

Smart consumption behavior? An approach related to fast fashion industry

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Abstract

Objectives: Given that the growing phenomenon of fast fashion has become an integral part of the daily life of individuals, it is imperative to analyze this industry from a consumer's point of view. This article points out the industry's ability to shape consumer behavior, raising several questions about the moral grounds practiced within the community while emphasizing the competitiveness that retailers have managed to create among buyers, which currently has a significant impact on individuals and ecosystems.

Prior work: Considering the lack of studies in relation with creative industries in Romania, our research, based on the concept of behavioral economics, investigates the irrational conduct of the consumer by breaking down the underlying decisions behind it.

Approach: To conduct the analysis, qualitative research methods were used by applying a survey for 88 respondents located in Romania to observe the consumers' perception on how fast fashion impacts the environment and local businesses. The decision to follow this methodology is based on a differentiated approach, in which the scope is rather an exploratory one.

Results: Regarding the results, a profile of the Romanian fast fashion consumer was outlined, based on which one can observe the awareness degree of the industry's negative externalities, consumption habits as well as the desire to be part of a smart society.

Implications: This research can be considered useful by companies operating in the field, as it can serve as market research.

Value: By exploring one of the main attributes of fast fashion industry success, namely its ability to be a part of the daily life of consumers and simultaneously shape it, this paper aims to fill in the gaps in the literature given that the presence of empirical data on the profile of the Romanian fast fashion consumer is limited.

Keywords: behavioral economics, smart decisions, creative industries.

1. Introduction

Fashion may be catalogued as one of the most complicated concepts related to social behavior as consumers actively choose to buy fashion items for what they mean rather than for their practical utility [1]. Fast fashion is currently a social and cultural phenomenon with a significant impact on the economy and the environment, succeeding in shaping consumers' behaviors and the way they think through the specific business model [2]. The fast fashion industry focuses on the rapid production of large volumes of clothing and more. Within it, all the processes related to the textile industry, from the creation of a design to their production and marketing stages are conducted in a much shorter time to allow the launch of 52 micro-collections per year instead of the 4 classic collections [3]. The fast fashion industry is based on replicating the trends promoted by the big fashion houses by creating garments from inferior quality materials.

It is a movement that has significantly increased consumerism and has negative effects on the environment, garment employees and, ultimately, on consumer wallets. Currently the fast fashion industry seems to be portrayed as exactly the opposite of what some authors would define as a circular economy because it does not maximize the service that its material flows offer and does not limit these flows to what nature can withstand [4]. Others defined fast fashion as a business model based on “giving buyers frequent novelty in the form of low priced, trend led products” [5]. Following the trend of retailers like Inditex, starting from the 1990, more and more companies decided to outsource production to low-income countries from Asia and later, Eastern Europe, thus enabling the fast fashion model. This has led to a geographical separation through subcontractors, thus alienating the social and environmental cost from buyers. In addition to this aspect, fast fashion determined the total fiber production to double in less than 20 years, meaning that on a per capita basis, the figure rose with 47% from 2000 to 2015 [6].

Globally, clothing consumption increased from 74.3 billion items of clothing and footwear in 2005 to 130.6 billion items purchased in 2019 [7]. This means that every person on the planet bought on average, 15 clothes and 2 pairs of shoes annually, although consumption patterns vary between countries. With such a rate of increase in consumption, considering the increase in living standards in emerging economies and the birth rate globally we can expect a tripling of textile and footwear production by 2050 [8]. It is estimated that every year an American throw away about 38 [9] kilograms of clothes while at European level 26 kilograms of textiles are used and about 11 are thrown away [10]. Less than 30% of what we wear is donated worldwide, although at every corner, in almost any country we can find thrift stores. By 2030, it is estimated that we will dispose of 134 million tons of textiles annually and only 12% of the clothing used will be recycled.

1.1. How much more the environment can take?

Fast fashion is seen by some authors [11] as a global environmental justice issue. In terms of ecosystems, the fast fashion industry destroys wildlife and threatens endangered species, using 115 million animals annually. One of the

underlying issues is how these clothes are produced. The current system uses huge volumes of non-renewable resources, including oil and once discarded, the clothes end up being burned or lying in landfills. It is a system that puts pressure on the earth's natural resources, contaminates water and degrades ecosystems.

Globally, the garment industry is responsible for 10% of greenhouse gas emissions, with estimates showing that textile production releases 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere annually. The amount of water used in the production process is responsible for 20% of global wastewater. For example, to make a pair of jeans you need at least one kilogram of cotton that needs about 7,500-10,000 liters of water, which is the amount of drinking water for a person for 10 years. Although there are currently ways to significantly reduce the amount of water used in cotton processing, polymeric synthetic polyester is the most widely used fabric in the industry, with 65% of clothing used globally based on polymers. To produce polyester fibers, 70 million barrels of oil are needed, a material that is easy to clean, cheap and most importantly for consumers, durable. However, it should be noted that a T-shirt or polyester fiber shirt has a double carbon footprint compared to a cotton one, producing the equivalent of 5.5 kg of carbon compared to 2.1 kg for a cotton shirt. Every time someone washes a garment made of synthetic fibers, especially polyester, up to 700,000 microfibers can be released that contain micro-plastic particles that are too small to be trapped by the conventional water treatment system and end up in rivers, lakes, and oceans. As a result, the textile industry is currently the largest source of microplastic pollution, with such particles being detected even in the deepest areas of the oceans [12]. It is an alarming problem, but only 20% of brands make public the actions taken by the company to minimize the problem.

1.2. My brand, my religion

Although the literature has not yet addressed the dilemma, there are current issues within our society related to the idolatry of some brands, where shopping goes beyond the status of hobby and is perceived rather as a religion, just as one of our respondents very well captured this aspect by saying "Some believe in a brand as in a religion." If 20-30 years ago, the malls were not open on Sundays, this being considered a day spent with the family, or at church, where I could reflect or meditate, this is no longer valid. Some even believe that it is time to modernize and redefine what we mean by religion, which is also perceived as a subcategory of human activities [13]. Smith, however, believes that every activity, if performed in a ritualistic way, either at the community or individualist level, can be considered a religion [14]. Brand idolization is marginally approached by academics, but recent literature points out that brands have shifted almost imperceptibly, focusing on existing customers rather than attracting a new wave [15]. Thus, the consumer attitude varied from commitment and loyalty in the early stages to deeper connection with the brand such as attachment, love [16] and the most powerful yet toxic one – addiction [17]. Fast fashion consumers immediately want the items, so companies are forced to put pressure on the delivery time specific to the supply

chain. Because of the demand for fast supply, the resulting product is poor in quality. The life of clothes produced in fast fashion is measured in the number of washes they withstand; the average being located somewhere at 10 wash cycles. Now the quality of some fast fashion stores is so poor that we can talk about disposable clothes, which will not withstand more than 2-3 washes without degrading, but which still has a high chance of being sold because the consumer will choose the store that offers the fastest product at the lowest price. By simply replicating fashion trends, fast fashion giants can create new styles on a weekly, if not daily basis, generating massive amounts of different clothes and designs, thus ensuring that people will always return to buy more. It is observed that accelerating the process of developing a product and launching it on the market in a shorter time increases the consumer's responsiveness, which translates into higher profit margins for retailers. This decreases the consumer's inclination to anticipate and expect future discounts, a behavior that stimulates the customer to buy instantly. The immediate response of the consumer to purchase as soon as a micro-collection appears decreases the need to use discounts to get rid of stocks for retailers, while the pleasant design of the clothes further increases the usefulness of buying the product at a full price [18].

The strategy associated with the fast fashion industry, which requires a rapid rotation of stocks by implementing a short manufacturing cycle and a limited supply has induced the perception of rarity in the eyes of consumers. Moreover, some studies suggest that the social overcrowding in stores, as well as the way clothes are arranged in the store can induce a competitive spirit among customers, while an apparent "disorder" in the store could lead consumers to believe that there are promotions, unconsciously inducing the element of rarity to individuals [19]. It has been shown that this competitiveness leads to impulsiveness in purchasing, as well as strong desires for possession that arise from the psychological need of the consumer to regain his freedom to make a choice [20]. This competition and the need to hide products in the store during a shopping session can be explained by reactance theory, which talks about an individual's reaction to the apparent loss of freedom. Therefore, it explains that when an individual's freedom is threatened or denied, one will experience a psychological reaction, a motivational state aimed at protecting a person's behavioral freedom, a motivation that increases the attractiveness of the denied behavior. The seemingly limited availability of a product can trigger such a reaction from consumers, leading them to buy or reserve items they may not really want.

Even though the consumer is the central piece of the fashion industry, the literature remained relatively limited in analyzing the buyers' perspectives on fast fashion retailers [21,22,23].

2. Results

Participant characteristics

The questionnaire was completed by 88 respondents. Most participants were women (85.2%), 13.6% identified themselves as males while 1.1% preferred not to disclose their gender. 62.5% were between the ages of 16 and 24, while 27.3% had

an age between 25 and 40. Giving that a vast majority of the respondents are still in their twenties, 40.9%, respectively 37.5% had a bachelor and master's degrees, with only 4.5% of the respondents being graduates of postgraduate studies. Looking at the amount of money the respondents are willing to spend on fashion items per year, the results are well balanced, 26.1% spending between 600 and 900 RON, followed by 19.3% of the respondents that choose to spend between 900 and 1201 RON, respectively above 1500 RON.

As we can see from the chart below, a majority of 68.2% have heard at least about the concept of fast fashion, although almost 24% do not know exactly what it means. Unfortunately, those 24% do not differ from those over 30% who have never heard of fast fashion, as the tragic impact of this industry remains foreign to them. So, we see that less than half of those interviewed are aware of the negative effects of the fast fashion industry on the economy and the environment, but we must keep in mind that this does not mean that they would like to take concrete steps to change the current situation in the garment industry.

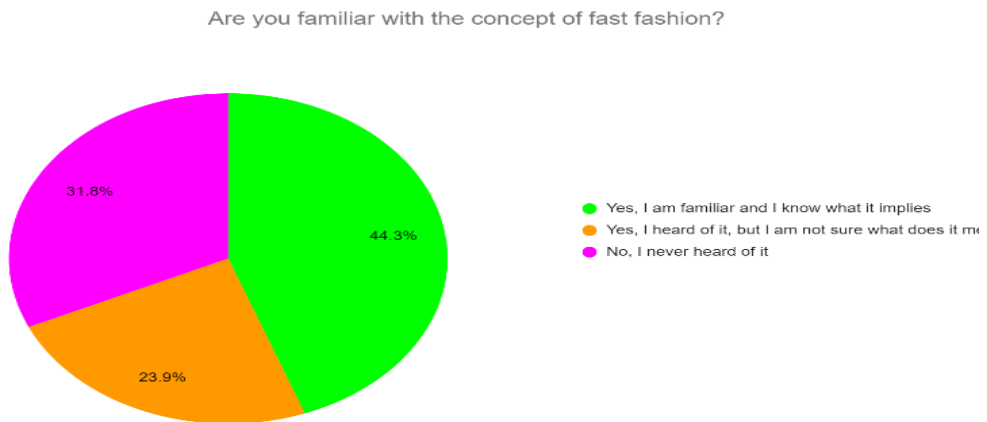


Fig 1. Are you familiar with the concept of fast fashion?

Over 50% of those interviewed declared they buy clothes several times a year, but a solid 25% purchase their clothes every month and over 10% even a few times a month. Although the figures do not seem worrying, the questionnaire was applied to a small number of people, but the global data looks different. Scaling the problem worldwide, the fashion industry makes 80 billion items annually, which means that every man on the planet could own 10 items of clothing, thus producing 400% more than 20 years ago. If we refer only to clothing, the world retail market amounts to 1.34 trillion dollars per year, but if we include footwear and jewelry, it amounts to two trillion. Out of 88 people, 60 said they bought clothes they had never worn. The justification for this behavior calls into question the motivations and behaviors of consumers who denote that clothing is often bought based on a fantasy that individuals have about themselves, buying things for a projection of their own person they aspire to, imagining more what they will be in the future rather than

what they are now. It has been shown that there is no physiological or psychological limit to the amount of clothing that people are willing to buy.

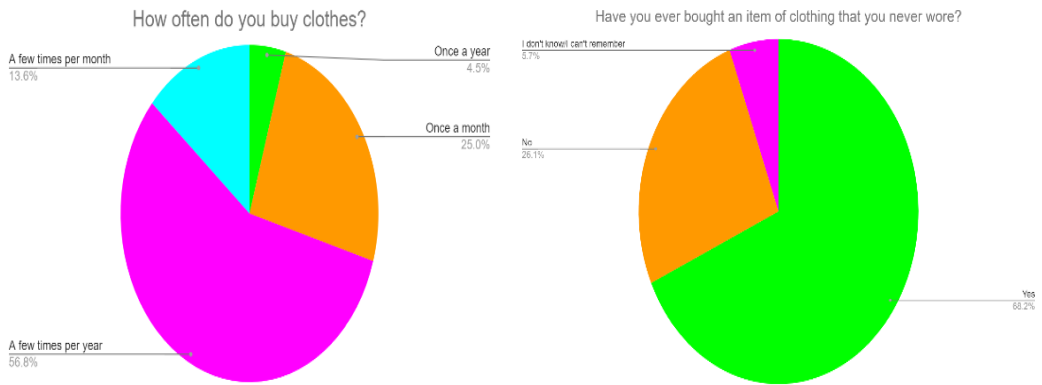


Fig. 2. a. How often do you buy new clothes? b. Have you ever bought an item of clothing that you never wore

For consumers, the quality and durability of materials is the most important thing, as can be seen from the chart below. Today's consumer wants quality items that are made without harming animals, that are not harmful to the environment and that do not use toxic substances. The fashion industry offers the exact opposite. We see that 68 people chose the strength of clothing as a basic criterion, followed by the absence of harmful chemicals in fabrics. 43 people were motivated by a low price and only 10 respondents prefer locally made products. 40 and 36 individuals, respectively, showed interest in animal and environmental safety, while only 25 were interested in worker safety when purchasing clothing. Surprisingly, only 9 people choose clothes that correspond to social media trends.

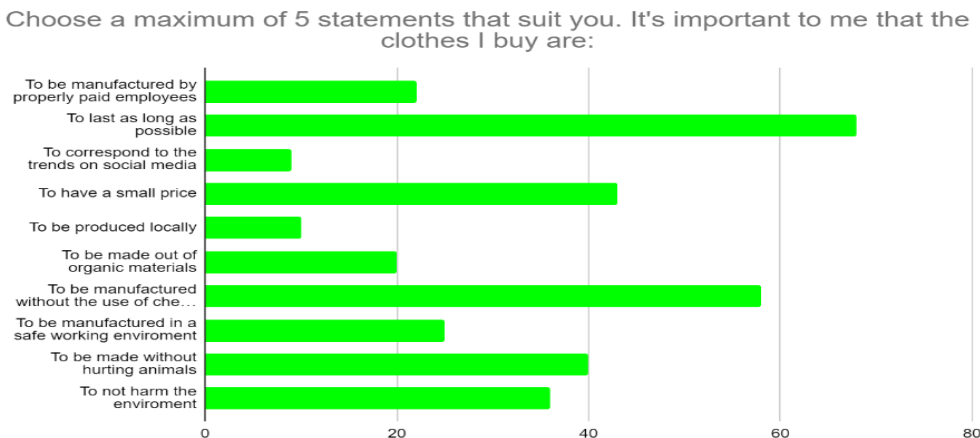


Fig. 3. It is important to me that the clothes I buy are.

2.1. An uneducated consumer is not a smart consumer

Once again, we see from the chart below that price remains the most important criteria in choosing stores, and the style that the brand promotes ends up taking precedence over quality, in the context in which stores that produce clothes for certain generations are above quality. superior offered. Another paradox that must be emphasized is the dwindling number of people aware that they frequent certain stores because they reproduce clothing items of the big fashion houses. The concept of the Zara store, for example, based its production for an exceedingly long time on copying the great fashion designers and on anticipating the style they were going to promote. Even today, they continue to be followers and not trendsetters, but we tend to believe that the younger generation, which includes the second half of Millennials and the entire Gen Z, misses this aspect. The familiarization of the Z generation with social media platforms from a noticeably early age has created a completely different environment that changes their perception as a consumer, changing the paradigms regarding consumerism. It is a subtle manipulation of large retailers, which offer illusions and feed on the human need to achieve a social status.

Strictly related to the Romanian market, 8 people consider that there are no Romanian products on the market and 6 people believe that local brands are more expensive. Both answers are true. The Romanian clothing market is still mainly based on exports, and most Romanian clothes that remain in the country are affiliated with fashion designers, larger or smaller, but which automatically sets a price well above the market bench.



Fig 4. Why do you shop from fast fashion stores most often?

Only 3 out of 88 people identify perfectly with the statement "You feel compelled by society to dress a certain way," even though previously they declared they did not feel forced by their friends to frequent certain stores. Although the answer options were integrated into different questions and formulated in different

forms, the message remained the same, namely whether individuals feel constrained by society and indirectly by their friends to dress in a certain way. Friends create the society we belong to, as evidenced by the very definition of society “Group of people who spend some time together; companionship, company.” The reality is that society is represented by each of us, and the circle of friends who force each other to take certain actions, as was the case, is part of the society we blame and accuse of lack of responsibility and cruelty to the environment.

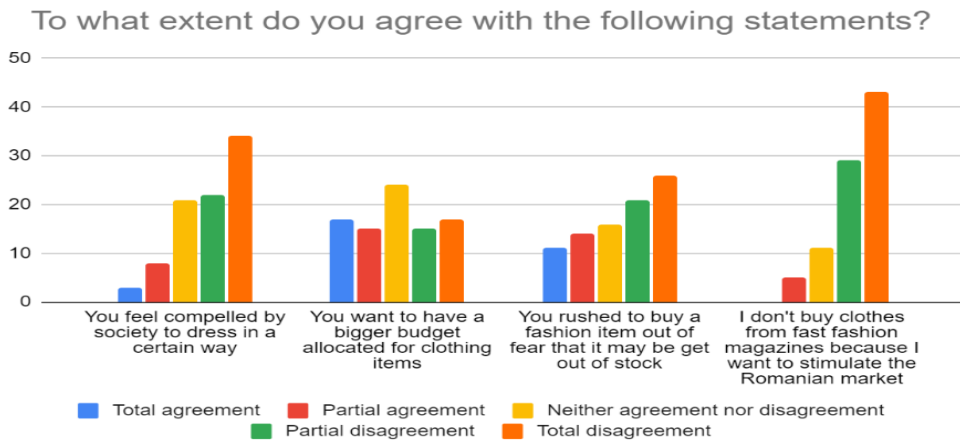


Fig. 5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Asked if they would like a bigger budget for shopping, 17 people completely agreed to this statement, while another 17 completely disagreed, most giving a balanced answer. Now there is a conflict between people who choose to buy less and buy better, and people who continue to take advantage of the low prices of fast fashion retailers, which balances the dynamics of the results. What is certain is that we are already consuming more than we should. The answers show that Romanians are more temperate when it comes to shopping for clothes, as only 11 people admit that they hurried to buy an item of clothing, just out of fear of running out of stock, while 26 people did not identified at all with this statement. Instead, no one completely identified with the statement "I do not buy clothing from fast fashion stores because I want to stimulate the textile industry in Romania", 43 people being in total disagreement, and another 29 in a partial one. This, as we have seen before, we can motivate by the absence of textile factories in the country. The Romanian textile industry has lost 150,000 jobs from 2008 till now and remains heavily dependent on exports. If we do not consider undeclared work, 175,000 tailors and shoemakers officially work in Romania, making clothes and slippers for Zara, H&M, Moncler or Buerberry. It is an industry that produces approximately 2% of GDP and houses 4% of Romanian employees.

38 people agreed partially about the statement "I would like to know how my clothes were made", while the rest of the statements on environmental policies and

the improvement of diversity were fully embraced by the respondents. A behavior like this minimizes the possibility of brands to greenwash their customers, a real malpractice of fast fashion companies in the face of the environment that invokes the climate crisis as a means of marketing, but without pursuing a fundamental change in its business model. Therefore, one can observe that a more informed customer will have more power over brands; as Amancio Ortega, the founder of ZARA, once declared, the customer has always been the one to dictate the business model, so the initiative must belong to consumers and force brands to become sustainable. However, there is also another issue here represented by the current gap in legislation and terminology as sustainability is not defined in clear, quantifiable parameters, and notions of ethics and ecology are powerless in the courts when it comes to the garment industry, which encourages a lack of commitment. Another hurdle is the lack of empirical data, which in turn leads to a lack of public education and an insufficient level of awareness of industry practices, allowing brands to increase their sales on false information.

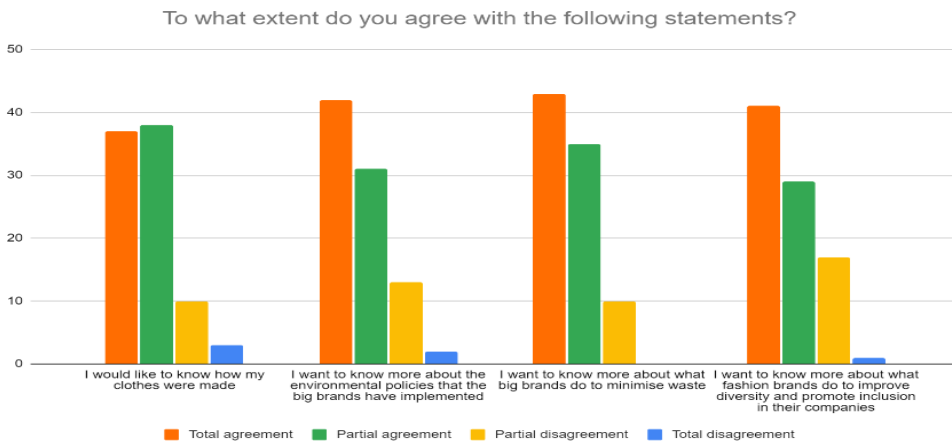


Fig. 6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Analyzing our results, the impact that the fast fashion industry has on consumers is not perfectly clear to them as 33% declared that there is some impact, while 30% consider that they do not think they are affected, and 13.6% simply do not know. In such scenarios we feel it is imperative to mention that fast fashion implies a crippling degree of consumer involvement, as they do not have a strong motivation to process the information provided or to understand the advertisements. For retailers, however, this disinterest can be a disadvantage because greater efforts must be made to build the product, and the chances of launching products fail on the market increase. Asked to give concrete examples of how they feel the negative impact of the industry, 30 people admitted that they feel compelled to spend more money than they can afford on clothing, while another 17 do not feel "fashionable" if not he dresses from certain stores. Hence the stigma, one of the current issues of the young generation, from which derives another

underlying problem, bullying. When a young person does not allow himself to follow the trends of social media and those of their friends, he will be marginalized and later excluded from the community. Indirectly, the fast fashion industry changes the behavior of consumers, urging them to judge and accept people not for their value, but for the way they look. Even one of the respondents stated that *"most of the fast fashion clothes are for people with a certain body that I don't even fit in, so in fact very rarely are fast fashion products accessible to me"*, while another person stated that she is concerned about the quality of the products and how much they are treated with chemicals.

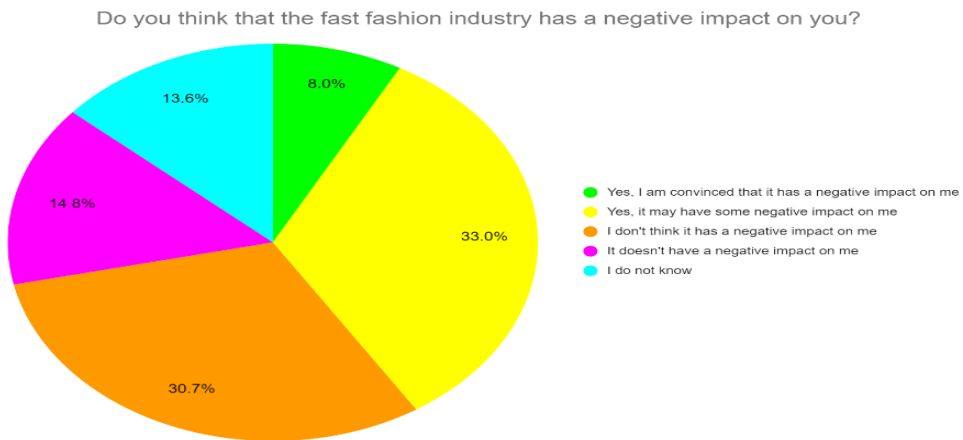


Fig 7. Do you think that the fast fashion industry has a negative impact on you?

Although 34% believe that the fast fashion industry has contributed to reducing unemployment in Romania, 22.7% have failed to notice any improvement from this industry. However, the only positive aspect are the jobs created by opening numerous branches of large retailers throughout the country. It is a temporary benefit that does not support the Romanian economy in the long run. Characterized by a cheap and experienced workforce in the field, the Romanian clothing market remains the largest exporter of clothing in Central and Eastern Europe, being easily integrated into the supply chains of Western European companies, particularly for Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and Belgium [24]. Although Romanians pay hundreds and even thousands of lei for foreign brands such as Asos, Benetton, Dolce Gabbana, Esprit, Hugo Boss, Levi Strauss, Marks & Spencer, and Armani, they are made in Romanian factories.

The biggest problem regards wages, which, although illegal, are often below the minimum wage in the economy. Many workers say they must borrow from banks or other creditors at high interest rates to cover their living costs, such as heating their homes in the winter or paying for their medical treatment. The sad alternative to this situation is subsistence farming on which the families of these workers or working abroad are based. In a report by The Clean Clothes Campaign, almost all Romanians interviewed stated that they had at least one member who

went abroad to work in construction or agriculture, with labor migration being a direct consequence of poverty. In addition to a meager salary of up to 230 euros net, garment workers have complained that they are constantly verbally and physically abused, but do not have the courage to speak out or be photographed for fear of being fired. Even though the minimum wage in the economy has continued to rise, the difference has not been felt by workers, who often work at least 15 overtime hours a week who remain unpaid just to reach the working quota, which increases exponentially more than each once the minimum wage in the economy increases. According to the ILO, those who work overtime to complete the workload assigned by their superiors fall into the category of forced laborers, which includes over 50% of Romanian garment factories that produce for export.

We believe that it is imperative to invest more in the development and consolidation of a horizontal industry, which would support the garment industry, as in Romania the presence of a textile industry is in serious need of improvement. Without government intervention, things cannot improve, given the cost of building a weaving mill amounts to around 50 million euros, while a spinning mill costs about 15 million euros. These investments would help the Romanian garment industry to reach its potential, while solving the problem of competitiveness.

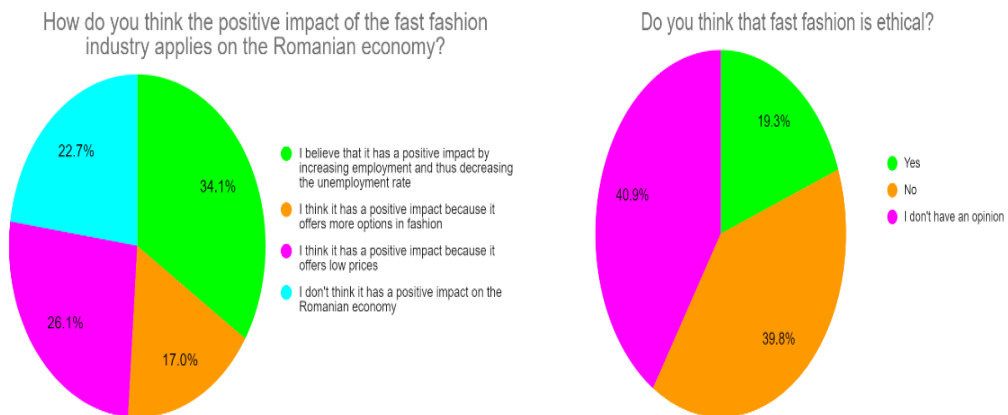


Fig. 8. a. How do you think the positive impact of the fast fashion industry applies on the Romanian economy? b. Do you think that fast fashion is ethical?

Taking into consideration everything we exemplified above, it comes as a surprise to see that 40% of respondents do not have an opinion about the level of ethics in the fast fashion industry. Equally shocking is the affirmative response of 19.3% people who believe that fast fashion is ethical. Once again, one can see one of the defining features of the fast fashion consumer, namely the lack of interest in the well-being of those involved in the production process, but also in the preservation of natural resources. In this context perhaps it is time to redefine our main question and ask not if fast fashion has the means to be reshaped but whether for how much longer its customer base can neglect the industry's negative effects.

3. Conclusion

To first address the limitations of this research, we must acknowledge that this was only a pilot study that can be extended to all the regions in Romania and afterwards applied on a regional level, in other East European countries, such as Poland and Slovakia, two countries that chose different roads when it comes to fast fashion, the latter aiming for a more sustainable and smart approach. As we mentioned in the beginning of our research, the paper had an exploratory approach, with a more general aim – that of creating a complete profile of the Romanian fast fashion consumer - and thus being differentiated from the existing literature.

Given the small sample taking into analysis we sadly conclude that the fast fashion consumer does not seem to be aware of the impact that the industry has on workers, the environment and upon themselves. Unfortunately, these clothes remain in the top preferences due to the low price and the appearance of superior qualities that Romanians attribute to these clothes. We can therefore see that their expectations for the quality of the materials worn is low, easily satisfied by fast fashion retailers. However, they also paradoxically believe that change must come from consumers and only after from companies, which they believe should be held accountable to anyone involved in the production chain. Most respondents would like to know information about the environmental policies applied by companies, respectively the policies that favor inclusion and diversity, but less than 5% are willing to buy items only from such stores. Moreover, over 45% said that although they do not believe that the fast fashion industry should exist, they will continue to buy this type of clothing. After analyzing the answers, the reality of a developing country with a minimum net wage of only 458 EUR is sad, as almost half of those surveyed admitted that they feel compelled to spend more money than they can afford on clothing, while another 17 do not feel "fashionable" if they do not dress from certain stores. In Romania, the problem of stigma and bullying has become a rising phenomenon, which continues to grow, present in Romanian society only marginally, through isolated cases, before the entry of these brands on the market. We can say that one of the factors that fuels this problem, which leaves the individual with mental and even physical traumas is the fast fashion industry itself, which cancels you out as part of society when you fail or cannot keep up with the current trend. Another problem is the variety of sizes, which in the Eastern European market is not as well covered as in Western Europe or America. This, as one of the respondents stated, excludes people with a certain body type from the social environment, thus inducing the idea that they are on a lower level only because they have a certain number of kilograms. Although brands such as H&M have begun to offer Plus Size collections, they are only available online, indirectly conveying the idea that such people have nothing to look for physically in their stores.

We cannot find a culprit who can take all the blame. The problem is one on a global scale and each party involved tends to highlight system defects as a whole instead of fixing the area they control. Consumers complain that there are no more convenient options. Brands claim that if consumers were willing to pay more, they would have the resources to manufacture more ethical products and implement a

stronger ethical policy. The owners of the factories, in turn, claim that if the brands were willing to pay better, they would allow safer working conditions for employees. It is a concentric system that can rotate in this rhythm indefinitely if we do not assume our own involvement, no matter how defective the circle we belong to is. Society needs to understand that we can be part of the solution to a problem for which we are not responsible.

Where the consumer's desire for change is not even vaguely present, the scenario remains ambiguous, as it is not clear how we can teach consumers to change their consumption patterns for the good of society and not for their own comfort. Given that many consumers loyal to the fast fashion industry have begun to recycle, save and control water waste, we hope that there is a high probability that a new type of consumer will emerge in the near future to consider more than their own needs that can be met in the short term.

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