THE ROMANIAN CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND AWARENESS LINKED TO SUSTAINABILITY IN THE FAST FASHION INDUSTRY

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Abstract. *Sustainable fashion has been gaining more and more attention in the last few years. The fast fashion industry is raising many questions regarding the demand and real need for collections and clothes purchases yearly. Although some companies are starting to take a call of action regarding these issues, at the other end of the purchase chain lies the consumer's attitude and awareness of the topic, as consumers play a significant role in reaching a more sustainable future in the fast fashion industry. Considering this, more and more academicians have started researching more and more the possibility of achieving sustainability in the fashion industry in the last decade.*

The investigation's purpose is to understand better the level of sustainable awareness and attitudes of Romanian consumers regarding fashion purchases. Other objectives are to identify the perceived barriers regarding adopting sustainable purchase behavior and the potential triggers/motivation to adopt a more sustainable behavior from the consumer's point of view. As for the methodology, a qualitative study was developed, aiming for both fashion-passionate and non-passionate respondents, where the research instrument was the focus group.

The element of originality lies in the fact that the study will take place in Romania. In this ex-communist country, the consumer mentality focuses more on price than ethical reasoning. Interestingly enough, we discovered that some Romanian consumers working as fashion specialists had little to no idea about the effects of the fast fashion industry from a sustainability point of view. The main barriers for Romanian consumers were the prices, design, and quality of sustainable items, the absence of legal regulations, and education towards sustainability. This research contributes to providing more awareness regarding the Romanian consumer's awareness level, attitudes, and behavior regarding sustainable fast fashion.

Keywords: *consumers, consumer behavior, fast fashion, sustainability, sustainable consumption, sustainability attitude.*

Introduction

The fast fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries on the planet, the second largest after the big oil industry (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Quantis, 2018). More than 500$ billion is lost yearly because of the lack of utilization and recycling of clothing (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). By 2030 approximately 102 million tons of apparel consumption will be wasted (Global Fashion Agenda & The Boston Consulting Group, 2017). Moreover, fast fashion leads to air and water pollution by using toxic chemicals, packaging, ozone depletion, and soil erosion (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Noh & Johnson, 2019).

When discussing sustainable development, we usually refer to the three dimensions or pillars: environmental, social, and economic (Barbier, 1987). While other scholars and thinkers have added other pillars, such as technical, institutional, or political (Hill & Bowen, 1997), the concept of the three pillars is still broadly accepted. It has been continuously developed through the triple bottom line of sustainability as an assessment tool, which John Elkington first enounced in 1994. The model of the triple bottom line took off in late 1990, also referring to 3 dimensions of corporate sustainability: profits (economic pillar), planet (environmental pillar), and people (social pillar). Also, we may refer to three different perspectives: the demand side (the consumers), the supply side (fashion brands), and the regulatory environment (government and other non-governmental organizations) (B, Zhang et al, 2021). This research will mainly focus on the demand side, the consumer perspective, their awareness regarding sustainability, and what they perceive as barriers coming from both fashion brands and the regulatory environment that will lead them to become more sustainable citizens.

According to fashion research conducted in Romania by Glami, 40% of respondents did not know what a garment's sustainability means, and 55% said that clothing production should not harm the environment. Half the respondents did not know which brands offer sustainable options (Glami, 2019). 78% of the respondents thought that cotton was the most sustainable material. However, it requires a high amount of water and many pesticides to grow; therefore, understanding the barriers, drivers, motivation, and the actual level of awareness of the Romanian consumer is essential for a better and more sustainable future.

In today's world, consumers must face the decision between choosing fast fashion products that imply a more negligible cost, lower quality, and generating a tremendous amount of waste and environmental degradation (Brewer, 2019) compared to slow fashion, which implies a higher cost, better quality, and environmentally consciousness (Bourland, 2011). Consumers have yet the option to choose and develop sustainable practices regarding their fashion choices and further usage of those. This leads us to why the research is highly interesting from an academic and practical point of view. From a practical point of view, we want to see if Romanians can learn to "value and know the object" (Conell, 2010) and learn about the potential barriers and triggers they face regarding adopting this behavior from an academic perspective.

Our research will focus on consumers' awareness levels and attitudes towards this problem in Romania using a model elaborated by McNeill & Moore (2015), which presents four stages of attitudinal change toward sustainability in the fashion industry, which will be further presented. The next objective will be to investigate the barriers and drivers of consumers adopting more sustainable behavior.

Fast fashion and fast consumption

Fashion retailers use" fast fashion" to refer to clothing collections manufactured after the latest fashion trends inexpensively and concisely (Roozen & Mariet, 2020). Although consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the possibility of choosing ethical and sustainable fashion, this is not always reflected in their purchase behavior (Collins, Bray, & Burgess, 2010). With the efforts coming from companies to provide sustainable fashion in both fast and slow departments, we must question the attitudes and

awareness level of the consumers. Consumers buy clothes, only wear them while they are in trend, and throw them away after (Haines & Lee, 2021). As a result, fashion brands are now producing twice the amount of clothes produced before 2000 (Remy & Speelman, 2016). Therefore, the drastic increase in fashion consumption by the consumer and the mass textile production reflected in the fast fashion industry has led to a concerning problem regarding sustainability, mainly because many unsold clothes are being thrown away (Niinimäki at al., 2020).

Usually, the consumers buying from fast fashion stores are aware that the clothes they purchase are not of a high standard or quality, but they get them cheaply (Sun et al, 2020). The cheap price has led to social and environmental factors like low wages, terrible working conditions, waste, and pollution. At least partially, these problems could be approached with the help of consumers. Although the general view is that buyers care about environmental problems, they do not act. According to Kim et al. (2013), increasing value perception of the fashion item is attached to the ethical factors of the consumer's purchase and the environmental consequences of their decisions. Furthermore, the literature shows that nowadays consumers tend to be more aware of the consequences of their purchases (Sun et al, 2016). However, the rising question is if it is the same in Romania and if they are willing to choose better options. As Roman et al (2015) found, in this ex-communist country, the consumer mentality is more focused on price than ethical reasoning.

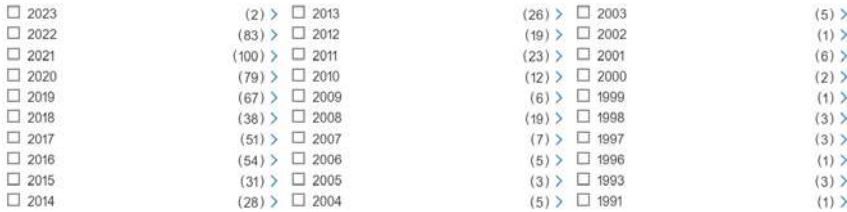**Sustainability in fashion and sustainability attitude stages**

Industrial activities are one of the main problems that lead to global environmental degradation and resource depletion (Sachs, 2015). Therefore, sustainability has become one of the main issues discussed about fast fashion. The fast-fashion business model has gained more and more popularity because of the low prices and fast production according to every trend, but sadly is leading to overconsumption (Siege, 2021). Although we can notice a strong push from authorities and companies in the fast-fashion industry to adopt more sustainable behavior (Gordon, 2015), we are still wondering if Romanian consumers are aware of this problematic topic and if the sustainability aspect impacts their fashion purchases.

Studies focused on systematic literature review found that sustainability in fashion knowledge has advanced only after 2006 and is still exponentially increasing. It has been pointed out that studies in different countries will have very different findings as developed and developing markets have different sustainability dimensions and contexts. In developed countries, consumers will view sustainability as a life choice. In contrast, in developing countries, consumers may see sustainability more as legal compliance or corporate philanthropy, although their awareness levels might be similar (Yang et al, 2017).

2022	57	2014	20	2006	5
2021	66	2013	16	2005	3
2020	70	2012	13	2004	4
2019	62	2011	8	2003	3
2018	53	2010	9	2002	4
2017	41	2009	2	2001	2
2016	31	2008	9	1997	2
2015	29	2007	3	1993	1

Figure 1 - Web of Science, Sustainability in fast fashion

Filter by year

2023	(2) >	2013	(26) >	2003	(5) >
2022	(83) >	2012	(19) >	2002	(1) >
2021	(100) >	2011	(23) >	2001	(6) >
2020	(79) >	2010	(12) >	2000	(2) >
2019	(67) >	2009	(6) >	1999	(1) >
2018	(38) >	2008	(19) >	1998	(3) >
2017	(51) >	2007	(7) >	1997	(3) >
2016	(54) >	2006	(5) >	1996	(1) >
2015	(31) >	2005	(3) >	1993	(3) >
2014	(28) >	2004	(5) >	1991	(1) >

Figure 2 – Scopus, Sustainability in fast fashion

Sustainability is one of the significant problems we face in the 21st century, and the fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries nowadays. Although sustainability as a theoretical concept has many definitions, the first time the term was widely accepted was in 1987 in the Brundtland Report on corporate social responsibility, being referred to as "the human ability to ensure that the current development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987). Later in the mid-1990s, a new framework was developed that has been extended to a three perspectives model named the "Triple Bottom Line" incorporating three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental value (Slaper & Hall, 2011). The three dimensions are also called the 3P of sustainability: people, planet, and profits (Hacking & Guthrie, 2008).

Redclift (2005) talks about the underlying needs, commitment, and attitudes of every day patterns the people approach to achieve sustainability. People tend to define their needs by excluding others from satisfying theirs, affecting long-term sustainability. Therefore, to attain sustainable development, we need to answer why people pass from one group to another and the environmental costs of their purchase choices in society. This is leading us to research their attitudes and behaviors.
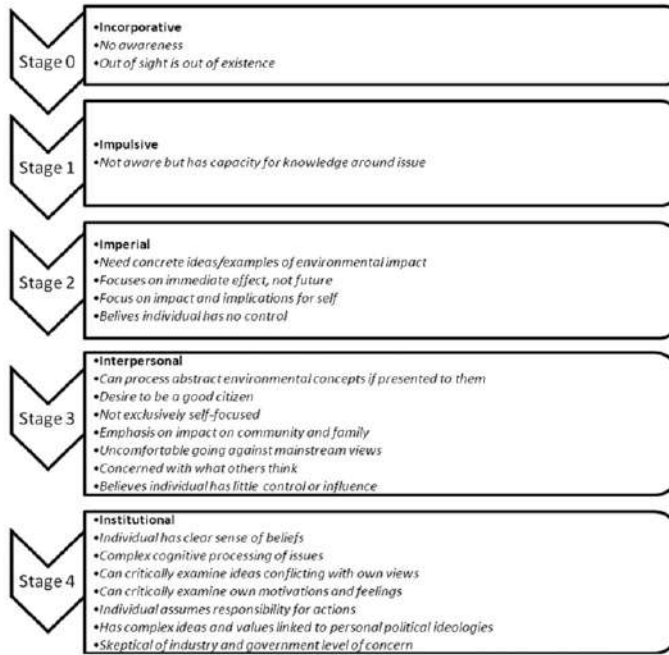
In the case of fast fashion, sustainability has many dimensions and challenges at every stage of production and from both industry and consumer perspectives. Although some research models have been developed, like the Framework for sustainability regarding personalized fashion products which focuses on the mass customization of sustainable fashion items (Black & Ekert, 2010), or more general models regarding ethical values and attitudes of the consumer's drivers for buying sustainable items (Shaw & Connolly, 2006), none of these models are considering sustainable fast fashion consumption.

We can point out through an adapted version of a sustainable model created by McNeil and Moore (2015) that has its roots in the Robins and Greenwald (1994) model of

environmental attitudes, which suggests the existence of 4 stages and the capacity of the individual to move through stages as they are making psychological progress (Piaget & Rosin, 1978).

Stage 0
- Incorporative
- No awareness
- Out of sight is out of existence

Stage 1
- Impulsive
- Not aware but has capacity for knowledge around issue

Stage 2
- Imperial
- Need concrete ideas/examples of environmental impact
- Focuses on immediate effect, not future
- Focus on impact and implications for self
- Belives individual has no control

Stage 3
- Interpersonal
- Can process abstract environmental concepts if presented to them
- Desire to be a good citizen
- Not exclusively self-focused
- Emphasis on impact on community and family
- Uncomfortable going against mainstream views
- Concerned with what others think
- Believes individual has little control or influence

Stage 4
- Institutional
- Individual has clear sense of beliefs
- Complex cognitive processing of issues
- Can critically examine ideas conflicting with own views
- Can critically examine own motivations and feelings
- Individual assumes responsibility for actions
- Has complex ideas and values linked to personal political ideologies
- Skeptical of industry and government level of concern
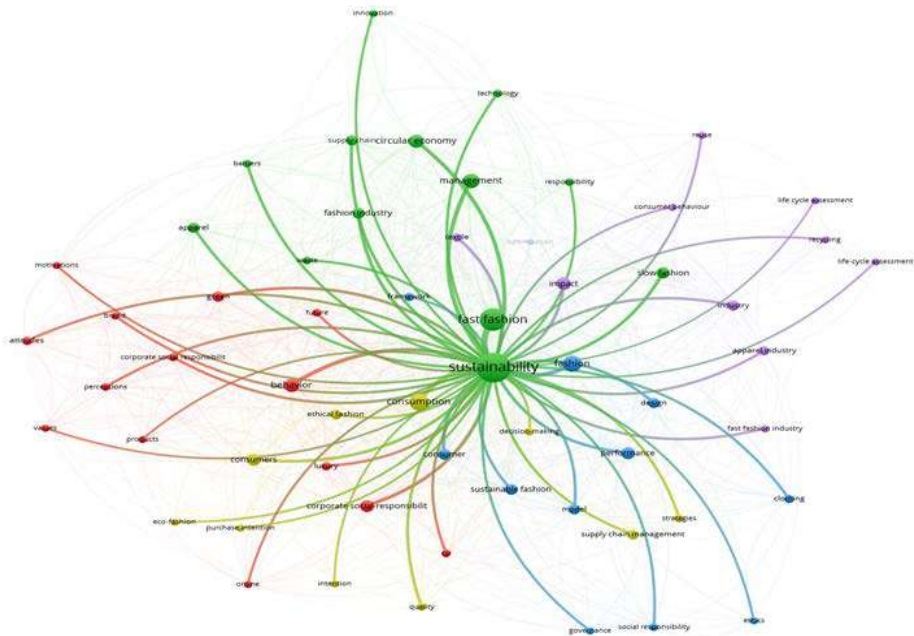
Figure 1 Sustainability attitude stages.
Source: Adapted from Robins and Greenwald (1994)

Figure 3. Sustainability attitude stages (McNeill & Moore ,2015, p.216)

As can be seen in the diagram, the first stage of attitude level in the fashion industry refers to the consumer with no awareness of environmental problems at any level or dimension. In contrast, stage 1 can acknowledge a sustainability problem but has no call for action or a genuine desire to change. The second stage refers to an individual who thinks they have no control over sustainability issues on an individual level; they blame the companies and focus on the short-term implications. The third stage refers to the desire of being a good citizen by understanding the impact of sustainability on communities and families. This refers to not being exclusively self-focused but caring about another human being and choosing sustainable purchases. The last stage, which is the desired one, refers to an individual with a clear set of beliefs regarding fashion sustainability issues, assuming his actions and comprehending his role in a potentially more sustainable future, and overall is skeptical towards the genuine concern of the government.

Theory of Consumer Behavior in the fashion industry

When mapping through the Web of Science database by using Vos viewer, sustainability in fast fashion, one of the main approached subjects are consumer, consumption, and behavior of consumers, therefore next, we will approach the Consumer Behaviour Theory and how sustainability can be a factor in this process.

Figure 4 – Web of science sustainability in fast fashion

Consumer behavior theory explores how consumers make purchase decisions. Sustainability should be a factor that contributes to this decision and a product attribute to be considered (Zhang et al., 2021). With the development of the modern era, shopping has become an activity done by both old and young to support the appearance, self-identity, and association of the customer with fashion (Sari & Asad, 2018).

One of the first purchases we make independently from a young age is represented by clothes purchase. Consumers spend part of their income buying certain products as they have different demands, wants, and needs. Although traditional economic consumer behavior does not consider the emotional aspect of purchasing, consumers nowadays tend to focus on this aspect. From a psychological point of view, the Maslow hierarchy categorizes our needs into three groups, physical needs (for food, clothing, safety, and warmth), social need (for affection and belonging), and individual needs (for self-expression and knowledge) (McLeod, 2007). Sustainability can be easily found in social needs such as love, affection, and belongingness cause being aware and ethical of our choices is proof of caring about society's future (Zhang et al., 2021). As Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan (2019) state, marketers cannot affect these needs, as they were not created by them and are a part of human nature. Because nowadays we have so many products, especially in the fast fashion industry, it translates into a selection and evaluation phase that can be found in the decision-making process. The main stages of the decision-making process are: (1) recognize or identify the problem, (2) collect information about alternative solutions, (3) evaluate the alternatives, (4) choose the best alternative, and (5) evaluate the decision (Rath, Bay, Gill, & Petrizzi, 2014, p.287).

Consumers usually purchase a product based on perceptions representing a process that occurs consciously or unconsciously when the individual is exposed to different

stimuli. In this process, the new information is interpreted individually. Therefore, two different people can have different perceptions of the same product, and once the perception is formed, it can be hard to change it (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015). In our context, sustainability will most likely affect product prices and, therefore, consumer preferences (Zhang et al., 2021). Although more and more customers are in stage 2 or 3 of the sustainability attitude model, therefore, aware of the environmental consequences, choosing eco-friendly clothes that are more expensive may be avoided because of the cost aspect. On the other hand, some customers may prefer natural, eco-friendly materials and durable materials (sustainable fashion) compared to fast fashion non-biodegradable materials that can translate into a lower price. *The geographic factor and culture may impact the research results, as the mentality of the Romanians plays a significant role in this matter, highlighting our research gap, as studies in Romania regarding this matter couldn't be found.*

One of the most exciting characteristics of fashion products is that they can improve the consumers' image and grant them recognition in their social environment. "These specificities also lead the shopper to search for information about the products before deciding to buy them" (Rath et al., 2014, p.47). Therefore, customers may value and research sustainability and socially responsible corporate implication of the brand before purchasing in the future.

Methodology

The research problem is that nowadays, too many clothes, either new or very little used, are being thrown away after very little wear time. Therefore, we will research if the consumers are more responsible from a sustainable point of view with their fashion purchases. Something that needs to be further addressed is if, after the pandemic, consumers tend to be more preoccupied with money and, therefore, not buying as many clothes anymore.

Our research objectives are: (1) identify at which attitude stage towards sustainability the Romanian respondents are according to McNeill & Moore's (2015) model (2) identify the perceived barriers regarding adopting sustainable purchase behavior; (3) identify the potential triggers/motivation to adopt a more sustainable behavior.

We developed a qualitative investigation. The measurement instrument was the focus group. The general directions for the focus group grid contain questions about general information regarding fashion purchase behavior, fashion purchase factors, what sustainability means for respondents, the awareness level of the customers, the main disadvantages when buying sustainable clothing, the barriers of being a more responsible consumer, whether the sustainability lays in the hands of consumer or brand and the potential triggers into adopting sustainability. The focus group was held in August 2022.

The research questions that we linked to our research direction were: (1) What is the level of sustainability achieved by the group respondents according to McNeill & Moore's (2015) model? (2) Which are the barriers of being a more responsible consumer from a sustainability perspective? (3) What is the potential trigger/motivation that would make our respondents and consumers, in general, adopt a more sustainable behavior in the future?

Table 1. Information about respondents and consumers

Respondents	Genre	Age	Profession	Sector
R1	Female	42	Recruitment Specialist	Fashion Industry
R2	Female	45	Trainer	Fashion Industry
R3	Female	32	Recruitment Specialist	Fashion Industry
R4	Male	63	NaturalResources Director	Packaging sustainability
R5	Male	25	IT Manager	IT
R6	Female	60	Sustainability Director	Packaging sustainability
R7	Female	25	Recruitment Specialist	Fashion Industry
R8	Female	34	Project Manager	Fashion Industry

We held a focus group of 8 people approaching the three research directions. The first direction was to identify the attitude level achieved by the Romanian respondents. The second and third direction was to identify the perceived barriers to adopting sustainable purchase behavior and the potential triggers/motivation to adopt a more sustainable behavior. Our respondents were questioned as consumers of different ages and professions although the majority were working either in the fast fashion industry or sustainability. Five respondents were working in HR, 2 were Sustainability directors from the packaging industry, and one was from the IT sector. All respondents had medium to high incomes from urban areas.

Results and discussions

For our first direction regarding the sustainability attitude stage identification, according to McNeill & Moore (2015), we noticed that 5 out of 8 respondents were not even aware of the sustainability problems that the fast fashion industry was raising, and they needed concrete examples from other respondents. Therefore, they were placed between stage 1 to stage 2 on the sustainable Attitudinal Model. R3 mentioned: "I thought that the stores are already very sustainable. I have seen a lot of sustainability campaigns and sustainable products," which is an alarming sign as other respondents agreed on the campaigns and marketing communications, which have misled half of the respondents on believing that the fashion industry is indeed green. Although 3 respondents (R3, R7, and R8) mentioned a Fashion Days campaign where you could bring used clothes, they also said that it was not promoted enough and that they did not bring clothes to be recycled. They were also more focused on short-term impacts and did not believe that they, as consumers play an active or essential role. Another study linked to ecological packaging in Romania showed that 65% admitted that they didn't have enough information about ecological packaging and questioned the entity that should inform and educate consumers (Orzan et al, 2018).

The other 3 respondents (R4, R6, and R2) were very aware of the environmental issues that the fashion industry raises, but they were working in the sustainability industry or

as a trainer in the fashion industry, and they were actively taking responsibility for environmental protection, therefore, they were placed between stages 3-4. Since we had 2 respondents that happened to work in the natural resources area and 1 trainer for the fashion industry, we obtained great insights and value with specific examples,

The second direction that we approached was the perceived Barriers regarding Sustainable Development. In a study where both perspectives of environmentalists and fashionists were debated, the main barriers against the popularization of sustainable fashion were limited knowledge about the issues from the fashion consumers, limited supply sources for sustainable fashion, economic issues (referring to sustainable products prices being higher than the usual products) and products design being not as appealing (Moon et al, 2015). Therefore, designers may find good opportunities to develop better designs and even specialize in green design. Also, in Romania, there is a problem with finding sustainable products in stores, as there is a small number of outlets/second-hand and not many possibilities. But probably, the most significant barrier in Romania from a consumer perspective is the price difference. Research showed that younger Romanian consumers prefer fast-fashion brands because of the low prices, which is the main factor when purchasing products (Nistor, 2019).

Our respondents mentioned the following facts: high prices are the main factor against Romania's sustainable development and the uncertainty of the legal environment. The industry should have legally introduced sustainable targets as other industries already have. They also discussed the Romanian mentality and that they tend to shop very frequently and keep changing their clothes based on trends and not a necessity, especially the medium and high-income consumers. Redirecting the shop's alcoholism into something more sustainable as a sport that would lead to fewer purchases also represents a barrier to reaching sustainability. Therefore, the respondents concluded that the fashion industry does not necessarily have an impact, but more fashion trends leading the market. Not following fashion trends was another barrier to achieving more sustainable behavior. R4 mentioned, "Trends are leading the fashion industry and are short-term concepts, while sustainability is linked with long-term objectives. Fashion items do not expire, and they can be used in the long term, as long as they are not damaged, and this is a call that should come from companies. Every time the tendency is to buy something new, and even if we recycle the object, the quality will be lower."

In the third and last direction, correlated to the potential triggers/motivation to adopt a more sustainable behavior, respondents mentioned awareness campaigns, companies promoting the option to keep an item longer, and sustainable education for the younger generation. R2 mentioned that "those methods have no impact and that there should be legal sanctions for the fashion brands that do not respect these rules, and that the prices should be more affordable or alternative options to be found like sales, vouchers, etc". Another motivation would be that fashion companies should explicitly announce that the fashion items do not expire and can be used long-term.

Other interesting aspects that may require further studies are that R1, R2, R3, R6, R7, and R8 bought fashion items at least once a week. The majority agreed that they prefer offline shopping because they can feel the material, and only two respondents preferred online shopping because it is faster. R4 and R5 were the only respondents buying fashion items only when they needed new items. They were the only male respondents; therefore, gender may significantly impact the shopping frequency.

Almost all respondents mentioned the price as the main factor when purchasing fashion items, the quality, and the material. Only one respondent, R4, mentioned the necessity of the fashion item as the primary purchase factor. No response mentioned sustainability as the main purchase factor. Two respondents (R5 and R2) thought that sustainable fashion items have better quality and are more expensive, and they were aware of some sustainable fashion brands. R6 thought quality is lower for sustainable materials and the industry's road towards sustainability is just beginning. The rest of the respondents have not tried products from sustainable fibers/materials or are unaware. They should start investing more towards reaching sustainability, and sometimes it is only declarative, as a marketing campaign.

Some of the recurrent themes that were observed are the fact that the consumers lack awareness regarding sustainability in fashion and the need for education, the limited recycling options and limited sustainable purchase stores like outlets and second hands in Bucharest, the fact that any big brand that sells sustainable items is more expensive, and the idea that they as consumers indeed buy way too many clothes and are not buying according to their necessities anymore but trends, without being even aware of the consequences.

Table 2. Main Themes and Research Directions

Directions	The Sustainability Attitude stage of the Romanian respondents	Perceived Barriers regarding Sustainable Development	Potential triggers/motivation to adopt a more sustainable behavior.
Main Themes of discussion	-lack of awareness regarding sustainability issues in the fast fashion industry from consumers and specialists -marketing sustainability communications	- price importance - legal regulations - sustainable targets -shop alcoholism -Romanian culture and mentality - fashion trends -necessities and possibilities -limited recycling options	- more education - legal sanctions -shopping education -fashion companies responsibility vs consumer responsibility and role

Conclusions

On average, fast-fashion stores like Zara, H&M, and Nike are introducing new clothing designs in stores every three to five weeks (Hu et al, 2014). This does not only translate into a huge negative environmental impact, but also a social impact. While on a social level, we are talking about long working hours, low wages, and child labor in less developed countries, from an environmental perspective, we are looking at chemical pollution, textile waste, CO2 emissions, energy, and water use (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Authors are already talking about changing the consumer's awareness level linked to sustainable and eco-friendly fashion products as a step toward a circular economy transition in the fashion industry (Mishra et al, 2020). Nevertheless, sustainability is still not a priority for consumers in Romania when purchasing fashion items, and about half of them are unaware of the sustainability issues. As for further studies, the research can be extended to a comparative study between more countries.

Sadly, during our study, we also noticed that the consumers not working in the sustainability area had little to no environmental education. However, some of them were working in the fashion industry, and surprisingly had little to no idea about the environmental, social, and economic impact that this industry still has. Marketing communication has created this illusion that many sustainability measurements exist, and the lack of education is due to living in a developing country where the price is a big differentiator factor. Still, sustainability is not a choice or priority for them as the prices overall have increased. As for the barriers, the main ones noticed were the tendency to shop very frequently, prices, fashion trends, and legal regulations. The main drivers toward a more sustainable behavior were more education, transparency of the subject from fashion companies, self-control when shopping, legal regulations, and ways to redirect shop alcoholism to more benefic outcomes.

One of the main limitations is that qualitative studies and researchers" are often accused of reading into text, things that are not there, or are not being specific enough, making interpretations and having subjective opinions, etc" (Berger, 2018, p.28) or not choosing a representative group, therefore, a quantitative study may be further developed. In the future, it would be interesting to study the income groups other than the average, the urban vs rural area, and the differences between genders. As R4 stated: ''There are more categories of consumers in Romania, we are talking about the poor people from rural areas that mainly buy second-hand products to reutilize them, then the medium income category, which does not buy by the trend but by necessity, and the high-income people that don't usually care about sustainability". Therefore, the study should be extended to these categories. We also saw a big difference between the frequency of purchases in men and women.

In conclusion, the managerial implications for countering the effect of fast fashion regarding sustainability are linked more to consumer education (Long & Nasiry, 2022), legal measurements, potential promotions, price reductions, and more awareness and communication from brands regarding these issues. Developing consumer education should not necessarily be focused on consuming less, but rather on changing the consumption patterns towards reducing waste and shifting the perspective from quantity to the quality of the item (Jung & Jin, 2016) by all means.

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