Article

The Online Shopping Experience During the Pandemic and After—A Turning Point for Sustainable Fashion Business Management?

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Abstract: The present paper studies the changes that occurred in the clothing trade during the COVID-19 pandemic and the influences exerted on business management. The pandemic sped up digitalization, pushing companies to quickly adapt to new economic conditions and marking a turning point for online commerce. In the fashion sector, where consumer behavior has shifted rapidly and digital technologies have transformed the business landscape, it is essential to examine these changes and their long-term impact. The research methodology involved an online questionnaire-based survey, targeting 153 respondents from various age groups. Descriptive statistics were used, such as the analysis of variation indicators, to explore patterns in the data and provide a clearer understanding of the phenomena studied. Additionally, a series of statistical tests were applied to validate the research questions. The aim was not to predict future behavior but to explain current trends and shifts, particularly the acceleration of digitalization during the pandemic. The findings highlight changes in customer behavior, the need for investments in technology and innovation, and the importance of adaptability, especially in marketing. There is a statistically significant relationship between income levels and spending on clothing, with higher incomes leading to increased expenditure. The pandemic amplified the role of online channels, particularly among higher-income groups. Promotional campaigns significantly impact purchase decisions, especially for lower-income consumers, serving as both purchase drivers and tools for customer retention. The shift toward online shopping, accelerated by the pandemic, highlights substantial growth potential for e-commerce in the fashion sector. Consumers favor platforms offering convenience, product diversity, and personalized experiences. A moderate interest in sustainable fashion was observed, with preferences leaning toward affordable and durable materials, underscoring the need for transparent and eco-friendly business practices.

Keywords: fashion industry; clothing items; online outlets; business; consumer behaviour

1. Introduction

In these past years, there have been increasing debates about the negative effects that the clothing industry has on the environment, with the literature characterizing it as polluting and "most resource-intensive" [1]. The main "culprit" is often considered to be the consumer. Under the influence of society's evolution or even under the pressure of various promotional tools, the consumer often chooses an unsustainable, even irresponsible, way to manage the concern for their own image. Thus, a person is frequently choosing to spend a lot on clothing items that are not worn with high frequency and that often end up being thrown away after only a few uses, making room in the wardrobe for new and perhaps more fashionable pieces. According to studies carried out by MKOR (2024) [2], as an example, in Romania, 9 out of 10 people buy at least one item of clothing every month. Does this indicate sustainability? Furthermore, the statements published in previous years by the European Commission highlight the impact that sometimes irresponsible behaviour

by individuals has on the environment and climate, forecasting a 63% increase by 2030 in clothing consumption starting from 2022 [3]. Ziarul Financiar provides data regarding the level of spending by Romanians on clothing and footwear, with the total amounting to RON 3.4 billion in 2024 [4]. As for producers, two different directions can be noticed. On the one hand, it can be stated that the fast fashion industry often encourages unsustainable behaviour on the part of consumers and raises many controversies regarding the labour conditions offered to employees. On the other hand, the companies with a continuous and dedicated concern for environmental protection are emphasizing the importance of ensuring decent and fair working conditions, while also using environmentally friendly materials. Often, they also aim to obtain certifications, focusing on reducing pollution, and on quality to the detriment of quantity [5].

Some hypermarkets are already implementing programs through which they aim to contribute to environmental protection, becoming involved in the recycling of clothing items, either by integrating pre-worn and resold clothes into their offerings [6].

In this spirit of promoting sustainability, the concept of slow fashion emerged, in contrast to fast fashion, with some companies promoting a sustainable approach to clothing trade and fashion in general [7]. This emphasizes the need for conscious decision-making, while also encouraging local production and ethical commerce, focusing on reducing the carbon footprint. Of course, customer receptiveness becomes a decisive factor in this regard, with Green Report studies indicating that around 60% of Romanians are "willing to pay more for sustainable clothing" [8].

According to the Ecologic magazine, "the global clothing market was valued at 3 trillion dollars in 2021, representing 2% of the global GDP" [9]. However, we are witnessing a rapid rise in the supply of sustainable products, with many entrepreneurs choosing to provide information about the country of origin of the materials.

A broad view of the business environment reveals that, although there are concerns about implementing sustainability principles [10] at the business level, Romania still faces a series of challenges in properly managing businesses from this perspective [11]. Companies are influenced by economic, social, political, and infrastructure factors. We are therefore talking about a legislative framework that is not yet clearly defined, with sustainability laws still having some unknowns, while relatively frequent changes pose difficulties for companies. Additionally, implementing sustainable practices requires investments, which can pose challenges, especially for small businesses. Access to financing is also often hampered by the lack of necessary skills to prepare eligible projects. Moreover, at both the consumer and company levels, the culture of sustainability is still developing, with some entrepreneurs being slower to accept the long-term benefits of sustainable practices. Beyond all this, entrepreneurs' motivation to invest in sustainability is directly linked to the demand for sustainable products and services. However, a 2020 EY report indicates a high level of popularity for this topic, with the study identifying that a significant 74% of respondents recognize the integration of sustainability principles into the overall business strategy as a priority. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many entrepreneurs to "reassess their business strategy" [12].

In the case of many large companies, a strong focus in this regard can be noticed, with their sustainability strategy often being published on their websites. Some companies (eMag is an example of this) also regularly publish sustainability reports [13].

According to Park and Lee [14], the way shopping is carried out has certainly undergone major transformations during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also affected fashion business management. Liu et al. [15] believe that "the pandemic lockdown and social distancing mandates have deeply disrupted consumers' daily lives and normal consumption", whereas studies by Ong et al. [16] indicate that clothing items were also continuously purchased by individuals during the pandemic, albeit in a smaller amount, being a non-essential product category and not a priority for consumers. The experience of online shopping, as stated by Devi et al. [17], has become predominant. Online commerce is developing in a major way and even an accentuated trend of migration of buyers to the

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form of e-commerce can be noted. Beyond other strategy changes, retailers have had to adapt to new trends and implement new online sales channels, with some entrepreneurs even developing specialized mobile applications [18]. It is clear that the challenges were numerous, with many businesses facing problems in terms of the pace of sales or experiencing delays in supply chains and the information provided by Forbes Romania [19] also pointing to decreases in terms of labour productivity.

Given that changes in customer behaviour can be observed compared to the pre-pandemic period [20–23], we also note that the pandemic has pushed businesses towards a much faster, even forced, digitization. Companies were determined to invest in new technologies and digital tools in order to be able to adapt more easily and to survive in an already competitive market [24]. Farida and Setiawan also study the importance of "performance and innovation as mediating variables in the relationship between business strategies" [24] and competitive advantage, while Kraus et al. [25] highlight the role of digital transformation in business. A vision of the future of the fashion industry leads to an increasing need to adapt, both to new customer preferences and to sustainability requirements, involving artificial intelligence tools [26–29] in the customer service process.

The way the businesses in this field will respond to the double perspective mentioned above will also determine the success or failure of the companies on the market, with the changes imposed by the pandemic during the last few years indicating a turning point for an efficient and sustainable management of the activity, as stated by d Amato et al. [30].

We further formulated two research questions, which aim to bring some additional clarifications in the mentioned context:

RQ1: How have individual preferences and purchasing behaviors in clothing evolved across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, particularly in relation to income levels, shopping outlets (online, physical, and mixed), and promotional influences?

RQ2: What opportunities exist for business development in the online clothing trade, considering shifts in consumer interest, the effectiveness of promotional strategies, and changes in spending across different income levels?

This article is structured as follows: its second section is dedicated to the review of the literature, where we find the presentation of the fast-fashion phenomenon, as well as the role that digitization and the online environment play nowadays in the life of business in the field of fashion. The premises of the expansion of influencer marketing in the context of the social commerce development are highlighted, as well as the changes that the buying and consumption behaviour of individuals went through during the pandemic, and the influences on businesses in this field. The third section presents the research methodology, listing the proposed objectives and the variables studied in correlation with the research questions. The tool used in the research is presented, as well as the demographic profile of the respondents to the questionnaire (153 in number). The fourth and fifth section present the results of the research and the discussions, with the conclusions being later outlined, specifying the limits of the study and future research directions.

2. Theoretical Background

The fast-fashion phenomenon has recently acquired an unprecedented scale. More and more companies appeared that are oriented towards the production of cheap but at the same time lower quality clothing, compared to established companies in the field of the production of this type of goods. Vesterinen and Syrjala consider the current fashion system as "unsustainable" [31]. Joy et al. [32] describe the concept of "fast-fashion" as "low-cost clothing collections that mimic current luxury fashion trends", with this phenomenon being encouraged to develop against the background of globalization [33], offering a higher level of flexibility and adaptability according to customer preferences. Nevertheless, fast fashion trends are considered by some authors as characteristic of an "uncontrollable phenomenon", which "burdens the environment not only in its final form, but also during the production process" [34], offering market products with a much shorter life cycle [35].

Hult et al. [36] discuss the concept of market-based sustainability in relation to this subject, defining it as a phenomenon that contributes to the development of the relationship between organizations, society, and the environment as a whole, while also paying due attention to customer needs. Gordon et al., on the other hand, address the concept of "sustainable marketing" in direct relation to green marketing, social marketing, and critical marketing [37], ideas partially shared by Kalafatis et al. [38].

Because of the lack of financial resources, but at least out of the desire to imitate the lifestyle of famous people, which is fuelled at the same time by the content posted by influencers on social media [39], some individuals end up turning to brands that target a wider market segment, despite having modest material possibilities. The influencer marketing is therefore considered dynamic and variable [39].

The first hypothesis is as follows:

H1. *There is a direct relationship between the income level and the amounts of money individuals allocate to the purchase of clothing items.*

Naeem and Ozuem [40] indicate that people who "buy fashion brands often follow experts in this field on social media". Nowadays, influencers therefore play an important part, with the 2023 Deloitte reports [41] indicating certain interesting statistics in this regard. Thus, according to the above-mentioned reports, most individuals (64%) who make online purchases discover the products through social media channels, being prone to opt for those "in trend" or promoted and validated by influencers. They show an increasing openness towards "virtual worlds" or immersive experiences [41], which also opens up new opportunities for business development in the online environment, where purchases are one mere click away. In this respect, the official reports also mention an interesting business trend. They indicate that, in addition to the already traditional forms of e-commerce and m-commerce, the variant of social commerce is gradually emerging, developed through the extensive and intensive use of social mediate. The Harvard Business Review articles mention retail's extraordinary ability to constantly reinvent itself [42], with the apparel industry increasingly investing in online tools [43]. Busalim [44] and Hajli et al. [45] define social commerce as a branch of e-commerce that takes advantage of social networking platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter) and Web 2.0 technologies. Vatanasakdakul, Aoun and Defiandry [46] even consider that "the mass diffusion of social media has enabled new commercial models in retailing". Other results published by the same authors [46] identify factors such as "lifestyle, price value and facilitating conditions" as positive determinants of the acceptance degree of social commerce. Thus, there can be noticed a change in paradigm and experience at the same time, by comparison with the pre-pandemic period. Al-Adwan and Kokash [47] indicated in 2019, i.e., before the pandemic, a reduced presence of individuals in the online environment in general, and also in social commerce, which at the time represented a "barrier to e-commerce development".

Alam et al. [43] even state that a more active presence on the Internet of an individual can determine positive results in society, through the lens of interpersonal relations, although other authors find a negative side of social media platforms. Thus, Kawaf and Istanbulluoglu (w.y.) [48] consider social media as a "space of individual expression", but with reference to the act of making purchases online, it cannot be neglected that the main source of information is someone unknown to the person of the buyer, with some sources even being anonymous and lacking in credibility.

Thus, digital marketing has benefited from an important boost, but, as Saiful [49] states, in order to successfully implement a marketing strategy, a good understanding of the purchasing and consumption behaviour of potential customers is first necessary. This study and also the significant amount of information accumulated on this topic demonstrate a certain behavioural pattern. Purwaningtyas and Rahadi [50] believe that the customer's purchase decision is based on a series of factors, which can be included in two large categories. First, there are the factors that are directly related to the product (price, design,

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quality, brand awareness, diversity, associated promotions). Also, it is important to mention the factors related to electronic commerce, namely the availability of information, degree of trust attributed to the seller, quality of associated services, etc. Knowing this information is necessary, the singular implementation of strategies based on the inclusion of digital tools in the work process is not sufficient [51]. Authors such as Arshad and Arshad [52] even argue that the purchase decision is most often directly related to promotions, and the amount perceived to be saved by purchasing a certain good would have a greater impact on the purchase intention than the perceived quality of that product.

Deloitte reports state that the implementation of virtual reality tools even contributes to the shaping of virtual store formats [41], in addition to other more well-known forms of online commerce, such as digital stores, livestream commerce, influencer commerce, through the use of augmented reality [53] or various mini-applications [54], etc. Shopifyplus reports [55] mention that "the global virtual and augmented reality market in retail is growing", with Statista [56] estimating an increase from USD 3.8 million in 2021 to USD 17.9 million in 2028. The connection between social media and the fashion industry has been studied quite intensely in recent years, with Kochhar [57] mentioning the essential role of these channels in the communication and marketing process, especially amplified during the pandemic and after. Beyond the previously mentioned statistical data, according to Sendible [58], the social commerce market worldwide totalled USD 89.4 billion in 2020, with an expected increase to USD 604.5 billion by 2027. Short [59] and Gunawardena [60] specify that "the presence of individuals on the Internet produces positive results both for the structure of society and in terms of the relationship with influencers" [43].

Official statistics show that in Europe in 2021, the level of expenditure on clothing and footwear was positioned between a minimum value of USD 140 per capita (in Albania) and a maximum value of USD 1770 per capita (in Luxembourg). Norway ranked second, according to the data presented by Statista [56] (USD 1510), followed by Iceland (USD 1240). Romania is positioned in the middle of this ranking, with an average level of spending of USD 610 per inhabitant.

Sendible [58] characterizes "the fashion e-commerce industry market" as both "crowded and competitive", distinguished by creativity in social media.

The recent period has been characterized worldwide by multiple changes having taken place in various fields of activity. The fashion industry and the field of online commerce were no exceptions in this regard, with the behaviour of individuals being largely influenced, especially by the COVID-19 pandemic, both positively and negatively. Over the three years or so that ordinary activities have taken on new dimensions, the way people have lived the shopping experience has also changed. This prompts us to reflect on whether the coronavirus pandemic can be considered a turning point in the evolution of fashion businesses. Thus, although the lockdowns did not have a very long temporal duration, they, together with certain restrictions on movement in physical stores, reoriented consumers towards an environment with more possibilities, namely the online environment, imposing, however, a more rational approach regarding spending money. However, as noted by Vladimirova et al. [61], the transition to an online variant of shopping [17] required a distinct skill set compared to the traditional variant.

Next, clothing items, as mentioned by Menon et al. [62], are considered a "feel-and-touch product"; therefore, a different approach compared to other categories of products ordered online is essential. The problem of the perception of the quality of the products bought online therefore comes into play, with even an analysis of the costs regarding the returns made by customers, as far as the companies are concerned, being necessary. These costs are often considered "enormous" by the economic operators and the actions of returning the products generate effects on the environment as well [63–65]. If, in physical stores, both the quantity and the options are usually limited, in the online environment, consumers have realized that it is easier to identify products they like, and to purchase them at much more advantageous prices than in the physical outlets. Sources from the literature [65] have identified, in addition to numerous benefits of the online commercial

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system, some disadvantages induced by this form of buying and selling products. These can be listed as the lack of certainty regarding the degree of suitability of a clothing item, the impossibility of touching it [65–67], the lack of consultants able to provide the necessary information, the lack of in-store experience and the impossibility of physically entering the atmosphere of a store [68] and factors that increase the risk of returning it, generating extra costs for the merchant.

Several benefits of the online environment have been identified beyond product diversity and variety. These include the ability to compare items across different websites, find attractive promotions, return unsuitable products, enjoy fast delivery, etc. These features have gradually drawn people deeper into the virtual world. Research by Bounkhong [69] reveals that online applications or even social commerce in general must be perceived as useful by users first and foremost. Kawaf and Istanbulluoglu [48] point to the importance of reviews in this regard, with a large proportion of customers analysing online opinions before purchasing a product. Some people discovered online stores they had never visited before, while other individuals became loyal customers of brands they had used much less often in previous periods. And the fast-fashion option has often proven to be handy, much cheaper and more accessible than brands renowned for their quality. Even though the origins of social commerce are not recent, technological developments have already turned the world into a "global village", and social media has greatly impacted both life in general and relationships between people, and in this respect, the "power over the industry fashion is one that cannot be denied" either [70].

This change in behaviour, however, has led to two interesting directions worth exploring. On the one hand, individuals spent less on a fast-fashion item compared to a quality brand clothing item. However, the risk of not being satisfied with the products ordered and consequently making more returns has increased, also causing additional costs for the companies concerned. As a reaction response, after the pandemic, certain companies imposed a limit on the number of returns that can be made free of charge within a month, while others increased the value threshold of an order, from which the shipping of products is offered as free.

Statista [56] published a list of the main benefits presented by online stores, compared to retail stores. Consumers rank free home delivery in first person, followed by the possibility of picking up the products without direct contact, which, during the pandemic represented a very big advantage. However, while online shopping may in some cases be mistaken as a "form of therapy" by individuals, or a false refuge for personal insecurities or grievances and uncertainty about the future gradually prompted individuals to exercise restraint, generally reducing the volume of clothing items purchased, which was later reflected in the level of the companies' turnover. Accenture 2022 studies indicate that the pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of human connections, leading to increased levels of adaptation among individuals and "forcing new avenues of connection" [71].

Along with the fading of the pandemic effects, an attempt was made to resume life in parameters similar to those to which individuals were accustomed. Thus, even if the advantages of the virtual environment have been largely realized and consumers still frequently turn to this way of shopping [72], there were also individuals for whom the return to the classic way of visiting stores represented a long-awaited moment.

As for Romania, after a careful analysis of the information, both theoretical and official statistics or those collected as a result of certain studies, it is clear that all the data refer to the dynamic character of the behaviour of the Romanian consumer, especially in the online environment, with the changes and trends being pointed out by numerous authors [73]. The period of the COVID-19 pandemic has not passed without leaving marks on the way the consumer relates to the entire process of buying a product. Thus, in the studies reported by Statista [56], a higher level of demand for cheaper products ranks first on the list of changes, from which we can also deduce the greater preference of individuals for fast-fashion clothing. At the same time, we witness a greater concern of people regarding

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the safety of the delivery, but also regarding the delivery time of the products ordered online, with the traders in most cases collaborating in an efficient way with the courier companies [74] and even offering discounts on transport or free shipping. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the courier business cannot be ignored [74].

The second hypothesis proposed is as follows:

H2. *The decision to purchase a clothing item is greatly influenced by promotions offered by retailers, especially in the case of individuals with lower incomes.*

With regard to pricing in this industry, promotions are a popular way to attract customers [75], but a significant change in the transition from the pandemic to the post-pandemic period was also the one related to the preferred payment method. If before the pandemic payment for online orders was often made upon delivery of the product, the desire to have limited contact with physical money led to a greater use of cards and online payments [74].

As some researchers of this phenomenon (Blazques, Boardman, Henninger) also mention, the online environment is still "characterized by a high level of uncertainty" [76]. This aspect also determines influences on consumer behaviour, with consumers wishing to acquire first of all a higher level of trust in traders, to be able to "develop long-term relationships". However, even before the pandemic period, there were some concerns regarding the ethics of consumerism in fashion, an issue analysed by authors such as Cavusoglu and Dakhli [77].

Articles on this topic mention the advantages the online environment offers to a business, especially through the use of social platforms or social media channels. In this sense, for customers, the advantages would consist, to a high extent, of the discovery of new experiences. For businesses, the generated advantages involve both the implementation of new and more effective methods of communication with consumers and the initiation of new partnerships [78].

According to Mileva [79], Influencer Marketing Hub reports indicate a value of the fashion industry of USD 775 billion, with the largest market share in the e-commerce area belonging to China (Shein is indicated as the most visited clothing site in world).

The impact of COVID-19 on businesses in the fashion industry can also be analysed through the lens of structural indicators relevant to this field. In order to understand a broader framework, Statista [56] provides us with data on the situation in Europe for the year 2020, analysing the changes that occurred between the quarters of that year. Referring to the clothing sector, we note that in Europe, production, according to the same source [56], decreased by 37.4% in the second quarter, and by 15% in the third quarter of 2020. One can also observe a drop if we refer to the general sector of textiles, where the decrease in production in the second quarter was 26.9%, followed by a decrease of 6.9% in the third quarter [56]. In the context of this negative evolution, changes can also be noted regarding the structure of the companies' personnel, with a reduction of 6.4% and 7.5% in quarters II and III, respectively, in the clothing sector and the evolution being slightly different in terms of the general textile sector (decrease of 2.8% in the 2nd quarter, and an increase of 2.9% in the 3rd quarter of 2020, according to Statista [56]).

Comparatively, by referring to the results indicators, one can analyse the evolution of the turnover, where the following phenomenon can be noticed. As stated by Statista [56], in the case of the clothing sector, a reduction can be observed in the turnover by 34.4%, and by 9.7% in quarters II and III of 2020, respectively, and in the textile sector, there were successive decreases of 24.7%, 4.4%, and 9.3%, which also reflect the reduction in retail sales by 43.5% and 9.4% in the 2nd and 3rd quarter of the same year, respectively.

The reports elaborated in 2023 by McKinsey & Company [80] demonstrate a sharp return of the global fashion industry in the years 2021 and 2022, although the market is still characterized as fragile, noting the significant price increases both in the United States of America and in Europe as a result of rising inflation. However, according to the same

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reports [80], sales growth is expected to continue, both for apparel in general and in the luxury goods category, especially with the unprecedented development of online commerce and the use of social media tools [81]. Cho and Son even state that social media allows communication without limits, contributing both to the exchange of information and to the sharing of impressions and emotions [81].

Therefore, the third hypothesis proposed is as follows:

H3. *In the context of an accelerated digitalization process, the online environment presents a high potential for development in the clothing retail business sector.*

As for the strategies of the companies in this field, the McKinsey reports [80] also mention strategic directions of action such as the focus on the sustainability of economic agents, in addition to the actions taken to differentiate the brand, and to build the consumer experience. The most targeted markets in order to make investments are considered to be those in North America, Asia and the Middle East. Mandaric et al. [3] also studied the impact that the sustainability of a brand has on customers' purchase decisions, indicating as the reference year for defining the concept of "sustainable fashion" the year 1960, designated as "the year when customers became aware of the impact of the fashion industry on the environment". Zhao, Lee and Sun [82] highlight the usefulness of social media in the process of promoting sustainable fashion. They mention, in addition to the obvious advantages of attracting young generations, and the contribution to the creation of a brand, the great potential for customer awareness regarding the environmental protection and social responsibility actions initiated by companies in this field. According to the research carried out by Soyer and Dittrich [83], the increase in the level of sustainability of the fashion industry is closely related to the change in the purchasing and consumption behaviour shown by customers.

3. Materials and Methods

In order to conduct this study, an exploratory type of research was applied, due to the multidimensional nature of the variables. The research is of a quantitative type, which is meant to determine the respondents' perception of the studied problem, and a questionnaire is used (the details of which will be described below).

3.1. Study Objectives, Hypotheses and Data Collection

After studying the benchmarks in the literature regarding the issue under analysis, two research questions were proposed, which were mentioned in the previous section. in accordance with these, the following three hypotheses were proposed:

H1. *There is a direct relationship between the income level and the amounts of money individuals allocate to the purchase of clothing items.*

H2. *The decision to purchase a clothing item is greatly influenced by promotions offered by retailers, especially in the case of individuals with lower incomes.*

H3. *In the context of an accelerated digitalization process, the online environment presents a high potential for development in the clothing retail business sector.*

In order to be able to answer the proposed research questions, and to test the proposed hypotheses, the main objective established was to study the perception of individuals regarding the evolution of the fashion industry, and the main changes in the personal behaviour of purchasing clothing items during the pandemic period and after.

During the research, a number of secondary objectives were established, subordinate to the main one, and these were as follows:

1. Identifying respondents' preferences regarding the categories of items and brands of products purchased.

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2. Studying the respondents' preferences regarding the preferred way of shopping, and the stores where they purchase clothing items.
3. Identifying the level of interest of the respondents regarding the promotion methods practiced by merchants, and the level at which the respondents are influenced by various online promotions.
4. Identifying the most accessed websites in the field of clothing trade.
5. Studying changes in individuals' level of interest in online, physical or mixed shopping during and after the pandemic.
6. Analysing the business development opportunities in the online trade in clothing.

The conceptual model (Figure 1) on which the analysis was based is described below.

Figure 1. The conceptual model.

The tool used in the study was the questionnaire, applied through the Google forms platform. The questionnaire included a number of 28 questions, with 22 being content questions, and 6 respondent identification questions. The content ones used the 5-point Likert scale to quantify the answers, or offered predefined variants with a simple answer option. The sample studied included a number of 153 respondents from the Caraş-Severin County, Romania, with the questionnaire administration period being 1 October–1 November 2023. The selection of respondents was carried out randomly, with no preconditions for completing the questionnaire. The sample was determined based on the available resources and the time required for data collection and analysis. Efforts were made to include a sufficiently diverse sample to create a database capable of providing meaningful insights into the topic under examination. This sample size was considered appropriate for an exploratory study, allowing the formulation of preliminary conclusions without the need for a large-scale participant group. Respondents were selected randomly, without the application of specific eligibility criteria, ensuring that all individuals available to complete the questionnaire could participate. This method aimed to achieve participant diversity and facilitate a degree of generalization, limited to the context of exploratory research. The use of random selection was deemed appropriate, as the objective was to obtain a broad overview of perceptions rather than to focus on a particular subgroup.

SPSS 29.0.2.0 (20) version was used for data analysis.

3.2. Respondents' Demographic Profile

In order to characterize the structure of the sample of respondents (Table 1), the following table reproduced the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants:

Table 1. Demographic profile of study participants (n = 153). Source: elaborated by the author.

Criterion	Number of Respondents	Variables	Frequency	Relative Values
Gender	153	Male	62	40.52%
		Female	91	59.48%
Age category	153	Under 25 years of age	61	39.87%
		Between 26 and 35 years of age	32	20.92%
		Between 36 and 45 years of age	38	24.84%
		Between 46 and 55 years of age	18	11.76%
		Over 55 years of age	4	2.61%
Level of education	153	High school, post-high school or vocational	82	53.59%
		Undergraduate studies	47	30.72%
		Master's university studies	18	11.76%
		University doctoral studies	6	3.92%
Occupation	153	Pupil/student	51	33.33%
		Employed in the public system	32	20.92%
		Employed in the private system	40	26.14%
		Homemaker	6	3.92%
		Pensioner	2	1.31%
		Unemployed	2	1.31%
		Other	20	13.07%
Monthly net income level	153	Under RON 2500	61	39.87%
		RON 2501–3500	44	28.76%
		RON 3501–4500	14	9.15%
		Over RON 4500	34	22.22%
Marital status	153	Married	68	44.44%
		Single	69	45.10%
		Divorced	6	3.92%
		Other	10	6.54%

In the table above, it can be observed that most respondents in the study were female (n = 91, VR = 59.48%), with the share of male respondents being 40.52%. The characterization of the sample was completed with information on the occupation of the respondents, with 33.33% of the respondents being pupils or students, while 20.92% are employed in the public system, 26.14% are employed in the private system and 3.92% are homemakers, with the unemployed and pensioner respondents having an equal share of 1.31% in the analysed sample. The remaining 13.07% do not fit into any of these categories.

The largest share by age category is represented by people under 25 (39.87%), with the structure by level of education indicating people with high school, post-high school or vocational education as the most numerous (53.59%). About 45% of respondents are single, predominating in the sample from the perspective of marital status, and the majority of respondents (39.87%) have net monthly incomes below RON 2500 (about EUR 500).

The verification of the level of homogeneity and representativeness of the collected responses was carried out by calculating a series of descriptive statistical indicators, and by determining the average position indicators and the variation indicators, testing the

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hypotheses by means of the Chi-square test, Cramer's V and Kendall's Tau. For this to be accomplished, SPSS 29.0.2.0 (20) version was used.

3.3. Data Screening

In order to check the level at which the collected answers are representative for the global population, the level of homogeneity was checked by calculating some descriptive statistical indicators, namely arithmetic mean, mean square deviation, dispersion and coefficient of variation. The testing of the proposed hypotheses was carried out using the Chi-square test, Cramer's V and Kendall's Tau c to measure the association between the variables under analysis and to determine the existence of a relationship between them.

4. Results

Following the centralization of the answers obtained to the questionnaire applied, primary processing of the data and their interpretation were carried out, as follows. Each of the items in the questionnaire was associated with one of the proposed secondary objectives, providing answers to the stated research questions, as can be seen above, in the presented conceptual model.

Before making observations regarding the data collected in relation to the proposed objectives, we were interested to see to what extent the respondents are interested in the evolution of the fashion industry, and in the information related to the trade in clothing. This question can even be considered a filter, through which we identified those answers that could be validated in relation to the proposed theme for the study. The majority of respondents (56.6%) stated in this case that they are interested at a medium extent in the evolution of the fashion industry, with 14.5% being interested to a high extent, and 11.8% to a very high extent. At the opposite pole, 17.1% of the respondents declared to be interested to a low extent. No respondents declared to be not at all interested; therefore, all 153 responses were validated. At a weighted arithmetic mean calculated as equal to 3.13, we observed a coefficient of variation of 31.77% (f = 153), which indicates that the analysed sample is homogeneous and representative, being below the threshold of 35% (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics. Source: elaborated by the author.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Dispersion	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Interest level	153	1	5	3.13	0.9894	0.9947	31.77%
Scale	1—to a very low extent, 2—to a low extent, 3—medium, 4—to a high extent, 5—to a very high extent						

RQ1: How have individual preferences and purchasing behaviors in clothing evolved across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, particularly in relation to income levels, shopping outlets (online, physical, and mixed), and promotional influences?

To answer this question, the first secondary objective aimed to identify respondents' preferences regarding the categories of items purchased. In the questionnaire, a number of three questions were associated with this objective.

After asking which items they purchase most often, the respondents indicated preferences regarding the following categories of clothing items: trousers (category ranked first by 69.7% of the individuals who answered the questions in the questionnaire) and footwear items (55.3%), but also t-shirts, tops or blouses (53.9%). A smaller percentage of respondents ranked the following items bought with a higher frequency in first place: coats (5.3%), jackets or suits (9.2%), dresses (21.1%) or sweatshirts and tracksuits (32.9%). We recall here the fact that the studies carried out by MKOR [2] in Romania indicate a high consumption of clothing items, with the reports stating that 9 out of 10 Romanians purchase at least one product from the clothing category every month [2].

With regard to the preferred materials (Table 3), respondents were offered several options for which they expressed their preference, stating the extent to which they opt for

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the purchase of items made from the respective materials. The perception of cotton, satin, velvet, silk, linen, lace, leather, fabric, wool and denim was thus studied, with the data being presented in the following table.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics. Source: elaborated by the author.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Material								
Cotton	153	1	5	4.42	0.806	18.21%	−1.407	1.445
Satin	153	1	5	2.17	1.067	49.03%	0.506	−0.726
Velvet	153	1	5	2.32	1.135	48.94%	0.641	−0.121
Silk	153	1	5	2.66	1.405	52.84%	0.265	−1.251
Linen	153	1	5	2.94	1.489	50.54%	0.053	−1.426
Lace	153	1	5	2.39	1.254	52.28%	0.413	−0.890
Leather	153	1	5	3.21	1.384	43.14%	−0.224	−1.167
Fabric	153	1	5	3.06	1.403	45.78%	−0.129	−1.195
Wool	153	1	5	2.46	1.308	53.11%	0.4836	−0.9272
Denim	153	1	5	3.21	1.394	43.43%	−0.273	−1.133

As it can be remarked in most cases, by calculating the coefficient of variation, the responses are generally heterogeneous, registering values higher than 35%. This is due to individual perception and personal preferences regarding the materials from which the garments the respondents purchase are made. An influencing factor in this respect can even be considered the level of income, as people with a higher income can afford to buy products of higher quality, made of better materials. A lower level of the coefficient of variation, indicating greater representativeness, is calculated in the case of the cotton material (v = 18.21%, f = 153), for which 134 respondents stated they opt frequently or even very frequently for this type of material. We note a greater degree of answers dispersion in the other situations.

By calculating skewness, one can observe a generally asymmetric distribution of responses. In the case of cotton, leather, fabric and denim items, the coefficient has a negative value, indicating asymmetry to the left. The kurtosis calculation shows a strong variation in the absolute frequency, with the vaulting coefficient indicating in most cases a platykurtic curve. Therefore, it is necessary to study the cause of the asymmetry.

If the material of a clothing item is taken into consideration, the individual's preferences are influenced by various factors, which can also influence the level of dispersion of the answers given in the study. Beyond the level of income, mentioned above as an element that can determine the choice, we can also identify other factors that may intervene in this process: comfort offered by the material, durability, clothing trends in Vogue and even the previous experiences of the individual or social desirability [84]. Thus, if people over 40 would rather choose comfort and elegance, teenagers or young people will be influenced to a greater extent by present trends and by what people in their own circle of knowledge wear, orienting themselves towards a casual or sports style.

When asked what is the range in which they fall regarding the expenses made during the last six months on clothing items, the majority of respondents (30.06%) stated that they spent between RON 301 and 500 (around USD 65–110), 29.41% spent between RON 101 and 300 (approximately USD 22–65), 19.61% spent more than RON 1000 (over USD 218), 18.31% spent between RON 501 and 1000 (around USD 110–218), and 2.61% of respondents spent up to RON 100 (about USD 22).

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The analysis of the contingency table (Table 4) regarding the relationship between the level of the net monthly income and the expenditure on clothing items in the last 6 months shows the following distribution of frequencies:

Table 4. Cross-tabulation of the level of net monthly income versus expenditure on clothing items in the last 6 months.

		Expenditure on Clothing Items in the Last 6 Months					Total
		RON 0–100	RON 101–300	RON 301–500	RON 501–1000	Over RON 1000	
The level of net monthly income	Under RON 2500	4	23	14	10	10	61
	RON 2501–3500	0	16	16	8	4	44
	RON 3501–4500	0	2	2	6	4	14
	Over RON 4500	0	4	14	4	12	34
Total		4	45	46	28	30	153

After performing the Chi-square test (Table 5) to study the level of association between the two variables, the level of income and that of spending on clothing items in the last 6 months, there can be observed a level of χ^2 equal to 30,206, with a degree of freedom df = 12 and an asymptotic significance of 0.003.

Table 5. Chi-square test.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-Sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	30,206 [a]	12	0.003
Likelihood Ratio	31,468	12	0.002
Linear-by-Linear Association	11,475	1	<0.001
No. of Valid Cases	153		

At a *p*-value level of less than 0.05, we can state that the results indicate a statistically significant association between the variables under analysis; therefore, spending on clothing items varies significantly depending on the level of an individual's monthly income. So, as income increases, the propensity to consume is more pronounced for clothing items, with income influencing purchasing behaviour.

The calculated value for Cramer's V test of association is 0.257, indicating a relatively weak association between the variables, but still statistically significant at a *p*-value = 0.003, while Kendall's Tau c test value of 0.218 indicates a relatively weak positive association, but significant at a *p*-value below 0.001.

There is a significant association between income levels and the amount allocated to purchasing clothing items, supporting hypothesis 1, which states that income influences clothing expenses. The data show a positive correlation between increasing income and increased consumption of such items, particularly highlighted by the Chi-square test and the analysis of Cramer's V coefficient, which indicates a moderate association. In connection with RQ1, the analysis of the collected data reveals significant changes in consumer purchasing behaviors, influenced by income levels and the specific conditions of each period.

Thus, before the pandemic, most consumers preferred physical stores, with higher income levels supporting frequent purchases in specialized stores, while medium- and low-income consumer categories favoured the development of second-hand stores or supermarkets. Online purchases were less popular, with just over 26% of respondents turning to this medium. During the pandemic, imposed restrictions led to a reversal

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in purchasing behaviors, with online becoming the main source of purchases for most respondents. Higher incomes facilitated rapid adaptation to digitalization, while lower incomes limited access to some online platforms.

Post-pandemic, the trend for online shopping persisted, but a slight increase in the use of mixed channels was observed. Respondents preferred to research the market online but, in some cases, made purchases in physical stores. Higher-income consumers continued to prefer online purchases due to convenience and diversity, while lower-income groups gradually returned to physical stores due to perceived lower costs.

The second secondary objective, in relation to Research question 1, aimed to study the respondents' preferences regarding the outlets where they purchase clothing items, being associated with two questions. With regard to the stores where the respondents used to purchase clothing items before the pandemic, most individuals (63.2%) mentioned specialized physical stores, with the online environment being relatively poorly represented by comparison. Only 26.3% of respondents state that before the pandemic, they purchased clothing items mainly from online stores. In total, 6.6% turned to supermarkets, while 3.9% indicated thrift stores as their main source. The situation changed radically during the pandemic in 2021 and 2022 when consumers had to take into account a series of restrictions. Thus, by comparison, the respondents state that, during the pandemic, their behaviour underwent changes, with the main source of purchases of clothing items being represented by online stores (67.1%) and frequenting specialized stores being greatly reduced. Only 26.3% of the respondents mention them as the locations visited most often for the purpose of buying certain clothing items, thus resulting in an inversion of preferences compared to those mentioned regarding the pre-pandemic period. The percentage of those who went to supermarkets also decreased (2.6%), while surprisingly maintaining the same percentage regarding second-hand stores (3.9%). At the moment, MKOR Fashion Retail reports [2] indicate a percentage of 20% of Romanians who exclusively prefer the virtual environment for the purchase of these types of products, while, according to the same studies, "1 in 4 people prefer an online-offline mix". The percentage of respondents who in our study declared a preference for second-hand stores (3.9%) is very close to that reported by MKOR (4%) [2].

The third secondary objective aimed to identify the level of interest of the respondents regarding the promotion methods practiced by merchants, i.e., the level at which the respondents are influenced by various online promotions. Four key questions were associated with this.

From the observations made, it can be stated that during the pandemic, the respondents had generally rational behaviour when it came to the purchase of items such as clothes, with these being included in the non-essential category. Thus, 56.6% of the surveyed individuals state that they spent less than before the pandemic, 38.2% maintained their spending level in this regard, and 5.3% of the respondents evaluated their spending on clothing items as higher than in the period preceding this.

Besides a number of personal factors, the promotions carried out by retailers (Table 6) play an important role in the way the respondents relate to the process of purchasing some clothing items. Thus, 39.5% of individuals believe that the available promotions influence them to a medium extent. In total, 39.4% are influenced to a great or very great extent, while at the opposite pole, we find 21% of respondents who declare themselves to be minimally influenced by various promotions.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics. Source: elaborated by the author.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Dispersion	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Influence level of promotions	153	1	5	3.34	1.1916	1.0916	32.68%
Scale	1—to a very low extent, 2—to a low extent, 3—medium, 4—to a high extent, 5—to a very high extent						

Checking the level of representativeness of the answers provided shows us a value of v = 32.68%, so the studied sample is homogeneous from this point of view.

The analysis of the contingency table (Table 7) regarding the relationship between the level of net monthly income and the influence of promotions on an individual shows us the following distribution of frequencies:

Table 7. Influence of promotions.

		Very Low	Low	Medium	High	Very High	Total
The level of net monthly income	Under RON 2500 (USD 545)	4	10	23	10	14	61
	RON 2501–3500 (USD 545–765)	0	8	18	14	4	44
	RON 3501–4500 (USD 765–980)	2	0	8	4	0	14
	Over RON 4500 (USD 980)	0	8	12	2	12	34
Total		6	26	61	30	30	153

People with incomes below RON 2500 (USD 545) generally believe that the influence of promotions is medium (f = 23), high (f = 10) or very high (f = 14), which suggests that, for people with lower incomes, promotions have a considerate impact. For respondents with incomes between RON 2501 and 3500 (USD 545–765), the influence of promotions is predominantly medium or high, which indicates a significant impact, while people with incomes of RON 3501–4500 (USD 765–980) mostly indicate a medium influence. Promotions are not considered insignificant even by respondents with higher incomes, with the majority indicating medium or very high importance.

By performing the Chi-square test (Table 8) to study the level of association between the two variables, the level of net monthly income and the perception regarding the influence of promotions, we observe a level of χ^2 equal to 29.916, with a degree of freedom df = 12 and an asymptotic significance of 0.003.

Table 8. The Chi-square test.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-Sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	29.916	12	0.003
Likelihood Ratio	36.582	12	<0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.315	1	0.575
No. of Valid Cases	153		

With the *p*-value level being lower than 0.05, the results indicate a statistically significant association between the level of net monthly income and the influence of promotions. Nevertheless, the fact that we have a fairly large share of frequencies below 5 found in the contingency table leads us to conclude that the robustness of the test is questionable, requiring additional calculations. Cramer's V test indicates a value of 0.255, i.e., a relationship of low intensity, with the value of Kendall's Tau c (0.017) being also very low and a clear correlation or direction of the relationship between the variables being questionable. These results suggest a moderate relationship between the two variables, with income level having some impact on the perception of the significance of promotions, although it cannot be considered a strong determinant.

In general, people with lower incomes are more likely to be influenced by the promotion practices, being more sensitive to price-related aspects. People with medium incomes do not neglect these aspects, but they represent a category of customers who do not depend exclusively on promotions, although their purchase decision is influenced by them. Promotions can also be attractive to people with high incomes and the company can thus

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formulate different marketing strategies according to the targeted market segment. Thus, we consider Hypothesis 2 as partially confirmed, which states that the decision to purchase a clothing item is greatly influenced by the promotions offered by retailers, especially for individuals with lower incomes. In order to substantiate clearer conclusions, it may be necessary to extend the study to a larger sample.

By asking instead which type of promotion they consider to be the most effective, the respondents indicated that the online environment achieved the best results, through websites and social media pages (57.9%). Being in direct connection with the online environment, entering the sphere of mobile commerce and notifications received on devices used in everyday life, namely phone or tablet, were recognized as important (by a percentage of 11.8%). Especially among older populations, tools such as classic catalogues delivered to homes by mail (6.6%), specialized magazines (7.9%), leaflets (7.9%), and also television advertisements (2.6%) prove to be effective. There is, however, a percentage of respondents (5.3%) who declare themselves immune to any form of promotion, considering themselves uninfluenced by these promotional tools whatsoever.

We were also interested in finding out to what extent the respondents consider themselves influenced by periodic discounts or vouchers granted by stores (Table 9). Thus, 30.3% have a neutral attitude in this regard and 57.9% consider themselves influenced to a great or very great extent, while 11.8% declare themselves influenced a little or not at all. The representativeness is quite high regarding the answers given regarding this aspect, with a coefficient of variation v = 28.25%.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Dispersion	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Level of influence of price cuts	153	1	5	3.70	1.0965	1.0471	28.25%
Scale	1—to a very low extent, 2—to a low extent, 3—medium, 4—to a high extent, 5—to a very high extent						

From the analysis of the frequency distribution, we find that people with incomes below RON 2500 are to a higher extent sensitized by the discounts offered by merchants, as well as those in the RON 2501–3500 income group. People with medium and high incomes indicate a lower level of reliance on rebates. The calculated value of the Chi-square test is 28.257, with a degree of freedom df = 12 and an asymptotic significance of 0.005. The 0.248 value of Cramer's V test indicates a moderate relationship between the income level and the influence of cuts, while Kendall's Tau c coefficient registers a negative value, close to 0 (−0.028), indicating that the perception of the influence of cuts does not vary significantly according to the level incomes.

The category of people most influenced by discounts is represented by those with low incomes (under RON 2500), a group of respondents sensitive to the prices charged by traders. The group of respondents with incomes between RON 2501 and 3500 lei are customers who appreciate discounts and are willing to optimize their budget, but want to focus on higher quality products. Respondents with average incomes of RON 3501–4500 report a lower importance of discounts and they do not constitute a decisive factor in the purchase of a product, putting, like people with high incomes, emphasis on quality.

The fourth secondary objective aimed to identify respondents' preferences from the perspective of the most accessed sites in the field of clothing trade. From this point of view, the answers are divided, with the website of the H&M retailer being nominated as the most visited by the respondents (25%), followed by Fashion Days (14.5%), Sinsay (13.2%) and About You (10.5%). Besides the frequency of accessing merchant websites, we also wanted to determine the frequency with which individuals purchase clothing items online from those merchants. Thus, in the top list of preferences are H&M, Zara and Fashion Days, which are retailers nominated by respondents as sources they turn to often or even

very often. Some of these retailers are also identified in the MKOR 2024 reports [2], which mention the following top retailers in online fashion: eMag, About You, Fashion Days, Sinsay and H&M.

As the tendency to turn to the virtual environment has been maintained even after the pandemic, we wanted to analyse what the main reasons are for respondents still opting for the online purchase of clothing items. The majority of individuals (30.3%) indicated convenience as the main reason, a high importance of acquiring and diversity of products (22.4%) and the desire to save time in the purchase process (15.8%), while 14.5% of respondents mention the importance of promotions. A significant role is also played by the fact that some products are only available in the online version of the stores, with 13.2% of respondents indicating the exclusivity of the products as the main reason why they mainly make online orders.

The fifth secondary objective aimed to study the changes in individuals' level of interest in online, physical or mixed shopping before, during and after the pandemic. When asked about the frequency with which they purchased clothing items before the pandemic, most respondents indicate that the option of physical stores was preferred to the highest extent, far outranking the online option. In certain situations, respondents' preferences were directed towards both the physical store option (Table 10) and the virtual environment, with the fusion between the two modalities taking different forms. Many people thoroughly study a product offer in the online environment, in order to save time spent in the physical store and to feel "safe" in the purchase of a product highlighted as "available" in a certain location. On the other hand, the online/physical option was also used to return products ordered online to a physical store, or to pick up an order placed on the merchant's website from the store.

Table 10. Descriptive statistics. Source: elaborated by the author.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Regime								
Online	153	1	5	2.88	1.418	49.21%	0.036	−1.386
Mixed	153	1	5	2.68	1.051	39.11%	0.037	−0.585
Physical	153	1	5	3.69	1.222	33.09%	−0.433	−0.987

We find, when it comes to this aspect, a higher level of representativeness of the answers regarding physical stores, a higher degree of dispersion, and a higher level of heterogeneity being perceived regarding the interaction with online stores before the pandemic.

In fact, 42.1% of respondents say that during the pandemic, they accessed the websites of online clothing retailers more often than before the pandemic. In total, 19.7% of individuals state that accessing the sites in question occurred less often compared to the pre-pandemic period, while in the case of 38.2% of respondents, no behavioural changes occurred in terms of online interaction with specialty stores.

By comparison with the period before the pandemic (Figure 2), during the pandemic (Figure 3), we noticed a series of changes in the behaviour of the respondents. Thus, the online environment has obviously gained ground compared to the previous period, while physical stores are not considered as much when making purchases of clothing items (Table 11).

The calculation of the coefficient of variation indicates a relative level of homogeneity, with the v value being above the 35% threshold. The behaviours of the respondents and, implicitly, their orientation towards the online environment, were influenced, among other particularities, by the categories of clothing items they tend to purchase most often. Thus, 40.8% of the respondents generally opt for clothes from the casual category, 34.2% prefer sports clothing, with classic or elegant clothes being preferred by 21.1% of individuals and a percentage of 3.9% opting for business clothes.
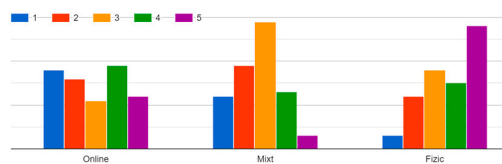
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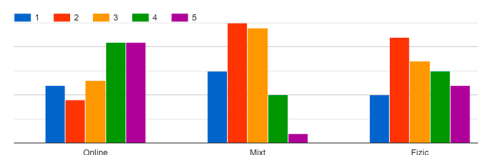**Figure 2.** Favourite stores before the pandemic.

Figure 3. Preferred stores during the pandemic.

Table 11. Descriptive statistics. Source: elaborated by the author.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Regime								
Online	153	1	5	3.39	1.401	41.31%	−0.479	−1.065
Mixed	153	1	5	2.46	1.029	41.76%	0.318	−0.493
Physical	153	1	5	2.96	1.277	43.15%	0.137	−1.092

Analyzing Hypothesis 2 in relation to RQ1 reveals that the results indicate a moderate correlation between net monthly income and the influence of promotions on purchasing decisions. Individuals with lower incomes proved to be more responsive to promotions, favouring purchases during discount periods. The Chi-square test confirmed the statistical significance of this correlation, while Kendall's Tau and Cramer's V values indicate a moderate association. The collected data show significant variations in how promotions are perceived by consumers from different income groups. Promotions are most strongly appreciated by consumers in the income category below RON 2500, with the importance of promotions for this segment likely linked to a higher price sensitivity, leading them to prioritize purchases during special offer periods.

The pandemic heightened consumer sensitivity to promotions, especially among medium- and low-income categories. This trend can be explained, on one hand, by tightened budgets and, on the other, by the accessibility of online promotions. Thus, in the context of economic uncertainty, promotions became a practical way for consumers to continue purchasing clothing items without compromising financial stability. The digital environment, in turn, allowed greater exposure to personalized promotions through targeted ads, mobile notifications, and social media campaigns, increasing their influence on purchasing decisions.

Promotions sometimes serve as tools for customer retention and loyalty building. However, for lower-income consumers, frequent promotions that can create a dependency on a brand may also pose future threats.

Adapting promotional campaigns to the specifics of each income segment is essential: general discounts are effective for lower incomes, while medium- and higher-income groups may be more attracted by personalized offers and additional benefits such as bonus points or loyalty cards.

RQ2: What opportunities exist for business development in the online clothing trade, considering shifts in consumer interest, the effectiveness of promotional strategies, and changes in spending across different income levels?

The sixth secondary objective concerned the analysis of business development opportunities in the field of online clothing trade, with five associated questions.

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Speaking of the online environment, regardless of whether we are referring to merchants or customers, both are subject to risks, greater or lesser and more or less known. Respondents generally express a high degree of confidence regarding the safety of shopping in the online environment (Table 12), with this opinion also being expressed based on the individuals' previous experiences. In total, 60.5% of the people who responded to the questionnaire declare that they trust to a high or very high extent in the transactions carried out, 34.2% indicate a minimum level of trust, and 5.3% express an opposite opinion.

Table 12. Descriptive statistics. Source: elaborated by the author.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Dispersion	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Confidence level	153	1	5	2.26	0.6667	0.8165	36.00%
Scale	1—to a very low extent, 2—to a low extent, 3—medium, 4—to a high extent, 5—to a very high extent						

Placing an online order is not without risk. Some of the respondents were also faced with less pleasant experiences, such as receiving products different in size, material or colour compared to what they ordered (aspect mentioned by 39.5% of the respondents), size mismatch compared to the size guide measurements available on the website (69.7%) and non-compliant product quality (problem encountered by 51.3% of respondents). Also, difficulty in returning items is indicated as an aspect faced by 15.8% of the respondents, along with poor communication with the merchant (10.5%), the trap of false advertisements (26.3%) and price differences from viewing the products to purchasing them (5.3%).

In an attempt to assess the extent to which the pandemic had a positive impact (Table 13) on the general evolution of the clothing trade, we observe a different distribution of respondents' answers. Thus, 42.1% of individuals indicate an average positive impact on the evolution of trade in clothing items, while 25% believe that the impact of the pandemic boosted this field, and 32.9% dispute the economic benefits.

Table 13. Descriptive statistics. Source: elaborated by the author.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Dispersion	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Positive impact of the pandemic	153	1	5	2.80	1.3602	1.1663	41.59%
Scale	1—to a very low extent, 2—to a low extent, 3—medium, 4—to a high extent, 5—to a very high extent						

This dispersion of responses can also be studied by calculating the descriptive statistical indicators, with the coefficient of variation (v = 41.59%) indicating a relative homogeneity.

The majority of respondents (44.8%) believe that at the moment, starting and developing a business in the field of online trade in clothing is opportune to a high or even very high extent. In total, 39.5% have a neutral attitude, while 15.8% of respondents declare themselves more reluctant in this regard. In addition, we tried to find out the respondents' perception of the future of this type of trade. A significant percentage of respondents, 64.5%, believe that customers will continue to turn equally to online and traditional retailers, while 30.3% believe that the virtual environment is strongly gaining ground, especially in an increasingly digitized world, where the speed of completing an order becomes essential. Only a low percentage, 5.3%, believe that traditional stores will regain their customers to a high extent, given that the online environment, in addition to its undeniable advantages, also entails a series of risks for consumers. These findings lead us to assert, in support of the third hypothesis, that in a context where digitalization is an ongoing development process, the potential for growth offered by the online environment is very high, with ample room for expansion in the clothing retail sector.

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Analyzing Hypothesis 3 in relation to RQ2, it can be observed that Hypothesis 3 is supported by the increased preference for online shopping, especially among younger consumers and those with constant access to technology. The data suggest that the pandemic accelerated this transition to online shopping, and the study confirms that digitalization has increased growth potential for online fashion businesses. Additionally, feedback indicates that the online environment was preferred not only for the convenience of purchases but also for access to promotions, which play a key role in purchasing decisions.

The analysed data highlight a significant shift in consumer preferences toward online shopping, particularly during the pandemic, opening new opportunities for fashion business expansion. In this context, online promotions have proven essential in customer attraction strategies, having a significant influence on purchasing behaviours. Digital platforms provide a suitable space for promoting discount campaigns as well as other advantages such as free shipping or gift vouchers. Frequent promotions, along with their personalization, have contributed to creating a stable base of loyal customers who appreciate personalized mobile notifications and targeted campaigns that give them a sense of exclusivity.

Digital expansion offers an appropriate framework for implementing personalized marketing campaigns. Online platforms can leverage data on past purchasing behaviors to provide tailored recommendations, and the online medium can also support sustainable initiatives.

5. Discussions

Over time, authors in this field have addressed the issues related to social commerce and the online shopping experience in relation to a multitude of aspects. Thus, we can mention works that highlight the need for a sustainable approach to commerce, with individual responsibility needing to be integrated into general consumption behaviour. The trend of the last decade has directed consumers to be more mindful of the ecological impact regarding the purchase of clothing items, with the idea of sustainability significantly influencing purchasing behaviour [5,32,82,83].

The integration of environmental concern leads individuals to be more mindful of the ecological impact of their actions, increasingly turning to companies that emphasize circularity and implement ethical production and sales policies. In this regard, younger generations especially value the idea of transparency and are showing greater openness to the idea of purchasing second-hand products or renting them. However, we are witnessing a paradoxical behavior, as the concept of fast fashion is also appreciated for its accessibility. Thus, although circularity is considered important and a future strategy in business, responsible initiatives are sometimes overshadowed by the desire for quick and inexpensive access to desired products.

The respondents analyzed in this study predominantly spend small amounts of money on these categories of items (up to EUR 100). Additionally, the results we obtained reinforce the ideas presented in the MKOR reports regarding attitudes toward second-hand stores. This aspect can be seen as directly related to the income levels of the respondents. The analysis of the sample structure shows that a significant number of respondents report a low income level. Specifically, 39.87% of respondents have a monthly net income below RON 2500, while 28.76% have an income between RON 2501 and 3500, which either does not allow them to purchase expensive products or compels them to make such purchases at longer intervals. The option of purchasing second-hand products thus emerges as a solution in this regard, also offering advantages related to environmental protection and adopting more responsible long-term behavior.

The type of items purchased confirms this notion, as a relatively small number of respondents indicated that they more frequently purchase items such as suits or coats, which are considered less perishable or have a longer lifespan or usage period.

The study results indicate a trend of reduced spending on non-essential items, particularly among low-income consumers. This finding is amplified by the interest in affordable

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and durable materials, such as cotton, with a significant portion of respondents (more than 50%) expressing moderate to high interest in the evolution of the fashion industry, including sustainability aspects. Fashion campaigns can capitalize on these trends in the following ways:

- Developing sustainable product lines (creating collections made from recycled materials or products obtained through eco-friendly methods);
- Transparency in the supply chain (informing consumers about the source of materials and production conditions can strengthen their trust and loyalty);
- Implementing recycling strategies (introducing programs for recycling or refurbishing products could attract consumers concerned about environmental impact);
- Sustainable return programs (simplifying the return process and encouraging product exchanges instead of direct refunds to reduce environmental impact).

Numerous studies [14–16,61] indicate an increasing preference for online shopping among customers, also noting a growing openness to actions such as renting clothing items, with the pandemic period causing shifts in purchasing habits. While the option of renting clothing items was not studied by us in this article, we do observe that our results support the idea that the orientation toward the online environment is increasingly preferred. The shift toward online shopping has been largely encouraged by the development of social platforms [41,78,81], which impact purchasing decisions. In this context, the role of influencers has become significantly more pronounced [41,78], as has the role of online reviews [48,49], which influence the level of trust customers have.

Individuals' interest in the online environment also extends to promotions, with social media providing a conducive space for promoting discounts to stimulate impulsive buying. However, it is also important to consider the attitudes of other consumers, who in recent years have opted for more durable, functional, and essential products, viewing spending on clothing items as non-essential or low priority.

However, social commerce has redefined the way in which the purchasing process of products takes place, with social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok being highlighted by some authors [41,43,81] as playing an important role in stimulating purchases. This idea is also confirmed by our research, with the type of promotion considered by respondents to be the most effective being promotions through social media pages, as well as the company's official website, alongside mobile applications, which are more convenient and faster.

Respondents in this study have exhibited rational behavior in this regard over the past few years, even reducing their spending levels, although the argument that promotions play an important role remains valid. Studies conducted by researchers in the field identify similar trends to those we analyzed, with the influence of promotions generally considered to be significant, especially for individuals with low to medium income levels.

From the study, we can detect a greater sensitivity of the respondents to the discounts practiced by traders, with the period of the pandemic causing individuals to be more rational in terms of the expenses made, especially those with a lower income, and this segment of consumers being more likely to react positively to certain discounts. High earners, on the other hand, while not ignoring price cuts, are more attracted to quality or exclusivity aspects of the shopping experience. We thus recognize a diversity of attitudes, which may determine the need for segmentation in terms of applying marketing strategies at the level of the organization, developing personalized offers. The diversification of the offer can prove to be an effective strategy, by including some product lines differentiated by price, with the idea of gaining the loyalty of a wide audience of consumers. And in this direction, the use of social media channels is indispensable in the context of digitization.

In this entire context, although online sales have been increasing for quite some time, returns are considered a significant challenge [65–67], with a relatively high rate. In this regard, we note uncertainty regarding the fit of products with customer expectations [63,65,67], which leads to additional costs for online retailers and generates harmful side effects for both people and the environment. Our study also presents similar find-

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ings, as cumbersome returns were indicated as an issue faced by 15.8% of respondents, alongside poor communication with the retailer (10.5%). A potential solution suggested by researchers could be the more active integration of artificial intelligence tools into the sales process, through the use of augmented reality [53], as well as interactive platforms that allow for virtual fitting experiences [66], which are elements that are already popular in other countries.

Promotions can also be tailored to market segments, with around 40% of respondents stating that they are at least moderately influenced by discounts. Especially for consumers with lower incomes, promotions can be used to provide accessibility, while for those with medium to high incomes, discounts can be combined with premium benefits. Additionally, segmentation based on purchasing behavior can optimize the costs of marketing campaigns.

The present study highlights difficulties in the return process, including size mismatches and non-compliant product quality—challenges that not only reduce customer satisfaction but also increase companies' operational costs. In this regard, the following measures could prove useful: integrating technology, digitizing the return process for transparency, implementing quick product exchange options, and carefully analyzing return data to improve processes and optimize the supply chain.

Thus, in the context where the fashion industry is currently under the influence of behavioral changes, we observe a dual orientation within it. On one hand, there is a more selective character among consumers, who pay greater attention to the products they purchase, also examining the sustainability policies of retailers. On the other hand, we note a trend that encourages the continued development of the fast-fashion industry, driven by the desire for quick access to a variety of items at reasonable prices. In this regard, our research findings reveal that, particularly among young people, there is an influence from current fashion trends and the preferences of their peer groups, stemming from a desire to integrate more easily.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to explore the changes that occurred in the field of clothing trade during the COVID-19 pandemic and the influences on business management, with the pandemic acting as a catalyst for digitization, causing companies to accelerate the process of adapting to the new economic conditions while also marking a turning point for online commerce. Given that, in the fashion sector, changes in consumer behaviour have been rapid and digital technologies have significantly contributed to reshaping the business landscape, it becomes essential to observe the transformations that commerce has undergone and their long-term implications, so that we can identify the directions strategies to which companies can orient themselves, so as to remain competitive in a highly competitive environment.

The pandemic has accelerated the process of transition to digitization, implicitly requiring investments in technology and even innovation, and at the same time specifying the need for a high level of adaptability, especially from the point of view of marketing.

Managers must show flexibility and be able to use available data to make informed decisions about product design, market segmentation, offer customization, allocation of budgets, etc. The efficiency of these approaches will depend on their ability to quickly respond to changes, to accept them in the first place and to adapt their strategy in time, taking into account the feedback collected from customers. A correct evaluation of campaign results can prove decisive at certain stages.

At the same time, besides the most correct implementation of strategies, the formation of high-performing teams can be decisive, as well as the promotion of a culture of innovation, which is aimed at improving the adaptability of the organization, in the context of imminent changes.

In addition, in the context of frequent changes in fashion trends, which are subsequently felt in consumer behaviour on the market, increasing interest in sustainability can become essential for long-term business survival.

Business development prospects in the fashion field are therefore subject to conditions from multiple perspectives: on the one hand, we have in mind the major momentum created by the digitization process and the development of electronic commerce, whose expansion opens up opportunities through the very optimization of the purchase experience and the use of tools business assistance, in order to make recommendations in the selection of products. On the other hand, we refer to the importance of two concepts that have been increasingly publicized lately, namely sustainability and consumer ethics, with the big retailers in the fashion industry developing a concern for sustainable fashion, which also implies the adaptation of strategies as well as practices, so that attracting new consumer segments is achieved in an ethical manner. At the same time, the development of the online environment leads to an increasingly accentuated internationalization, with access to products becoming easier than in the past, which allows any merchant to penetrate into unexplored markets.

At the managerial level, the implications of the changes in recent years are certainly important. We are thus talking about the need, in certain cases, to review the supply chain and the need to make adjustments to the entire strategy from this point of view, so that the business can face the challenges in the production sphere as effectively as possible. Consequently, good management of stocks becomes necessary, in order to reduce losses.

Going further, from the perspective of managerial implications, we are talking about the diversification of the product portfolio, and the awareness of the importance of effective planning, both for the short term and for the medium or long term. Managers must carry out thorough analyses regarding the evolution of past orders, so that the impact of future fluctuations is managed as well as possible by developing business continuity plans, possibly with the creation of pessimistic and optimistic scenarios.

Last but not least, investments, both in the production technology and in the digitization process, become indispensable for the sustainability of the company; companies must invest both in the digital infrastructure and in the training of people, so that the transition to new working methods can be carried out as smoothly as possible, improving the customer experience, while securing the future of the business, in a proactive manner.

As an added value, compared to previous studies found in international databases, we can point out that our research addresses an issue that has only been partially explored in the Romanian context, relating business management in the fashion field to consumer behavior and the idea of sustainability. Thus, by conducting the study in a local context, we can emphasize that this paper provides new empirical data from a region that has not been sufficiently studied regarding this aspect, bringing a fresh perspective and contributing to the understanding of the dynamics of the local market. The results can therefore be useful for fashion brands looking to implement business strategies in Romania, particularly in the western region of the country.

However, the paper also presents a number of limitations, among which we can mention the importance of conducting the study on a small sample of individuals. This aspect can, however, be transformed into an opportunity for further research, with the intention of expanding the study to a much larger group of respondents in the future, in order to find conclusions that can be generalized and widely accepted on a larger scale. Another limitation that may be considered is the focus of the study on a limited area of the country, with the potential for expansion at least at the level of the western region, but also nationally, with a greater emphasis on the topic of sustainability.

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