BARRIERS TO THE CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY TRENDS IN THE FAST FASHION INDUSTRY IN ROMANIA

(SUMMARY)

In 2023, the fast fashion global industry was worth $1.7 trillion, with over 300 million workers all around the world (Zippia, 2023). The sustainability issues that the fast fashion industry is raising nowadays are worrying. The continuous level of mass production and consumption based on trends and not necessities, along with resource depletion without a viable solution to ensure long-term preservation of finite natural resources, needs to be addressed as soon as possible. It is estimated that by 2030, global apparel consumption will rise by 63% to approximately 102 million tonnes (McKinsey & Company, 2025). Approximately three out of five garments produced end up in landfills or are incinerated yearly (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Another worrying environmental aspect is that the fast fashion industry is the second most polluting industry, with 1.2 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions per year, more than all the international flights and maritime transport combined (Biswas, 2024). Keeping pace with the environmental targets also seems to be challenging for companies, as in McKinsey's State of Fashion 2025, 63% of the companies remain behind with their sustainability commitments (McKinsey & Company, 2025). Furthermore, along with the environmental issues, the fast fashion industry raises multiple concerns from an economic and social point of view. From poor wages, long working hours, child labour and sexual harassment in countries where the factories are based (Chang, 2020; James, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021) to approximately $500 million lost yearly because of the lack of sustainable practices like recycling and throwing or burning the unsold garments (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). The PhD thesis entitled "Barriers to the Current Sustainability Trends in the Fast Fashion Industry in Romania" aims to identify the barriers that hinder the transition of the fast fashion industry to a more sustainable future. In Romania, a limited number of studies regarding the problematic were conducted. Given the fact that Romania is still a developing country with limited to non-existent infrastructure for textile recycling, urgent measures need to be taken. As Cuc & Tripla (2024) state, developing countries face more severe and harder-to-address environmental consequences due to the

lack of institutional capacity and lack of infrastructure, which highlights the study research gap.

The research offers valuable insights for both practitioners and academicians, as it provides valuable findings for addressing effectively the issue of sustainability in Romania and also identifies all the barriers and the actual state of the industry. The theoretical framework of the paper includes the triple bottom line theory, sustainability consciousness, the theory of planned behaviour, the value-belief-norm theory, consumer culture theory, sustainable development theory, the application of sustainability within fast fashion, the stakeholder theory, the key dimensions of sustainability, the stages of adoption of sustainability practices in Romania, and also a detailed explanation of the identified barriers, both organisational and consumer.

Through qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study manages to identify these barriers from both consumer and organisational points of view, the motivators to address these barriers, and the actual state of the industry by identifying the sustainability area that performs better and the stage of corporate sustainability that the companies in Romania are currently at. The instruments used for this mixed-method research are the semi-structured interviews, surveys and systematic literature review.

The first qualitative objective was to identify the perspectives of Romanian environmental specialists and fashion managers regarding sustainability barriers. To identify perspectives, the study addresses four research questions that highlight the respondents' understanding of fashion sustainability, the perceived organisational and consumer barriers by specialists and the differences in perception between environmental specialists and fashion employees. In order to answer the last question, the study conducted a comparative analysis between fashion managers and environmental specialists. This objective is valuable, as it will provide a deeper understanding of the actual state of the specialists in the field.

The second qualitative objective was to identify potential motivators and drivers to overcome consumers' and organisational barriers toward sustainable development from a fashion and environmental specialist's perspective. To address the second objective, the research questions explore from a specialist's point of view what motivators/drivers can help overcome consumer and organisational barriers in the fast fashion industry.

The quantitative objectives of this study aim to examine sustainability within the Romanian fast fashion industry from various perspectives. The first objective of our quantitative study aims to identify the relevance of sustainability from the viewpoint of industry representatives, considering its impact on overall performance (financial and non-financial), social impact (internal: job satisfaction, productivity, and retention of employees and external: job creation, economic development and reducing inequalities) stakeholder impact (stakeholders' trust, consumer purchasing decisions, brand image) and environmental objectives of the company (recycled products/packaging, waste/energy reducing and new technology/design product). The second objective of the qualitative study is to identify approaches to overcoming organisational barriers where the aim was to identify the organisational barriers that Romanian fast fashion industry specialists consider mainly in their sustainability strategies as also the most effective drivers for overcoming organisational barriers to sustainability in the Romanian fast fashion industry. Furthermore, the study identifies approaches to overcoming consumer barriers from a specialist point of view as well as potential strategies to address those barriers. For our last objective, the study evaluates the sustainability performance of the Romanian fashion industry, based on respondents' perceptions, identifying the areas where the industry performs best and the stages at which corporate sustainability practices are currently implemented in the Romanian, European and international fast fashion industries.

The main conclusion drawn from the comparative analysis is that fashion industry employees tend to focus more on financial barriers, while environmental specialists emphasise policy solutions. The same observation was also perceived in the level of understanding of sustainability; while fashion employees were defining sustainability from an environmental point of view, specialists were able to provide a multidimensional definition of the concept.

The organisational barriers analysed with sub-barriers were the financial barrier (higher cost of raw materials, production, recycling, and final products); the barrier of lack of management involvement (including lack of training); the barrier of lack of government support (reflected in insufficient legislation and infrastructure); the stakeholder barrier (lack of partnerships and absence of a reward system); and the barrier related to eco-friendly packaging. The consumer barriers analysed with sub-barriers were the barrier related to the existence of behavioural differences in consumer purchasing decisions; the higher price barrier for consumers (willingness to pay extra); the cultural

barrier (impulsive buying and desire for low prices); and the barrier of lack of consumer awareness (greenwashing, lack of awareness, interest, and limited understanding of what sustainability means on the part of consumers). The overall research concludes that from an organisational point of view, the financial barriers, along with the lack of governmental support, are the most mentioned barriers, with sustainability being perceived as a trade-off with profit by companies. From a consumer point of view, the research identified the higher price for consumers as being the hardest to combat barrier perceived by the Romanian consumers, followed by the barrier of lack of consumer awareness, the cultural barrier and the behaviour gap in the purchase decision of the consumers. The study highlights that financial barriers, the lack of government support and infrastructure, and consumer-related barriers exist in Romania, similar to the global market. Unique barriers were also identified, such as the absence of sustainability focused government programmes and the absence of a sustainability culture and habits among Romanians.

The potential identified organisational drivers to address the organisational barriers were motivators from the EU and governments (tax incentives, grants), followed by stakeholder motivation (customer demand, pressure) and CSR actions. From a consumers motivators perspective, consumer education, reward systems (discounts, loyalty programmes, and cashback), and sanctions (for influencers promoting mass buying) were perceived as effective drivers.

The study reveals that there is a positive correlation between sustainability and other variables like overall performance (financial and non-financial), social impact (internal: job satisfaction, productivity, and retention of employees and external: job creation, economic development and reducing inequalities), stakeholder impact (stakeholders' trust, consumer purchasing decisions, brand image) and environmental objectives of the company (recycled products/packaging, waste/energy reduction, and new technology/design products).

At this point in Romania, industry representatives perceive the procurement and supply chain area to be performing the best, and the companies were rated as being in the first stage of sustainability, the compliance stage, which is also the case for the European and international markets. European and international markets were being seen as a bit more advanced, with companies being in a transitional phase toward the second stage, the business-centred sustainability stage.

The research limitations encountered during the study and addressed were the sample bias, data availability, time management, complexity of interdependencies, data privacy, the lack of research instruments and industry dynamics. To address this issue, the respondents were drawn from diverse companies, international, national, big, small, and medium. The confidentiality of the respondents was taken into account, and they were able to withdraw from the study at any given time. The availability played a big role, and both respondents and researcher, managed to schedule the interview according to their time preferences. No existing research instruments were found; therefore, a new interview and survey had to be developed. Ultimately, the dynamic regulations, the always-changing legislation and industry specifics required permanent research and will influence the study results.

A recommendation from a macro level drawn from the study is to implement national sustainability regulations regarding textile waste management and recycling infrastructure and also extended producer responsibility (EPR) policies so that brands can assume responsibility for their products and address the lack of governmental support barrier, which, as the study showed, is one of the hardest barriers to combat in Romania. Another recommendation is to develop a digital infrastructure for textile collection by capitalising on the area where Romania performs the best, the procurement and supply chain area, and the excellence in business and operations that could combat the barrier of lack of infrastructure. Romania also lacks a monitoring system that could easily be implemented to address the stakeholders and supply chain barriers. As the highest-rated consumer barrier was higher prices for consumers, tax deduction programmes could be implemented as in Sweden, where tax deductions were offered for textile repairs in order to reduce consumption (Swedish Government, 2021). As the innovation and research area was seen as the area performing the worst in Romania, grants for innovation can be given toward research. Another potential recommendation is to foster public-private partnerships (PPPs), as the stakeholders' cooperation barriers and financial barriers have been proven to be barriers vital to address. The lack of awareness was the second hardest to combat perceived consumer barrier that can be addressed through education, confirmed to be an efficient motivator from a young age to foster sustainable behaviour for the next generations.

On a micro level, top management has rated, in general, all barriers as more urgent to combat, but their real commitment toward sustainability must be questioned, as the barrier of lack of management commitment was also confirmed in the Romanian market. Subsequently, the study showed that the existence of sanctions and a reward system can be an effective way

to address the barrier of lack of stakeholder cooperation. As the barrier of lack of awareness comes from consumers and the higher prices were rated as the hardest to combat, green labelling and buying from second-hand sources can be a good way to address these barriers. The study also highlights the areas where the Romanian fast fashion markets do not perform as well, such as research and innovation, quality of life (health, wellness, safety & security), sustainability management measures and governance. Some potential recommendations to address those areas are to conduct more training for employees, programs from the government to encourage sustainable behaviour for consumers, stakeholders and companies, and assess the quality of employee life.

Another motivator that was seen as being effective was CSR actions (which include campaigns to inform consumers, donations, and employee education); that being said, hopefully, in the future, a change will be seen that integrates social, environmental, and governmental factors (ESG) and not only CSR.

From a research point of view, the study provided a comprehensive mapping of the Romanian fast fashion industry barriers, identifying the financial and lack of governmental support barriers as being the most challenging from an organisational point of view and the higher prices and lack of awareness from a consumer barriers perspective. Through the integration of theoretical models, the research showed interconnection between the two dimensions of barriers. While the findings correspond to other Western studies (Niinimaki, 2020; Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2019) where the regulatory and financial barriers are central, it differentiates itself by confirming specific barriers by the Romanian specialist while also rejecting others and discussing the existence of new barriers like lack of sponsorships, the absence of regulations, greenwashing, the lack of human resources and training, trade-offs with profit, uncertainty regarding real, sustainable shops, and perceived limited supply sources for sustainable fashion purchases. The study also confirmed the importance of demographic factors (age, gender, education, organisational role, and company size) that are influencing sustainability perceptions and attributes; therefore, a potential recommendation is to develop targeted strategies.

Future research should focus on emerging technologies in the field, such as artificial intelligence, the index of sustainability of companies in Romania and recycling innovation, given the growing interest and usability. The ever-changing Romanian consumer behaviour should also permanently be monitored, as should the demographic factors and the ever-

changing barriers, as the fast fashion industry is highly dynamic. Lastly, studies should further evaluate the actual effectiveness of the existing sustainability regulation and the potential of implementing other policies that could easily be adapted for the Romanian market as also the actual sustainability index of companies in Romania.