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Online Trade of Clothes in the
Context of the Green Economy

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Abstract: Over the last fifteen years, the concept of the „green economy" has started to be given increasing importance not only in academia, but also in the implementation of various public policies, as a result of the need to respect sustainable development. Given the increased importance of respecting the environment in the current context, this article aims to highlight the impact of online trade in clothing sector on the consumer in terms of sustainability. Through an opinion poll, young people's perception of the impact of online clothes trade in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was investigated, reaching the conclusion that the pandemic led to a change in behavioral trends with regard to the acquisition of clothing.

Keywords: online commerce; clothing; behavioral economics; green economy

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Introduction

Economics as a science is about the proper use of scarce resources in a world of ever-increasing needs. This is in fact the challenge of the present century. Economic

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science is constantly evolving and new areas of research are emerging such as green economics, behavioural economics, circular economics, blue economics, bioeconomics and so on. An effective choice has to be made as we consider what resources we should use to meet our needs. In the context of increasing talk about sustainable development and preserving the quality of the environment in which we live, it becomes imperative to make optimal use of the resources we have. One of the areas of activity where resource use can be wasteful is the marketing of clothing. Starting from the way the fashion industry influences the environment, this paper aims to highlight, by means of a survey, young people's perceptions of the online clothing trade from a sustainability perspective.

The first section describes trends in consumer behaviour in the context of the green economy. Nowadays, companies are more and more concerned about protecting the environment and all the social issues resulting from this process. Even in terms of clothing, nowadays both designers and large companies have adopted different practices to protect the environment.

The second section presents an overview of the relationship between the online clothing trade and Romanian consumer behaviour. The green economy offers an opportunity to change the way individuals manage the interaction between the economy and the environment. Some solutions to limit resource wastage are also presented here.

1. Clothes Buying behaviour in the Context of the Green Economy

Nowadays, companies are increasingly concerned about protecting the environment and all the social issues that are automatically involved in this process. As a result, new approaches to managing existing resources are emerging, with the goal of producing more sustainable products and services, enhancing corporate image, and differentiating brands on the market. (Szmigiera et al., 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us several lessons, including that we need to realise that now is the time to act for a sustainable future. The entire population has succeeded in creating an inevitable and alarming situation of uncontrolled waste growth. These are huge threats to human health, wildlife and the environment, ultimately affecting social and economic structures (The Catalan Waste Agency, 2020).

The circular economy works together with the green economy and is the way to tackle this challenge. Waste management, whether generated from domestic or industrial sources, is the most threatening issue of this century. The extent of waste rationalisation depends on the life cycle of consumer products, from the source of production to eventual disposal, and not least on how our society has manufactured, consumed and disposed of those products. The amount of waste is continuously

increasing due to factors such as population growth, spreading urbanization, economic growth, consumer habits and lifestyles (Ma et al., 2020: p.1).

As far as the fashion industry is concerned, big companies have come to the market to help customers on recycling and repairing clothes. For example, in H&M stores around the world there are recycling boxes for clothes, regardless of brand or condition. In return, customers receive a voucher as a thank you. A whole process then follows:

- "Wear it again" - clothes in good condition are then sold second-hand. This process has been taken to the next level in Stockholm retailers, with the option of renting different clothes for a single evening.

- "Reuse" is a second process - if textile items can no longer be traded/used, they are turned into cleaning cloths or various remake collections.

- The last step is "Recycle", i.e. all other clothes left over after the first two processes are turned into fibres and used for insulation (H&M, 2022).

Technology is increasingly influencing consumer behaviour. The efficiency of the virtual clothing market has been high recently. Nowadays, analysing and stimulating choices under online conditions is no longer a controversial topic (Hertwig et al., 2001, pp. 383-403). The use of online platforms already has a significant impact on business, consumption, sales strategies, etc. If a company decides to invest in its online presence, the most convincing reason is that it brings more value (Schechtman, 2012, pp. 329-343).

Virtual reality offers remedies for existing limitations of electronic transactions, such as the lack of face-to-face interaction or direct contact with the product (Jiang, Benbasat, 2005, pp. 111-148). Because of this, most companies offer free product returns and a live chat on their website. In this way, online consumers have the possibility to give feedback. An early study showed that advertising a product has positive effects on consumer behaviour in economic terms. According to it, the individual is influenced to buy a certain product without realising it, considering that he/she is doing it on his/her own initiative (Kim & Biocca, 1997, p. 3). On the other hand, conveying the value of a real-life brand is a great difficulty, as it is impossible for the customer to feel the texture of the product, closely observe the cut, etc. (Barnes, & Pressey, 2016, pp. 285-296).

Psychological research has confirmed that an individual's desire for social affirmation is an important force driving the luxury goods market (Dreze, Nunez, 2009, pp. 890-905). Consumers with a greater need for status prefer visibly marked clothes to signal their distinction from mainstream consumers. On the other hand, individuals with a lower need for status prefer products marked subtly or not at all, to signal their similarity to the mainstream (Wilcox et al., 2009, pp. 247-259). Aside from product qualities, luxury firms rely on a brand visibility plan that is in sync

with people's consumption habits, as a way to demonstrate their social status (Veblen, 1899, pp. 25-167). For this reason, some luxury brands have chosen to adopt different strategies. For example, Louis Vuitton or Gucci, have approached a dual strategy: one range of products is made in plain colours without displaying the brand logo, and another range of products has the brand logo carefully displayed in notable colours such as white, red and green (Han et al., 2010, pp. 15-30).

As the virtual world gains more and more popularity, the use of online platforms, where consumers buy products from the real world, can provide advantages for both themselves and manufacturers (Jung, Pawlowski, 2014, pp. 520-531). The purchasing power of the millennial generation and digital natives is very important, as they are almost always connected to the internet and are likely to make purchases online, given their access to the internet anytime and almost anywhere. Analyzing the lifestyles of these consumers, it can be seen that they grew up in an environment where shopping was seen more as a form of relaxation, especially shopping online for fashion (Canadapost, 2017).

Clothes are means that serve individual human needs, both physical and social, as well as cultural representations and art forms. Thus, the clothes we wear can be expressive in terms of identity, providing others with details about our gender, status or attitude (Kaiser, 1997).

The fashion trade in Romania is 83% controlled by foreign investors and 62% of the manufacturing sector is controlled by local firms. The fashion industry in our country is among the most important employers in the economy, as evidenced by the number of employees, which has remained constant in recent years at around 200,000.

Due to the expansion of store networks and on the back of increased consumption, the total profit reported by companies amounted to 1.9 billion lei (KeysFin, 2018).

Table 1. Number of foreign fashion shareholders in Romania

Country of origin of investors	Number of companies
China	1.957
Italy	793
Turkey	585

Source: Own data processing from www.keysfin.com

According to the table, firms with foreign shareholders account for 22% of the total of 24,566 firms in the fashion industry. According to estimates by Fashion Days, in 2019, the leader of the fashion market in Romania is Pepco (retailer selling both

clothing and home decoration items), followed in second place by H&M and Zara, both of which have home&deco products (Fashion Days, 2019).

According to estimates by the Romanian Association of Online Shops, the e-commerce sector in Romania is on a positive growth trend, with a double-digit increase in 2019, surpassing the 4-billion-euro threshold for the first time, which represents a 20-22% increase compared to the previous year.

Growth in the average consumption basket was mainly recorded in the following categories (GPEC e-commerce report, 2020):

- Clothing - from 175.35 lei in 2018 to 185.59 lei in 2019;

- Toys - from 242.10 lei in 2018 to 256.26 lei in 2019;

- Pet Shop - from 165,12 lei in 2018 to 186,90 lei in 2019;

- Books, Music and Film - from 104,04 lei in 2018 to 118,53 lei in 2019.

The fast fashion business model has recently dominated the fashion industry, resulting in a surge in the volume of clothing with shorter life cycles. Constant changes in fashion trends stimulate new designs and product sales, which in turn drive consumption. This development has highlighted the extent of sustainability issues in the fashion industry, which are defined by balancing economic performance and environmental resilience for the benefit of future generations (Cachon, Swinney, 2011, pp. 778-795).

According to a "fashion research" conducted by the GLAMI website, 40.35% of respondents do not know what is meant by sustainability of a garment. Although 55% of respondents say that the production process of clothes should not harm the environment, half of them do not know which brands offer truly sustainable clothes for sale. 34% of respondents prefer to spend more on biodegradable packaging than on products made from recycled materials (Glami, 2019). If a garment is made from 100% sustainably sourced cotton, it can easily be recycled. On the other hand, if the product is made of 60% cotton, 15% wool and 25% polyester, it cannot be recycled properly because there is currently no machinery that can separate the mixed fibres.

The complexity and variety of products, the need to differentiate through content, to respond to market pressures and to work in the shortest and most efficient time present specific challenges for both business and the environment (H.I. Stal, J. Jansson, 2017: pp. 546-558). The objective of the circular economy is to keep resources in active use for as long as possible and to recover and recycle them at the end of their life. Thus, the field of fashion expands into the use, collection, recycling and reuse of garments. Sustainable fashion design encompasses a number of dimensions of the circular economy, from the initial selection of materials to the longevity of garments and their potential reuse (Ecap, 2019).

2. The behaviour of the Romanian clothes buyer on the online market

The aim of the research was to observe the impact of the online clothing trade on shopper behaviour. The main objective of the research was to determine the main characteristics of online clothing consumer behaviour. The present research aimed to highlight the following aspects:

-   Identifying certain factors that influence consumers in their decision to buy clothes online;
-   Identify the tendency to purchase clothing from top selling websites in the country;
-   Identifying reasons that influenced the decision to buy from the websites;
-   Measuring the degree of influence of brands;
-   Identify changes in the frequency of clothing purchase, given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The present research is based on hypotheses that are included in the category of generally valid rules, but adapted to the online context and whose validity was confirmed throughout the research. Qualitative research was conducted using the questionnaire method, which is a flexible research tool. The questionnaire was distributed online via the Google Forms platform, data was collected between 10 and 15 May 2020, 310 responses were recorded, with the target audience aged between 18 and 45. From a statistical point of view, this is not a representative number, but the purpose for which it was used is didactic.

In terms of occupation, 63% of the respondents are students, 12% are working in the labour market, and 25% are both students and employees.

The present research is based on a series of questions, which will analyse whether consumer trends in purchasing clothing change according to different factors. The first question of the questionnaire: *Do you buy clothes online?* Here, 275 people answered yes and the remaining 35 answered no. As a result, only the answers of the 275 respondents will be considered in the following, so that the result is not influenced in any way.

33% of respondents have a net monthly income between 1,001 and 2,000 lei. In the next category are respondents with incomes between 2,001 and 4,000 lei. Only 27 respondents have a net monthly income of more than 4,001 lei.

2% of respondents claim to shop for clothes online once every few months and 26% of them once a month. Breaking these results down by net income levels, 83% of those who shop for clothes every few months have a monthly net income of less than 1,000 lei.

Making a connection between the reason for shopping online for clothes and the gender of the respondents, 90.19% of women buy clothes just for the pleasure of enriching their wardrobe. In contrast, 44.27% of men prefer to buy clothes out of necessity, to replace their worn-out clothes. For most women, clothes shopping is a relaxation, a kind of therapy. In addition, clothes are a way of expressing themselves and fashion is an important tool when it comes to self-confidence.

According to a study by N.A. Rudd and S.J. Lennon, the individuals interviewed claim that their self-confidence is higher when they feel good about the clothes they wear. Clothes underline the lifestyle, the way of expression, the way a person wants to live (Rudd & Lennon, 2000, pp. 152-162).

Individuals may buy clothes to compensate or replace another need, for example the need for attention. Others buy for the simple reason of taking pride in a different social status, marked by luxury goods. For some people new purchases keep them in step with the trend, for others this means nothing. The reasons for buying clothes online are diverse and subjective.

According to respondents, the main factors influencing the purchase decision are the material, design and quality of the clothes. The important factors are discounts and therefore price. Respondents are not interested in the brand and advertising of the clothes.

When asked *how easy it is for you to buy clothes online*, 84% of respondents said they shop online very easily, with the remaining 16% knowing how an online platform works, but taking longer to complete an order. The increase in the number of consumers looking for differentiated products that suit both needs and expectations brings with it relevant questions about clothing.

Fashion is in fact an expressive human interaction, a continuous process of searching for meaning and belonging. It is a way of showing others how we feel about ourselves. This is why clothing design is so important, because fashion has subjective meanings when it comes to direct contact between consumers and the product itself.

Asked being *what kind of clothes do they you prefer* (to wear outside), 218 people (79%) answered that they don't care about the brand as long as they like the design. A 19% share of respondents claimed to prefer clothes made by well-known brands, and only 2% liked to wear only no-name clothes.

When it comes to dissatisfaction with clothing items purchased online, 60% of respondents chose the following reasons: size mismatch (45%); product not matching in reality with the one in pictures on the internet (31%); lack of quality of material (21%); ordering product X and receiving product Y (2%); other (1%).

According to consumer preferences, the most popular online platforms are Fashion Days, H&M, Zara and About You, followed closely by the second most popular sites, Bershka and Pull&Bear. This analysis confirms the positions in the top of the Romanian fashion market leaders 2019.

Identifying the reasons that influenced the purchase decision on the respective sites, 86% of respondents chose price and discounts on clothing items as the main reasons. Secondary reasons include: brand; ease of purchase; delivery costs; payment methods. Advertisements, colours and structure of the websites are indifferent features for the 275 respondents.

The main category of products bought online by respondents is clothing, with footwear in second place, followed by accessories, cosmetics and make-up products, perfumes, etc.

Given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, 63% of respondents say that the frequency with which they buy clothes online has not changed. The remaining 37% claim that the frequency has changed, the reasons falling into two categories: (1) The frequency of online shopping has decreased, due to fear of virus infection and lower disposable income; (2) The frequency of online clothes shopping has increased, due to the closure of physical shops.

Another problem identified in the questionnaire responses was related to the size of clothes not matching. When you buy clothes online, it is impossible to try them on, as it is physically possible in the shops. To solve this inconvenience, specialty stores have introduced a web app, where each shopper can enter (with their consent) their height, weight, size in centimetres of bust, waist, hips, etc., and the app automatically provides the appropriate size. Most online clothing platforms already have certain standard tables that conform to clothing sizes, but it is not a personalised table for each individual clothing model, which is why it gives erroneous information.

Another interesting application would be a web platform, where there would be the possibility to upload a personal photo, on which the buyer could attach different clothes available in the major online clothing stores. It would be an application similar to online dress-up games, but once a shopper 'dresses up' in the virtual environment with certain items of clothing, there would be access to those products and then purchase them.

Conclusions

Green economy and circular economy are production concepts that minimise waste and pollution and can be achieved through sustainable design. It integrates both economic benefits and environmental impacts covering the entire life cycle of consumables from resource collection, through production, assembly, transport, recycling and disposal. The green economy is about using natural resources, energy and new technologies together with clean production methods in order to promote economic growth and the creation of new jobs. With this concept, it is new sustainable patterns of consumption and production that do not strain the ecosystem. Sustainable development requires dynamism, requires adaptation and research, all of which are closely intertwined.

In addition, appropriate recycling protocols should be mentioned. Used consumables should be recycled efficiently and managed correctly so that they do not have any dangerous impact on the population or the environment. The transition to a new economic system based on sustainable development appears to be on track to solve environmental, economic, and social concerns while also managing the crisis and its consequences. This requires action to be taken through the use of appropriate policies that create conditions to sustain economic growth and reduce poverty. In the current economic environment, most countries have been and are still affected by the crisis, hampering economic growth. However, economic growth must be possible to break out of this collapse by creating strong links between development, production and sustainable consumption.

Also, waste flow and management are now a primary concern for us to save and sustain our world. No more promises and talk, we just have to act, it's time for sustainability!

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