

FAST FASHION VS SUSTAINABLE FASHION – A PERSPECTIVE FROM CONSUMERS IN SPAIN AND ROMANIA

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Abstract. Consumers across Europe are becoming more conscious of environmental and ethical concerns related to the fashion industry, leading to an increased demand for sustainable and ethically-produced clothing. Despite the growing interest in sustainable fashion, fast fashion brands still remain dominant in terms of market share. Considering the socio-economic and environmental impact of consumers' preferences on the fashion industry, the objective of this research was to study the consumer preference for fast fashion versus sustainable fashion. The data were collected from the Meta database, as well as from Google Trends, based on various demographics, such as: age, gender, and location – the sample consists of fashion consumers from the main cities of Spain, Madrid and Valencia, with the Romanian cities, Bucharest and Iasi. By analyzing the consumers' preference for fashion in different urban centers, one can ascertain the degree to which specific fashion trends influence the clothing choices of their particular residents. This research emphasizes the importance of studying consumers' preferences, the need to shape them towards a more sustainable future, and, also, this paper argues that understanding the trends in apparel manufacturing in different urban areas will enable the development of strategies to reduce the global carbon footprint linked to the fashion sector.

Keywords: sustainability; fashion industry; consumer' preferences; sustainable development

1. INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry has been subject to major paradigm changes in light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sheds light on dynamics between consumer demand, environmental consciousness, and ethical perspectives [1]. Under the new sustainability paradigm, the fashion industry is undergoing a profound transformation [2,3]. This shift is characterised by increased consumer demand for sustainable clothing, heightened environmental consciousness, and emphasis on ethical aspects [4–6].

Consumers have started to focus on sustainability, being more inclined towards quality over quantity, demanding transparency in the fashion supply chain [7–9]. This has intensified the use of ecofriendly materials [10,11], the reorientation towards circular fashion models [11], and the reduction in the industry's carbon and water footprints [13–15]. Fair labour practices and animal welfare are paramount ethical approaches in this new sustainable paradigm of the fashion industry [16–18]. Brands that show respect for these values and sustainable practices are gaining consumers' favour, while those that stay indifferent to the imminent transformation face the risk of losing market share [19]. Thus, the fashion industry is witnessing a significant increase in accountability, transparency, and environmentally friendly practices.

Across Europe, consumers become more and more aware of their impact of clothing choices and attitudes on the natural capital and on society, in general [20]. This sustainability-momentum in the fashion industry has capitalized on an increase in the demand for environmentally-friendly and ethically-produced clothing [21]. Moreover, the consumers' preference for sustainable fashion has maintained and remained resilient in the face of crisis, such as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic [22–25].

For example, Sweden is well-known for its thrifting culture – popular thrift shops like "Myrorna" and "Stadsmissionen" mark the ground for Swedish consumers in the direction of circular economy through

second-hand clothing behaviours [26]. Swedes take pride in finding stylish and affordable second-hand clothing, which is a sustainable fashion trend that minimises waste and leads to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [27]. French consumers have embarked on a journey towards sustainable fashion with brands like Veja [28], which produce sneakers by resorting to environmentally friendly materials, ethical labour policies, transparency, and commitment to sustainability. The Netherlands is one of the countries at the forefront of circular fashion initiatives in the European Union, which has become a complementary industry to the agricultural industry, in a highly sustainable manner [29]. A good example to highlight this strong symbiosis between the two industries is Fruit leather Rotterdam, a sustainable circular business created by Koen Meerkerk and Hugo de Boon, two young designers who found a manner to capitalize on the fruits that lack aesthetic standards and, consequently, are rejected by supermarkets. The business is focused on transforming the rejected fruits into leather-like material, which is later used in fashion, providing an innovative and sustainable alternative to the polluting practices of the leather industry [30]. In Denmark, brands resonate with consumers who try to become more sustainable by seeking fashion with a conscience – for example, "Ganni" is a Danish brand with approximately 50% of the fabric composition certified recycled, lower-impact, or organic. As part of their carbon offsetting scheme, Ganni has installed solar panels with their Portuguese supplier, in the race to achieve 50% greenhouse gas emission reduction by 2027 [31]. In the United Kingdom, a surge in rental and resale platforms like "HURR Collective" and "Depop" has been noticed [32]. Such platforms dedicated to fashion deliver sustainability by enabling consumers to rent/sell pre-owned clothing, extending the product lifecycle and reducing waste.

As far as Spain and Romania are concerned, both are witnessing a healthy shift towards sustainable fashion practices, especially if considering the emergence of local eco-friendly brands, increased awareness of ethical issues, support for local artisans, as well as the adoption of circular fashion models [33–35]. These trends stand proof of a larger global movement towards a responsible and environmentally-friendly fashion consumption model, in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [36].

With a strong commitment to eco-friendly materials, "Ecoalf" is one of the many prominent sustainable Spanish fashion brands, specialised in designing and producing stylish clothing, as well as accessories made from recycled materials, including ocean plastics [37]. Madrid and Barcelona host Sustainable Fashion Week, an event that encourages brands and designers to promote eco-conscious fashion [38], thus raising awareness about responsible fashion choices – not only among Spanish participants, but at a large scale, considering the attractiveness of such important fashion events among fashion consumers. Moreover, Spain is considered home to some responsible textile manufacturers and fashion brands that take pride in delivering sustainable production – "Textil Santanderina" is one of the best examples in this regard [39], as it adds more value to achieving the SDGs by focusing on water and energy conservation.

In Romania, big cities like Bucharest host thriving vintage shops, second-hand boutiques, and fashion markets [40]. Customers are increasingly attracted to these types of fashion outlets, not necessarily because of economic considerations [41], but because they recognize the environmental benefits of extending the life of clothing items and of fostering sustainability through reducing the demand for new production [42]. Romania has a rich tradition of fine artisanal craftsmanship, which includes weaving, embroidery, and the manufacturing of traditional fabrics [43]. Many ethnic designers and artisans harmoniously blend these traditional techniques into modern clothing, ensuring both environmental sustainability and cultural preservation. In addition, universities in Romania are progressively providing courses and programs in applied sustainability practices, including in the case of the fashion industry. For example, at the Faculty of Agri-food and Environmental Economics (part of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies), disciplines such as ecomarketing, strategies for sustainable consumption, circular management of resources, and ecoentrepreneurship are part of the syllabus, which prepares future professionals to manage constantly challenging and changing industries, the fashion industry being no exception. Thus, by providing interested individuals with the necessary information and abilities to efficiently adopt sustainable practices, it becomes more facile to deliver positive societal changes and foster a fashion industry that is characterized by responsible and ethical behaviours. Yet, this change is slowed down by the phenomena of fast fashion.

The fast fashion phenomena is noticeable in almost all the major cities of the European Union and is distinguished by the accelerated and ever-evolving approach of apparel manufacturing, distribution, and consumption within the fashion industry [44]. Fast fashion brands highly value speed in the clothing production process, often resulting in just a matter of weeks for products to transition from the design phase to their final placement on store shelves, as opposed to sustainable fashion cycles, which tend to follow a more lengthy timeline, spanning several months [45–47]. Fast fashion brands actively and closely monitor

the latest fashion trends showcased on runways and within popular culture, while their main objective is to expeditiously copy these trends and then make them accessible to a broad customer base at affordable price points [48], many times disconsidering the environmental price [49]. The fast fashion industry heavily relies on the utilization of global supply chains for the procurement of materials and establishment of production facilities [50]. This strategic approach aims to achieve cost efficiency in order to satisfy customer demands for affordable prices [51]. Nevertheless, as a consequence of the affordable price and apparent transience of fast fashion products, consumers frequently engage in excessive clothing consumption, acquiring more clothing than necessary and subsequently discarding them after minimal usage [52]. This trend has given rise to significant apprehensions regarding the sustainability of such practices, which oftentimes result in adverse environmental consequences. The fast fashion model has been extensively linked in the literature to several environmental issues, including but not limited to excessive waste generation, increased resource consumption, ethical dilemmas concerning labour practices [53–55]. Furthermore, it should be noted that the fast fashion model perpetuates a culture of perpetual consumerism, wherein consumers are incentivized to consistently acquire new products in order to maintain their trendy status [56]. Thus, while it does ensure accessibility and affordability to customers, the phenomenon of fast fashion has also been raising concerns about aspects related to sustainability, ethics, and to the long-term consequences for the natural capital.

The objective of the research conducted in this conference paper was to study the consumer preference for fast fashion versus sustainable fashion from the main cities of Spain, Madrid and Valencia, with the Romanian cities, Bucharest and Iași, based on various socio-demographics, such as: age, gender, location, and also based on their digital "footprint", referring to their engagement with fashion brands on Meta-owned social platforms. Robustness is added to the research by studying the consumers' interest in brands based on Google Trend Scores. The study of consumers' preference for fashion is valuable when assessing the degree to which specific fashion trends influence clothing choices and contributes to the construction of a sustainability roadmap for the fashion industry. Thus, studying consumers' preferences is essential in order to be able to provide more sustainable fashion alternatives based on real consumer needs, which would lead the way to a more sustainable future with a cleaner fashion industry and responsible consumers.

The novelty factor of this research resides in the framework of analysis. The socio-demographic profiles and digital "footprint" of fashion enthusiasts from Spain and Romania were collected and assessed by resorting to Meta Audience Insight and Google Trends data. Empirical research findings were discussed in light of the self-designed framework of analysis dedicated to the study of consumer preference for fast fashion versus sustainable fashion. Proposals for the transition to the sustainable fashion model were made while taking into account the particularities of each fashion consumer typology, as defined in the unique research methodology explained in the experimental part of the conference paper.

2. EXPERIMENTAL PART

This empirical study employed a wide range of datasets in order to ensure high-quality research findings. To investigate the consumer preference for fast fashion vs. sustainable fashion from the main cities of Spain and Romania, data relevant to this topic were gathered in September-October 2023. The statistics utilised for this study were obtained from Meta, previously recognised as Facebook [57]. The Meta-owned datasets are valuable sources of information regarding fashion consumers, considered suitable for this research. Resorting to this source has demonstrated its worth in academic research, with results often being validated when the research methodology is appropriately implemented. With regard to this particular study, two Audience Insight queries were executed with the following parameters: "Interests: H&M, Primark, Stradivarius, Zara, Pull&Bear, or Mango" – as a proxy for fast fashion preferences, and "Interests: sustainable fashion" as a proxy for sustainable fashion. Statistics were gathered based on gender, age, and location. Data regarding the Google Interest Score were collected during the same period by systematically querying the Google Trends database [58], according to the terms: "Primark", "Stradivarius", "Zara", "H&M", "Pull&Bear", and "Mango" – all of them being recognized as fast fashion brands [59].

Raw data collected were processed and statistical analyses were carried out regarding the consumers' preferences concerning fast fashion versus sustainable fashion, while taking into account the importance of filtering the results based on criteria such as location, gender and age group. The sample was described in Table 1. Carbon footprint estimation would have been a great addition to the filtering of the results [60], but due to data availability that was not possible at the moment of carrying out this empirical research. The results and discussion section begins with the analysis dedicated to the consumers' preferences for fast

fashion, then it is followed by the analysis regarding sustainable fashion. Lastly, robustness is ensured through the Google Trends analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research findings show that there is a greater level of interest in fashion among women compared to males, regardless of whether it is fast fashion (Figure 1) or sustainable fashion (Figure 2), a pattern which was noticed for all analysed cities – both Spanish and Romanian. For both countries, the interest in fast fashion is declining more rapidly for men than women if age increases and the interest in sustainable fashion is increasing in the case of women once age increases, whereas the situation is the opposite for males.

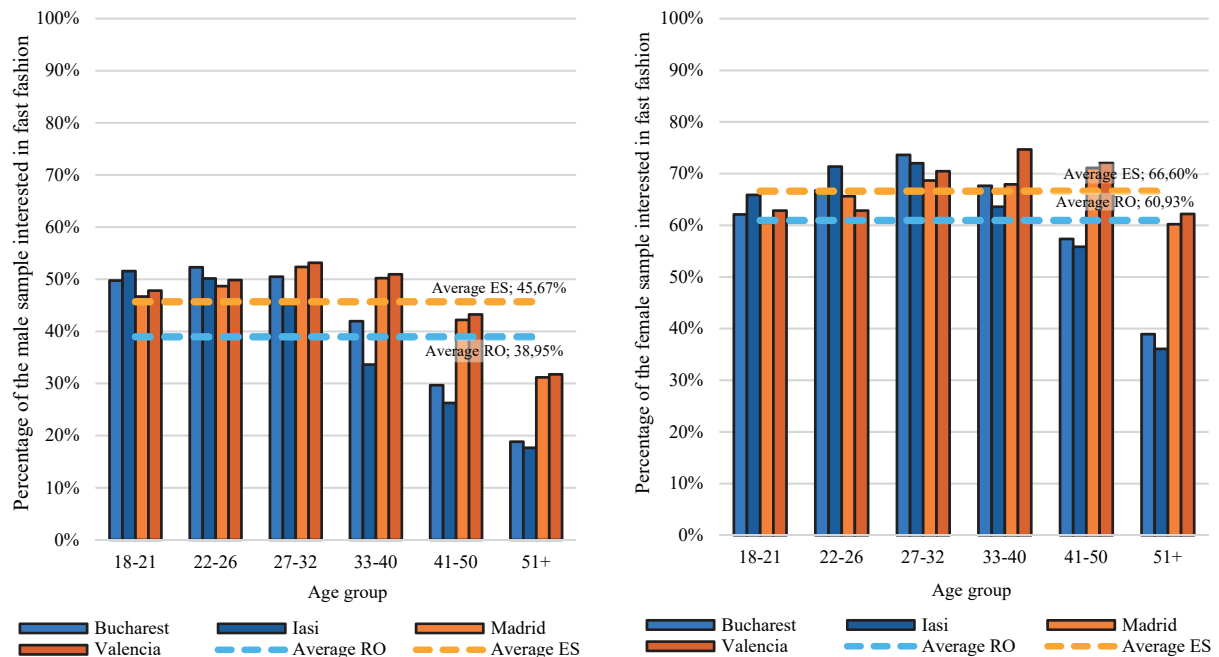


Figure 1. Fast fashion preferences analysis based on location, gender and age group

Source: Author's graphical representation of the processed Meta data (2023)

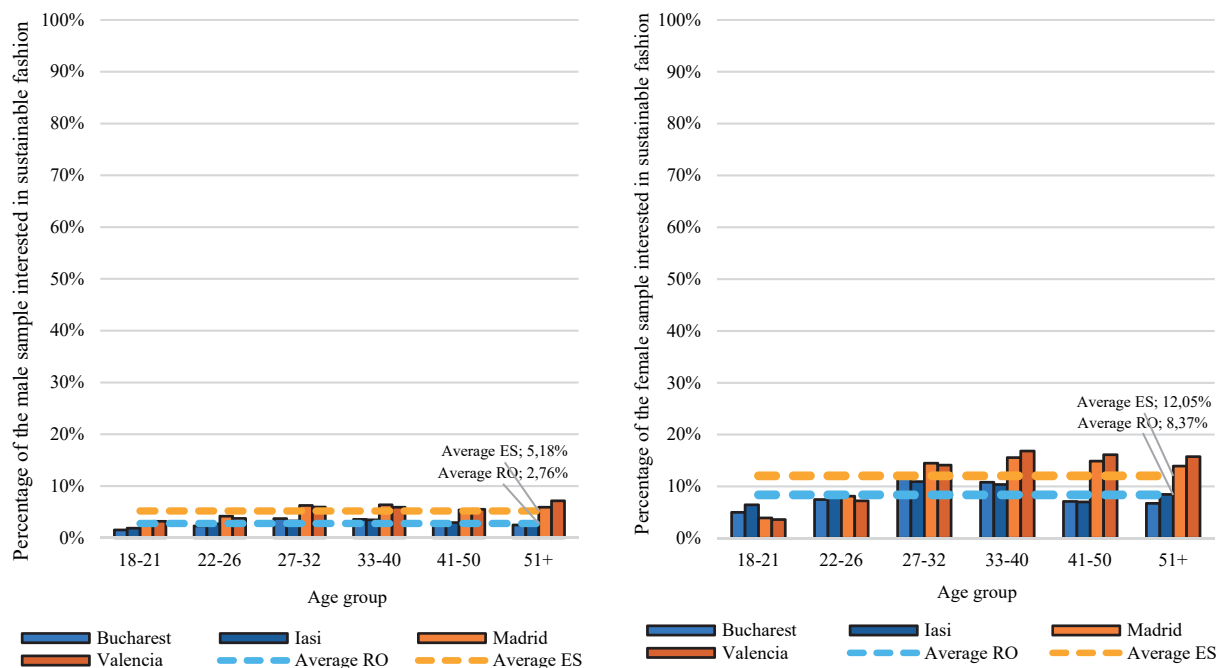


Figure 2. Sustainable fashion preferences analysis based on location, gender and age group

Source: Author's graphical representation of the processed Meta data (2023)

Table 1.
The number of population with a linked Meta account

City		Bucharest	Iasi	Madrid	Valencia	Bucharest	Iasi	Madrid	Valencia
Gender		Female				Male			
Age group	18-21	81,800	21,700	206,600	69,200	59,500	16,100	167,700	50,200
	22-26	160,600	38,400	352,100	106,600	139,600	33,300	323,600	87,900
	27-32	142,200	29,300	393,000	100,600	145,400	27,700	359,200	90,700
	33-40	208,000	35,700	464,100	110,600	193,800	34,500	390,100	101,500
	41-50	197,200	34,200	531,300	153,200	194,100	33,900	468,700	134,100
	51+	268,600	53,200	651,000	206,900	217,600	39,600	549,000	166,800

Source: Meta data (2023)

Only 2.76% (Romania) and 5.18% (Spain) of males are interested in sustainable fashion, whereas women can be even three times more prone than men to adopt this type of fashion. An inflection point between Spain and Romania is that age increase triggers a rise in the level of interest in sustainable fashion in the case of Spaniard women, whereas the opposite was observed for Romanian women. The older Romanian population is not familiar with the concept of sustainability, which is one of the negative consequences of the communist regime. To provide robustness to research findings, the evolution of the Google Interest Score for fast fashion brands was analysed in Figure 3 (Spain) and Figure 4 (Romania).

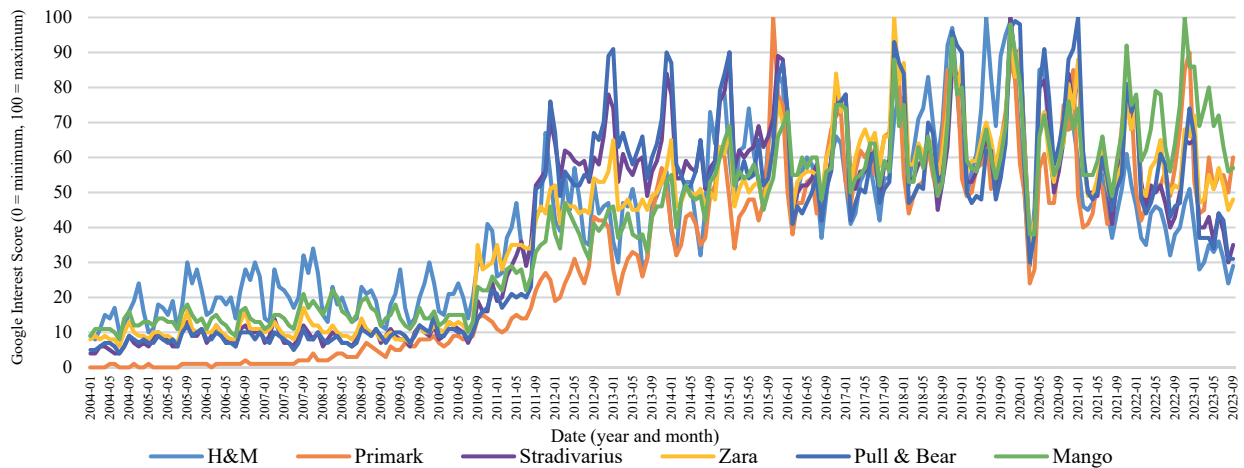


Figure 3. Google Interest Score evolution for fast fashion brands in the case of Spain

Source: Author's graphical representation of the data extracted from Google Trends (2023)

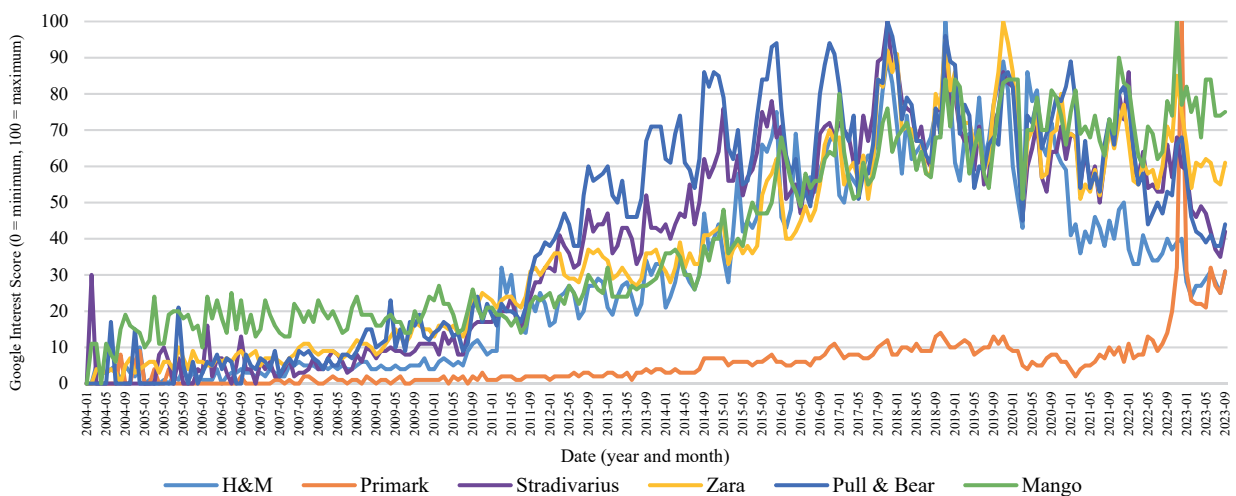


Figure 4. Google Interest Score evolution for fast fashion brands in the case of Romania

Source: Author's graphical representation of the data extracted from Google Trends (2023)

The analysis of the evolution of the Google Interest Score shows a longer history for Spain in the favour of fast fashion brands, with a significant rise in the year 2010. This result validates the initial conclusion reached based on Meta data, regarding Spaniards being more fond of fashion than Romanians. In Romania, the interest in fast fashion has intensified one year later than in Spain. In addition, the interest in a big brand, Primark, has only grown in Romania after the first shop was opened recently, in 2022.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The beginning of the twenty-first century marks a period of major societal importance regarding the ongoing clash between fast fashion and sustainable fashion. This clash has developed in reaction to important factors: primarily, the observable environmental repercussions of the fashion industry, encompassing its major part in pollution, depletion of resources, and development of waste. Furthermore, there has been an increased focus on ethical considerations regarding labour conditions within the business, highlighting the imperative for fair and secure operations. Simultaneously, the evolving consumer preferences which place a higher emphasis on sustainability and ethical values have significantly influenced the dynamics of the market and prompted transformations in industrial processes.

In addition, a growing trend towards more stringent regulations was remarked in the case of the fashion industry, as countries and international organisations are enacting mandates to promote sustainability and ethical practises. Fashion brands are required to comply with and adapt to these regulations. Moreover, the sector is being facilitated in its incorporation of eco-friendly practises by technological developments in sustainable materials and manufacturing methods. The rise of the circular fashion sector, characterised by its focus on recycling, reusing, and waste reduction, has garnered momentum as a feasible alternative to the conventional linear fashion paradigm. Thus, the fast fashion vs. sustainable fashion debate is an ardent topic with a profound impact on the cultural, environmental, and socio-economic aspects of the fashion industry.

Since the level of interest in fashion and the extent to which sustainable fashion practises are embraced by customers can differ among countries as a result of many cultural and socio-economic factors, the main contribution of this research resides in the empirical insight provided regarding the consumer preference for fast fashion vs. sustainable fashion from the main cities of Spain (Madrid and Valencia) with the Romanian cities (Bucharest and Iasi), based on socio-demographics, as well as digital "footprint" specific to their engagement with fashion brands on Meta-owned social platforms. The Spanish population generally demonstrates a greater inclination towards fashion in contrast to their Romanian counterparts, and this variation can be linked to various significant factors. One of the key factors that contribute significantly to this disparity can be attributed to the historical setting of Romania, which is still enduring consequences of communism, visible in many socio-economic contexts, including the context of the fashion culture.

The enduring impact of communism in Romania is characterized by prolonged economic difficulties and restricted access to global fashion influences. During this particular period, the primary emphasis was directed towards utilitarian and standardised attire, rather than fashion as a means of personal expression or individualistic endeavour. Consequently, the growth of the fashion culture in Romania have exhibited a slower pace in comparison to nations with more extensive backgrounds in market-oriented fashion, like Spain, whose economy is comparatively more advanced and varied, affords its populace with higher disposable money, hence facilitating greater engagement in fashion-related pursuits and expenditures. The culture of fashion consciousness is further enhanced by the urbanisation and cosmopolitan nature of Spanish towns. In relation to the adoption of sustainable fashion, as research findings show, Spaniards exhibit a greater inclination towards embracing eco-conscious practises in comparison to Romanians. There are other elements that contribute to this disparity. Spain exhibits a larger gross domestic product per capita, ensuring enhanced financial capabilities for Spanish consumers to actively engage in the area of sustainable fashion. Additionally, Spain boasts a well-developed fashion industry, characterised by the presence of sustainable fashion businesses and designers. The increased availability of sustainable fashion solutions has the potential to enhance accessibility and attractiveness among the Spanish population. Furthermore, Spain may exhibit a more robust fashion culture that prioritises ecological awareness, which can be attributed to heightened levels of knowledge, education, and media attention to sustainability concerns.

The very weak interest in sustainable fashion in the case of Romanians noticed in this empirical research can be partially explained by the lasting effects of communism. The presence of ongoing economic issues serves to constrain the amount of spare income that individuals have at their disposal for fashion-related

expenditures. Furthermore, the process of transitioning to a market economy has been characterised by intermittent periods of instability, so posing further obstacles to the establishment of a thriving fashion industry and a vibrant consumer fashion culture. Although Romania may exhibit some level of interest in fashion, it is noteworthy that this desire may be relatively subdued and less inclined towards sustainability.

This empirical research, although it does provide valuable insight regarding the consumers' preferences in fashion between Spain and Romania, it is still subject to various limitations. Firstly, this study was focused on four specific cities – two in Spain and two in Romania, which overlook the regional and national overall context. Secondly, data were collected from the Meta database and only citizens with accounts linked to Meta platforms were analysed in this study. Thus, this quantitative study can be further refined by resorting to more comprehensive databases or even complementary ones. Future research endeavours may consist of implementing more comprehensive qualitative investigations, which might involve the utilisation of interviews and questionnaires to effectively capture the diverse fashion preferences of the Spanish and Romanian consumers. In addition, this research can also be replicated at the level of other countries than the ones studied in this conference paper. Lastly, conducting an investigation into the impact of marketing and media on the adoption of sustainable fashion, as well as analysing the significance of education and cultural elements in determining consumer fashion preferences, will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of these phenomena within the contexts of Spain and Romania.

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