

What influences the purchase intentions of sustainable luxury among millennials in the UK? An empirical study of vegan leather luxury accessories

Yan Sun Oxford Brookes Business School, UK.
Rachel Wang Oxford Brookes University, UK
Eleonora Cattaneo César Ritz Colleges Switzerland
Bianka Mlodkowska British Dental Association, UK

Correspondence

Eleonora Cattaneo
Swiss Education Group, César Ritz Colleges Switzerland
27, Avenue des Alpes
1820 Montreux, Switzerland
Email: ecattaneo@swisseducationpro.com

Abstract

Five factors are found to influence millennials when buying vegan leather luxury products (VLLP): sustainability awareness, peer pressure, and the perceived conspicuousness, quality and aesthetics of these products. Five factors are identified, all positively impacting purchase intention: sustainability awareness, positive friend or family opinion on VLLPs, and the perceived conspicuousness, quality, and aesthetics of these products. Brands producing VLLPs and targeting millennials should focus on these factors while creating a marketing strategy.

Keywords: Consumer behaviour, millennials, luxury fashion, sustainability, vegan leather.

JEL codes: M31, M14.

Introduction

Sustainability has been widely discussed in recent years. The concept was first described as the process of fulfilling present needs without compromising the needs of people in the future (WCED, 1987). In subsequent years, the definition of sustainability refocused on the importance of nature and encompassed the usage of products, services and policies that would not harm the environment including abolishing animal cruelty and human exploitation (Kianpour *et al.*, 2014; Lundblad and Davies, 2016). A more recent definition of sustainability

(Franco *et al.*, 2019) focuses on the materials used in a production process and the production process itself, broadening sustainability to include using recycled materials and respecting labour rights.

Compared to baby boomers and generation X, millennials are more environmentally conscious and strongly influenced by calls for sustainable consumption and ethical practices (Kianpour *et al.*, 2014; Mintel, 2019a; Rolling and Sadachar, 2018). Millennials show a strong interest in products from sustainable brands, even with a higher price tag (Nielsen, 2015; Franco *et al.*, 2019). It is also important to underline that consumers have a deeper and more meaningful relationship with luxury brands than non-luxury brands (Atwal and Williams, 2009) and will carefully scrutinise product ingredients.

Luxury brands have responded to the change in consumption habits among the younger generation by adopting sustainable practices (Jain, 2019b); for instance, creating a new category of products described as “scarce, experiential, authentic, reflecting consumers’ desire of having quality experiences” (Moscardo and Benckendorff, 2010, p.713). The niche luxury brand von Holzhausen uses plant-based leather made from bamboo, and the brand So Long Marianne won the Best Ethical Luxury Brand award 2021 with their PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) certified vegan leather products. Nevertheless, global luxury brands are still very leather-focused. Some notable exceptions include Stella McCartney, an early adopter of fur-free fabrics and now vegan leather, and Prada, which has a line of bags made from Econyl, a recycled plastic. Hermès launched a handbag in partnership with MycoWorks, which produces plant-based leather, but the bag will still contain some calfskin.

According to D’Arpizio *et al.* (2020), luxury leather bags and small leather products are the third fastest-growing luxury goods category on the global market. The luxury leather market is forecast to grow in the UK in the next few years (Passport, 2020b). Alongside the growing popularity of sustainability, millennials increasingly opt for a vegetarian diet (Mintel, 2019a).

Driven by this consumption trend, luxury practitioners have shown strong interest in leather alternatives (Jung *et al.*, 2016). Although *faux* leather products are often advertised as environmentally friendly, they are typically made of PVC, which is difficult to recycle and will increase waste (Tsunoda, 2019). From mushroom-based Mylo to cactus-based materials, vegan leather is successfully becoming an alternative to both genuine and petrol-based PVC leather (Western, 2018).

Value perceptions of luxury goods and brands vary across countries and cultures (Shukla and Purani, 2012; Shukla *et al.*, 2015). While some scholars question the significance of cultural phenomena in luxury consumption (Stępień *et al.*, 2016), others propose that culture might be one of the factors impacting sustainable luxury behaviour (Jain, 2020). The diverse demographics of under the 40s in the UK is representative of the global luxury market, providing an exciting opportunity to study the factors which impact purchase intentions of vegan leather goods among millennial customers (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

This study aims to identify the factors influencing purchase intention of sustainable luxury (vegan leather products) among millennials in the UK's mature market. In the first part of this paper, the theoretical background and hypotheses are discussed and developed based on existing literature. A conceptual framework is proposed, including the potential factors influencing purchase intention of luxury vegan goods. The findings allow recommendations for the global luxury sector and contribute to knowledge in this research area.

Literature Review

Millennials and Sustainability

Millennials, also known as generation Y or echo boomers, have been defined using various age ranges. According to Lu *et al.* (2013), millennials are born between 1980 and early 2000.

However, Dimock (2019) suggested a year range of 1981-1996, whereas Fromm and Garton (2013) use 1977-1995 to define millennials (gen Y). Alternatively, MarketLine (2019) identifies the population cohort born between 1981 and 1999 as millennials. This study will consider millennials to be those born between 1980-1999 and therefore aged 20-40 in 2020.

By 2025, millennials are forecast to contribute 45% of luxury purchases (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015; D'Arpizio *et al.*, 2020). Several factors that specifically influence millennials' luxury purchases have been studied in recent years, including symbolic consumption, conspicuous value, experiential and utilitarian values, high quality and aesthetics (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015; Jain, 2019a). Compared to other age cohorts of luxury consumers, millennials pay more attention to a product's perceived quality and social influences (Soh *et al.*, 2017). Almost 60% of millennials express concern over climate change, and over 70% are willing to pay more for sustainable goods (Nielsen, 2015; Passport, 2020a). For instance, using recycled materials in luxury manufacture is well received by millennials (Rolling and Sadachar, 2018).

Millennials' unique buying behaviour creates new trends for luxury consumption and challenges for luxury brands. As the luxury sector aims for a smooth recovery in the post-pandemic period, it is important to better understand millennials' approach to purchases that typically include products of animal origin.

Luxury (Unsustainable vs Sustainable)

Luxury consumption refers to non-essential and unnecessary purchases, leading to overproduction and resource exploitation (Voyer and Beckham, 2014; Franco *et al.*, 2019). In particular, luxury fashion has been accused of unethical operations and environmental damage, for instance, the burning of unsold apparel (Harris *et al.*, 2016; Franco *et al.*, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2019).

Some studies have found that consumers perceive luxury brands as highly aspirational and free of environmental and labour exploitation (Joy *et al.*, 2012). In the UK, customers

believe that luxury goods are prestigious and do not harm the environment and society (Moraes *et al.*, 2017). According to McKinsey & Company (2019), consumers do not question the luxury industry's business ethics, and they assume that the high price tag is the guarantee of ethical practices. However, in response to negative communication about luxury brands, some customers may reconsider luxury purchases for fear of appearing insensitive to current issues. In recent years, luxury brands have been trying to find solutions to balance 'enjoyment brought by luxury' and 'sustainability'.

Supporters of sustainable luxury focus on the positive characteristics of luxury, such as craftsmanship, high quality, and durability (Lundblad and Davies, 2016; Magnuson *et al.*, 2017; Athwal *et al.*, 2019). According to Magnuson *et al.* (2017), sustainable luxury goods are usually made of carefully chosen natural materials (with a high cost), which involve a longer production process. In other words, sustainable luxury products last longer, decrease unnecessary purchases and reduce overall pollution caused by overproduction (Ki and Kim, 2016; Magnuson *et al.*, 2017).

Significantly, negative attitudes towards sustainable luxury are associated with low awareness of sustainability (Han *et al.*, 2017). As customers acquire more knowledge of environmental and social issues, they typically change their opinion about sustainable luxury. Increasing awareness of sustainable consumption among luxury consumers, particularly the younger generation, has become a focus for global luxury brands.

Sustainability of Leather Luxury Goods

The production of leather products has been repeatedly criticised due to high energy consumption and environmental damage caused by traditional manufacturing processes (Pati *et al.*, 2014; De Klerk *et al.*, 2019). Polluting substances are directly emitted into the environment (Jung *et al.*, 2016). Livestock farming is known for high methane emissions, which directly impact global warming (Crowley, 2018).

As an alternative to genuine leather, emerging leather substitutes are mainly plant-based, such as cactus-based material, fruit skin, fungus-based texture, or coconut, hemp, vegetable oil and cork (Western, 2018; Petter, 2019; Farra, 2020). The latest development of leather substitutes is ‘lab-grown leather material’ (Keech *et al.*, 2020).

Luxury consumers hold different assumptions and perceptions of emerging leather substitutes, apart from concern for the environment. In general, leather products made from exotic animal skin are regarded as prestigious, rare and exclusive, which fits the accepted definition of luxury, and genuine leather is regarded as prestigious (Summers *et al.*, 2006). Conversely, synthetic materials are often perceived as less luxurious, of worse quality and lower value (Keech *et al.*, 2020). For instance, luxury consumers in France did not show much enthusiasm for vegan leather products (Dekhili *et al.*, 2019).

Jung *et al.* (2016) indicated that sustainability awareness positively impacts attitudes towards eco-friendly faux leather. Furthermore, if customers can better understand the leather alternatives, they might change their opinion of sustainable luxury goods. Since the younger generation is more environmentally conscious, millennials might become key supporters of leather alternatives among luxury consumers.

Purchase Intention of Sustainable Leather Goods

The concept of purchase intention originates from behavioural science, and the subjective probability that a person performs a particular action is an intention (Triandis, 1979). Individual purchase intention is closely linked to actual purchases and brand loyalty (Su and Huang, 2011).

Cowan and Kinley (2014) identified eight factors that impact purchase intentions of sustainable apparel products: past environmentally conscious buying behaviour, social pressure to act sustainably, and general attitudes towards sustainable clothes (which had the strongest impact on purchase intention). The other five factors are self-efficacy, accessibility of

sustainable clothes, the perceived environmental impact of fashion, individual environmental concerns and sustainability knowledge. A study on customers in the UK (Lundblad and Davies, 2016) found that the six main drivers influencing the purchase of sustainable clothes are self-expression and self-esteem, sense of accomplishment and responsibility, social justice, and protection of the environment.

Personal values have also been identified as an important factor influencing sustainable consumption. According to Manchiraju and Sadachar (2014), American customers who score highly on self-enhancement and power achievement are more likely to buy ethical fashion products. Individuals with high self-perceived power also hold a strongly positive view of sustainable luxury goods (Voyer and Beckham 2014). Phau *et al.* (2015) propose that consumers with high self-efficacy are willing to pay more for luxury goods produced with respect to labour rights. When it comes to genuine leather products, the main factors impacting purchase decisions are their superior quality, durability and ‘emotional pleasure’ (Gorp *et al.*, 2012; De Klerk *et al.*, 2019).

Inspired by changing consumer behaviour regarding luxury leather products, some brands have adopted vegan leather materials as sustainable solutions. For instance, Stella McCartney became one of the first luxury fashion brands to use only vegetarian leather (Kapferer and Michaut, 2016). Another leading international luxury fashion brand, Chanel, also decided to stop using exotic animal skins and invest in a company producing biodegradable plastic (Passport, 2020a).

The existing literature mainly focuses on genuine leather goods or sustainable products with no specific evidence around luxury goods made of vegan leather. The purchase intention of millennials towards vegan leather products remains unknown. **Appendix 1** shows that previous studies have been conducted outside the UK, in India and the United States. However, limited research has been done on millennials in the UK, and the factors impacting their

purchase intention of luxury vegan leather products have not yet been examined. The diverse demographics of millennials in the UK enable the current study to represent this age group more in the global market.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

This research aims to identify factors influencing UK millennials' purchase intention of luxury leather bags, backpacks and small leather goods which are made of vegan leather. Factors possibly impacting purchase intention of vegan leather luxury goods are discussed and later verified using a quantitative approach. Social factors that might positively influence millennials' purchase intention of vegan leather goods are proposed in the following hypotheses.

Sustainability awareness and vegan leather luxury goods

Sustainability awareness is described as 'understand[ing] the fragility of the environment and the importance of its protection, thinking in terms of an ecological consciousness' (Raymundo *et al.*, 2019 p.2). Customers who have low sustainability awareness and knowledge may not make sustainable buying choices (Shen *et al.*, 2013). According to D'Souza *et al.* (2006), sustainability knowledge combines two elements: customers are aware of the environmental impact of products (and services), and of products (and services) that are sustainably made. However, some customers show a low level of environmental activism even if they are aware of environmental issues (Magnuson *et al.*, 2017).

Young customers of luxury brands are more sustainability-conscious than the older generations (Passport, 2020a). Social consciousness and social knowledge positively influence the purchase of sustainable luxury products (Ki and Kim, 2016).

According to a study of Indian millennials (Yadav and Pathak, 2016), environmental knowledge and environmental concerns impact sustainable purchases. When it comes to leather

products, Jung *et al.* (2016) indicated that sustainability awareness positively impacts attitudes towards eco-friendly faux leather. Furthermore, consumers concerned about the environment and animal cruelty are more likely to purchase clothes labelled as ‘ethical’ (Stringer *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Sustainability awareness will positively impact purchase intention of vegan leather luxury bags and small goods.

Peer pressure to act sustainably

Social influence has a significant impact on Millennials’ buying behaviour: 60% are influenced by friends and family (Soh *et al.*, 2017; Passport, 2020a). Word-of-mouth (WoM) is exchanging information between consumers within a social network of peers, friends, family (Ennew *et al.*, 2000).

As intensive users of digital media and new technology, millennials closely follow influencers on social media before making a purchase (McKinsey & Company, 2019). In particular, Lee *et al.* (2019) found that the negative impact of genuine leather greatly discourages purchase intention of leather products. With a better understanding of the difference between unsustainable and sustainable consumption, individuals are inclined to change their buying behaviour favouring green solutions (Yadav and Pathak, 2016; Amatulli *et al.*, 2016; Khare and Sadachar, 2017). Therefore, it is proposed that peer pressure influences sustainable choices, including vegan leather alternatives:

H2: Positive peer pressure around vegan leather luxury goods will positively impact purchase intention of vegan leather luxury bags and small goods.

Perceived conspicuousness of vegan leather luxury goods

Luxury goods are considered conspicuous consumption due to their high symbolic value (Gorp *et al.*, 2012; Giovannini *et al.*, 2015; Shukla *et al.*, 2015; Ki and Kim, 2016; Ajitha and Sivakumar, 2019). Undoubtedly, owning luxury products signals success, confidence, powerful impression, and high social status (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015; Stępień *et al.*, 2016; Liang *et al.*, 2017; Ajitha and Sivakumar, 2019).

Symbolic consumption also plays a vital role in influencing millennials' buying behaviour, and it is the indicator that most influences their luxury purchases (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015; Jain, 2019a). Relevant studies have been conducted in other markets and countries; however, the situation in the UK has not been studied.

Sustainable bags used to be seen as having lower symbolic social status than non-sustainable products (Voyer and Beckham, 2014). However, Hammad *et al.* (2019) suggested that sustainable purchase may represent responsible social behaviour, awareness of current environmental issues, social status and conspicuous motives. In recent years, sustainable luxury has become a signal of success, projecting a positive image and impressing others to prove social status (Liang *et al.*, 2017; Keech *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Conspicuous value of luxury vegan leather goods positively influences the purchase intention of vegan leather luxury bags and small goods.

Perceived quality of vegan leather luxury goods

Undoubtedly, high quality is one of the main characteristics that define luxury goods, together with excellent craftsmanship, durability, and rarity (Kapferer and Michaut, 2016; Stępień *et al.*, 2016) and this is also valued by millennials (Soh *et al.*, 2017; Jain, 2019a).

An earlier study in South Korea suggested that millennials negatively perceive the value of eco-friendly materials used in luxury products (Han *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, young buyers

in the United States have positive views on goods made from recycled materials (Rolling and Sadachar, 2018). Young female consumers in South Africa purchase genuine leather goods for their durability and quality, which are the main dimensions associated with traditional luxury leather brands (Gorp *et al.*, 2012; De Klerk *et al.*, 2019). According to Dekhili *et al.* (2019), mixed opinions on leather substitutes are observed in France and Saudi Arabia. Here, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Perceived high-quality of vegan leather luxury goods will positively impact purchase intention of vegan leather luxury bags and small goods.

Perceived aesthetics of vegan leather luxury goods

Aesthetics is another critical dimension defining luxury goods and is also valued by younger generations, who use luxury brands/products to communicate personal style and unique fashion taste (Ajitha and Sivakumar, 2019; Lundblad and Davies, 2016; Jain, 2019a).

Using recycled materials to manufacture luxury products is less accepted by mature luxury customers but more accepted by millennials (Achabou and Dekhili, 2013; Rolling and Sadachar, 2018). Studies show a positive relationship between aesthetics and attitudes towards faux leather goods among young consumers in the UK and the United States (Jung *et al.*, 2016). Also, being 'interested in fashion' and 'seeking personal style' drive positive attitudes towards sustainable clothes and sustainable consumption (Gam *et al.*, 2014; Ki and Kim, 2016).

In other words, fashion consciousness and ecological awareness positively impact individuals' perception of sustainable consumption (Cho *et al.*, 2015). If luxury products made of leather substitutes are seen as aesthetically appealing, consumers will respond positively. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Positively perceived aesthetics of vegan leather luxury goods will impact purchase intention of vegan leather luxury bags and small goods positively.

Figure 1 The developed framework of five hypotheses.

Methodology

Measurement

The final questionnaire comprises three sections, including 31 questions. The first section includes five demographic questions to determine the age, sex, annual income, ethnicity (British/Non-British), and participants' occupation. The annual household income range was extracted from Davies *et al.*'s (2012) study on ethical luxury among British customers. The targeted age range (20 to 40 years old) was based on the previously described definition of the millennial generation and a study by Giovannini *et al.* (2015). The second section includes six multiple-choice questions. One question asks the participants' diet preferences to verify whether these could impact their choices. The other five questions ask about participants' understanding and purchase experience of luxury leather and sustainable luxury products.

The third section was designed to test the theoretical model consisting of five constructs: sustainability awareness, peer pressure, conspicuous value, perceived quality and perceived aesthetics. Measurement items were adapted from the relevant literature, with each construct measured by four items. A 5-point Likert scale, also used by Stringer *et al.* (2020) in their study on sustainable fashion, was labelled from 'strongly disagree (1)' to 'strongly agree (5)'. Four items relating to sustainable awareness (SA) were adopted from Ki and Kim (2016), Jung *et al.* (2016) and De Klerk *et al.* (2019). Peer pressure (PP) was measured using four items borrowed from Phau *et al.* (2015), De Klerk *et al.* (2019) and Phau *et al.* (2015). Three items concerning conspicuous value (CV) were adopted from De Klerk *et al.* (2019). Ki and Kim (2016), and one further item in this set, was added to conceptualise the respect gained when buying luxury vegan leather goods (Ki and Kim, 2016). The impression vegan-leather luxury

goods could make on friends and family (De Klerk *et al.*, 2019). Drawing from the work of Jain (2019a; 2019b), Talukdar and Yu (2020) and Ki and Kim (2016), four items relating to perceived quality (PQ) were developed. Three items concerning perceived aesthetics (PA) were adopted from Jung *et al.* (2016), Magnuson *et al.* (2017) and Stępień *et al.* (2016). One further item in this set was added to capture the perceived aesthetic taste of current fashion trends. Appendix 2 presents all items and their detailed sources.

Sampling and Data Collection

The target population for this research was millennial customers living in the UK. Therefore, the sampling criteria for this study were: 1) participants must live in the UK and 2) participants must be between 20-40 years old. Two screening questions asking about participants' residence and age were included to filter for the required samples. Online non-probability sampling was adopted for data collection, a method previously used in various studies on sustainable luxury (Davies *et al.*, 2012; Phau *et al.*, 2015), sustainable fashion (Stringer *et al.*, 2020), sustainable consumption (Stringer *et al.*, 2020), luxury consumption among millennials (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015; Soh *et al.*, 2017) and attitudes towards faux leather (Kim *et al.*, 2016). An online questionnaire was the most suitable method due to the target population's high internet usage (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, and the link was posted on different social media platforms that are popular among millennials, including LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. Following previous studies on luxury goods (Shahid *et al.*, 2021) and millennials (Jain, 2019a), a pilot study was conducted to ensure instructions and questions were understandable (Chetioui *et al.*, 2020) and to improve the clarity of the measurement items (Yadav and Pathak, 2016). Ten voluntary respondents participated in the pilot study. The questionnaire was revised subsequently. For instance, the number of questions per page was

reduced to provide a more user-friendly format. Instructions were improved, and any missing information was added. Definitions of sustainable luxury were clarified.

The finalised questionnaire was launched in August 2020, and 277 individuals responded, of which 270 responses were extracted as valid for further analysis, giving a response rate of 97.5%, which is an improvement compared to previous studies on ethical clothing (Magnuson *et al.*, 2017) and luxury goods (Shukla *et al.*, 2015).

The demographic characteristics of the 270 respondents and their diet preferences are presented in **Table 1**. The sample consists of a higher proportion of females (70%) compared to males (27.8%), whilst 2.2% of the sample do not associate themselves with either of the two genders. This disproportionate gender ratio can be explained by the fact that women are the major customers of leather goods, considering that the total sales of women's luxury bags and small leather goods in the UK were worth £1,522,900. In contrast, the total sales of counterparts for men were worth £213,100 in 2019 (Passport, 2020b). The majority of respondents were between 20-24 years old (41.1%) and 25-30 years old (39.6%), whilst the 31-35 and 36-40 age groups each account for approximately 10 % of the total sample. Interestingly, over 61% of respondents do not follow any specific diet, whilst 21.1% of respondents avoid meat on a daily basis and eat more vegetables (flexitarian) and 17.4% of respondents were vegans or vegetarians.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the respondents

Constructs verification and analysis procedure

Prior to analysis of the data, a reliability test was conducted in SPSS using the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient test (Table 2), which is a common method determining internal reliability (Bryman and Bell, 2015) and has been previously used in the study of luxury goods (Stępień *et al.*, 2016), sustainable luxury (Talukdar and Yu, 2020), and leather fashion goods (De Klerk *et al.*, 2019). Most of the studies employ 0.8 as a figure standing for reliability (Bryman and

Bell, 2015). As indicated in **Table 2**, the alpha value was over 0.8 for each construct, indicating an acceptable level of internal reliability.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

Following the verification of internal reliability, hypotheses testing was conducted in SPSS in three steps. Firstly, the descriptive statistics of all constructs were calculated to obtain a general description. Secondly, the Pearson Correlation test was adopted to examine relationships between each construct and the purchase intention of VLLPs. The Pearson Correlation test was previously used to study consumer empathy towards sustainable apparel (Cowan and Kinley, 2014) and the factors influencing eco-friendly fashion (Khare and Sadachar, 2017). Thirdly, a scatter plot was created to determine a possible linear regression between two variables (McCormick *et al.*, 2015), also previously used in the studies of luxury goods and millennials (Soh *et al.*, 2017). The linear regression test and the analysis of coefficients were conducted where the regression was evident.

Analysis and Results

Experience with vegan leather luxury products

Over 60% of all respondents were familiar with sustainable luxury products. Regarding luxury goods made of vegan leather, over 65% of respondents were familiar with them, while around 15% did not know. Around half of the respondents had not purchased a luxury product made of vegan leather. Among respondents who purchase luxury products, 34.8% of them usually purchase it every couple of years, 14.8% purchase it once a year (14.8%) and only 1% purchase them every 2-3 months. Interestingly, nearly 40% of respondents were not sure if they had purchased such products, indicating that they were not aware of vegan leather material or had not paid attention to materials when buying a luxury product. The majority of respondents

(88.9%) would consider buying VLLPs, and only around 6% of respondents were not sure whether to purchase VLLPs in the future. Just 2,2% would not be interested in buying VLLPs.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were produced in SPSS, as presented in **Table 3**. The highest mean comes from ‘sustainability awareness’ (M=3.98), followed by ‘perceived quality’ (M=3.94) and ‘perceived aesthetics’ (M=3.61), indicating that the respondents agree the most with these constructs. The lowest mean scores are seen in ‘conspicuous value’ (M=3.21) and ‘peer pressure’ (M=3.17), indicating the least agreement with these constructs. Standard deviation varies across all constructs. The highest result is seen in ‘peer pressure’ (SD=0.96), followed by ‘conspicuous value’ (SD=.79), meaning that the responses are notably different. Greater agreement was observed in ‘sustainability awareness’ (SD=0.67), ‘perceived aesthetics’ (SD=0.66) and ‘perceived quality’ (SD=0.60). The consistent results between the mean and standard deviation suggest more agreement on ‘sustainability awareness’, ‘perceived quality’ and ‘perceived aesthetics’.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of social measures

Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses testing was performed by following the same procedures in SPSS for all five hypotheses. For the Pearson Correlation test, positively significant correlations were observed between ‘sustainability awareness’ and ‘purchase intention of VLLP’ ($\alpha = 0.01, r = .192$), ‘peer pressure’ and ‘purchase intention of VLLP’ ($\alpha = 0.01, r = .170$), ‘perceived conspicuousness’ and ‘purchase intention of VLLP’ ($\alpha = 0.01, r = .172$), ‘perceived quality’ and ‘purchase intention of VLLP’ ($\alpha = 0.01, r = .637$), and ‘perceived aesthetics’ and ‘purchase intention of VLLP’ ($\alpha = 0.01, r = .284$).

In the scatterplot analysis, linear regressions were identified between ‘sustainability awareness’ and ‘purchase intention’, ‘peer pressure’ and ‘purchase intention’, ‘perceived conspicuousness’ and ‘purchase intention’, ‘perceived quality’ and ‘purchase intention’, and ‘perceived aesthetics’ and ‘purchase intention’ respectively.

The regression analysis identified a positive and significant relationship between ‘sustainability awareness’ and ‘purchase intention’ ($R^2 = .037$, $t = 3.207$, $p = 0.002$), indicating that 3.7% of the ‘purchase intention’ can be predicted from ‘sustainability awareness’. Similarly, a positive and significant relationship between ‘peer pressure’ and ‘purchase intention’ is identified ($R^2 = .029$, $t = 2.828$, $p = 0.005$), indicating that 2.9% of the ‘purchase intention’ can be predicted from ‘peer pressure’. A positive and significant relationship is also observed between ‘perceived conspicuousness’ and ‘purchase intention’ ($R^2 = .030$, $t = 2.857$, $p = 0.005$) in the regression analysis, indicating that 3.0% of the ‘purchase intention’ can be predicted from ‘conspicuous value’. A stronger positive relationship between ‘perceived quality’ and ‘purchase intention of VLLP’ was observed in the line ($R^2 = .405$, $t = 13.518$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that 40.5% of the ‘purchase intention’ can be predicted from ‘perceived quality’. As for ‘perceived aesthetics’ and ‘purchase intention’, the regression analysis also identified a positive and significant relationship ($R^2 = .081$, $t = 4.856$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that 8.1% of the ‘purchase intention’ can be predicted from ‘perceived aesthetics’.

It is concluded that all five hypotheses are supported. The results of hypotheses testing are summarised in **Table 4**. The findings suggest that all social measures of this study positively impact the purchase intention of VLLPs. The strongest positive impact on the purchase intention has been observed from perceived quality of VLLPs and the weakest impact from peer pressure. No negative impacts on the purchase intention of VLLPs have been observed.

Table 4: Test results of hypotheses and the model

Discussion and Conclusions

Theoretical implications

Our study examines the factors that influence the purchase intentions of VLLPs for millennials. The most significant contribution lies in a developed framework that includes factors (sustainability awareness, peer pressure, perceived conspicuousness, the perceived quality of VLLPs and perceived aesthetics of VLLPs) that positively influence purchase intention of vegan leather luxury products among millennials in the UK.

Firstly, most respondents are aware that their buying choices may impact the environment, which confirms that millennials are interested in sustainability and are more likely to buy sustainable products (Stringer *et al.*, 2020). It is also in line with the study by Yadav and Pathak (2016), which showed that knowledge about sustainability is the strongest factor impacting eco-friendly purchase behaviour.

Secondly, this study confirmed that having a positive or negative opinion of sustainable products will influence millennials' purchase intention, which agrees with the studies by Khare and Sadachar (2017) and Amatulli *et al.* (2016). Although among the five factors, this factor has the weakest positive impact on the purchase intention of VLLPs, it suggests that millennials are conscious about peer pressure in their purchase decisions, which consequently suggests that the information provision around VLLPs can be important for millennials prior to their purchase.

Thirdly, this study demonstrates a positive relationship between conspicuous value and purchase intention of sustainable goods, in contrast to studies by Talukdar and Yu (2020) and Keech *et al.* (2020). Furthermore, this study suggests that VLLPs have the same symbolic and prestigious value as traditional luxury products, especially among millennials prizing sustainability as a social norm.

Fourthly, this study shows that millennials value quality in their purchasing criteria, meaning that they would consider a VLLP if it is made of durable material; at the same time, they are sceptical about vegan leather in general. This finding is in line with the study from Dekhili *et al.* (2019), which suggests that consumers are unfamiliar with the new materials hence the mistrust of VLLPs.

Last but not least, this study confirms that perceived aesthetics influence the purchase intention of VLLPs. This finding is in line with Kim *et al.* (2016) research, which suggests that millennials seek personal style when purchasing luxury sustainable products. This study further suggests that millennials following current fashion trends will be interested in buying VLLPs if they feature pleasing designs.

Practical Implications

This research has shown that customers are aware of environmental and ethical issues and that they would consider purchasing luxury bags, backpacks and small leather goods made of vegan leather, confirming the demand for sustainable luxury goods (MarketLine, 2019; Passport, 2020a). As more luxury brands, such as Hermes and Jill Milan, launch their latest designs made of vegan leather, the future of leather substitutes is looking promising.

The resultant framework will provide a valuable and relevant set of indicators for luxury brands and companies in designing, producing, launching and promoting new or existing sustainable leather alternatives and in promoting sustainable behaviours.

Firstly, since sustainability awareness positively impacts the purchase intention of VLLPs, customers should be educated and actively informed of the advantages of vegan leather substitutes. Luxury brands that are willing to implement non-leather alternatives in their designs should advocate them as innovations for forward-looking sustainable fashion industry.

Secondly, millennials are conscious about how they are judged by their friends or family when considering purchases of VLLPs. Luxury brands should consider collaborating with appropriate fashion influencers to promote VLLPs. Since millennials follow influencers (McKinsey & Company, 2019), their recommendations of VLLPs will result in positive word-of-mouth and drive sales of these products.

Thirdly, luxury brands could increase the demand for VLLPs by enhancing their conspicuous and sustainable features. For example, luxury brands can focus on symbolic values and emphasise the social status of VLLPs while communicating with customers. Conspicuous values could be promoted through celebrities and social media influencers by providing engaging content on their channels. Moreover, luxury brands can also make more efforts to engage with accredited certification, such as that offered by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), and communicate their vegan credentials in the promotion.

Fourthly, the durability of vegan leather needs to be emphasised. Therefore, luxury brands should educate consumers on the specific functional characteristics of leather alternatives. Since perceived quality proves to have the strongest positive impact on the purchase intention of VLLPs, luxury brands should consider this and promote high-quality materials as a strong competitive advantage in their marketing strategies.

Finally, VLLPs should not be associated with unappealing design. Although personal style is a matter of choice and one size will not fit all, luxury brands designing VLLPs should make a substitute of genuine leather products rather than designing sustainable apparel with a hippie fashion aesthetic (Athwal *et al.*, 2019). The similarity between designs could make a transition from genuine leather products to non-leather substitutes less drastic for customers. They could easily find a design they like or are familiar with. Luxury brands should consider making their iconic leather products or 'best-sellers' in a vegan version. Consumers unable to

distinguish between vegan and genuine leather may follow a sustainable trend unknowingly instead of being encouraged to purchase non-leather alternatives.

Limitations and future research

The research was limited by the chosen market - the United Kingdom. Considering how culture influences consumers' purchase intentions, future research could investigate other markets. The findings would be especially relevant for luxury brands willing to adjust their marketing strategy for specific markets. Research in a specific market would allow relevant product and/or communication adaptations for brands that are not global solid players.

The second limitation is also related to culture. Cultural values were beyond the scope of this study. Previous research showed differences in consumer behaviour depending on cultural factors. For instance, a Universities UK International report (2011) suggests that conspicuous consumption is more valued in collectivistic countries. Therefore, the positive influence of conspicuous value on purchase intention should be analysed in different cultural contexts. The other four social measures could also be examined taking cultural differences into consideration, thus providing further comparisons.

This research focused on the millennial generation. Future studies should explore the buying behaviour around VLLPs among other generations, such as baby boomers or generation Z, to understand whether there are differences between age groups. Moreover, this research focused on vegan leather in general; future research could look into how consumers perceive the different types of leather alternatives and whether plant-based is prized over recycled plastics.

Lastly, the vegan leather trend is an emerging opportunity for the furniture market in the near future (Mintel, 2019b). This research focused on luxury leather bags, backpacks and small

leather goods made of leather alternatives. Future research could investigate leather apparel or vegan leather materials in the furniture and automotive industries.

Author Biographies

Yan Sun is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at Oxford Brookes Business School, UK. She leads specialist modules for postgraduate International Luxury Marketing students and her research interests include luxury consumption, young consumers, sustainable luxury and innovation.

Rachel Wang is a Senior Lecturer at Oxford School of Hospitality Management, Oxford Brookes University. Her research interests are primarily in Data Analytics and application of Big Data in Business and Organisational Management.

Eleonora Cattaneo is a faculty member at César Ritz Colleges and Executive Education Director at Swiss Education Group. Her research interest is mainly in luxury branding and has over two decades' experience in advising luxury and premium brands.

Bianka Mlodkowska is a digital marketing executive at the British Dental Association.

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