

ONLINE APPAREL SHOPPING BEHAVIOUR: A CASE OF MILLENNIAL WOMEN FROM KWAZULU-NATAL

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Abstract:

The research examined millennial women's online apparel shopping behaviour from KwaZulu-Natal. It utilised a quantitative and exploratory research approach. A total of 255 millennial women from KwaZulu-Natal were selected using non-probability sampling, with purposive sampling employed. The data collected was analysed using SPSS, incorporating both descriptive and inferential statistics and the results were presented using charts and frequency tables. The study suggests that addressing factors such as body representation, product quality visibility, safety concerns, logistical challenges, cultural representation, inclusive fashion ranges, and community engagement can significantly enhance the online shopping experience for South African millennial women. These findings have significant implications for marketing, fashion, and textiles, as they provide insights into the preferences and behaviours of a key consumer demographic. Implementing these recommendations could lead to a more inclusive and sustainable online shopping sector, thereby improving the online shopping experience for millennial women. The findings of this research underscore the need for future research to explore specific dimensions of the online shopping behaviour of young women and to investigate the perceptions of individuals without internet access, highlighting the potential for further exploration and the importance of the topic.

Keywords: Apparel Shopping, Millennial Women, Online Shopping, Shopping Behaviour.

1. Introduction

The South African millennial demographic, particularly women, is a significant target market for online apparel shopping (Parment, 2013). They are recognised for their careful purchasing decisions, particularly clothing items (Naidoo, 2018).

Understanding this consumer segment better requires further research. This study aims to fill this research gap and contribute to a deeper comprehension of the factors influencing online apparel shopping among South African millennial women. In 2018, this demographic included nearly 20.5 million individuals, with over half (56.2%) being below the age of 30 (Statistics South Africa, 2018). South African millennials are the first generation to come of age in the post-Apartheid era. They generally experience better opportunities, social mobility, and higher wealth creation prospects than earlier generations (Duh and Struwig, 2015). Considered the most educated generation in South Africa and globally, millennials represent a critical market segment for businesses (Van Deventer, De Klerk and Bevan-Dye, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2018). This generation is diverse in race and ethnicity (Licsandru and Cui, 2019). As the first generation to be raised with technology, millennials are often viewed as having the potential to drive social change through technological advancements. However, it is important to acknowledge the variations within this global cohort across different regions and subgroups (MSCI, 2020: 5).

According to a study by World Wide Worx (2021), online sales in South Africa made up just 2.8% of total retail sales, despite a high rate of internet users in the country, as reported by We Are Social (2023). The study also revealed that about 72.3% of South Africans are active internet users. In contrast, global e-commerce comprised approximately 19% of total retail sales in the same year. A study by Mkhosi (2018) found that out of the adult population of 33 million in South Africa, only 3.2 million, just under 10%, engaged in online shopping. Additionally, research suggests that the online shopping sector in South Africa lags five to seven years behind that of developed nations such as Britain, America, Australia, and Europe (Rudansky-Kloppers, 2014). Despite various online businesses like Zando and Superbalist.com, the adoption of online retail in South Africa is considerably lower compared to other BRICS nations (Maake and Shevel, 2013). South African retailers primarily perceive online retail as an additional avenue for product sales, targeting a select group of affluent households (Goga and Paelo, 2019). The slow adoption of online retail practices in South Africa makes it important for the country to catch up with other countries in online shopping (Goga and Paelo, 2019; Makhitha et al., 2019). Despite the global growth in online shopping, the South African online apparel market has shown limited growth (Prinsloo, 2016). According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (2018), e-commerce in South Africa is still in its early stages compared to more developed countries.

This research aims to uncover the main factors influencing online apparel shopping behaviour among millennial women in KwaZulu-Natal and to identify the factors contributing to the limited online shopping activity among South African millennial women. This study aims to contribute to fashion and women's studies by offering a detailed perspective on various factors. It investigates the digital access gap, shedding light on disparities in technology access, including hardware and software (Faloye and Ajayi, 2022). Furthermore, the study explores South Africa's diverse cultural landscape, digital literacy, and product attributes, which are often overlooked in existing research. This study is based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, introduced by Ajzen in 1991. This theory offers a practical framework for exploring how female consumers' attitudes and perceptions shape their intentions to shop for fashion online.

2. Literature Review

Millennial Women in South Africa

Millennial women, born between 1980 and 1996, are often seen as more progressive, liberal, and open-minded compared to previous generations. They consider themselves advocates for advancing race relations and are determined to shape a political agenda that aligns with their beliefs. They are less likely to adhere to their parents' perspectives on issues such as racism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, as well as the associated violence and harm. In South Africa, the millennial generation is recognised as the first to come of age after apartheid, growing up in an era characterised by cellular phones, the internet, convergent technologies, and multi-platform media. They are also known as the "educated generation" in South Africa, living in the time of the "gig economy," where staying in one job can be challenging, leading some millennials to keep switching jobs (Makhalima, 2022; Mbumbwa and Chigada, 2018; Mkhize, 2024).

In South Africa, millennial women comprise one of the most significant segments of the economically active population. They prioritise achieving a healthy work-life balance, have diverse needs, value connectivity through technology, demonstrate an interest in social responsibility, and have a strong passion for travel. They are considered digital natives, adept with technology, and recognised for their quick learning abilities (Davids et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2023). They come from a society that believes that race is not a defining factor, and they are a sought-after demographic for marketers due to their influence on the growth of self-improvement. However, they are also perceived as a challenging market to attract and retain due to their diverse needs (Love et al., 2018; Rens, 2023; Thusi and Maduku, 2020).

Millennial women are significant in driving the shift towards ethically conscious clothing consumption. They are recognised as one of the largest and most influential consumer segments in the clothing industry (Moodly et al., 2023). Studies indicate that millennial women are more involved in online apparel shopping than men, significantly shaping their purchasing habits and positioning them as a pivotal demographic in the e-commerce sector, particularly in fashion and apparel (Hollett et al., 2023; Pareek and Babel, 2022; Tripathi and Dubey, 2023). The convenience of online shopping, as opposed to traditional retail, is a significant driver behind millennial women's preference for online apparel shopping, and online retailers need to cater to these preferences (Pardeshi and Khanna, 2021).

Online Apparel Shopping

Online apparel shopping combines modern digital convenience with traditional product delivery, allowing consumers to shop anytime and anywhere. This method relies on efficient logistics and supply chain management to ensure timely and accurate delivery (Karaveg, 2021; Kaur, 2018). Online apparel shopping offers many advantages, including the convenience of accessing various products from numerous online retailers. This ease of shopping enhances the overall experience, making it more enjoyable. Additionally, consumers can easily compare prices across different platforms, which increases their purchasing power. They also have the opportunity to view products from multiple angles and assess how clothing items will fit and look on their bodies, helping them better understand fit and appearance (Baytar et al., 2020; Goyal et al., 2021; Kushwaha, 2020).

The e-commerce landscape for apparel in South Africa is still developing and is expected to grow rapidly as traditional retailers and online stores compete for customers. Online apparel shopping is preferred by innovative consumers with

higher incomes and education levels, and those willing to take risks. Consumers who purchase apparel online find the experience more enjoyable, convenient, secure, and efficient (Cunningham and De Meyer-Heydenrych, 2018; Mofokeng, 2021; Pentz and Ryke, 2021). In discussing the evolving expectations of South African consumers within the e-commerce landscape, especially in apparel purchases, Makhitha and Ngobeni (2023) highlight several key demands. These include the need for quicker delivery times, enhanced after-sales services, and the availability of both convenient and secure payment methods. Furthermore, they emphasise the growing preference for contactless digital payment solutions and the desire for more flexible payment options, underlining a shift towards more consumer-centric practices in online retail.

In a study by Melović et al. (2021), two types of online apparel shoppers were identified. The first group, "problem solvers", approaches online shopping as a transactional activity to acquire specific products or services. The second group consists of consumers who seek entertainment and pleasure through online apparel shopping, viewing it as an enjoyable experience. On the other hand, Pervez (2021) further categorised online apparel shoppers into occasional and regular shoppers. Occasional shoppers only shop online a few times a year when necessary. In contrast, regular shoppers shop online many times a month, enjoy the process, conduct pre-purchase research, and prefer the ease of navigation and modern website design.

In recent years, women have increasingly turned to online platforms for shopping, with apparel being the most popular category. The convenience of online shopping has made it a regular part of our lives, offering ease, security, privacy, competitive pricing, and a wide array of products. The advantages of online apparel shopping, including convenience, time-saving, detailed product information, ease of transactions, and flexibility, have contributed to the widespread adoption of online shopping (Hooda and Singh, 2018; Pardeshi and Khanna, 2021). However, online apparel shoppers often worry that the clothes they see on a website may not look, feel, or fit the same as the ones in a physical store. This can create a difference between what they expect online and what they get when they receive the product. This is because they cannot touch or try on the clothes before buying them online. To address this concern, using Virtual Fitting Room technology can help. This technology allows customers to virtually try on clothes using advanced technologies like augmented and virtual reality. This can help eliminate these perceptions (Baytar et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022).

Online Shopping Behaviour

The purchasing process for online shopping consists of several steps similar to those involved in physical purchases. Typically, the online buying experience includes five key phases. First, when customers identify a desire for a specific product or service, they begin by conducting an online search. After gathering relevant information about the product, the customer compares their options and selects an item that meets their needs and transaction criteria. This process culminates in a post-purchase experience (Goyal et al., 2021). Furthermore, online shopping involves customers buying products and services through various channels, including the Internet, email, web browsing, and instant messaging (Mahmood et al., 2022). This behaviour can be divided into three stages: i) pre-purchase, ii) purchase, and iii) post-purchase. Unlike traditional shopping, online shopping integrates information searching and comparing alternatives, providing

personalised information. The linear shopping behaviour typically observed in physical stores does not apply directly to online consumers, whose decision-making process is more complex and characterised by non-linear patterns.

Online shoppers tend to extensively research available options before making a purchase, a phase referred to as the "Zero Moment." Online consumers now quickly express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with products. They often consult their mobile devices before making purchases and carefully review product feedback to satisfy utilitarian motives such as cost-effectiveness, improved usability of product information, the right assortment, and convenience and hedonic motives like entertainment and enjoyment. Furthermore, they seek various socio-psychological hedonic benefits, including emotional satisfaction, mental refreshment, social association, attraction, and recognition, particularly when shopping for apparel online (Agrawal, 2023; Chen et al., 2017; Karaveg, 2021).

In the current retail environment, consumers can access product information and make purchases through various digital channels. These consumers are known as research or multichannel shoppers (Jo et al., 2020), exhibiting different shopping behaviours than traditional retail consumers. Online apparel shopping offers advantages as customers encounter various perceived risks and psychological factors. Online shoppers consider quality, price, and product feedback when purchasing. Social networks and media significantly influence consumer decisions by providing information and experiences from other consumers (Goyal et al., 2021; Najihah et al., 2018). Therefore, retailers must have visually appealing online apparel product displays, as this can influence consumer reactions and lead to positive visual, cognitive, and affective responses. Consumers seek visual information to purchase online (Chen-Yu et al., 2022).

3. Research Methodology

The research employed a quantitative and exploratory approach, using an explanatory design to collect and analyse quantitative data to better understand the results (Harrison et al., 2020). The study focused on the female millennial population of KwaZulu-Natal, which is estimated to exceed 1000 000. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), a sample size of 385 to 400 respondents is recommended for populations exceeding 10,000. The intended sample size was 400, but due to limitations, the final sample size was 255 millennial women. A nonprobability purposive sampling strategy was used to select the respondents, with 255 millennial women conveniently selected for specific purposes. Data collection involved using closed-ended questionnaires, and the collected data were analysed, coded, and corrected for errors before being entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. The statistical data were then presented visually through charts and frequency tables. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their information, as the questionnaire did not request their names, skin colour, or political affiliations. Additionally, a letter outlining the study's purpose was provided to the respondents, along with a request for permission to participate in the study. As a result, respondents volunteered to participate and were free to opt out if they felt uncomfortable at any given time.

4. Results and discussion

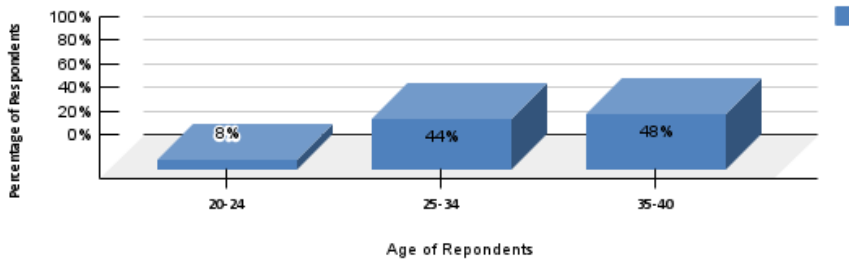


Figure 1. Age range of the respondents

Source: Adapted from own research

In Figure 1, it is illustrated that a significant portion of the respondents, precisely 47%, were categorised within the age bracket of 35-40 years. Moreover, a close percentage, 44%, of the participants were identified to be between the ages of 25 and 34. A smaller fraction, constituting 8%, fell into the 20-24 age range. This distribution highlights the varied age demographics of the respondents involved in the study.

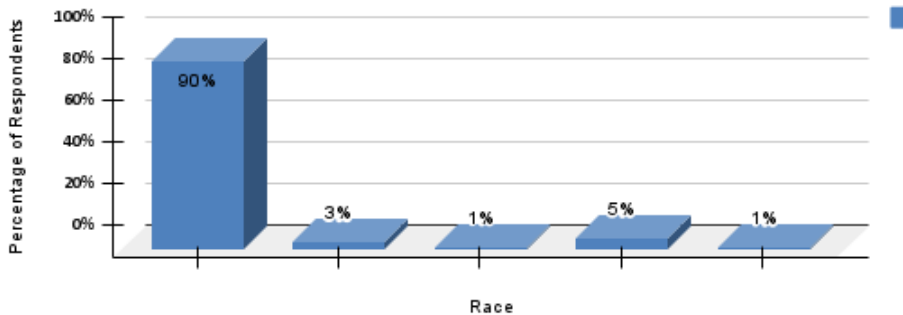


Figure 2. Racial Demographics of Respondents

Source: Adapted from own research

The demographic breakdown of the sample is depicted in Figure 2. The largest group, comprising 90% of the respondents, self-identified as African. White participants comprised 3% of the sample, while Asian respondents constituted 1%. Coloured individuals represented 5% of the total, and an additional 1% identified as Other.

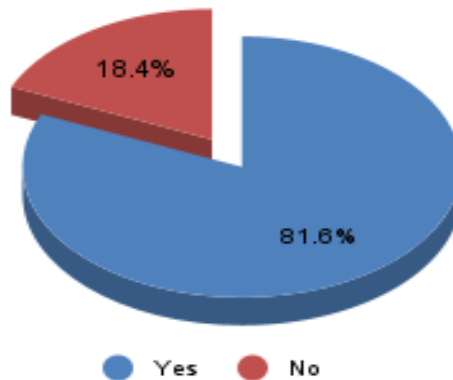


Figure 3. Respondents' previous online shopping behaviour

Source: Adapted from own research

Figure 3 presents an analysis of respondents' online shopping behaviours. The findings reveal that 82% of the respondents have engaged in online shopping, while 18% reported not participating in such activities. These results indicate that a significant proportion of respondents have experience with online shopping. Moreover, these findings align with a recent survey conducted by We Are Social, which evaluated online shopping trends in South Africa. This survey indicated that South African women comprise 47% of the country's e-commerce market (Nash, 2019).



Figure 4. Sources of Inspiration for Shopping Online for Fashion Items

Source: Adapted from own research

Figure 4 depicts the sources of inspiration for online shopping. Personal recommendations from friends, family, and colleagues emerged as a significant source of inspiration for many participants, accounting for 30% of the responses. Online advertising had a notable impact, with 29% of respondents identifying it as a key influence on their online shopping behaviour. Additionally, platforms like Pinterest influenced the shopping decisions of 16% of participants. A smaller segment, 9%, reported being swayed by search engines such as Google, Firefox, and Yahoo. In contrast, television advertising and other sources had relatively minimal effects, with only 3% and 8% of respondents citing them as influences.

The Most Significant Aspects of Online Shopping

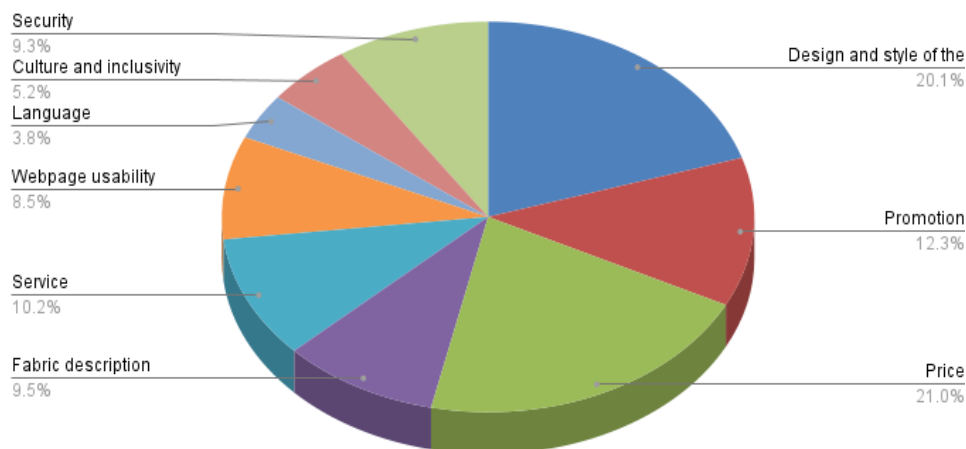


Figure 5: The Most Significant Aspects of Online Apparel Shopping

Source: Adapted from own research

Figure 5 highlights the key factors influencing online apparel shopping, as noted by respondents. Price and design/style emerged as the most important factors, with 21% and 20% of respondents emphasising their significance, respectively. Other aspects, such as promotions, fabric descriptions, service quality, website usability, and security, were also regarded as essential, collectively representing 40% of the responses. In contrast, culture/inclusivity and language played a limited role, contributing only 9% to the overall feedback.

Table 1. Frequency of shopping online for clothing and accessories vs. access to the internet or connection at home

Access to the internet	Once every quarter	Twice or more a month	Once or twice a year	I never shop online	Strongly	Total
I have my internet	73	61	49	35	0	218
I do not have internet	6	3	9	9	0	27
Agree	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	79	64	58	44	1	246

Source: Developed from research results

Table 1 summarises the frequency of online shopping for clothing and accessories, categorised by whether individuals have internet access at home. Those with internet access engage in online shopping significantly more often, with 73 respondents making purchases once every quarter and 61 shopping two or more times each month. In contrast, a smaller group without internet access shows limited engagement in online shopping, with only 6 individuals shopping once every quarter. Overall, most respondents have internet access, totalling 218, while only 27 do not.

Table 2. Frequency of shopping online for clothing and accessories vs. monthly income

Frequency shop online for clothing and accessory items						
Monthly income	Once every quarter	Twice or more a month	Once or twice a year	I never shop online	Strongly	Total
R16 001-R30 000	20	14	15	7	0	56
R30 001- R60 000	20	15	8	9	0	52
R6 001- R16 000	11	13	15	6	0	45
No income	6	4	6	13	0	29
R501-R2 500	5	3	8	4	0	20
R60 001 and above	7	10	1	2	0	20
R2 501-R6 000	7	4	4	3	0	18
Agree	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	76	63	57	44	1	241

Source: Developed from research results

Table 2 depicts how often people shop online for clothing and accessories based on their monthly income. The results indicate that higher-income groups shop online more frequently than lower-income groups.

Table 3. Frequency of shopping online for clothing and accessories items vs Employment Status

Frequency shop online for clothing and accessory items					
Employment status	Once every quarter	Twice or more a month	Once or twice a year	I never shop online	Total
Employed	44	43	37	17	140
Unemployed	5	3	10	10	28
Self-employed	9	10	3	4	26
Employed and studying	9	1	1	4	15
Studying full-time	3	1	2	2	8
Working part-time	3	0	2	2	8
Employed casually	1	1	0	2	4
Total	74	59	55	41	229

Source: Developed from research results

Table 3 highlights the correlation between employment status and online shopping behaviour for clothing and accessories. It shows that employed individuals shop online more frequently than those who are unemployed. This suggests that employment status may influence disposable income and the frequency of online purchases.

Table 4. Reliability coefficient of the socio-economic factors affecting the frequency of online shopping

Variables	Coefficient Mean	Alpha Coefficient
Education status	0.03	0.06
Monthly income	0.15	0.27
Employment	0.17	0.29
Internet access	0.10	0.18
Children size	0.01	0.02
Overall	0.09	0.16

Source: Developed from research results

The results indicate that Cronbach's alpha for education status and frequency of online shopping is 0.05819888, which is equal to or greater than 0. This suggests that the scale is considered reliable. For the relationship between monthly income and online shopping frequency, Cronbach's alpha is 0.26827832, exceeding 0.09478618, further affirming the scale's reliability. Additionally, for employment status and frequency of online shopping, Cronbach's alpha is 0.29121761, surpassing 0.11828424, demonstrating the scale's consistency.

Interpretation of Findings

The study's findings demonstrate a high prevalence of internet access among participants, with most reporting a reliable connection at home. In contrast, a smaller portion of respondents indicated that they do not have such connectivity. The data also reveal consistent online shopping behaviours among participants when purchasing clothing and accessories. A noteworthy segment reported shopping online twice or more each month, while others indicated that they shop online once every three months. Additionally, 25% of participants engage in online shopping only once or twice a year, and a minority reported never making online purchases for clothing and accessories.

The motivations behind online shopping were also explored, revealing that many participants use online platforms for various purposes. Some primarily shop for clothing, while others seek information about fashion products or browse without a specific intention to purchase. The findings indicate that respondents generally find online shopping more accessible, quicker, and more convenient than traditional methods. Furthermore, 42% of participants perceived online and physical stores as relatively inexpensive options, with many believing that online shopping tends to be cheaper, although 20% felt that physical stores offer more competitive prices.

Influences on purchasing decisions were also examined, highlighting personal recommendations from friends, family, and colleagues as a prominent source of inspiration. Online advertisements emerged as a significant factor, affecting 28% of respondents, while platforms like Pinterest impacted 16% of participants. In contrast, search engines and television advertising were less influential in shaping shopping behaviour.

Finally, the survey identified key factors respondents prioritise when shopping for apparel online. Price and design/style were regarded as critical elements, while additional factors such as promotional offers, fabric descriptions, service quality, website usability, and security considerations also played an essential role in their online shopping experiences.

5. Conclusions

The first recommendation focuses on increasing body representation and fit reviews in marketing materials. Collaborating with diverse models and showcasing a variety of body shapes in product images can significantly alleviate fit concerns for consumers. Research by Bleier, Harmeling, and Palmatier (2019) indicates that displaying a range of body shapes online reduces apprehensions about the fit and improves the effectiveness of product assessments for potential buyers. Additionally, elevating the visibility of product quality is essential. This involves providing comprehensive product descriptions and high-quality images accurately representing the items. According to Raviadaran et al. (2019), customers often lack awareness of a product's quality when shopping online, mainly because they cannot physically interact with the merchandise. Ensuring solid product representation can lead to better-informed purchasing decisions.

The third recommendation addresses safety concerns related to online transactions. Implementing secure payment gateways, transparent pricing strategies, and clearly communicating any potential additional costs, such as import taxes, are crucial steps. Alzoubi et al. (2022) argue that adopting modern security measures is vital for building consumer trust in electronic payment platforms, thereby ensuring transactional protection. Furthermore, instilling ethical principles in e-

commerce design, such as data usage transparency and privacy policies, can foster a positive customer perception of online shopping (Hammadi and Al-Refaiy, 2023).

The study further emphasises the importance of overcoming logistical challenges to enhance the online shopping experience. Developing an efficient and reliable delivery system specifically catered to rural areas can significantly increase inclusivity. South African online apparel retailers should prioritise representation by highlighting diverse body types and cultural backgrounds in promotional materials. This approach can help alleviate concerns about how clothing will fit various individuals. As noted by participants in the study, while garments may appear appealing on idealised models, uncertainty remains regarding their fit on different body shapes, underscoring the need for diverse representation in marketing.

In conclusion, these recommendations aim to bridge the gap between consumer expectations and the online shopping experience, creating a more inclusive and satisfying environment for all shoppers. Future research on online shopping behaviours among millennial women in South Africa could consider including other demographics, such as Generation Z and Generation X, to provide a broader understanding of shopping habits. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of individuals without internet access could reveal valuable insights into the barriers and opportunities for e-commerce in South Africa.

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