Factors Influencing Sustainable Fashion Avoidance among Millennial Consumers in Sri Lanka: A Brand Avoidance Perspective

V.W. Acharige
University of Plymouth, UK

T. Yatawara & I.A. Caldera
NSBM Green University, Sri Lanka

P. Herath
International Psychoanalytic University

ABSTRACT: Sustainable fashion is presented as a response to the environmental and social costs of conventional apparel, yet consumers may still avoid it. This study examines associations between four proposed factors and sustainable fashion avoidance intention in a cross-sectional online survey of Sri Lankan millennials. The survey contained 303 responses; 302 recorded explicit consent and were included. Four item scores for functional avoidance, symbolic avoidance, moral avoidance and perceived knowledge deficit were entered in an ordinary least squares regression. The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 297) = 6.661$, $p < 0.001$, but explained 8.2% of the variation in avoidance intention. Only symbolic score had a significant adjusted association, and it was inverse ($\beta = -0.272$, $p < 0.001$). Functional ($\beta = -0.067$, $p = 0.365$), moral ($\beta = 0.043$, $p = 0.453$) and knowledge deficit ($\beta = 0.068$, $p = 0.283$) scores were not significant in the joint model. Functional scale reliability was below 0.70 ($\alpha = 0.660$). The inverse symbolic finding, provisional measures and concentrated convenience sample limit interpretation. The study identifies a relationship requiring further investigation, rather than causal drivers of purchases.

Keywords: sustainable fashion; brand avoidance; Sri Lanka; millennials; symbolic identity; consumer intention

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Background and problem*

Fashion production and consumption impose substantial environmental pressures, while sustainable fashion encompasses different approaches to reducing harm across products and supply chains [1], [2]. Yet favourable views of sustainability do not consistently translate into clothing purchases [3]. Understanding avoidance intention may therefore clarify how consumers evaluate the practical and personal fit of sustainable apparel. This study tests four proposed associations among Sri Lankan adults aged 25 to 40, using the original online survey rather than treating a positive environmental attitude as evidence of purchasing behaviour.

1.2 *Research gap and objective*

Earlier brand avoidance research distinguishes rejection arising from unmet expectations, identity conflict and moral objections [4]. A recent study applied a modified avoidance model to sustainable fashion shoppers in South Africa [5]. The present analysis considers functional, symbolic and moral scores together with perceived knowledge deficit in a Sri Lankan sample. It asks which variables remain associated with avoidance intention when the others are held constant. Because respondents were recruited by convenience and the questionnaire measured intention rather than observed purchases, the findings concern this sample

and cannot establish causes or population prevalence.

The research question is: How are functional, symbolic and moral avoidance scores and perceived knowledge deficit associated with sustainable fashion avoidance intention in the sampled Sri Lankan adults? The objective is to estimate the direction and strength of each association in a joint model. Studying intention is useful, but it must not be equated with actual refusal to buy sustainable clothing.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 *Brand avoidance and functional concerns*

Lee and colleagues distinguish experiential, identity and moral forms of brand avoidance [4]. In this study, functional concerns are approximated by items on perceived quality, durability, expectations and value; symbolic concerns by items on style, social image and identity; moral concerns by avoidance of unethical brands and preference for social responsibility. Knowledge deficit adds uncertainty about sustainable fashion concepts and claims. These are adapted survey domains, not proven dimensions of a single validated avoidance scale. Research on eco-clothing relates purchase decisions to identity and the social meaning of appearance [6]. Working on fast fashion also describes the tension between style desires and sustainability [7]. Studies of eco-conscious apparel acquisition identify practical and informational barriers [8].

Functional avoidance in the brand avoidance literature concerns disappointed expectations and unsatisfactory product performance [4]. In this questionnaire, three items directly mention poor quality, unmet expectations and durability. A fourth refers generally to avoiding brands without value for money. That broader wording may reflect price or perceived worth rather than a product failure specific to sustainable fashion. Therefore, the four item average is an approximate indicator of functional concerns, not a verified measure of functional avoidance. Sustainable apparel research has identified practical barriers such as difficulty locating suitable products and doubts about value [8].

2.2 *Identity and competing explanations*

An alternative account is the theory of planned behavior, which emphasizes attitudes, social norms and perceived control as determinants of intention [9]. Its attention to perceived control makes affordability and access plausible influences, while identity research draws attention to social image in clothing choice [3], [6]. Recent work on high volume fashion consumers shows that stated sustainability concern can coexist with high garment consumption [10]. This design did not measure the full planned behavior model, actual purchases or attitudes to specific brands, so it cannot adjudicate between theories or demonstrate an attitude–behavior gap in this sample.

Symbolic avoidance refers to a perceived mismatch between a brand and a consumer's self-concept [4]. Clothing can communicate personal style and social identity [6]. The current items ask whether sustainable fashion fits personal style and social image, whether consumers reject brands that do not match identity, and whether they prefer brands that improve self-image. The last item describes a general preference and could have a different interpretation from rejection of sustainable fashion. This matters when interpreting the negative coefficient. Moral avoidance is also conceptually distinct: disagreement with a brand's conduct can lead to rejection, but the present moral items often express support for ethical behavior rather than rejection of sustainable products. Greenwashing literature provides a reason to study credibility, but no brand's actual conduct was measured here [11], [12].

2.3 *Consumer knowledge deficit*

Knowledge deserves separate attention because knowledge of sustainability differs from confidence in a brand's claims. Han and colleagues report an association between accurate sustainability knowledge and purchase intention in other Asian samples [13]. The present questionnaire instead asks about information shortage, conceptual difficulty, brand authenticity and limited awareness. Its score therefore combines related but distinct perceptions; a null coefficient here cannot overturn findings based on objective knowledge tests.

2.4 *Hypotheses and conceptual framework*

H1 proposes an association between functional score and sustainable fashion avoidance intention. H2 proposes an association between symbolic score and avoidance intention.

H3 proposes an association between moral score and avoidance intention. H4 proposes an association between perceived knowledge deficit score and avoidance intention. These hypotheses are non-directional because adapted items mix statements about rejection, brand preference and ethical approval. All four scores enter the same model; the framework tests adjusted statistical associations, not causal pathways.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Design and respondents*

The study used a cross-sectional online questionnaire circulated through Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and LinkedIn. Convenience sampling did not give every eligible person a known chance of selection. Survey timestamps place the recorded responses on 8–9 April 2026. Of 303 records, 302 selected "Yes" to voluntary participation; one "Yes;No" response was ambiguous and excluded before analysis. The analysed respondents selected age bands 25–30, 31–35 or 36–40.

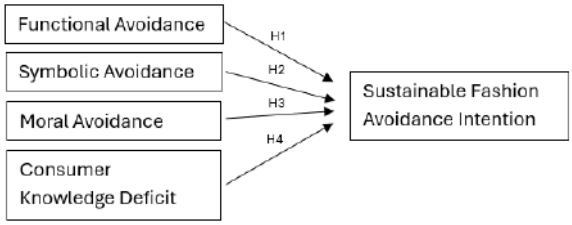


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

These bands overlap the millennial cohort but cannot establish each person's birth year, and the youngest respondents may fall outside commonly used millennial boundaries. The findings therefore apply to the sampled age bands rather than all Sri Lankan millennials. The study plan proposed employment, income and awareness screening, but recorded students and unemployed participants show that those conditions cannot be treated as enforced. The number invited, response rate and independent eligibility checks were not recorded.

3.2 *Questionnaire and operational definitions*

The questionnaire contained demographic questions and 20 agreement statements, grouped into five proposed four item scales. Response options were coded 1 for strongly disagree through 5 for strongly agree. Functional items concerned quality, expectations, durability and value. Symbolic items concerned style, social image, identity and self-image. Moral items concerned ethical practice, environmental harm and social responsibility. Knowledge items concerned insufficient information, difficulty understanding sustainable fashion, uncertain authenticity and limited awareness. The outcome items asked about deliberately avoiding sustainable fashion, preferring alternatives, lacking interest and being unlikely to purchase it. Each scale score was the arithmetic mean of its four recorded items; higher outcome values indicate more stated avoidance. Because some predictor items are affirmative preferences or general brand statements, no reverse coding was imposed without evidence that such a transformation matched the questionnaire's intended meaning. No included record lacked a scale response after normalizing category capitalization. These operational choices allow replication but leave construct meaning and item direction open to further validation.

3.3 *Statistical analysis*

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for internal consistency. Pearson's correlation coefficient summarized the unadjusted relationship between each predictor and the outcome. The joint ordinary least squares model regressed the four-item avoidance intention mean on the four predictor means. Unstandardized coefficients (B), standardized coefficients (β), t statistics, two-sided p values, a 95% confidence interval for the significant symbolic coefficient, R^2, adjusted R^2, F and variance inflation factors (VIF) are reported below. The significance threshold was 0.05. The model's standard errors use conventional ordinary least squares assumptions; no claim of fully verified residual normality or constant variance is made. Cross sectional, self-reported and nonran-

dom data permit association estimates but cannot establish causal effects or population prevalence.

3.4 *Ethics*

A voluntary participation question was included and analysis retained only explicit "Yes" responses. The study records available for this article do not document an institutional ethics approval or exemption, the information presented before consent, anonymization procedures, or a retention policy. These details need to be verified, and the appropriate approval or exemption statement supplied before submission. A positive answer to a participation question is evidence of an expressed response, not of institutional review.

4 RESULTS

4.1 *Respondent profile*

Table 1 summarises the 302 explicitly consenting respondents. The sample was concentrated among women (79.8%) and respondents aged 31–35 (87.4%); 83.8% held a degree or diploma. These distributions describe the online convenience sample and should not be interpreted as representative of Sri Lankan millennials.

Table 1. Respondent profile in the analysed sample (N = 302)

Group	Category	n (%)
Age	25–30	21 (7.0)
	31–35	264 (87.4)
	36–40	17 (5.6)
Gender	Female	241 (79.8)
	Male	61 (20.2)
Education	Degree	145 (48.0)
	Diploma	108 (35.8)
	Postgraduate	33 (10.9)
	School level	16 (5.3)
Employment	Full time employed	102 (33.8)
	Self employed	102 (33.8)
	Part time employed	72 (23.8)
	Student	15 (5.0)
	Unemployed	11 (3.6)
Monthly income	Below LKR 50,000	27 (8.9)
	LKR 50,000–100,000	138 (45.7)
	LKR 100,000–150,000	113 (37.4)
	Above LKR 150,000	24 (7.9)

4.2 *Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics summarised the study variables, while Pearson correlations examined their unadjusted relationships with sustainable fashion avoidance. Symbolic avoidance recorded the highest mean (M = 3.5924, SD = 0.66091), whereas sustainable fashion avoidance recorded the lowest (M = 2.8003, SD = 0.86108).

Functional and symbolic avoidance were negatively correlated with sustainable fashion avoidance ($r = -0.201$ and -0.275, respectively; $p < .001$). Moral avoidance ($r = -0.074$, $p = .200$) and consumer knowledge deficit ($r = -0.078$, $p = .174$) were not significantly correlated with the outcome. These bivariate relationships were examined further in the joint regression model.

4.3 *Reliability Analysis*

The internal consistency of the five study constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Each construct was measured using four questionnaire items, and the analysis included 303 responses. As shown in Table 1, sustainable fashion avoidance intention had the highest reliability ($\alpha = .871$). Symbolic avoidance ($\alpha = .795$), consumer knowledge deficit ($\alpha = .760$), and moral avoidance ($\alpha = .744$) also exceeded the .70 criterion. Functional avoidance produced an alpha of .668, which was slightly below this criterion. Therefore, four of the five scales met the selected reliability criterion. Findings involving functional avoidance should be interpreted with caution because its items showed weaker internal consistency.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations with sustainable fashion avoidance

Construct	Mean	SD	r	p
Functional avoidance	3.4150	0.52385	-0.201	<.001
Symbolic avoidance	3.5924	0.66091	-0.275	<.001
Moral avoidance	3.4172	0.54875	-0.074	.200
Consumer knowledge deficit	3.5253	0.62721	-0.078	.174
Sustainable fashion avoidance	2.8003	0.86108	-	-

Table 3. Reliability analysis of the study measures

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	Interpretation
Functional avoidance	4	.668	Below .70 criterion
Symbolic avoidance	4	.795	Reliable
Moral avoidance	4	.744	Reliable
Consumer knowledge deficit	4	.760	Reliable
Sustainable fashion avoidance intention	4	.871	Highly reliable

4.4 *Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing*

The joint ordinary least squares regression was statistically significant, $F(4, 297) = 6.661$, $p < .001$, but explained 8.2% of the variation in sustainable fashion avoidance intention ($R^2 = .082$). Only symbolic score remained a statistically significant independent predictor after adjustment ($\beta = -.272$, $p < .001$). Functional ($\beta = -.067$, $p = .365$), moral ($\beta = .043$, $p = .453$), and knowledge deficit ($\beta = .068$, $p = .283$) scores were not significant in the joint model.

The inverse symbolic coefficient indicates that higher symbolic scores were associated with lower reported avoidance after controlling for the other predictors. H2 was therefore supported as a statistical association, although the direction complicates substantive interpretation. H1, H3 and H4 were not supported in the adjusted model. Given the convenience sample, cross-sectional design and adapted measures, these results should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 *Symbolic score and identity*

Symbolic score was the only independent predictor meeting the statistical threshold in the joint model, but its inverse sign complicates theoretical interpretation. A South African study using a modified brand avoidance model identified symbolic incongruence as relevant to sustainable fashion avoidance [5], while other research links clothing choice with social identity and self-expression [3], [6]. In this sample, however, higher symbolic scores corresponded to lower reported avoidance after adjustment. Mixed item direction may partly explain this result: a general preference for brands that enhance self-image does not necessarily measure rejection of sustainable fashion. The concentrated sample may also differ from populations examined elsewhere. Neither explanation was tested directly, so the finding requires replication using clearly worded, consistently directed items before stronger theoretical conclusions are drawn.

Table 4. Joint regression and hypothesis testing

Predictor	β	p	Result
Functional avoidance	−.067	.365	Not supported
Symbolic avoidance	−.272	<0.001	Supported
Moral avoidance	.043	.453	Not supported
Consumer knowledge deficit	.068	.283	Not supported

Fashion remains an important form of self-expression, meaning that sustainability attributes are likely to be evaluated alongside design, lifestyle compatibility and desired social image. For practitioners, this cautions against assuming that environmental positioning alone will create preference. Sustainable offerings may still need to compete on aesthetics and identity relevance. At the same time, the negative adjusted coefficient means the present data do not justify a claim that symbolic mismatch causes avoidance; the result is better treated as a measurement-sensitive association requiring confirmation.

5.2 *Functional, moral and knowledge scores*

Functional score was inversely correlated with avoidance intention at the bivariate level but was nonsignificant after adjustment. Its below-benchmark reliability and broad value-for-money item further limit interpretation. Moral score and perceived knowledge deficit were also nonsignificant in the joint model. These findings should not be read as evidence that ethics or information are unimportant. The moral items mainly captured support for ethical practice, which does not necessarily imply rejection of sustainable products, while the knowledge measure assessed perceived information gaps rather than objective knowledge. This differs from research connecting objectively assessed sustainable-

fashion knowledge with purchase intention [13]. Similarly, greenwashing research highlights the importance of claim credibility [11], [12], but the present survey did not measure actual misleading claims or responses to named brands. The distinction between bivariate and adjusted findings is important. A variable may show an association with avoidance when examined alone but contribute little unique explanatory power once overlapping predictors are considered simultaneously. Functional considerations such as quality, durability, accessibility and perceived value may still matter in real purchasing contexts, but this dataset does not establish an independent adjusted effect. Likewise, the nonsignificant moral and knowledge coefficients should be interpreted as sample-specific statistical results rather than evidence that ethical concerns or sustainability education have no role in consumer decision making.

5.3 *Managerial implications and future research*

For managers, the findings are best used to frame exploratory questions rather than prescribe proven interventions. Interviews could investigate whether consumers perceive sustainable clothing as compatible with personal style, how they evaluate durability and value, and what evidence makes sustainability claims credible. This may help brands identify whether avoidance reflects product performance, identity fit, information uncertainty, or other barriers not captured adequately by the current measures.

Further research should revise the questionnaire to distinguish rejection of sustainable products from rejection of unethical conventional brands, verify the factor structure, and specify which items require reverse coding. Research using a broader age and gender distribution, measured purchasing behaviour and a sampling strategy with known coverage would help determine whether the inverse symbolic association recurs. Experimental work could then test whether specific design, pricing or communication changes alter consumer choices. The present cross-sectional regression cannot establish that any such intervention would increase sustainable-fashion purchases.

The modest explanatory power of the joint model also indicates that substantial variation in avoidance intention remains outside the four proposed scores. Future studies could therefore examine additional influences such as price sensitivity, product availability, perceived quality, fashion involvement, peer influence, trust in sustainability claims and prior purchasing experience. Separating stated intention from observed purchasing would be particularly valuable because consumers may express support for sustainability without making corresponding clothing choices. Longitudinal or experimental designs would also provide stronger evidence about whether changes in product attributes or communication precede changes in behaviour. Until such evidence is available, managerial recommendations should remain exploratory and should not be presented as proven causal solutions.

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 *Summary and limitations*

This study examined four proposed correlates of sustainable fashion avoidance intention among 302 explicitly consenting Sri Lankan adults aged 25–40. The joint model was significant but explained only 8.2% of variation in intention. Symbolic score was inversely associated with intention ($\beta = -.272$, $p < .001$), while functional, moral and perceived knowledge deficit scores were nonsignificant after adjustment. The concentrated convenience sample, mixed item wording, weaker functional-scale reliability, unverified factor structure, self-reported intention and cross-sectional design limit interpretation. The study therefore identifies an association requiring further investigation rather than causal drivers of sustainable fashion purchasing.

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