

# UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER IDENTITY IN SUSTAINABLE FASHION: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF UK MILLENNIALS' NARRATIVES

## Background and Rationale:

The sustainable fashion movement has rapidly evolved in the UK, with millennial consumers at the forefront of ethical consumption. While sustainability is often marketed through environmental and social values, the personal meanings consumers attach to these choices remain complex and layered. Identity—how people view themselves and want to be perceived—plays a central role in fashion-related decisions. This dissertation seeks to understand how UK millennials construct and express their identities through sustainable fashion, revealing both alignment with and resistance to brand messaging.

## Research Objectives:

- To explore how sustainable fashion consumption relates to personal and social identity among UK millennials.
- To examine recurring themes in how consumers rationalize or justify their choices within the sustainable fashion space.
- To understand the emotional, cultural, and ethical tensions present in consumer-brand relationships in this context.

## Research Questions:

1. How do UK millennials use sustainable fashion as a tool for identity construction and expression?
2. What narratives emerge around authenticity, ethics, and aesthetics in sustainable brand engagement?
3. What contradictions or tensions are revealed in consumers' narratives of sustainable consumption?

## Methodology:

- **Research Design:** Qualitative, exploratory
- **Approach:** Constructivist paradigm

- **Participants:**
  - 12 UK-based millennials (aged 25–38), equally split across gender
  - Recruited via Instagram and ethical fashion communities using purposive sampling
- **Data Collection Methods:**
  - In-depth, semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes each)
  - Participants encouraged to describe recent purchases, brand preferences, and personal values
- **Data Analysis Strategy:**
  - Thematic analysis using Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase framework
  - NVivo software used for coding, theme mapping, and memo writing
  - Iterative coding with member checks for accuracy and trustworthiness

## Key Findings:

1. **Sustainable Fashion as Moral Identity Marker**
  - Participants described eco-conscious brands as reflective of “who they are,” aligning purchases with personal ethics and social values.
2. **Aesthetic and Ethical Duality**
  - While valuing ethics, many admitted prioritizing aesthetics, revealing an internal conflict between sustainable values and fashion preferences.
3. **Brand Authenticity and Distrust**
  - Participants were wary of greenwashing and preferred smaller brands perceived as authentic and transparent over high-street names claiming sustainability.
4. **Class and Access Tensions**
  - Several participants expressed frustration about sustainable fashion being “elitist” or unaffordable, highlighting economic barriers to identity alignment.

## Conclusion and Theoretical Implications:

Sustainable fashion consumption among UK millennials is not merely a behaviour but a form of identity work. Consumers construct a narrative of themselves as responsible, stylish, and

aware—though often caught in a tension between values and realities. The study enriches consumer behaviour literature by highlighting the symbolic role of sustainable brands in identity performance and the contradictions embedded in ethical consumption.

## Future Research Scope:

- Comparative study across generational cohorts (e.g., Gen Z vs Millennials)
- Inclusion of minority ethnic perspectives in sustainable fashion identity research
- Expansion to include digital influence (e.g., Instagram aesthetics, influencer culture)
- Longitudinal tracking of identity evolution through sustainable consumption

## Academic and Corporate Suitability:

- **Academic:** Suitable for dissertations in consumer behaviour, marketing, sustainability, or cultural studies.
- **Corporate:** Useful for sustainable fashion brands, marketing strategists, and consumer researchers looking to position products around authenticity and ethical identity alignment.