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**Fashion as a Communicative Phenomenon.
Discourses about Clothing Consumption among Youth**

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Contents

Introduction

PART 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 1: The Field of Fashion: Definitions of a Symbolic Domain

1.1. Definitions of Fashion

1.1.1. From Academic Devaluation to Fashionology

1.1.2. Defining the Field of Fashion

1.1.3. Micro- and Macro-Level Definitions of Fashion and the Dynamic Nature of Fashion

1.2. Fashion and Its Many Roles: the Symbolic Function of Fashion

1.3. Fashion as Communication

1.4. Distinction and Adjustment through Clothing

Chapter 2: Theories of Fashion Consumption. (Fast-)Fashion Diffusion in the Postmodern Era

2.1. Consumption Theories and Their Relevance for the Understanding of Fashion Consumption

2.1.1. The Productivist View

2.1.2. Conspicuous Consumption and Distinction

2.2. Fashion as Social Mobility: the Trickle-Down Theory and Its Critics

2.3. Consumption as Sense-Making and Communication

2.4. The End of Classes and the Emergence of Consumerism

2.5. (Fast-)Fashion in the Postmodern Era

2.6. New Models of Fashion Diffusion: the Trickle-Across and the Trickle-Up Theories

2.7. The Role of Influencers in Fashion Diffusion: Social Media and the Fashion Adoption Theory

2.8. Some Critical Aspects Concerning the Democratic Nature of Fashion in Postmodernism

Chapter 3: Millennials and Their Relationship with (Fast) Fashion

3.1. Millennials and Generation Z. Who Are They?

3.2. Millennials' and Post-Millennials' Consumption Patterns

3.2.1. General Remarks

3.2.2. Millennials' and Post-Millennials' Fashion Consumption

3.3. Millennials' and Generation Z Members' Relationship with (Fast) Fashion

3.4. Young Fashion Consumers between Offline and Online shops: the Emergence of the Omni-Channel Consumer

3.5. Intra-Generational Specificities: the Role of Segmentation with a Focus on Students

3.6. Fashion and the Young Consumers in Romania

PART 2: RESEARCH STRATEGIES, METHODS, AND POPULATIONS

Chapter 1: Overview of the Methodology

1.1. Research Methods, Dynamics of the Research, and General Research Questions

1.2. Research Population

Chapter 2: The Methodology of the Online Survey

2.1. The Convenience Sample with Students: Advantages and Limitations

2.2. Convenience Samples with Student Populations in Connection with Fashion: Some Previous Studies

2.3. Convenience Sampling and Sample Sizes in the Present Research

2.4. The Structure of the Online Questionnaire

Chapter 3: The Methodology of the Focus-Group Research

3.1. Definition of the Focus-Group Method

3.1.1. Focus-Group as Interactive Method

3.1.2. Focus-Group as a Flexible Method

3.2. Focus-Groups in Fashion-Related Studies: Some Previous Research

3.3. The Focus-Group Method in the Present Research

3.3.1. Group Numbers, Sizes, and Composition

3.3.2. The Interview Guide of the Focus-Groups

3.4. Grounded Theory: Its Forms and Relevance for Data Analysis

3.4.1. Definition of the Grounded Theory: Strauss vs Glaser

3.4.2. The Gioia Methodology of Data Analysis and Its Application in the Present Research

PART 3: EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

Chapter 1: The Online Survey on Students' Fashion-Related Attitudes and Behaviours

Introduction

1.1. Item Selection and Research Questions

1.1.1. Fashion-Related Consumption

1.1.2. Fashion-Related Information Sources

- 1.1.3. *Brand Preferences and Brand Sensitivity*
- 1.1.4. *Fashion Adoption*
- 1.1.5. *Fashion Involvement*
- 1.1.6. *Sustainable Fashion*
- 1.2. The Convenience Samples. Socio-Demographic Descriptive Analysis
 - 1.2.1. *The Sapientia Sample*
 - 1.2.2. *The Babeş–Bolyai Sample*
- 1.3. Clothing Consumption
 - 1.3.1. *Amount Spent on clothing in the Sapientia and the Babeş–Bolyai Samples*
 - 1.3.2. *Frequency of Shopping and the Preferred Place of Shopping*
- 1.4. Sources of Information on Fashion
 - 1.4.1. *The Sapientia Sample*
 - 1.4.2. *The Babeş–Bolyai Sample*
- 1.5. Brand Preference and Brand Sensitivity
 - 1.5.1. *The Sapientia Sample*
 - 1.5.2. *The Babeş–Bolyai Sample*
- 1.6. Fashion Adoption Groups
 - 1.6.1. *The Sapientia Sample*
 - 1.6.2. *The Babeş–Bolyai Sample*
- 1.7. Fashion Involvement
 - 1.7.1. *The Sapientia Sample*
 - 1.7.2. *The Babeş–Bolyai Sample*
- 1.8. Sustainable Clothing Consumption
- 1.9. Summary of the Online Surveys' Results

Chapter 2: The Results of the Focus-Group Research on Millennials' Fashion-Related Attitudes, Behaviours, and Discourses

Introduction

- 2.1. The Meaning of Fashion
 - 2.1.1. *Fashion: A Three-Dimensional Concept*
 - 2.1.2. *Style and Its Dimensions*
 - 2.1.3. *The Intrinsic and Extrinsic Criteria of Well-Dressed*

2.2. The Importance of Being Fashionable/Stylish/Well Dressed for Status Expression

2.3. Information Sources: Online and Offline Combined

2.4. Preferred Sites for Shopping: A Tripartite Combination

2.5. Favourite Brands: Fast Fashion Takes It All

2.6. A Not-So-Ethical Closet

2.7. Concluding Remarks

Discussions and Conclusions

References

Keywords: fashion, communication, clothing consumption, digital media, millennials, online survey, convenience sample, focus-groups, narratives.

Summary of the thesis

My thesis is built on the premise that “clothing choices are both individual (e.g. pleasure, hedonism) and social (interpersonal influences, status assignments, etc.), and as far as clothes are visual objects they represent ways of message encoding and decoding not only about stylistic preferences but – through these preferences – about our social values, status, group adjustments, etc.” (Nistor, 2016: 76). It follows, that clothes can be regarded as communication. Our dresses have a visual, non-verbal message but the communicative nature of fashion and dress is evident also in the everyday discussions in which people speak about fashion, about the clothes they wear. Thus, as Barthes puts it, in connection with clothes we can outline several forms of language repertoires (Barthes, 2013 – see Nistor, 2016). Approached as such, fashion and the clothes we wear offer a fruitful terrain for communication research, whether we are studying youngsters’ fashion-related attitudes and behaviours (e.g., information sources, frequency of clothing purchase, time of trend adoption, fashion involvement, brand preferences, etc.) or their fashion-related narratives (e.g. definition of fashion, the manner in which choices and preferences are augmented, etc.).

Rooted in these considerations, my research was based on a mixed-method strategy which combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative technique consisted in the

method of online survey and aimed to reveal some quantitative trends regarding students' fashion-related attitudes and behaviours. The qualitative phase of the research was based on the focus-group technique and studied the participants' narratives about fashion, and about their clothing-related attitudes and behaviours (see also Aspers & Godart, 2013; Nistor, 2016).

My empirical studies were focused on the students of Babeş–Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca and the students of Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania. Sapientia University is a university where teaching takes place in Hungarian language, and the university has three campuses located in Miercurea Ciuc, Târgu-Mureş, and Cluj-Napoca, i.e. in small towns and in larger cities. By defining these two universities as the sites of my research, I intended to ensure a quite heterogeneous public, which allows to investigate whether variables like urbanity or ethnicity have influence in youngsters' fashion-related behaviours and discourses.

The thesis is constructed of three major parts. The first part presents a literature review on the topic of fashion and fashion consumption among the youth. The second part contains the description of the methodology of the research, while the last part presents the findings of the empirical research. The thesis ends with concluding discussions and remarks, respectively with the list of references.

Part 1

The first part of the thesis has three major chapters. The first chapter is an introductory text on the topic of fashion. It starts from defining fashion and fashion studies as an interdisciplinary field which once neglected but now has reached academic relevance (cf. fashionology – Kawamura, 2005). Fashion refers to actual, latest styles, and it is omnipresent in each life domain; however, the most taken-for-granted approach of fashion can be linked to clothes. In this respect, there is presented a short discussion about the differences in the meanings of styles, fashion, fad, and trend. Compared to fads, which spread rapidly, fashion develops slower; compared to styles, which are durable over time, fashion does not last over time, while compared to the directional trends fashion is often a less general, more fuzzy phenomenon (Aspers & Godart, 2013). Later on, fashion is defined both on the macro- and the micro-level. In the macro-social approach, fashion is a system which encapsulates the institution of fashion creation, distribution, and retail (Crane, 2012), i.e. the economy, communication, and marketing of fashion. The macro-level approach of fashion

refers also to those fashion-related conventions that specify which are the actual trends in a specific era, place, or group and, as such, this approach provides guidance for personal dressing, i.e. for identity construction through clothes (Miller, 2005). Through the everyday practice of identity construction, fashion gets micro-social accents; through our dresses, fashion can provide social affiliation and distinction – such themes are discussed also, mostly based on the classical text of Simmel (1957) and on its newer interpretations (e.g. Kaiser, 2012; Aspers & Godart, 2013).

Fashion as a form of individual agency is then approached through the various functions of the dress (symbolic, cultural, communicative). By quoting authors like Barthes (2013) and Barnard (2002), the discussion insists mostly on the normative and communicative function of the dress. Fashion as communication means that fashion is a meaning-making, sense-constructing phenomenon: through the clothes we wear (or through the ways in which we wear the clothes), we are sending not only messages about our social positions and preferences in terms of lifestyles but also define our stance towards fashion: whether we follow the latest trend or ignore it, we are “in” fashion through those messages we are sending about ourselves through our clothes (Nistor, 2016; 2017a). The ways in which we speak and chat about our clothes, about fashion in general or the manner in which institutional agents speak about fashion determine the discursive nature of fashion, i.e. the textual, narrative form of fashion, which can be typical of eras, seasons, or social groups (Nistor, 2016; 2017a).

The second chapter of the first part approaches fashion as consumption and insists on those major theories which explain the process of fashion diffusion. The classical theory of Veblen (1899/1994) is a typical example for the spreading of fashion from the top of the society, i.e. from elites to lower social strata. The author defines “conspicuous consumption” as the consumption of objects which contribute to the enhancement of social and economic status. Veblen’s early approach illustrates that basic or real needs do not constitute the driving force of consumption; consumption can be viewed as a process through which people satisfy their social or false needs. Simmel (1904/1957) also defines consumption, and specifically fashion consumption, as a form of imitation and distinction, and later, in Bourdieu’s (1984) approach, this is again accentuated when the author speaks about taste communities at the crossroads of cultural and social capital.

The chapter continues with a short discussion on the symbolic role of consumption (cf. Baudrillard, 1970/1998), enters the ground of liquid modernity, and approaches the success of fast fashion from the perspective of instant gratification (cf. Bauman, 2004). Then, the text presents

those critical approaches which reject the relevance of the top-down fashion diffusion and promote alternative models. Blumer's (1969) "collective selection" approach is one example in this sense, and the approach admits that as soon as social classes become more fluid and the professional discourse on fashion becomes less professionalized we will be facing various options for being in fashion or in style, and these options are irrespective of social class.

The trickle-across model or the mass-market theory of fashion diffusion (King, 1963) is considered, together with the bottom-up model of fashion diffusion, as suitable approaches for conceptualizing the spread of fashion in the postmodern era. Trickle-across assumes that fashion diffusion does not occur vertically but horizontally due to the fact that through the industrial production of clothes different social classes have access to the same styles at the same time through the possibility of purchasing stylish clothes at various price ranges. The spread of fashion in this approach is dependent not on the social class but on the media.

Nowadays' media means mostly social media, and the trickle-up model of fashion diffusion places the emphasis exactly on the new media when assessing that today fashion can be created from the bottom of the society by lower socioeconomic groups, adolescents, and various other subcultures as well (Crane, 2000), and once these groups have sufficient followers in the social media they can create style and fashion communities.

The third chapter of the first part introduces the concept of generation and brings some clarifications on the notions of millennials and Generation Z, the subjects of my investigations. According to the literature, the Millennial Generation comprises those youngsters which were born between 1981 and 1995, while Generation Z, or post-millennials, refers to those people who were born after 1996. Millennials and post-millennials are a generation which grew up in a world full of fast changes (Colucci & Scarpi, 2013), out of which the spread of the digital world is considered the major life event of these generations, and so they are referred to as high-tech generation (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016). These generations have specific patterns in terms of their consumption behaviour and, more specifically, fashion-related consumption behaviour. The chapter presents some of these patterns based on the international literature: the case of instant gratification through consumption (e.g. impulse buying, consumption of fast-fashion items), the need of status and lifestyle expression through the consumption of "cool" goods and brands, and the preference for online shopping, the rise of the so-called "omni-channel consumer" who mixes and matches between online and offline shops are all referred to here.

Then, there are presented several empirical studies which insist on the role of segmentation among these generations. Such studies assess that in spite of a set of common characteristics both millennials and members of Generation Z can have various specific attitudes towards (fashion) consumption, ranging from price-conscious to sensation-seeking behaviours. The chapter ends with some considerations regarding young Romanian consumers' fashion-related consumption: from the data of several – otherwise sporadic – research, it is possible to draw a *grosso modo* picture according to which Romanian millennials appear as fashion-conscious who prioritize the role of online channels in what regards fashion-related consumption and who put in balance their preference for fashion and their relatively limited budgets.

Part 2

The second part of the thesis presents the methodology of the empirical research. The first chapter of this part discusses the ways in which the online survey took place. In each of the two universities, i.e. Babeş–Bolyai and Sapientia universities, the quantitative studies took the form of online surveys which were based on convenience samples. It follows that the results of the surveys have considerable limitations in terms of the generalization of the results since convenience samples are non-probability samples, and usually those people become the respondents who self-select themselves or have an interest in the researched topic. By quoting authors like Pernice et al. (2008), Gliner et al. (2009), Leiner (2016), etc., convenience sampling is presented as a relatively common form of sampling, which can have a value in certain situations (e.g. exploratory research, combined methodologies, etc.), and as far as the researchers respect the recommendations considering this form of sampling its limits can be kept in reasonable frameworks. The relevance of convenience sampling in fashion-related studies is also “defended” here by quoting several international studies which made use of this form of sampling.

Then, the ways in which convenience samples took place in my research are presented: in the Babeş–Bolyai University, 305, in the case of Sapientia University, 270 students self-selected to respond the survey. The structure of the online questionnaire is also presented: the questions of the survey were selected on the basis of the international literature and focus-group discussions and cover themes like clothing consumption habits, fashion-related information, brand awareness, fashion adoption, fashion involvement, and sustainable consumption.

The next chapter of this part presents the ways in which the qualitative studies, i.e. focus-groups took place. This was a research stream which occurred both before and after the online survey, and so it allowed both to prepare questions and reflect on the results of the survey. In the case of students, a total of 11 focus-group discussions were realized, and these were then completed by three group discussions with non-student millennials. These latter groups aimed to ensure some sort of comparison and to “look out” of student populations. The research strategy of the focus-group discussion was both inductive and deductive. In order to keep the results of the focus-group narratives in a rigorous framework and in order to visualize the discursive data, I made use of the so-called Gioia Methodology (Corley & Gioia, 2004), which is also presented in this part of the thesis.

Part 3

The third part is composed of two major chapters. The first chapter shows and discusses the results of the online survey, while the second one discusses the results of the focus-group discussion. The chapter on the online survey starts with a literature review, which, in fact, prepared the ground for both developing the questionnaire and the research questions/hypotheses which were investigated through the survey.

The quantitative research through the method of convenience-sample-based online survey reached a total of 575 students, 270 of which from Sapiientia University and 305 from Babeş–Bolyai University. The online questionnaire was developed mostly based on the international literature; so, there were tested specific hypotheses which aimed to verify whether socio-demographic variables impact students’ fashion-related attitudes and practices, how informational sources are structured, which are the major determinants of fashion involvement, etc. In general, the results suggested that socio-demographic background has little to say about students’ fashion-related practices, but their involvement is strongly dependent on their fashion-related information, trend adoption, etc. There can be revealed a coherence between students’ fashion-related attitudes and practices: the most trend-sensitive individuals are those who are better informed, more brand sensitive, more frequent shoppers, and less price-conscious shoppers of fashion.

Moreover, by comparing the two universities as well as the campuses of Sapiientia University, the research allowed to test the role of the so-called urbanity hypotheses. Both the

results of the online survey and that of the focus groups (11 groups with students and 3 groups with non-student millennials) confirmed that across the campuses students are much more similar than different. Indeed, they can have different access to fashion (availability of shops and different levels of budgets for shopping clothes), but due to the online platforms and social media the similarities tend to overrate the differences. In each site, students struggle between prices and brands, between conformity and their need of uniqueness, and in each location they reject the classical approach on fashion as the latest trend and are advocates of personalized styles and trends (obviously declined at the crossroads of affiliation and distinction – see the classical approach of Simmel, 1957).

It can be concluded – also aided by the results of the focus-group study as well – that while malls represent important sites for hanging out, second-hand shops and outlets are the most preferred places of shopping, even in the case of the Cluj-Napoca-based respondents. In accordance with the previous findings of the literature (e.g. Roux & Korchia, 2006), the narratives of the focus groups showed that students prefer outlets and second-hand shops mostly for the lower prices of the products, but there are also data which confirm that such sites offer more heterogeneous products, “treasures”, or better-quality brands. It was interesting to see that even when they buy in second-hand shops respondents mostly look for the well-known fast-fashion brands, and the cases when they try to localize vintage or more exclusive items in second-hand shops are usually much rare. This finding suggest that youngsters, even the most fashion-involved, are quite amateur fashion-seekers: they are looking for general, mass market brands and the examples in which they are searching for (local) designers’ products are rare, they represent isolated cases. Both the case of the malls and that of the online shops seem to resemble the situations of a so-called amateur market research: youngsters visit these sites in order to look around, to form an opinion on the available trends and the prices of the products, and, later on, the majority of them buys these or similar clothes from the outlets or second-hand shops. Thus, malls are places of “showrooming” (Gensler et al., 2017), while online shops are places of “webrooming” (Flavián et al., 2016).

In terms of information on fashion, the most important sources are represented by malls, online shops as well as by friends, colleagues, the street, and social media. This finding confirms those data of the literature (e.g. Nam et al., 2007; Wolny & Mueller, 2013) which assessed that the traditional media which was once very important in indicating the fashion trends lost, indeed, its

supremacy. Now, fashion has turned into a digital world. Fashion innovators now are represented not by the high-fashion houses but by the icons of social media, by fast-fashion brands, and also by the dressier members of youngsters' reference groups. Consequently, in the case of the researched millennials, the concept of fashion does not represent an abstract thing which is accessible only for economically better-off social elites: through creative adaption of trends (for which the digital fashion world offers inspiration), through the ways in which clothing items are combined, youngsters manifest individualized, yet fashionable appearances.

This finding can be further nuanced by the finding of the focus-group research, which asked the respondents to define the concept of fashion. Fashion is a complex issue, and it is thus revealed to complex narratives; it is closely linked to being stylish and well-dressed. Fashion is considered by the interviewees either as a normative ideal or as an individual practice. In the first case, fashion is imposed from the outside: by wearing certain "fashionable" trends, individuals can have little freedom in expressing their personal values and preferences. Compared to this, the definition of fashion as a personalized style revealed a kind of post-modernist perspective; fashion is here a bottom-up practice, a form of personal creation, a way of communication about personal preferences: when the wearer selects what and how to wear from the latest trends, he/she makes a bricolage, individualize fashion and translates it so to express his/her lifestyle. While fashion is approached mostly as a normative practice, the style-related acceptance of fashion gives the freedom of choosing and adapting the clothes (and not necessarily trends), it is a playful approach on dress, and youngsters – no matter their university background – largely sympathize with this perspective (cf. Crane, 1999, 2000).

It comes thus as a surprise that the concept of well-dressed is mostly defined as a form of contextual normativity: students consider that being well-dressed means above all to respect the written or unwritten dress codes of certain situations. While interviewees tend to reject the normativity of fashion, they insist on the need of being dressed in accordance with social expectations. Interviewees either articulate the role of dress in talking about personal style, lifestyles, and preferences (the style concept) or are very sensitive about their social image, interpret status mostly in terms of adequate self-image, and accentuate the need to conform and behave in a desirable way in certain situations. These youngsters, regardless of their university background, are – in any case – exponents of a new era in terms of fashion: for them, fashion as the latest trend imposed from outside (cf. top-down diffusion) starts to lose its dictatorship; they

are in favour of constructing a personalized fashion (cf. trickle-up) which can speak about their lifestyles. However, these self-fashioned images are expected to behave in accordance with contextual expectations: bricolage through fashion must meet the dress codes, and it is also required to speak about social status by the wearing of branded clothes. This is a kind of ambiguity: students want to “break free” but are still not sure whether it is worth to completely challenge the rules.

The results of both the survey and focus-group discussions showed that there are only a few students who deliberately follow fashion (v)blogs, fashion-related Instagram-profiles, etc. However, the role of digital world in fashion information search is very salient: it helps youngsters to check the trends, to get inspiration, to adjust their clothing to other youngsters’ or celebrities as seen on the social media. Moreover, the role of digital fashion world gets further accents in situations when youngsters plan the acquisition of a certain clothing item. There are only a few cases when the fashion-related content of the social media is researched in order to adapt the appearance to a particular lifestyle, movement, or subculture (e.g. anti-consumption, minimalism, etc.). Indeed, the research revealed some examples in this direction (mostly in the case of the non-student millennial participants of the focus-group discussions), but these are relatively rare. In the case of the students, the major imperative of online information search is to look for global, homogenous lifestyles, to ensure that they do not make a mistake in their appearance and they are following the trends of their global fellow youngsters as revealed by the social media.

The need to conform to expectations, situations, and groups is a very important conclusion of the research. I succeeded in localizing a paradox in the ways in which youngsters describe and define fashion on a theoretical level and the ways in which they practise it. In theory, they are against fashion normativity, but in practice they aim to conform through their outfits to situations, contexts, and groups. It is thus illustrative that, *grosso modo* irrespective of the respondents’ campus or university, the most important criteria of well-dressed is the need to have an outfit adapted to contexts (cf. dress code). Next to this comes the criterion of a creatively composed outfit. It is possible to conclude that youngsters want to feel free and are for composing an outfit based on items which are in accordance with their tastes, lifestyles, and financial possibilities, but at the same time they bear in mind the expectations of others, usually in situations when being judged by others is very important (job interviews, wedding, public speaking, etc.). To put it with the words of Giovannini et al. (2015), personal style represents a form of private self-

consciousness: once they wear clothes in accordance with their preferences, youngsters feel comfortable, while when exposed to others they try to adapt their personal styles in such a way to gain public approval (i.e. public self-consciousness).

The results showed the dominance of fast-fashion brands. The majority of the respondents have a favourite brand, and most of these are fast-fashion brands. Even if the literature has many arguments in the direction of blaming these brands for their low quality, poor environmental performance, homogeneity, etc., the majority of the respondents see these brands through the lenses of prestige: they think that such brands can bear quality, durability, and, above all, they are perceived as cool brands. Youngsters speak about these brands in appreciative ways and associate them with success, prestige, and social status. These are indicative for students' materialistic views on fashion and brands: it is illustrative in this respect that the male students from the Miercurea-Ciuc campus of Sapientia University proved to be one of the most brand-sensitive groups, whereas they spend the least on clothes. It follows that in the context of relative scarcity owning a (fast-fashion) brand is a signal of social status and prestige (cf. conspicuous consumption), and so it is worth the effort of hunting for such brands at low prices at sales or in second-hand shops. Thus, brands are important building blocks of the image, social status and are signals of success, as the findings of the focus-group research suggest as well (cf. Eastman et al., 2012).

These results also showed that besides the hedonistic group, who have a favourite brand to which they try to stick, there are other two groups present as well. In one of these, brands count only to a certain degree, usually in the case of some items (mostly shoes); in the other group, which resembles mostly the case of price-conscious shoppers, criteria other than brand are important; these respondents try to guide their shopping based on the criterion of price or on the criteria of anti-consumerist revolt.

Fashion-related involvement is one of the major topics of fashion literature. It refers to the importance of fashion and trends in people's lives. Involvement was researched through two questions in the online survey: one of these simply asked the respondents to indicate how important fashion is for them, while the other item touched upon involvement rather indirectly, through the adapted version of the Appearance Emphasis Scale (Johnson et al., 2007), asking from the respondents how important is for them to have a fashionable appearance. While fashion is considered to be important by nearly half of the students, in the case of the fashionable appearance, the results are more nuanced. The multi-variable analysis of fashionable appearance indicated that

socio-demographic variables and the sites of the campus are not so important in segmenting the respondents. However, having a fashionable appearance is significantly more important for those who are more informed about fashion, are brand-sensitive, and adopt the trends earlier than their colleagues. With other words, having a fashionable appearance goes hand in hand with fashion adoption, and being part of the so-called early fashion adopter group (about 15% of the respondents) means that the respondent is involved in fashion and is more interested in all aspects of fashion (information, brand, frequency of shopping, etc.). In the case of Babeş–Bolyai University, a greater preference for brands and a higher involvement in fashion could be revealed, which can be explained by multiple aspects: the role played by the urban context in presenting a larger array of styles, these students' higher budgets, and possibly their higher interest in prestige consumption.

The late majority and late adapters – as indicated by their names – are interested in fashion only to a certain degree. They spend smaller amounts on clothes, are less informed, and fashion occupies a less central position among their interests. This is a group for whom the price of the clothes is an important criterion of clothing choice, while other aspects of the apparel, such as brand and trendiness, are not so important. Obviously, this does not mean that the respondents are not interested in fashion – after all, they are young people in whose lives the way in which they look and are perceived by others is central –; it is much more about the fact that (mostly due to their limited budgets) that kind of fashion which interests late majority and late adapters is understood in the form of a bricolage of several (more or less) fashionable items in order to fit their fellows and not the fashion which is reflected in the *stricto sensu* following of the trends.

This latter issue constitutes an important result: if we understand fashion as the latest trend, students seem less fashionable, they create their fashion by combining outfits of the current and past seasons; however, they still make efforts to dress in accordance with the expectations of their reference groups. Students do not want to make mistakes; so, they follow the route of conformity, mostly through the acquisition of fast-fashion brands. It must be also remarked that, besides conformity, they attach great importance to creativity and the individual adoption of styles and trends. Thus, as already outlined, in the case of these students, we can speak about a co-existence between conformity and challenge; they are a kind of “soft challengers” in terms of fashion.

In any case, it can be suspected that the social media through its fashion influencers and the reference group through its courageous, trendier exponents can influence youngsters in being

more daring, more open-minded towards creative, agency-centred styles. The already signalled trends clearly show that the traditional fashion which was disseminated through traditional media (fashion magazines) is passé, and youngsters become creators of individualized fashion when they look around and adopt those trends which are in accordance with their personality (and with the expectations of their friends and environments as well).

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