

Impact of Slow Fashion Orientation on Socially Responsible Apparel Consumption: Reference to Millennials in Western Province, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Slow fashion promotes conscious consumerism, equitable manufacturing, and mainly durable clothing, it is important but not much studied in Sri Lanka. This study examines the extent to which various dimensions of slow fashion orientation namely equity, authenticity, functionality, localism, and exclusivity affect the socially responsible apparel consumption by millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The study is based on the Customer Value Creation Theory focusing on the values of slow fashion and their contribution to ethical clothing decisions. Following the quantitative approach, 302 usable responses were collected from millennial consumers under the purposive sampling using a self-administer structured questionnaire. Findings demonstrate that authenticity, functionality, and exclusivity appear to be strong motivating factors that prompt socially responsible apparel usage in the case of Sri Lankan millennials, while equity and localism did not play a significant role.

These findings indicate that the values of the product, including authentic design, functionality, and distinctiveness are more critical when it comes to responsible purchases of clothing than such values as social fairness or local identity in isolation. To the brands, this translates to authentic storytelling, long-lasting quality, and unique designs, making it more appealing to the millennial consumer. The study suggests to policymakers and educators the significance of increasing the visibility of ethical and local apparel production, a key aspect of the fashion industry, and its attractiveness. In general, this study will contribute to the expansion of the slow fashion literature by shedding light on the key drivers of value that can convert slow fashion orientation into socially responsible and sustainable apparel consumption in emerging economies, such as Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Authenticity, Exclusivity, Functionality, Millennials, Slow Fashion*

1. Introduction

The fashion industry in the world has evolved at a very fast pace in the last several decades. The major part of this transformation is fuelled by the business model of fast fashion, which is concerned with making clothes within a short time, cheaply, and in massive amounts. Although it enables buyers to acquire fashionable outfits at a minimal cost, the issue of fast fashion has caused severe environmental and social issues. It has been found that textile and apparel industry contributes about 10 percent of total carbon emissions worldwide and generates approximately 92 million tons of textile waste each year (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Igini, 2024). Meanwhile, poor labor conditions, low income, and unsafe working environments are practiced in numerous factories (Bick et al., 2018). Due to these detrimental effects, individuals worldwide have begun to challenge the long-term effects of fast fashion and are now becoming interested in more environmentally friendly options.

Slow fashion is one of the most significant options and is built on the principle of quality and less quantity, where consumers purchase fewer items, with a longer lifespan, ethically produced, and less harmful to the environment (Fletcher, 2010; Jung and Jin, 2016). Slow fashion principles are transparency, durability, creativity, fairness, and respect to culture. As an example, the slow fashion clothes are focused on robust fabrics, sustainable construction, classic design, and socially friendly production procedures (Henninger et al., 2016; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Due to these features, slow fashion encourages more conscious consumerism and minimizes waste.

Millennials have made slow fashion popular worldwide and are more concerned with ethical and eco-friendly fashion than previous generations were (Joy et al., 2012; McNeill and Moore, 2015). It has been demonstrated that a large portion of millennials tend to wear sustainably sourced clothes because of their beliefs in climate change, pollution, and labor rights (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Millennials tend to be the creators of fashion trends, so their attention to slow fashion will make it more popular and motivate companies to go green. Slow fashion is still fledgling in Sri Lanka. Cheap imported clothing dominates the local apparel market greatly, promoting the aspect of fast fashion and making it hard to develop slow fashion.

The volume of textile waste generated in Sri Lanka reaches over one million tons annually, and this fact demonstrates the extent to which the issue of fast-fashion has escalated (Arachchige et al., 2019). Although environmental issues are gaining popularity among young consumers, slow fashion is not yet prevalent due to the affordability and easy access of fast fashion (Dissanayake et al., 2017). Nevertheless, slow fashion is what several Sri Lankan brands have begun to market, including House of Lonali, G FLOCK, Barefoot, Selyn, and Majae, through the utilization of natural resources, ethical work, and sustainable manufacturing. Such brands indicate that slow fashion can become popular in Sri Lanka and capture clients who attach importance to quality and responsible manufacturing (Najmudeen, 2023). In the Western Province, particularly in the Colombo area, there is an increase in consumers developing interest towards sustainable clothing due to the rising awareness on environmental matters and pollution (Gunarathne & Ranathunga, 2023).

As the millennials of the Western Province are increasingly concerned with the environment, one must consider the impact of slow fashion values on the consumption of socially responsible apparel by the millennials (SRC). SRC refers to the choice of clothing that is based on environmental protection, fairness, and responsible resource utilization (McNeill and Moore, 2015). With the rapid expansion of the fashion industry in Sri Lanka, it is significant to decipher the behavior of millennials to minimize waste, promote ethical manufacturing, and promote sustainability in the industry. In this research, the Customer Value Creation Theory (CVCT) is employed to describe the way values of slow fashion influences consumer behavior. According to CVCT, consumers will make decisions depending on their perceived value of a product. Slow fashion consists of five key value dimensions which affect consumer behavior, such as equity, authenticity, functionality, localism, and exclusivity (Jung and Jin, 2016).

These aspects can be used to describe the way slow fashion generates emotional, practical, and ethical value among millennials. Speaking of which, authenticity builds trust and emotional attachments, whereas functionality fosters long-term usage, minimizing waste. Despite the existing global research on the topic of slow fashion and sustainable clothing, only a small number of studies have been conducted on the concepts in the Sri Lankan setting, particularly among millennials in the Western Province (Niwarthana et al., 2020; Welagedara and Ranaweera, 2015). Thus, the proposed study bridges a significant gap by investigating the effect of slow fashion orientation on the socially responsible apparel consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.

2. Objectives

By conducting this research, the researcher tried to achieve the following objectives.

General Objective

1. To identify the impact of slow fashion orientation on socially responsible apparel consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.

Specific Objectives

- 1.1 To identify the impact of equity of slow fashion orientation impact on socially responsible apparel consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
- 1.2 To identify the impact of authenticity of slow fashion orientation impact on socially responsible apparel consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
- 1.3 To identify the impact of functionality of slow fashion orientation impact socially responsible apparel consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
- 1.4 To identify the impact of localism of slow fashion orientation impact on socially responsible apparel consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.

- 1.5 To identify the impact of exclusivity of slow fashion orientation impact on socially responsible apparel consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.

3. Research Methodology

The study took a systematic method to analyze the role of slow fashion orientation (SFO) on socially responsible clothes consumption (SRC) among millennials in the Western province of Sri Lanka. The research design was well-developed to facilitate the reliability and validity of the study and to correspond to Customer Value Creation Theory (CVCT) that the theoretical base of the study is based on. According to CVCT, it is believed that the purchasing decisions among consumers are directly attributed to their perceptions of the value of the product based on the product attributes (Anderson, Narus, and Van Rossum, 2006; Smith and Colgate, 2007). SFO dimensions as independent variables are equity, authenticity, functionality, localism, and exclusivity, whereas SRC is the dependent variable, in this case. These dimensions were operationalized to indicate ethical, functional, and experiential considerations which influence millennial behavior in Sri Lanka.

The philosophy of the research used in the study was positivistic, which focuses on objectivity, quantifiable results, and testing theories (Saunders et al., 2019). This philosophy enabled the study to dwell on facts and not subjective meanings. The method of deductive research was adopted and it commenced with already known theoretical concepts and hypotheses that were based on the previous literature. Through this method, the researcher was able to establish the relationships between SFO and SRC with quantitative data so that the results could be extrapolated to the target population to a certain degree (Creswell, 2018).

The study was based on the quantitative research design in terms of the correlation between the SFO dimensions and SRC. The survey research strategy was chosen as it provides the opportunity to gather information about a huge number of respondents in an effective and organized way (Saunders et al., 2019). The approach is appropriate in describing how the independent variables affect the dependent variables and it is consistent with the deductive approach of testing hypothesis that are supported by theories.

Population and sampling were well spelt so that they focus on the millennials in the Western Province, Sri Lanka, who are aware or interested in slow fashion to some degree. The target group of millennials, who are the people who were born between 1981 and 1996, was chosen as they constitute a major consumer of the apparel category and are becoming more sensitive to the sustainability and ethical consumption concerns. There is no total number of millennials who consume socially responsible apparel, this is why purposive sampling was applied. This non-probability sampling method gave the researcher an opportunity to sample the participants who had appropriate knowledge and behavior with respect to SFO and SRC. Screening questions were used to make sure that only the right respondents were used; this boosts the validity of the gathered data.

The main instrument that was created as a data collection tool is a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three parts, the first one had filtering questions to validate millennial status and slow fashion interest; SFO dimension and SRC were measured with a five-point Likert scale, the third section was the demographic section, including gender, income, and education. The adapted questions were based on validated instruments that had been tested by other researchers previously and tested in with respect to clarity and reliability. The last survey contained 23 items so that the coverage of the constructs was adequate and did not overburden the respondents. The sample size was 384 participants out of which 310 participants answered the questionnaires that were sent to them. The results were done on 302 valid questionnaires out of the 332 questionnaires that were received after removing incomplete questionnaires, which is a response rate of 78.65. Data cleaning was done to check whether there was any missing information but there was none and identify the outliers by box plot as the dataset was accurate.

The data were then deployed into the SPSS version 21.0 to perform an analysis that would give good foundation to execute the descriptive and inferential statistical functions. The methods involved in data analysis were descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics gave a review of the demographic characteristics and general patterns in SFO and SRC. The correlation analysis was used to test the strength and direction of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

The regression analysis also measured the effects of SFO dimensions on SRC so that the researcher could identify what dimensions were significantly predictive. Cronbach alpha was used to evaluate reliability and all the constructs have the value above 0.7, which indicates good internal consistency. Validity tests were done to make sure that measurement items reflected the constructs as they were intended. Lastly, the methodology also realized its limitations. The purposive sampling implies that one cannot apply the results to the entire population of Sri Lankan millennials.

Further, being a quantitative study, it was unable to identify the more in-depth motivations or individual experiences of socially responsible consumption. Even though these are the limitations, the methodology gives a systematic and rigorous explanation of the relationship between the slow fashion orientation and responsible apparel consumption in the particular setting of Western Province millennials. Summing up, the data collection and analysis design were developed based on the principles of the CVCT, use a positivist and deductive approach, and a quantitative survey to verify hypotheses. The study offers credible and substantive information about the effects of the slow fashion attributes on socially responsible purchases in Sri Lankan millennials by clearly defining the population, sampling, and measurement procedures. The systematic analysis of the data using SPSS methods can be considered warrant of ensuring results are readable, and are based on sound statistical practices, which forms the basis of the later discussion and results.

4. Results and Discussion

This paper has examined the impact of slow fashion orientation (SFO) to the socially responsible apparel consumption (SRC) by millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The number of questionnaires included in the study was 384, and 302 responses were selected as valid after cleaning up the questionnaire. The sample population was predominantly well-educated millennials, being more female (64.9) than male (35.1). The monthly incomes differed but most earned LKR 100,000-150,000 and most of the people had a bachelor degree or postgraduate. The research instrument was checked in terms of reliability and validity.

The reliability of all variables was high with Cronbach Alpha being above 0.895. Validity tests such as content, face, convergent and discriminant validity were conducted to establish the measures were able to measure what they were intended to measure. This gave the analysis of SFO dimensions (equity, authenticity, functionality, localism, and exclusivity) and their impact on SRC some degree of confidence. The analysis of descriptive statistics demonstrated an average to high degree of awareness and interest in socially responsible consumption of sportswear among millennials. Pearson correlation and multiple regression as inferential statistics were used to test the relationships between SFO dimensions and SRC.

SRC explained by the regression model was 51.2% and authenticity, functionality, and exclusiveness had a significant impact. Equity and localism had positive correlations with the responsible consumption though not statistically significant. Authenticity had a positive and significant role in SRC ($\beta = 0.388$, $p < 0.001$). Millennials who placed emphasis on truthfulness, openness, and novelty in producing clothing were also more likely to purchase ethically made clothes. The greatest influence ($\beta = 0.454$, $p < 0.001$) was made by functionality, meaning that when making responsible decisions, consumers are more interested in how durable the clothes are and how many other purposes they serve. Exclusivity was also significantly positively related ($\beta = 0.436$, $p < 0.001$), which implies that items of unique and limited-edition persuade mindful purchasing and discourage consumption of fast fashion.

Equity and localism, conversely, had no significant influence on SRC ($\beta = 0.331$, $p = 0.465$, and $\beta = 0.421$, $p = 0.072$ respectively). Even though fairness, ethical labor, and support of local brands are significant in theory, they did not have a strong impact on the real-life purchasing behavior of millennials. Some of the possible reasons are the availability of ethical brands is limited; price sensitivity and global preference of global brands compared to local products. According to the discussion, the millennials in Sri Lanka are more concerned with the quality, authenticity, and exclusivity of the product rather than ethical work or local manufacturing.

This conforms with world studies which have indicated that in most cases, consumers may appreciate functional and experiential factors, rather than a moral consideration in making sustainable fashion decisions. The findings indicate that SFO is effective in encouraging apparel socially responsible consumption, but it will vary in terms of the dimensions highlighted. In general, the results are in line with the Customer Value Creation Theory (CVCT) and demonstrate that the perceived value of apparel by consumers in terms of

authenticity, functionality, and exclusivity influences the socially responsible consumption. Promotion of these dimensions, as well as increasing the awareness of the ethical labor and local production should be addressed by fashion brands, policymakers, and educators to address the gap between consumer values and real actions.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of slow fashion orientation in socially responsible clothes consumption among millennials in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The findings indicate that some of the SFO dimensions such as authenticity, functionality, and exclusivity are instrumental in promoting responsible consumption, and some dimensions such as equity and localism have a minor influence. Millennials like clothes that are original, wearable, and exclusive. When the clothes conform to these requirements, they will purchase them more readily because they are more green and moral. This means that quality, durability, and uniqueness of designs are some of the conditions that affect their purchasing behaviors rather than fairness or nationality. Another aspect identified in the findings is that although millennials are conscious of the ethical and sustainable problems, their decision-making can be controlled by their financial power, the presence of a brand, and fashion choice.

Theoretically, the research establishes that the CVCT can formulate a hypothesis explaining how perceived value intends responsible purchase. The connection between SFO dimensions and SRC allows seeing that value creation is not functional, emotional, or social only but also ethical. Nonetheless, the findings are that not every value has an equal impact, and the contextual and cultural factors related to sustainable consumption in emerging markets are noted. To managers and brands, the research highlights the importance of emphasizing on slow fashion features that are most important to millennials.

The marketing approaches must emphasize purity and usefulness, and originality of dresses. More responsible consumption might be advanced with the help of education campaigns, raising awareness about ethical labor practices and local support. The policy has also offered suggestions that can be used by policymakers to promote sustainable fashion by way of regulations, incentives, or public campaigns. Fast fashion is one of the major causes of pollution and waste in the world, therefore, promoting slow fashion can decrease the negative impact of fast fashion on the environment. To sum up, slow fashion orientation can positively impact socially responsible consumption among millennials in Sri Lanka (in particular, when it focuses on authenticity, functionality, and exclusivity). Through creating a strategic marketing of these attributes, fashion brands can influence people to consume sustainably and add to ethical and environmentally good practices. The study contributes to the knowledge base on sustainable fashion in the new markets and it can guide both practitioners and scholars who aim at enhancing responsible consumption practices.

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