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## FAST FASHION VS. VINTAGE FASHION – AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF ROMANIAN YOUTH SUSTAINABILITY PERCEPTIONS

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to explore young people's perception about sustainability in the Romanian fashion market, as well as to understand their opinions about various aspects of sustainability in this field. The fashion industry is valued at \$3 trillion and employs millions of people worldwide but it is ranked the second-largest polluter globally, next to the oil industry (Teibel, 2018). Ensuring sustainability for the fashion industry by reducing waste generated by fast fashion and implementing circular economy models has currently become an urgent requirement.

**Key words:** *fashion industry, fast fashion, vintage fashion, sustainability.*

**JEL code:** *E2, O1, L6*

### INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is a business model in the clothing industry based on mass-marketing, focused on the latest trends, and seeking production efficiency to allow for low prices. Garments are often made from cheap materials, don't last long, become quickly obsolete in terms of style (short life cycles), are used for a short time and then discarded. The drive to cut costs often results in unsafe working conditions and low wages for workers in manufacturing countries, predominantly from Asia. The discarded clothing items end up in poor countries, often in Africa, where they generate environmental degradation.

In contrast to fast fashion, slow fashion relies on an ethical and sustainable approach to clothing design, manufacturing, marketing, consumption and recycling. The Slow Design Manifesto, launched in Milan in 2006, posits three pillars for this new consumption paradigm (Clark 2008):

- a) local design and production, promoting a variety of new business models, that follow ecological, social and cultural sustainability imperatives, including second hand/vintage/thrift stores or rental stores.
- b) transparent products, often manually crafted by local artisans, that allow for direct interaction between customers and producers, allowing the customer to become a co-author of a unique piece of clothing, imbued with personal meaning
- c) The production of sustainable and sensorial items of clothing, seen as an investment and not as a disposable commodity. The pieces become a part of the extended self of the individual and an experience in the life of those who use them. They are versatile, in the sense that they can be used in multiple kinds of occasions and paired up with a variety of shoes and clothes that the consumer might own or rent. Buying such a product requires careful planning, in contrast with the impulsive purchases of fast fashion.

One particular aspect of slow fashion is the preference for reusing previously owned items, manifested in second hand shopping. People motivation for second hand clothing shopping might range from frugality (the degree to which consumers are restrained in acquiring and resourcefully using goods and services, per Lastovichia 2006), to sustainability. In this broader category, vintage fashion refers to clothing that was made in the past (typically in the last 100 years), and it reflects the style and trends of a specific past period. Among consumers, wearing vintage clothing reflects a sense of sartorial sophistication, characterized by knowledge and appreciation of past fashion trends, as

well as nostalgia for a specific period in the past. If a garment is made new but in an old style, it is referred to as “retro”. Since it is based on reusing an old, unique garment, often in a creative way, vintage fashion is inherently sustainable.

## RESEARCH METHODS

*The study methodology* to explore young people’s perception about sustainability in the Romanian fashion market, as well as to understand their opinions about various aspects of sustainability in this field is based on qualitative insights collected by way of focus groups and interviews.

*Sample and procedures.* The in-depth interviews were conducted in June of 2023 with the owners of five upscale vintage fashion stores in Bucharest, while the focus groups were conducted between April and September 2023 with 30 teenagers, 15 -18 years old.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

*In depth Interviews.* The in-depth interviews were conducted with the owners of five upscale vintage fashion stores in Bucharest: Flacai pe Roti, ALTRNTV, OPSHOP, Bine Boutique, Kitfunky. Key take-aways:

- a) Customers are drawn to the stores by the uniqueness and the selection of the clothes, the variety, and the trend of shopping second-hand. The store owners acknowledged that the prices are higher than average, but this is because they curate the clothes and wash them before listing them for sale. Respondents indicate that they source the clothing from other stores in Bucharest or in the country, and sometimes from abroad.
- b) Vintage fashion customers tend to be artistic types, nonconformists and young, mostly women. The respondents contrasted this segment with the people shopping in the fast fashions’ stores, characterized as lacking in creativity, and people who tend to follow societal norms.
- c) Respondents acknowledged that vintage clothes market is not as developed in Romania yet, but indicated that the interest in vintage fashion is growing and that people see this practice as “cool.” Another reason for growth is that people become more informed about sustainable practices.

*Focus groups.* The focus groups were conducted with teenagers, 15 -18 years old, enrolled in a high-ranked high school, in Bucharest, Romania.

Key take-aways: The majority of participants are aware of the fast fashion and sustainable fashion concepts but cannot make informed purchase decisions yet. All participants provided details about the conditions under which fast fashion products are produced (non-sustainable, non-ethical, large production non- durable, created for short trends). Still, participants mentioned the need for more awareness and information. Some expressed concerns about greenwashing practices, where stores falsely claim to offer sustainable options. The majority “don’t really think” about these aspects when buying a piece of clothing they like. Maybe if they are a big fan of the brand, they might read more about the company’s practices. The fabric quality, price, style, fit, and compatibility with existing wardrobe were mentioned as important factors influencing clothes purchase decisions. Our findings match those of Fowler et al. 2022 (from a study of Chinese consumers) who indicates that sustainability is not the first criterion when buying fashion since design, prices, comfort are more important. This indicates the prevalence of functional and utilitarian benefits for the consumer, when compared to social and psychological benefits.

1. *Attitude toward sustainable practices:* the majority of respondents sees sustainable practices as “cool”, making them feeling good about environmentally conscious choices. However, the majority stated that they are making sustainable choices but do not see themselves as living a sustainable lifestyle. The participants consider that they are not doing enough but they are on the right path. They are aware of its importance and each of them tries to be more mindful regarding the environment. The consensus among

participants is that recycling is a positive and necessary habit and they mentioned actions such as:

- Donating clothes, being mindful of food waste, reusing plastic bottles or using a water filter to avoid buying bottled water.
  - The importance of conscious consumption and not buying unnecessary items
  - Recycling clothes by buying from second-hand and vintage stores or using family member's clothes. Traditionally, Romanians reused their clothing, sometimes through upcycling or by donating them to family members.
2. *Types of consumers.* Sustainable fashion buyers are perceived as mindful, environmentally conscious individuals with a particular style preference. On the other hand, participants associated fast fashion buyers with a search for identity, lack of individuality, insecurity and an overall more negative perception compared to sustainable fashion. When asked to describe the type of customer that frequents fast fashion stores, participants said that they tend to be loyal buyers who are interested in new collections regardless of price, as well as discount hunters.
  3. *Contrasting sustainable stores and fast fashion:* Participants had mixed opinions on whether they preferred sustainable stores or fast fashion stores. Some appreciated the unique options and styles available at sustainable stores, while others valued the convenience and affordability of fast fashion. They mentioned that fast fashion brands often reuse collections from previous years with minor changes. Participants expressed concerns about the poor quality of fabrics used in fast fashion and the lack of transparency regarding production practices. They emphasized the importance of conscious consumption and not buying unnecessary items. Preferences varied based on individual needs, time constraints, and financial considerations. Most of the participants said that they go to second-hand and vintage stores sometimes, but all of them buy from fast-fashion stores too. Moreover, sustainable fashion is perceived as a luxury product that most young people cannot afford. Sustainable fashion tends to be more expensive, making it accessible primarily to those with more financial resources. All participants noted that price is an important aspect when deciding to buy clothes. On one hand, going thrifting is time-consuming, but second-hand and vintage stores offer unique pieces at great prices. On the other hand, fast fashion is chosen when customers prefer to because there are time constraints, or they are looking for a specific piece. Vicinity is also a factor in deciding from what type of store to shop. Our findings match those of Dabija et al 2022 who focused on store satisfaction and loyalty as predicted by consumer perceptions of store attributes, including assortment, prices, ambiance, communication, service, location, socio-environmental responsibility and found some differences between Gen X, millennials, and Gen Z segments
  4. *Cultural Influences.* All participants agreed that while Romanian culture is still biased against re-using old things, including clothes, young people are more open about using second-hand clothes. Sometimes, parents feel offended if young people buy second-hand clothes, believing that they host diseases. When choosing between fast fashion and second-hand fashion, opinions were split between the respondents. Peer pressure, internet trends, and social media have an important influence on young people's purchase decisions. Participants agreed that social media has a significant influence on fashion trends and purchase decisions. They mentioned that fashion inspiration is often derived from social media platforms, and public figures can also impact purchasing behavior. Advertising combined with smaller prices influence a lot the purchase decision. Peer pressure is another critical factor in purchase decision influence.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.

Based on the results of this study we can mention that most of Romanian youth sees sustainable practices as "cool", making them feeling good about environmentally conscious choices.

They are aware of its importance and try to be more mindful regarding the environment. They also consider that recycling is a positive and necessary habit.

Sustainable fashion buyers are perceived as mindful, environmentally conscious individuals with a particular style preference, while buyers of fast fashion have overall more negative perception compared to sustainable fashion.

Most of the Romanian youth said that they go to second-hand and vintage stores sometimes, but all of them buy from fast-fashion stores too, because the price of fast fashion clothes is more acceptable. Sustainable fashion tends to be more expensive, making it accessible primarily to those with more financial resources.

Romanian young people agreed that while Romanian culture is still biased against re-using old things, including clothes, young people are more open about using second-hand clothes.

The conclusions of this study corroborate those of similar studies located in different geographies. Nonetheless, more research needs to be done to verify the external validity of our findings, for example by comparing the results from our Romanian youth sample with those from an American youth sample. The next step in our research will be to attempt to generate psychological profiles of the two segments (slow fashion vs. fast fashion shoppers) and compare them along meaningful dimensions such as fashion innovativeness (Zhang and Kim (2013) or buying impulsiveness (Kacen and Lee 2002).

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