

# The Generation Y's sustainability perceptions and consumption habits in the footwear industry in Portugal

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to study the attitude that Millennial consumers (or Generation Y) have towards sustainability and sustainable purchasing habits and what they actually do in terms of their 'green' purchasing behaviour regarding footwear. In order to understand this, some internal and external influencing factors were obtained from the literature review which can positively or negatively influence the 'green' purchasing behaviour of the Millennial consumers. And they are: Consumption habits; Economic availability; Personal benefits and Consumer consciousness. All these factors were analyzed in the form of a questionnaire, applied to Millennials reaching 635 answers from all over the country. In sum, with this paper is possible to understand that the attitude this generation has towards sustainability is very positive but is it not reflected in their purchasing behaviour in terms of sustainable footwear.

**Keywords - Footwear, 'Green' Purchase, Millennial Generation, Sustainability.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is evolving at a fast pace manner where on one hand consumers are becoming conscious of the impact of their purchasing behaviour and willing to support a more sustainable fashion industry, but, on the other hand, are complying with unsustainable business models [1]. Encouraged by low prices and influenced by marketing campaigns and trend changes, consumers tend to speed their fashion consumption [2]. Experts blame fast fashion for the expansion of our wardrobes [3]. Fast production and fast consumption lead to the decrease of resources and increase of waste, thus stressing the earth's capacity to regenerate at a natural pace.

Consumption of footwear in Portugal increased in 2016 to 57 million pairs, the highest figure in the last six years. In 2017 Portugal produced 82 million pairs of footwear and is an industry that now accounts for 3.4% of value added in manufacturing industry [4]. APICCAPS launched *FOOTure*, a strategic plan of measures with the objective to place the Portuguese Footwear industry on top of world competitiveness. One of the goals is innovation through the

promotion of sustainable and responsible development, and communicating and internationalizing, recurring to digital marketing strategies, communication plans and campaigns [4]. Although sustainability is one goal for the footwear industry, there is still a lot to learn about this cluster in terms of sustainable production and communication. If footwear companies perceive the competitive advantages of being 'green' and understand how consumers perceive sustainability, then they will be able to incorporate design principles and make sustainability an essential part of their strategies [5].

Consumers are an important part of the fashion system and can create a valuable influence in the pursuit of sustainability in the fashion industry. There are several aspects to consider when analyzing fashion consumers and sustainability: the consumer knowledge about sustainability, consumer behaviour and consumption habits and feelings associated with sustainable consumption. In fact, the attitude and the behaviour of consumers are in line with the rapid production [2].

## II. STATE OF ART

### A. Sustainable Development

Based on the desire of preserving the environment without sacrificing economic growth and social development, emerges the concept of sustainable development. This concept has evolved to a sustainability perspective that brings together three vital aspects: the environmental, economic and social pillars. Nowadays design should incorporate the principles of sustainability in order to work with the natural world and not impoverish the remaining resources on the planet [6].

A sustainable design has several names, such as 'Eco-Design', 'Green', 'Eco-conscious', and its meaning depends on the context, the situation and the social, cultural, financial, and of course, environmental impacts [7]. A sustainable design aims to create value by finding the triple bottom line: economic, environmental and social benefits [8]. Sustainability is defined as the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [9].

Associated to a sustainable development is the concept of sustainable product. This concept can be misleading because the impacts that any product has on social and ecological environment depends not only of its production, but also of its use by consumers [10]. Previously the main goal of design was centered in mass-production cycles and each individual part was independent of the other, thus affecting the entire ecosystem. But now, a sustainable design considers a holistic process, interrelated and interdependent. Sustainability focuses on efficient and effective solutions that are best for society, the environment and businesses. A successful and sustainable design follows and complies with strict criteria and consider in response to customers, users, participants, people, marketing, company, brand, channel, culture and environment. It is created for and about customers as people and not just as consumers. So, the design has a healthy result for the ecosystem [11].

### B. Millennials: the new consumer

The new consumers, or the generation Y (Millennials) are defined as a group of people born between 1980 and 2000 and their core values include confidence, loyalty to civic duty, sociability, morality, intelligence and diversity. This generation maintains a positive attitude in relation to sustainability in general and are very aware of the opportunities that companies have to help the environment and reduce the ecological footprint. Also, this is a generation that thinks that it is the companies' duty to invest in a better environment and society by producing products in a sustainable way. However, there is a clear contradiction between how Millennials thinks about sustainability and what they effectively do when it comes to a sustainable consumption [12].

## III. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The research method used in this paper was quantitative, through the analysis of a questionnaire answered by 635 Millennials from every district in Portugal [13]. The results of the questionnaires allow a better understanding between the gap of what Millennials think about sustainability and how they perceive it, with their actual consumption habits regarding footwear. In order to design a solid questionnaire, four influencing factors were selected from the literature and will be further subject of analysis: 1. Consumption habits; 2. Economic availability; 3. Personal benefits and 4. Consumer consciousness; This paper will analyze each of these influencing factors allowing a better understanding of the Generation Y's sustainability perceptions and consumption habits in the footwear industry in Portugal.

## IV. RESULTS

Before analyzing the different factors, it is important to understand Millennials overall attitude towards sustainability, so, to the question: "Do you search for information about sustainable products and services?", 55% said "Yes" and 45% said "No". When asked if they buy 'green' products, only 42% answered positively, 28% negatively and 29% didn't know if what they buy is sustainable or not. To the statement "I'm aware that I should consume 'green' ", 471 Millennials answered positively, (34,2% for "Agree" and 40% for "Strongly agree"), however when they were asked "For me it is important to consume 'green' " their responses, although positive, weren't as positive as the previous statement, having 258 answers for the "Agree" (174) and "Strongly agree" (84). Out of the 635, 141 answers were negative, with 94 Millennials answering "Disagree" and 47 "Strongly disagree". Also, it is interesting to note that, when asked "I believe that by buying 'green', I can contribute positively to the environment", a smashing majority (75,5%) answered "Agree" (38%) and "Strongly agree" (37,5%).

Below is the analysis of the four influencing factors regarding sustainable footwear purchasing habits:

### 1. Consumption habits

Habits are behavioral routines that are repeated regularly and tend to develop subconsciously. A habit is a fixed form of thinking, acting or feeling and is determined by the repetition of a prior experience. When a behavior is often performed, can conduct an immediate behavior under the control of a usual process [14].

Regarding the questionnaire, to the statement "I usually buy footwear in the same places/stores/brands" only 17,3% answered positively (3,6% for "Strongly Agree" and 13,7% for "Agree").

This comes as an opportunity because Millennials don't always buy at the same stores, so when offered a different

product that they find value, they could easily switch brands.

## 2. Economic availability

The author [15] perceives a relationship between income and ecological footprint. Consumers with higher incomes have a negative footprint, while consumers with lower income have a positive footprint. The price of 'green' products depending on the economic availability is the most common barrier for consumers not buying 'green' products or services [16]. However, the amount of expendable money also seems to be a personal factor since it is related to the willingness to pay a certain price. Some studies claim that the income does not affect the behavior of buying 'green' [17-18]. The author [19] hopes that this personal factor overlaps the contextual factor of economic availability in the decision-making process.

In the questionnaire, to the statement "I'm willing to pay more for shoes made with sustainable materials", only 8,3% answered "Strongly Agree" and 29,9% "Agree", summing up to 38,2% of positive responses. These results go in line with the results of this next statement "Even though a footwear model that I like is made with sustainable materials, if the price is high I don't buy", with only 21,6% of Millennials willing to buy the sustainable model.

## 3. Personal Benefits

Personal benefits, personal concern or personal interest, all refer to the efforts that a person has to do to satisfy their needs and desires. Consumers will assess whether the expected behaviour (for example, what to do) corresponds with their own personal concerns [20]. There is the tendency to decide in favor of their own interests, which is thus related to the fact that consumers often fail to estimate the actual impact of buying 'green' in their lives [21]. A consumer will buy a 'green' product, when in addition to the environmental benefit, they realize some benefit individual direct in acquiring the product [22].

To the statement "I'm only willing to buy sustainable footwear if I'm sure that this action will have a positive impact on the environment", the majority of Millennials (347) answered "Strongly Agree" (141) and "Agree" (206). And to the statement "I find personal benefits in consuming green", "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" obtained 123 and 225 responses, respectively. This way, 54,8% of all the Millennials believe that consuming green is something that will add value to their life and that is beneficial.

## 4. Consumer Consciousness

This factor is defined as the amount of time that was spent in the processing of information about 'green' and sustainable products [23]. It is important that consumers are aware of the fact that buying 'green' can be a criterion of

purchase and should also pay attention to the communication of organizations about products of this type [24].

Consciousness holds a key role in the acquisition of sustainable products and is a bonus when making a 'green' purchase. When consumers are not aware of the existence of these types of products, they will never be able to form strong attitudes and intentions regarding the purchase of sustainable products. So, the level of consciousness influences the relationship between 'green' attitudes and purchase intentions [25].

To the statement "Footwear made with sustainable materials is of higher quality" only 31,6% answered positively and to the statement "The price of footwear is a good indicator of its quality" 38,6% answered positively, so these two statements are in line. When asked if "The extra effort to find sustainable footwear is not worth the personal benefits" 33,4% answered positively and only 29,3% of Millennials think that the personal benefit of being 'green' outweighs the extra price of sustainable footwear.

Lastly, it is important to understand if Millennials can detect sustainable footwear at stores, so, to the statement "It is hard for me to detect sustainable footwear", 258 answered positively (13,2% for "Strongly Agree" and 27,4% for "Agree"), and 141 answered negatively (7,4% for "Strongly Disagree" and 14,8% for "Disagree"). This answer is in line with the information stated in the beginning of the results, when 29% of Millennials didn't know if what they buy is sustainable or not.

One of the goals of this study is to analyze Millennials not only from Portugal, but also from different countries in order to develop comparison studies. The same methodology adopted in this paper (questionnaire) is going to be applied to Millennials all across Romania in April 2018. This will allow a better understanding of Millennials perceptions and sustainable purchasing habits, and how can the cultural factor influence these decisions. Also, a focus group will be done in Romania in order to obtain qualitative insights to complement the quantitative results.

## V. CONCLUSION

The questionnaire was answered by Millennials all across Portugal, 68% being female and 32% male. In fact, 94% of the Millennials assume that they are the main responsible for sustainability on earth, but not all have sustainable consumption habits. Only 55% say that they search for sustainable alternatives for products and services, and 43% actually buy 'green'.

Going back as an example to the economic availability as an influencing factor, the questionnaires showed that 47,6% of the Millennials assume that the price doesn't stop them from buying 'green' but 22,9% agree that they don't buy

because the price is too high. When it comes to footwear, 38,2% of Millennials assume that they are willing to pay more for a pair of shoes made with sustainable materials, however, 60,4% can't recognize a pair of sustainable shoes and 93% can't name a footwear brand that offers a sustainable line. This factor comes up as the main barrier to buy 'green' because their willingness to pay a higher price for a pair of sustainable footwear outweighs the personal benefits of being 'green'.

This is a generation that is aware of their role in society and are willing to buy sustainable products if they know for sure what are the impacts in the environment coming from that purchase. However, this attitude does not translate in actual purchases. Regarding footwear, Millennials still aren't aware of the different 'green' alternatives in the market and only associate sustainable materials to high price and not high quality nor trendy designs. This is due to their lack of information and motivation to search for 'green' products and services, where only 55% claim to do so.

After analyzing all the factors, it is possible to see that even though Millennials have a very positive attitude towards a sustainability, this does not translate in 'green' purchases, in this case, in footwear.

The main limitation of this study is that the analyzed sample is 100% Portuguese, therefore it is not possible to extrapolate these results to other countries. This limitation will be overcome by the comparative study with Millennials all across Romania. This study will take place at the Gheorghe Asachi Technical University of Iasi.

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