responsibility are challenged by the lack of discernible variations in CSR judgments between value and well-known clothes stores (Connelly et al., 2011). The observed discrepancies draw attention to the necessity for a more critical, contextualised application that looks at the ways that systemic influences influence attribution, scepticism, and access. Second, confirming proposed CSP-behavioral connections based on planned behaviour is consistent with the body of existing literature; nonetheless, the magnitudes of impacts differing according to brand identity and channel indicate circumstances that require more research (Dean et al., 2008). Understanding could be improved by moderator analysis using structural equation modelling. Lastly, comparisons showing supply chain ethics to be more important than sustainability programmes point to areas that should be prioritised for industry change and consumer-informed CSR. Critical scholars argue that

multidimensional assessments like this are still restricted if they don't examine how economic systems link with waste and exploitation that persists (Öberseder et al., 2014). Research directions therefore include using mixed qualitative methodologies and paradigm pluralism to produce a contextualised and nuanced understanding of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the setting of consumption restrictions and identity tensions.

Managerial Implications

Research shows that in order to effectively leverage CSR in fashion marketing, communication strategies must be balanced with reliable transparency. Since past mistakes have led to distrust, companies need to go beyond performative messaging and engage in a participatory reform of the underlying production logics. Another best practise that comes to me is customising platforms and messaging for identity-based customer segments. Showing off supply chain worker empowerment, for instance, could successfully attract millennial demographics that are interested in justice. Securing legitimacy, however, necessitates resolving competing demands for development, speed, novelty, and sustainability at the same time. Companies should recognise systemic limitations on moral agency and jointly build solutions that incorporate both structural and individual action, rather than exaggerating consumer "choice."

Concluding Remarks

Through an empirical analysis of millennial consumers' associations with garment businesses' CSR initiatives, this study tackled uncharted area. Quantitative findings demonstrated consequences and awareness difficulties that need for more critically informed scholarship. Prospects for further investigation encompass utilising interpretive, discursive, and observational techniques to place CSR relationships in the framework of identity plurality. In order to involve various consumer voices in participatory paradigm shifts, it is necessary to move beyond reductionist measurements of attitudes and self-reported actions in order to enable responsible transformation of the fashion industry.

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