

Millennials and Ethical Eating: Bridging the Gap Between Intent and Action

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability and ethical consumerism have become crucial in modern food choices, with millennials emerging as key drivers of change. This study examines the attitudes and behaviours of millennials in Dehradun and Haridwar regarding ethical eating, focusing on sustainability, locally sourced food, eco-friendly packaging, and the willingness to pay a premium for sustainable products. The findings highlight significant regional and generational differences, exposing gaps between intention and action. While younger millennials (23-32 years) are more inclined toward ethical food choices, financial constraints and convenience remain significant hurdles. The study also discusses policy implications, the role of social media in influencing ethical consumerism, and strategies to bridge the gap between intent and behaviour. This study adds to an expanding corpus of research that examines how consumer behaviour can promote sustainable change by examining the motivations and obstacles associated with ethical eating. The results highlight the need for a multifaceted approach involving education, policy support, and retailer intervention to make ethical food choices more accessible.

Keywords: Millennials, Sustainable eating, Ethical consumption, Social media influence, Environmental concerns, Healthy food choices

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability and ethical food consumption are no longer merely personal preferences; they are now global requirements that will shape future environmental health, food security, and consumer accountability. The need to strike a balance between convenience and mindful consumption is more important than ever in India, where dietary patterns have changed due to rising urbanization and changing lifestyles. Food trends are greatly influenced by millennials, the greatest consumer group. In addition to market dynamics, their views on ethical and sustainable food choices have an impact on national policies that promote waste reduction, environmental preservation, and economic sustainability.

The Indian government has started several programs to encourage ethical consumerism since it understands how urgent sustainable food practices are. The necessity

of making responsible food choices is emphasized by initiatives like the “Eat Right India Movement,” the “National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC),” and the “SDGs” framework. While the “Plastic Waste Management Rules” seek to lessen unnecessary packaging, a significant issue in food sustainability, the FSSAI’s “Jaivik Bharat” project promotes organic cultivation. Furthermore, initiatives like “Vocal for Local” and “PM Kisan” promote assistance for regional farmers, which is consistent with the ethical sourcing of food. But it’s still unclear how much millennials actively apply these rules to their everyday eating routines.

Millennials are a major group pushing environmental trends, and ethical considerations are having a growing impact on food choices. Among the many facets of ethical eating include the use of organic food, fair trade methods, assistance to regional farmers, and environmentally friendly packaging. The true question is still whether

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millennials truly translate their intentions into actions. This study examines the ethical food consumption practices of millennials in Dehradun and Haridwar, two Indian cities, while examining generational and regional variations in consumer behaviour.

Objectives of the Study:

- ♦ To Investigate Millennials' Attitudes Towards Sustainable and Ethical Food Choices.
- ♦ To Identify the Key Factors Influencing Millennials' Ethical Eating Behaviour.
- ♦ To Examine the Gap Between Millennials' Intent and Actual Purchasing Behaviour.
- ♦ To Explore Strategies to Bridge the Gap Between Intent and Action.
- ♦ To Compare the Influence of Ethical Eating Factors Across Demographics.

Significance of the Study:

This study is significant as it explores the gap between millennials' intent and actual behaviour regarding ethical eating, providing valuable insights into their food choices. It highlights the key factors influencing their decisions, such as convenience, cost, and social influence. The findings can help businesses, policymakers, and public health organizations develop strategies to promote sustainable food consumption. Additionally, the study contributes to existing literature on consumer behaviour and offers practical implications for marketing strategies, awareness campaigns, and policy recommendations, ultimately encouraging more informed and responsible food choices among millennials.

Literature Review:

Ethical Consumption and Sustainable Food Choices:

Vermeir *et al.* (2020) investigated the variables affecting millennials' consumption of environmentally sustainable foods. According to their survey, only 38% of millennials routinely bought sustainable food products, despite 72% expressing concern about how their food choices affect the environment. Price and accessibility were noted by the authors as major obstacles to ethical consumption. The study also underlined how peer pressure and societal norms might encourage sustainable behaviour. The authors concluded that to make sustainable food options more accessible and desirable to millennials, governmental changes, and educational initiatives are required.

Kushwaha *et al.* (2018) looked into the connection between actual food choices and intentions to consume ethically, with an emphasis on organic items. According to their research, only 29% of millennials regularly buy organic and sustainable food, despite 60% of them saying they prioritized those types of foods. Price sensitivity, cynicism about labelling, and mistrust of organic certificates were the reasons given by the study for this discrepancy. To foster consumer trust and promote moral purchasing practices, the authors advised businesses to employ transparent labelling procedures and reliable, third-party certifications.

Social and Environmental Impact of Food Production:

Garnett (2013) highlighted the significant environmental effects of food production while examining the complex issues surrounding food sustainability. According to the report, the agricultural sector was a major cause of deforestation and biodiversity loss, and it accounted for around 30% of worldwide emissions of greenhouse gases. The author highlighted how intensive agricultural methods caused long-term ecological damage by depleting freshwater resources and soil health and how animal production affected the climate by emitting nitrous oxide and methane, which exacerbate global warming. The study emphasized the necessity of systemic changes in food production and consumption patterns, promoting sustainable dietary changes, technology developments, and governmental changes. Additionally, the study emphasized how plant-based diets and less food waste might help to lessen the environmental impact of food systems. Garnett's work is an invaluable resource for comprehending the connection between agriculture and sustainability because it offers a thorough review of the environmental effects of food production.

Poore *et al.* (2018) carried out a thorough investigation into the global food system's sustainability issues. Data from more than 38,700 farms across 119 nations was analysed by the researchers, including 40 food categories that account for 90% of the world's caloric intake. Despite producing only 18% of calories, the study discovered that the production of meat and dairy accounts for 60% of agricultural GHG emissions. Moving toward plant-based diets may cut land use by 76% and food-related GHG emissions by 49%, the scientists noted. The study found that the best way to minimize the environmental impact of food production is to reduce food

waste, enhance agricultural productivity, and make dietary modifications.

Johnston *et al.* (2014), explored the social and ethical implications of food production and consumption. According to the authors, livestock is a major contribution to the global food system, which accounts for 25–30% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and substantially contributes to environmental deterioration. They stressed that although intensive food production increases food supply, it also contributes to climate change, biodiversity loss, and deforestation. The study also discussed moral issues like animal welfare, unfair trade tactics, and labour exploitation. The authors also highlighted the importance of food price and accessibility in ensuring food security, pointing out that 30% of people worldwide suffer from some kind of food insecurity. They argued for integrated policies to support ethical and sustainable food production and consumption, and they supported sustainable food systems that put public health, social justice, and environmental preservation first.

Role of Packaging and Waste Reduction in Ethical Eating:

Steenis *et al.* (2017) investigated how customers view sustainable packaging and how it influences their choices. Their research showed that environmentally friendly packaging increased consumer purchasing intentions and improved product appeal. However, if customers thought that sustainable packaging was less practical or inconvenient, they were less likely to select it. The survey underlined that the secret to increasing customer approval is to combine sustainability with functionality.

Dilkes-Hoffman *et al.* (2018) examined how packaging that is compostable and biodegradable can help cut down on waste related to food. When compared to traditional packaging, the study showed that biodegradable packaging decreased waste by 30–40%. Customers were more receptive to compostable packaging when it came with explicit disposal guidelines. The study underlined how crucial lifecycle assessments are to guarantee packaging's actual sustainability.

Willingness to Pay for Sustainability and Ethics in Food:

Minor *et al.* (2021) conducted a large-scale study to examine the effect of ethical labels (e.g., organic, fair trade, sustainably sourced) on consumers' willingness to

pay for food products. According to the study, buyers were willing to pay an extra 10–30% for goods bearing ethical and sustainable labelling. The survey also discovered that consumers were more inclined to pay more for sustainable products if they had stronger ethical principles and were more environmentally conscious.

Li and Kallas (2021) investigated consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for sustainable food items by conducting a meta-analysis of 80 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2020. According to the research, customers are often ready to pay 30% more for food that has sustainable qualities, with organic and eco-friendly products fetching the largest premiums. According to the survey, European consumers showed a higher WTP than consumers in other regions, indicating a greater understanding of sustainability. Additionally, it discovered that demographic characteristics like income, education, and environmental awareness, as well as confidence in certification marks and unambiguous sustainability statements, have a big impact on WTP. This study serves as a useful reference for future research on ethical food consumption since the authors concluded that clear labelling and successful marketing techniques are essential for boosting customers' trust and raising their willingness to pay for sustainable food items.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study follows a descriptive approach based on primary data collection. This study is quantitative and cross-sectional. This study employed a survey-based approach, collecting data from 400 millennials - 200 from Dehradun and 200 from Haridwar. A structured questionnaire was used to analyse purchasing behaviour, willingness to pay for sustainable products, and attitudes toward ethical consumption. The sample was divided into two age groups, 23-30 years (younger millennials) and 33-42 years (older millennials). A chi-square test was used to determine the statistical significance of regional and generational differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainability and ethics in food choices have become buzzwords among Indian millennials, fueled by social media, government initiatives, and global climate concerns. But does this newfound awareness actually

translate into action? Our study of millennials in Dehradun and Haridwar paints a compelling picture—while many claim to care about sustainable and ethical food choices, practical barriers like cost, convenience, and availability often hold them back.

The Power and Pitfalls of Social Media:

Influencers on Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (X) are pushing organic superfoods, plant-based diets, and environmentally friendly packaging, making sustainable eating a popular topic. But are millennials actually making different choices because of it? (Fig. 1)

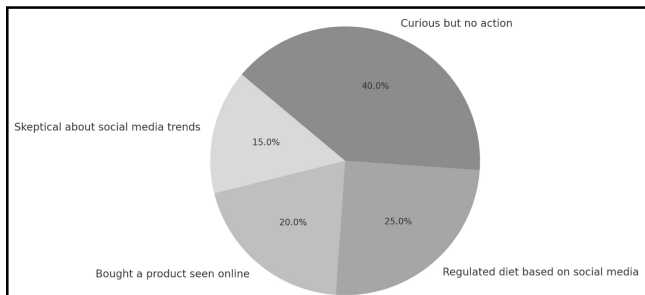


Fig. 1 : Influence of Social Media on Healthy Food Choices

With an overwhelming 40% of respondents admitting that they feel curious after seeing nutrition and health-related content, it is clear that social media sparks initial interest. However, only 25% of millennials actually regulate their diet based on what they see online, and an even lower 20% end up purchasing a product promoted on these platforms. A notable 15% remain skeptical, questioning the credibility of online health trends. While social media creates awareness, it does not always translate into action. Many millennials engage with the content but hesitate to make substantial changes, indicating that other factors—such as affordability, accessibility, and trust—play a crucial role in decision-making.

The Ethics Paradox: Wanting to Do Good vs. Actually Doing It

Millennials in both cities express strong support for ethical food choices—buying from local farmers, cutting down on plastic packaging, and switching to organic products. But here's the catch: intent and action don't always align (Fig. 2).

Millennials often express a strong inclination toward ethical food choices, with 80% of respondents in Dehradun and 75% in Haridwar stating that they prefer

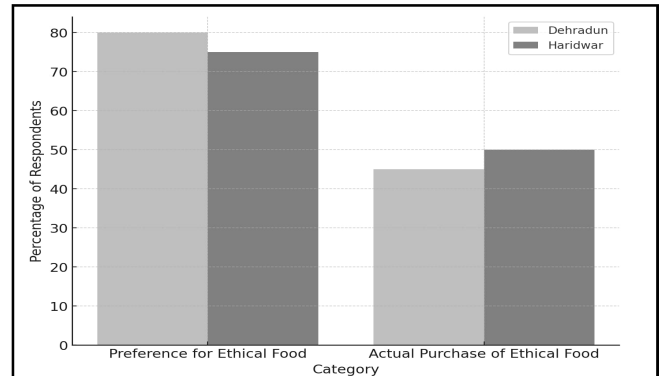


Fig. 2 : Preference vs. Actual Purchase of Ethical Food

ethical food. However, their actual purchasing behaviour tells a different story—only 45% in Dehradun and 50% in Haridwar actively buy ethically sourced or organic food.

This gap reflects the ethics paradox: while people desire to make responsible choices, barriers like high costs, lack of availability, and ingrained habits prevent them from following through. This suggests that promoting ethical food consumption requires more than awareness—it needs incentives, subsidies, or easier accessibility to sustainable options.

The Real-World Hurdles: Convenience Still Wins:

If millennials care about sustainability, why do fast food chains continue to thrive, and why does convenience outweigh conscious choices? The data provides some answers:

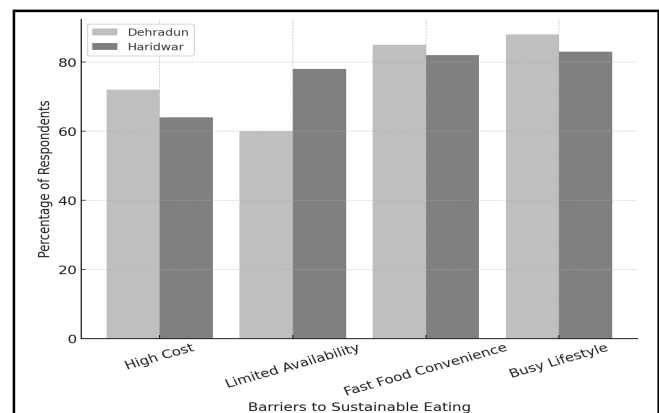


Fig. 3 : Barriers Preventing Millennials from Choosing Sustainable Food

- ◆ Sustainable food remains expensive, 72% in Dehradun and 64% in Haridwar cite cost as a reason they don't buy organic or eco-friendly

products.

- ♦ Access matters – In Haridwar, 78% say limited availability is a key issue, whereas Dehradun enjoys better access to sustainable choices.
- ♦ Fast food is just too easy – With 85% in Dehradun and 82% in Haridwar admitting they rely on convenience food, it's clear that fast food beats sustainability in the battle for time and taste.

This study reveals a glaring gap between millennials' aspirations for sustainability and the realities of their consumption habits. While awareness is at an all-time high, real change demands affordability, better accessibility, and practical alternatives to fast food.

What can make a difference?:

Policy Implications

The findings of this study indicate that while millennials in Dehradun and Haridwar express a strong preference for ethical and sustainable food, actual purchasing behaviour lags due to factors like cost, convenience, and availability. This highlights the need for policy interventions that align with millennial behaviour patterns and address the barriers identified in this research.

- ❖ **Cost Reduction Through Government Support:** Since high prices have become a significant obstacle, subsidies for foods that are grown organically and sustainably can promote affordability. Reducing the GST on food products that are locally grown and organic can encourage millennials to consume more ethically.
- ❖ **Enhancing Sustainable Food Availability:** In urban and semi-urban locations such as Dehradun and Haridwar, access can be enhanced by growing the network of local farmers' markets. The provision of specialized areas for organic and ethical food options in supermarkets should be promoted to address the problem of restricted availability.
- ❖ **Influencing Social Media Trends for Sustainable Eating:** The results of this study demonstrate how much social media influences millennials. Changes in behaviour can be achieved through government-sponsored partnerships with influencers who support sustainable diets. The credibility of social media as a source of nutritional information can be guaranteed by fact-checking and controlling false

statements regarding processed and unhealthy foods.

- ❖ **Addressing Convenience as a Barrier:** Incorporating sustainable food options into restaurant menus and meal delivery applications would increase accessibility to morally sound options. To dispel the myth that choosing eco-friendly foods takes more work, extensive awareness campaigns can highlight quick, simple, and sustainable meal preparation techniques.
- ❖ **Aligning Policies with Millennials' Lifestyle Preferences:** University canteens and business cafeterias must offer reasonably priced, environmentally friendly lunch options, as leading a hectic life is a major obstacle. Sustainable food labels ought to be more noticeable and simpler to read because millennials' decisions to buy can be influenced by clarity.

Strategies to Bridge the Gap Between Intent and Behaviour:

This study highlights the gap between what millennials claim to prefer (ethical food) and what they actually purchase. To bridge this gap, targeted strategies must address the psychological, economic, and behavioural drivers influencing millennial food choices.

- ❖ **Leveraging Social Influence for Sustainable Choices:-** Since social media is so important, millennial-focused websites like YouTube and Instagram should be used to spread the word about ethical eating habits. Campaigns with rewards, peer challenges, and "sustainable food influencers" can all boost real acceptance.
- ❖ **Incentivizing Ethical Purchasing:** To attract millennials, supermarkets in Dehradun and Haridwar can implement loyalty programs or offer discounts for eco-friendly goods. Discounts for large purchases of ethical food goods can inspire young people to make sustainable choices without financial pressure.
- ❖ **Making Sustainable Eating More Convenient:** Pre-packaged sustainable meal kits should be marketed as fast food substitutes since convenience is a decisive factor. Food delivery services can advertise ethical meals and showcase sustainable restaurant options.
- ❖ **Bridging the Knowledge Gap Through Education and Transparency:** Since moral

considerations are important but may not always result in action, educational initiatives might help people understand the long-term advantages of eating sustainably. Consumer confidence can be strengthened by using QR codes on ethical food packaging to connect to sustainability initiatives and transparent sourcing.

By implementing these targeted policies and strategies, the gap between intention and action in sustainable food choices can be effectively reduced, encouraging millennials to adopt healthier and more ethical food behaviours in alignment with their stated preferences.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the evolving yet challenging relationship between millennials and sustainable food choices. While there is a clear awareness and preference for ethical and environmentally responsible eating, real-world hurdles often prevent individuals from fully committing to these choices. Social media has emerged as a major influencer, sparking curiosity and shaping perceptions about health and sustainability. However, awareness alone is not enough—practical concerns such as affordability, availability, and lifestyle constraints continue to be major deterrents.

Despite these challenges, the rising consciousness around sustainability signals a positive shift. Many millennials express a desire to align their food consumption with ethical and environmental values, suggesting an opportunity for meaningful change. Government initiatives promoting organic farming, local markets, and sustainable consumption align well with this growing mindset, but further efforts are needed to make ethical food choices more accessible and affordable.

To bridge the gap between intention and action, a multi-pronged approach is essential. Businesses must innovate to provide sustainable options that are convenient and affordable, policymakers should introduce supportive measures to encourage ethical consumption, and awareness campaigns should continue to highlight the long-term benefits of responsible food choices. With the right interventions, the transition toward a more

sustainable food system can become a reality, ensuring that ethical eating is not just an aspiration but an achievable norm.

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