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# Redefining the Future of Retail: Millennials and Gen Z Envision a More Sustainable Retail Culture

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Retail environments play a significant role in contemporary consumer behaviors. Decades of progressive capitalism has led to fast fashion and an abundance of consumer waste. Millennials and Gen Z still value physical environments, however their desire for experience has changed. Recognizing this shift, retailers are looking at insights from both of these generations' behaviors to inform the future landscape of the retail store experience. They focus less on products and more on the company's purpose towards environmental and social impact and are driven by their ethical responsibility toward environmental and social sustainability. These generations demand authentic and transparent retail storytelling to create a connection between their beliefs and the value they place on the products they purchase. Driven by these generations documented ethical concerns towards environmentally and socially conscious decision making, it is critical that the purpose of the retail store be redefined. As an emerging field of study, sustainability in retail design requires more research to understand how to leverage the physical environment's design to foster environmentally conscious consumer behaviors.

**Introduction**

What is the future of Brick and Mortar retail? This question has plagued the retail design community and retailers for many years as they strive to address the change in consumer demographics with more Millennials and the emerging Gen Z population. For a time, retail experts proclaimed that the Brick and Mortar (B & M) store was dead, citing the insurgence of digital consumer platforms. However, time has proven that is not true. Retail environments play a significant role in contemporary consumer behaviors. Millennials and Gen Z still value physical environments, however their desire for the retail experience has changed. Recognizing that decades of progressive capitalism has led to fast fashion and an abundance of consumer waste, these generations seek to align their ethics regarding consumption and sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) with the brands they shop. Within B & M, they desire the store to tell the brand's sustainable story and foster a community around their values. Driven by these generations documented ethical concerns towards environmentally and socially conscious decision making, it is critical that the purpose of the retail store be redefined.

**New Generation of Consumers**

By 2020, Gen Z (those born after 1995) will become the largest population worldwide, making up 40% of consumers in the U.S.,

Europe, and BRIC countries [1]. Recognizing this shift, retailers are looking at insights from both of these generations' behaviors to inform the future landscape of the retail store experience. These generations demand authentic and transparent retail storytelling to create a connection between their beliefs and the value they place on the products they purchase. They focus less on products and more on the company's purpose towards environmental and social impact [2] and are driven by their ethical responsibility toward environmental and social sustainability.

Slow fashion encourages consumers to evaluate the ways in which products are designed, produced, consumed, and used in everyday life to establish a more environmentally responsible lifestyle. Kate Fletcher states: "Sustainable fashion is about a strong and nurturing relationship between consumer and producer" [3]. These themes resonate with Millennials' and GenZ's ethics and behaviors. The retail store environment is a critical link in establishing this relationship. In the decade since the introduction of slow fashion, retailers and retail store designers have struggled to establish an emotional connection to these generations. Lacking the design tools to effectively transform the apparel retail store experience, many slow fashion retailers do not capitalize on their store's experience to foster this relationship, missing an opportunity

to communicate their sustainable story through the physical space where consumers experience fashion. Through the design of the physical retail environment we can broaden slow fashion's reach and establish what I am terming "Slow Retail" experiences [4].

In an upper-level retail design course that I teach at Ohio State, students within these generation are tasked with redefining the future of retail based on their ethics and sustainable values. Kicking off the course, students engage in a discussion, not about retail stores, but rather about their approach to personal finances. Asked how they would spend a gift of \$1,000, unanimously they said they would save half and use the rest to pay for necessities such as rent, food, and their education. When prompted to spend at least a quarter of the money, students reported they would spend it on experiences, such as concerts or trips with friends. When encouraged to spend a portion on objects, they reported they would purchase clothing or shoes they needed, preferring to spend their money on items they know would last and from brands that align with their personal ethics. This is not entirely surprising considering that the average American college student is working a part-time job to pay for his or her own education and living expenses.

These insights from the retail design students align with a 2014 survey of Millennials from 17 different countries that indicated 78% would recommend a company they believe is a good citizen and 71% would be loyal to that business [2]. Millennials, motivated to establish a personal connection or trust in a brand, are compelled to make purchases when products or services align with their values [5]. In a 2014 survey of GenZ [6], 60% aspire to have jobs that make a difference and have a social impact and 76% are concerned about humanity's impact on the planet. This same survey revealed that GenZ also communicates best with images [6], therefore they connect to a brand or a cause on a personal level through successful visual communication and transparent storytelling.

Currently many slow fashion and sustainable brand's retail environments vary little from fast fashion stores. Adidas' New York flagship store which opened in late 2016, constructs their brand's relationship with their youth customer through digital touchpoints and product test zones, however the product's sustainable construction elements and care instruction remain missing through these storytelling moments. The brand's compelling sustainable initiatives, particularly their collaboration with Parlay for the Ocean, is mainly featured on their website and is easily overlooked in-store [7]. When the retail story and experience is not differentiated from those promoting mass consumption, products hold little emotional value and are disposable. Understanding the emotional connection between storytelling components and products reinforces slow fashion's goal by elevating products from disposable to cherished artifact. As the maker movement's popularity illustrates, value is placed on products where the story of authentic and responsible manufacturing is told. This concept is well integrated in Levi's London stores. From the flagship on Regent Street to the smaller

Covent Garden store, they integrate a "tailor shop" which lets customers personalize their denim through patches or create a complexly custom pair of jeans as well as hem, taper and repair your favorite denim apparel [8].

These generations are willing to spend more and buy less when a deep connection to the product exists. As designers look to create a sustainable future by promoting product longevity, how can a store's design utilize storytelling to educate consumers towards making environmentally responsible decisions? How can these elements inform consumers of product care and longevity?

## Future

As an emerging field of study, sustainability in retail design requires more research to understand how to leverage the physical environment's design to foster environmentally conscious consumer behaviors. I am currently working on a research project that examines how the interior retail environment, through its physical, digital, and human touchpoints, can connect, educate, and influence consumers' behaviors to be more environmentally and socially responsible. Through case study analysis of existing retail store designs I seek to understand, theorize, and develop a framework for a strategic approach to creating a slow retail vernacular. This includes spatial and programmatic elements (physical, human, and digital touchpoints) necessary to foster stronger relationships between consumer and producer, educate the consumer on best practices, and influence consumer behaviors.

## Acknowledgement

None.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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