Transforming Fashion Consumerism:
Leading Change in a Disruptive Industry

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Abstract: *The fashion industry is one of the most innovative and fast-growing sectors of the global economy. Being led by consumer demand, fast production cycles and changing market trends, it evolves at a fast pace. The growth of fast-fashion giant brands had a huge impact on environmental decline, it led to overworking the employees and created a supply chain instability felt by smaller companies. In these times with major and rapid changes, marked by tariff wars, climate crises and shifting consumer preferences, the industry faces an urgent need for transformation.*
This paper explores how important stakeholders like businesses, policymakers and consumers can make a change in this industry by shifting towards sustainable and ethical fashion business models. We look into how circular economy principles, technology innovations and legal frameworks are giving a new face to the industry. Additionally, we show the role of consumer awareness and their consumption patterns.
From a social perspective, many people buy luxury brands not because they need them but rather to get validation from others. Consumers developed an unhealthy spending habit just to cover this need of belonging to a social group of people that dress in a certain way which can also be viewed rather as an addiction than a preferred way of spending their money. Psychologically speaking, besides not being a good way to impress others with their expensive products, this cycle of overconsumption feeds the false appearance that someone's worth is determined by tangible assets rather than by accomplishments or values.
By looking at the issues caused by consumerism, this research paper shows us that true leaders in the fashion industry require more than profit-driven models and lead to sustainable strategies instead. This paper suggests that in times of disruption, looking for change isn't just a necessity, it's a strategic opportunity for innovation.

Keywords: consumerism, fast fashion, fashion industry, sustainability, circular economy, consumer behaviour

Introduction

The fashion industry has been a constant in humanity's evolution, giving people the opportunity to shape their individuality, culture and sense of self. As a result of its importance in people's lives, the fashion industry started evolving as fast as humans, times and societies did. This led to the formation of fast fashion, which first made its rise to the top in the 1990s. It has made a drastic change in the industry by introducing the rapid production and consumption of trendy pieces of clothing sold at very appealing prices to the masses.

However, this change did not just affect how people used to dress, but it also had major negative effects on the environment, work conditions for employees and the exaggerated spending habits of consumers. In order to produce these enormous amounts of clothes at such a fast rhythm,

many resources like water and energy are sacrificed daily, producing a shortage of raw materials and a concerning emission of greenhouse gases, which pollutes the soil and overall natural environment. As a consequence, in this manner, the fast fashion industry contributes to the cruel reality of climate change, and humans are the ones fueling this movement.

Moreover, big fast fashion corporations like the well-known Shein, Temu and AliExpress are exploiting workers from third-world countries in horrific ways by overworking them to the point of pure exhaustion and underpaying them considering their astronomical efforts and time spent in factories. Big fast fashion giants manage to cut significantly on the manufacturing costs of their products by taking advantage of people with an inferior social and material position, and there is nothing and no one stopping them from doing this.

From another point of view, this constant supply in the market changed consumers' behaviour as well. Thus, they started the so-called overconsumption phenomenon, which basically means that people are buying at a much bigger rate than they can consume what they are acquiring, or in this case, wear. Because of their obsession with owning everything that is in vogue at the moment, consumers are buying clothes they do not need and usually are never going to be used, producing a lot of unnecessary waste. Naturally, there are some social aspects that play a big part in this addiction. Since forever, people from all over the world have been obsessed with social status and one of the most crucial characteristics of social class is how one presents themselves through the clothes they are wearing. This explains why people are feeling forced by peer pressure to constantly dress in a certain way and spend unnecessary funds on new items of clothing very often due to micro trends and the desire to fit in with the majority who are doing exactly the same thing. In addition to this idea, Ciornea (2020) affirms that ''it must be emphasised that the disposal of fashion items after a short period of time is a consequence of overconsumption (behaviour that implies frequent purchase of more apparel than needed and substitution of clothes while they are functional, due to reasons such as social integration, status communication, personal desire to be fashionable, impulsive purchase); but is also a result of poor performance of the low quality garments made with cheap materials and labour (Yoon et al., 2020; Dissanayake; 2019; Niinimäki, 2011; Fletcher, 2012), which additionally reflects in the lack of attachment towards the products (Fletcher, 2012). In conclusion, the fast-fashion industry consumes large amounts of non-renewable resources while having an environmental impact, for the purpose of producing goods that are mostly used for a short period of time (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017)''.

This research study aims to demonstrate the strong correlation between environmentally conscious people and how they make their decisions in terms of fashion. Hence, individuals who are more interested in sustainability are most likely to have a positive attitude towards circular fashion. These attitudes make a difference on the micro level. This segment of people will be more inclined to search for alternatives to procuring their clothes. They will be making use of thrift stores, flea markets, and reselling platforms like Vinted and Vestiaire Collective, slowing the fast fashion approach with their considerate choices. It could be said that the main reason behind the choices of this group of people is most likely the realization that the rapidity of environmental deterioration stays in the hands of humankind and that the fashion industry has a considerable role in this, especially if an innovative sustainable advancement is not adopted soon. Nonetheless, that is not exactly the only reasoning behind their choices, these kind of people are more prone to believe that second hand and vintage clothes are made of better quality and resistant materials while the quality of fast fashion is considerably lower and more questionable considering the massive proportion of plastic derivatives being used in the production of the products. Of course, these problems could be avoided by introducing new policies and regulations within the industry, just like Niinimäki (2011) remarks that ''some countries started to establish environmental laws

concerning industrial manufacturing and waste treatment, but it was very common that the factory could acquire a permit exceptional to the law and hence continue manufacturing as before. In Finland, the Water Act, which included wastewater treatment regulations, came into effect in 1961, but waste practices did not change until the 1970s (Pulkkinen 2008; Niinimäki & Pulkkinen 2008, Santti 1985)''.

Literature review
Marketing's influence on consumers
Fashion giants like Inditex, Shein, Temu, Uniqlo and Asos target consumers through marketing strategies. The most successful way in which they obtain customer retention is through social media. Using these platforms allows customers to engage with them in a direct way and make the consumer feel like they are part of a group. These companies prefer to use media platforms because they are cost-effective and more efficient. A study published by the Aalto University School of Business states that static and video content became the easiest and most effective way to present products and services to customers because they have a born desire to buy the latest trends that can be visualised with the help of media content. In order to see what is the most popular platform, when marketing for fast-fashion, they conducted a survey on over 100 consumers. The results found that Instagram, at 86%, was the most popular site for producers and consumers of fast fashion (Koivulehto 2017). When we look at how customers of fast fashion behave, it is certain that their spending habits are impulsive and have become a reason for these brands to continue to mass-produce clothes. Ella Bjerre (2023) stated that the impact of social media on people's impulsivity was studied by Dr. Elvira Bolat, a recognizable professor in Digital Marketing. In her study, she stated that key opinion leaders or influencers are people who have a significant impact on consumer behavior through manipulation on social media networks. In order to see how consumerism is manipulated by these influencers, a survey was answered by over 450 people. The result showed that 57% of respondents agreed that the impulsive spending they had was because of seeing influencers using a certain product. Out of that 57%, the participants agreed that the most impactful influencers were those that cared about social issues and environmental problems.

Sustainability shift
It is no secret that the fast fashion industry finds itself in serious need of change, a shift towards more sustainable practices and environmentally-conscious business models and operations. This present paper expects to offer a fairly thorough explanation as to why such methods are highly demanded in the said industry.

The major players in the industry should consider how impactful their business practices are on the planet. Just as Ciornea (2020) explained in her paper, the fast-fashion industry is polluting the water, soil and air. By shifting towards more sustainable practices, these giants can stop the use of synthetic fibers as polyester, resulting in less plastic that will have an impact on the environment when the clothes are not worn anymore. The usage of fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides needed for the crop production (Rana et al., 2014; Suruj-Zaman et al., 2021; Chowdhury et al., 2015) will negatively impact the rivers and landfill with chemical contamination by the waste discarded in these places. (Koszewska, 2018; Eryuruk, 2012; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Chowdhury et al., 2015). Additionally, psychology plays a big role in consumers' behaviour and their decision-making process, one of the key common characteristics of fast fashion enthusiasts being that they buy products that do not have a high quality, but only at an affordable price. They use the clothes for a short period of time and visit the fast-fashion giants frequently. These

consumers tend to not wait for sales, and they often follow fashion trends on social media. It was observed that they have an indulgent consumption. (Alimen 2014) .

In light of the aforementioned, Niinimäki (2011) observes that: "In the context of sustainable development it is crucial to consume less and to invest in products with longer life spans. To ensure this future path it is most important to focus on designing better product satisfaction and experiences. Through deeper satisfaction, it is possible to create deeper engagement with products, thereby avoiding disposable products. Consumers create an emotional bond with certain products, and this emotional bond is an opportunity to increase the lifespan of the product." This suggests a shift from the fast fashion disposable culture and reduces waste by also promoting a more sustainable consumption approach.

In 2025, it became clear that small changes would not solve the environmental problems the fast-fashion industry is causing. Only if the majority of commercial enterprises which produce fast-fashion clothing would change their operating models to completely sustainable business models would we be able to see a change. Each enterprise should use more renewable energy and invest in technologies that would help them be more efficient in terms of raw materials. Yet, considering the resources' scarcity blatant issue, the industry may not be able to meet the future needs of customers if their pattern of consumption remains unchanged and based on overconsumption (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Even the industry' efforts to improve sustainability appear to be outpaced by overconsumption at the individual level and increasing global consumption (Niinimäki et al., 2020, p. 196) as a result of world population growth.

It is important to educate and reshape the behaviour of consumers towards more sustainable consumption (White et al., 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2020), even though this will affect the growth of the global fashion industry (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Greenpeace, 2017). Because a collective contribution is needed in order to obtain visible results (Bamberg et al., 2015), this breakthrough in consumers' minds towards more reasonable consumption can be possible if governments and large global organizations promote educational programs. With the help of marketing departments of big fast-fashion companies, they can reshape the consumers' perception of always buying the last collection of clothing in order to be in trend with their friends and the influencers they watch and share common traits with. In addition, "marketing and sustainability are inextricably intertwined" (White et al., 2019; Viswanathan et al., 2014), thus, the business models these companies operate on need to be changed in order to include eco-friendly measures in their marketing strategies and operations.

If we take a closer look at the luxury fashion industry, which has made more progress towards a more sustainable process (Arrigo, 2015; Campos Franco et al., 2019), it might contribute with solutions that can be embraced by the fast-fashion industry. Fashion luxury is an industry in which the brands advocate exceptional quality and longevity, thus, they are able to create brand and product attachments, fulfilling an astonishing amount of needs from functional to psychological (Ciornea et al., 2011a; Ciornea et al., 2011b; Ciornea, 2013)

Methodology

Based on the issues pointed out in the abstract, this study hypothesizes that consumers who are aware of the environmental impacts of fast fashion and those who value long-lasting, high-quality products are more likely to choose sustainable options like second-hand clothing. In other words, they tend to recognize that overconsumption contributes to environmental degradation and therefore, they shift towards more ethical and sustainable fashion choices.

This study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to get a better view of consumer behaviour regarding the fashion industry. By using a mix of these approaches, the survey provides us with a better understanding of shopping habits, second-hand clothing opinions and views on sustainability.

The quantitative research consists of a survey designed with multiple-choice and rating-scale questions. The questions measure the influence of social pressure, spending habits, sustainability awareness and familiarity with second-hand clothing platforms. The qualitative component consists of open questions that offer insights into personal experiences and challenges in shopping for second-hand clothing. The survey was made online using Google Forms and was distributed on WhatsApp and other social media platforms. By sharing the survey online we obtained the data extremely fast from various consumer groups. Our research focused on two age groups: 18-25 years old and 26-35 years old. These groups of consumers have an important influence on fashion trends and customer behaviour. Our sample included people who shop at malls, second-hand stores and online clothing platforms users, thus resulting in a variety of perspectives.

The data gathered from the survey were analysed using Microsoft Excel and Google Forms. The qualitative responses were grouped together based on similarity. This allowed us to see that many people mentioned the affordability and quality provided by second-hand products. To be sure that our results are trustable, we designed the survey with clear questions, without leaving room for any subjectivity. In order to maintain legitimacy, we aligned our design with other studies and research in consumer behaviour and sustainable fashion, such as Niinimäki (2011), the Fashion Revolution (2020) and the Business of Fashion - "State of Fashion 2025" report.

The sources showed us the importance of growing resale markets, which helped us shape our survey. Ethical standards were also followed: the participants were notified about the study's purpose, and their confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

Results and discussions

This section explores and presents consumer behavior and implications in the fashion industry. The results provide us important insights about their choices and thought processes when buying new clothes. From the quantitative part of our research we obtained that 96.6% of our respondents think that the overproduction of clothing could have a negative impact on the environment with 48.3% thinking that it is definitely a major environmental issue and 48.3% choosing that it has a negative impact to some extent, but other industries are more harmful. Another discovery we have made is that 79.3% of the consumers think clothing trends are changing faster compared to previous years, out of which 62.1% think that trends change much faster than before. Because fast-fashion companies want to sell as many clothes as possible, they had to change two things: the grade of clothing and the rotation of new collections. Luxury brands usually have one or two clothing collections a year, depending on the type of brand they are, but these giants from the fast-fashion industry release new garments daily. John A. Deighton (2023) managed to get some insight into how Shein is using a large-scale automated test and reorder (LATR) model. Between July and

December 2021 Shein managed to add from 2000 to 10000 articles per day to its app. An associate professor of fashion and apparel studies at the University of Delaware called Sheng Lu estimates that this model LATR generated 20 times as many new items as H&M or Zara in 2021. Shein uses the data gathered from its consumers in order to produce more look-alike items.

Another topic that was approached in our study was how much money consumers spend on new clothes from the mall each month. 55.2% of our respondents spend from 100 to 500 RON a month. This would result in a yearly consumption of 1200 to 6000 RON a year. Our survey's data is supported by the Household final consumption expenditure by purpose dataset provided by Eurostat. We can see that in Romania, the average household spends about 480 euros a year on clothing and footwear, resulting in 2400 RON in a year. Our research aligns with the data set, giving our study a more profound accuracy.

Table 1. Household final consumption expenditure by purpose – Clothing and footwear, unit of measure current prices, euro per capita

TIME 2021		
GEO (Labels)	COICOP (Labels)	
European Union – 27 countries (from 2020)	Clothing and footwear	690
Belgium	Clothing and footwear	880
Bulgaria	Clothing and footwear	230
Czechia	Clothing and footwear	370
Denmark	Clothing and footwear	1,090
Germany	Clothing and footwear	790
Estonia	Clothing and footwear	690
Ireland	Clothing and footwear	960
Greece	Clothing and footwear	450
Spain	Clothing and footwear	520
France	Clothing and footwear	610

TIME 2021		
GEO (Labels)	COICOP (Labels)	
Croatia	Clothing and footwear	470
Italy	Clothing and footwear	930
Luxembourg	Clothing and footwear	1,570
Hungary	Clothing and footwear	250
Netherlands	Clothing and footwear	1,010
Austria	Clothing and footwear	1,090
Poland	Clothing and footwear	410
Portugal	Clothing and footwear	740
Romania	Clothing and footwear	480
Slovenia	Clothing and footwear	720
Slovakia	Clothing and footwear	440
Finland	Clothing and footwear	840
Sweden	Clothing and footwear	890
Norway	Clothing and footwear	1,270
Switzerland	Clothing and footwear	850

Source: Eurostat

Another important discovery was that 100% of participants at least occasionally check the materials of clothes they are going to buy, out of which 41.4% say that they actively look at materials before buying the garment. When asked about their opinion on the overall concept of circular fashion, the respondents were extremely positive about the idea: 51.7% fully support and

engage with it, and 34.5% think it is a good idea but don't use it a lot. We went more in-depth with our next questions because we wanted to see how our control group is engaging the circular fashion concept. We found out that they know about second-hand online platforms like Vinted, Vestiaire Collective, Depop and Grailed and that 55.2% of them occasionally buy from these platforms. With another question we did find out that 24.1% of the consumers considered using these platforms, but they did not actually do it. With the qualitative data gathered from the respondents, we find out that a big majority liked the process of selling and buying used clothing on second-hand reselling platforms because they are easy to use, the prices are cheap and the process of getting rid of old clothes has never been more convenient.

When talking about sustainability, it is important to say that 69% of the people said that they encourage their friends and family to be more mindful of their purchases and avoid impulsive shopping. The majority, 41.4%, occasionally adopt this attitude when the topic comes up in the discussion, and 20.7% actively encourage them to shop more consciously.

However, it was observed from our survey that buying second-hand clothing does not come without its challenges. Some of the most common downsides that our participants have encountered were overpriced items, hygiene concerns, difficulty finding the right size followed by the anxiety that it will not actually fit in reality and a time-consuming searching process. Needless to say, each of these problems make second-hand shopping less appealing, even if people are open to the idea and have initiative. In order to overcome these setbacks, the businesses that activate in this industry could implement better regulations and requirements for sellers and more performant search engines and online augmented reality fitting rooms to help buyers make better decisions about their purchases. Lately, one online platform that took steps towards this goal was Vinted and it can be seen in the rising popularity the app has among consumers.

Figures and tables

Do you think that the overproduction of clothing could have a negative impact on the environment?
29 responses

- Yes, definitely, it is a major environmental issue
- Yes, to some extent, but other industries are more harmful
- I'm not sure, I haven't thought about it much
- No, I don't think it has a significant environmental impact
- No, fashion production is necessary and not a problem

48.3%
48.3%

Figure 1. Overproduction of clothing has a negative impact on the environment

Source: Author's own study

Approximately how much money do you spend on new clothes from the mall each month?
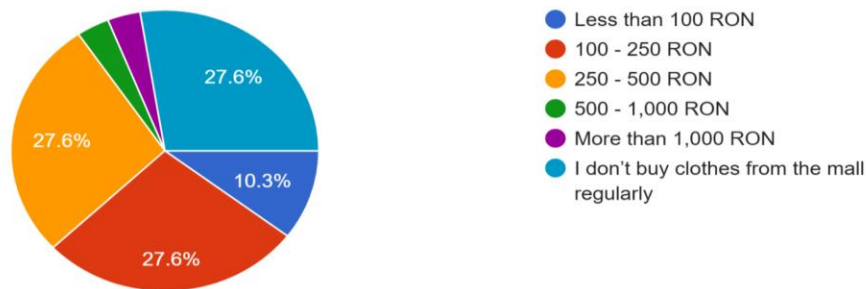29 responses

- Less than 100 RON
- 100 - 250 RON
- 250 - 500 RON
- 500 - 1,000 RON
- More than 1,000 RON
- I don't buy clothes from the mall regularly

27.6%
10.3%
27.6%
27.6%

Figure 2. Consumer's monthly clothing expenditure

Source: Author's own study

Have you ever felt social pressure to buy trending clothing just because everyone else had it?
29 responses

- Yes, many times
- Yes, occasionally
- Rarely, but it has happened
- No, I buy what I personally like
- No, I don't care about trends at all
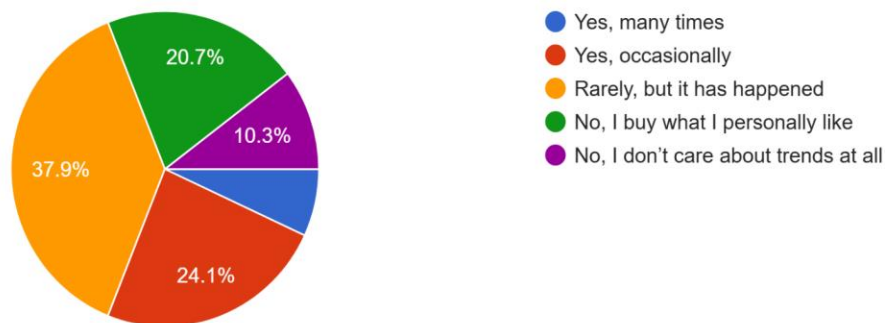
20.7%
10.3%
37.9%
24.1%

Figure 3. Social pressure is an input when consumers buy clothes

Source: Author's own study

When buying new clothes, how much do you consider the materials they are made from?
29 responses

- Not at all (I never check the materials)
- Rarely (I check sometimes, but it's not a priority)
- Occasionally (I consider materials for certain items)
- Often (I actively look at materials before buying)
- Always (Material quality and sustainability are key factors in my decision)

41.4%
20.7%
10.3%
27.6%

Figure 4. Social pressure is a factor when consumers buy clothes

Source: Author's own study

In recent years, have you noticed a change in the quality of new clothes?
29 responses

- Yes, I've noticed a significant decrease in quality
- Yes, I've noticed a slight decrease in quality
- No, I think the quality has remained the same
- Yes, I've noticed a slight increase in quality
- Yes, I've noticed a significant increase…
- I haven't paid attention to this

17.2%
72.4%

Figure 5. Quality of manufactured clothes has decreased

Source: Author's own study

What is your opinion about thrift stores, second-hand clothing platforms, and the overall concept of circular fashion?
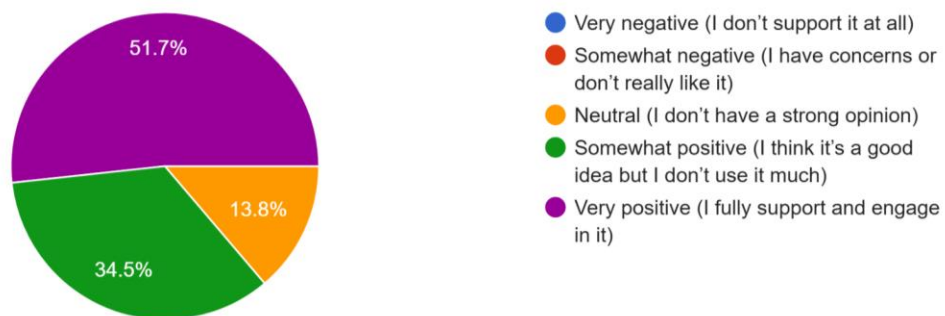29 responses

- Very negative (I don't support it at all)
- Somewhat negative (I have concerns or don't really like it)
- Neutral (I don't have a strong opinion)
- Somewhat positive (I think it's a good idea but I don't use it much)
- Very positive (I fully support and engage in it)

51.7%
13.8%
34.5%

Figure 6. Consumers are open to the circular fashion concept

Source: Author's own study

Do you think the recent rise in second-hand clothing should be encouraged?
29 responses

- Yes, definitely—it's a great way to promote sustainability and affordability
- Yes, but only if quality and hygiene standards are ensured
- Neutral—I don't have a strong opinion on this
- No, second-hand clothing should not be heavily promoted
- No, I think people should prioritize buying new clothes

37.9%
58.6%

Figure 7. Consumers think that people should promote second-hand clothing

Source: Author's own study

Have you ever bought or sold clothing on second-hand platforms like Vinted, Depop, or Vestiaire Collective?
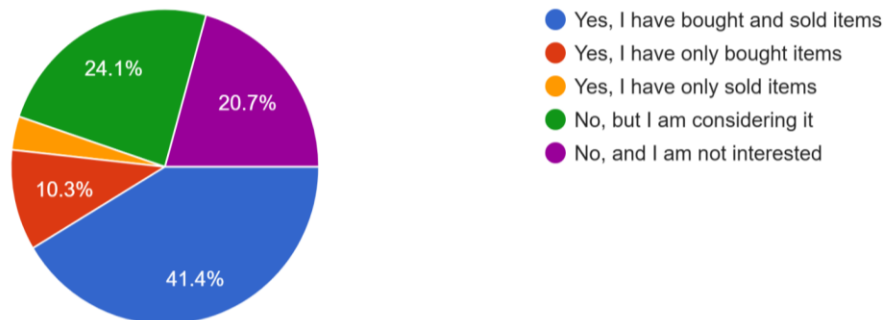
29 responses

- Yes, I have bought and sold items
- Yes, I have only bought items
- Yes, I have only sold items
- No, but I am considering it
- No, and I am not interested

Figure 8. People use second-hand platforms to buy and sell clothing

Source: Author's own study

Do you encourage your friends and family to be more mindful of their purchases and avoid impulsive shopping?
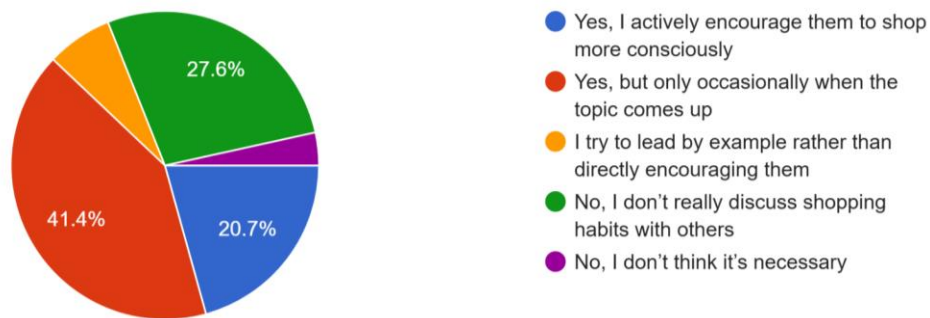
29 responses

- Yes, I actively encourage them to shop more consciously
- Yes, but only occasionally when the topic comes up
- I try to lead by example rather than directly encouraging them
- No, I don't really discuss shopping habits with others
- No, I don't think it's necessary

Figure 9. Consumers promote a conscious mindset to family and friends

Source: Author's own study

Conclusion

The present research paper had the purpose of concluding if there is a direct connection between consumers' environmental consciousness and the choices they made regarding fashion related issues like non-sustainable fast fashion practices and consumerism.

After analysing the results of this research, it can be said that the fast fashion industry has an extensive contribution to environmental abuse, which has become one of the most discussed concerns worldwide. Although a shift towards more sustainable business methods would be a huge step in revolutionising the industry, it is not to be ignored how big of a difference it would make a change on the individual level. It is vital that consumers are educated on the consequences of their overconsumption habits and what other alternatives they have instead of abusing fast fashion. A drastic change in consumer behaviour and the way the fast fashion industry operates would surely ensure a better industrial evolution in the direction of an environmentally friendly future.

Considering the before-stated outcomes, a fair base of premises has been provided in hopes of possible extensions of the research with regards to the importance of sustainable fashion practices, implementing circular fashion and lastly, but not least, the influence of marketing on

consumers' behaviour and the choices they make. Fast fashion consumerism represents a complex subject that has a great deal of nuances to it. Hence, for a deeper research into the subject, one must consult facts about economy, sustainability, psychology, sociology, marketing and even chemistry to understand the rate of impact it may have fully and to have breakthroughs after performing the research.

Nonetheless, though the present study covered in depth several points of the given subject, there were some limitations in raising the scale of the research. One downside was the fact that the studied control group did not consist of more than 30 persons, which may have limited the diversity of answers and insights from actual consumers. Also, the age intervals of the control group were 18-25 and 26-35. The provided data only refers to people within these age groups, so the opinions of consumers of all ages cannot be known. Surely, the present results can be used to lead research at a larger scale by preparing a larger control group and having more precise data about the amount of clothes each person consumes in a month.

Lastly, this paper reveals a great gap between sustainability and individual consumer choice and stresses the much-needed shift of the fast fashion industry towards sustainable and eco-conscious measures.

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