Consumer Behavior Towards Apparel E-Commerce in Romania

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to study consumer behavior towards e-commerce in the context of the Romanian market. Besides the local context, the study is concerned with the factors that may influence consumer behavior, and the attitude of Romanian consumers towards online apparel shopping. Therefore, the following objectives were set: to identify the attitude of individuals towards online shopping for apparel in Romania; to find out what are the factors of influence on the consumers' attitude towards buying apparel online, and to identify the advantages and disadvantages perceived by consumers toward buying apparel online. In order to reach these objectives, 14 interviews with young Romanian consumers were conducted. The results of the study revealed two consumer profiles: occasional apparel shopping users and regular apparel shopping users. These two different consumer profiles have different behaviors, but both of them pay attention to the matter of trust and risk, word of mouth, website quality, and customer support, considering them critical factors in choosing online stores over classical brick and mortar stores.*

Keywords: *e-commerce; Romania; consumer behavior; word of mouth; apparel.*

Introduction

The rise of the Internet and new technologies has led to the appearance of a new retail medium. The rapid growth in the number of customers choosing online stores for their shopping needs made traditional brick and mortar retailers to consider e-commerce. Convenience, wide range of products, availability of coupons and discounts are just a few of the advantages offered by the new online retail environments. Because of the new medium, there are serious differences between brick and mortar stores and online stores. For instance, online, there are no physical products a consumer can touch or physically see, the customer cannot feel the in-store atmosphere and ambiance, there are no real in-store consultants which can influence the consumer decisions. Instead, in e-commerce, we have a webpage with pictures, videos, a virtual shopping cart, and reviews or testimonials. We can suppose that these differences generate serious changes in consumer behavior. In order to understand these changes, it is important to determine the factors of influence on the online consumer behavior and the role of technology. The importance of this topic was highlighted in previous

papers. As noted by Yujong Hwang and Jaeseok Jeong (2016, p.377), "the role of technology in customer-supplier interaction needs explicit attention, not only in regards to purchases through electronic channels but especially in understanding important factors that drive consumers to buy from specific websites".

Therefore, in this paper, we aim to study consumer behavior towards apparel e-commerce in the context of the Romanian market. Our attention was captured by apparel e-commerce especially, as this is a field where consumers operate with several uncertainties when buying products. One can never be certain about the right fit, the quality or color of the fabric, or the overall experience with the delivery of the products. Therefore, we are interested in the motivations behind consumer choice for such services. By doing so, this paper aims to fill in a gap in the Romanian scientific literature regarding consumer behavior and e-commerce, a field that is little investigated.

We start by outlining several factors of influence on the consumer behavior which were later included in the study, based on previous research: *attitude, subjective norm, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, technological anxiety, security and privacy, trust and risk, web quality,* and *online word of mouth*. To these research dimensions, based on our own observations and experience as consumers of online purchased goods, we added *customer service* and *retailer's marketing efforts* as additional determinants that might explain consumers' preference for online apparel stores over traditional ones. The paper continues with the discussion of the results of 14 semi-structured interviews that aimed to investigate the attitude of young Romanian consumers towards online shopping for apparel, the factors that influence the consumers' attitude towards buying apparel online, and the perceived advantages and disadvantages associated with this process. The results of the study revealed that young Romanian consumers are open to shopping for apparel online and they show a great level of digital literacy, which helps them in the process – they pay attention to the structure of the site, they do online research before purchasing a product, they make sure their personal data is protected and they pay attention to online word of mouth.

What influences online consumer behavior?

Consumer behavior in the context of online shopping was extensively studied by numerous researchers worldwide. A recent Romanian study on the topic (Sabou, Avram-Pop, & Zima, 2017), provides a new perspective on online consumer behavior. The study is valuable in terms of giving insights related to the European market of e-commerce and the particular situation in Romania. This research analyzed several problems which users may encounter: speed of delivery longer than indicated, wrong or damaged goods/services delivered, and problems with fraud where no satisfactory response was received, technical failure and difficulties finding information concerning warranty. These potential problems were correlated with time intervals of the latest online shopping orders. The results of the study situated Romania among the countries with the lowest adoption rate of e-commerce, compared to other European countries. Also, what's interesting in the results and requires further research, is the fact that "online shoppers will continue to make online purchases even if they have experienced delays in delivering goods/services, damaged products, online fraud, technical

problems, or difficulties in finding information about the warranty of goods/services. Moreover, those who never ordered online are not discouraged by such problems as even as the number of unsatisfied clients grows, the number of those who make frequent online purchases will also grow" (Sabou et al., 2017, p.87). These insights can give researchers a better understanding of the regional and local context.

Another study by Ronald Goldsmith and Elizabeth Goldsmith (2002) provides insightful data in relation to e-commerce adoption. The research covered dimensions such as internet access, previous online purchasing experience, how often people buy online, how much they spend on online purchases, how likely they are to repeat the purchase, as well as peoples' attitude towards buying online. The results of this study show that online buyers consider online shopping more enjoyable, safer, and quicker than traditional shopping. Those who prefer online shopping were found to be more innovative and to have more knowledge about the internet. What is particularly interesting is the motivation of online apparel buyers, which is explained by the authors: "while online apparel buyers were clearly more positive on the attitudinal and psychological characteristics, they were no more likely than non-buyers to shop for clothes by other means, to enjoy shopping in general, or to spend money buying clothes. That is, they are not disproportionately motivated by clothing as a product category or by interest in shopping, but by the perceived advantages of online buying and their positive predisposition toward this mode of commerce" (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2002, p.98). The results revealed in this article served as a ground for further investigation in our study and were considered while elaborating on the research objectives. In the following sections, we discuss the most important aspects consumers take into consideration when choosing to shop online.

Web quality and technology anxiety

Of great importance in e-commerce is web quality. Besides having a functional role, web quality or the website design can affect the consumer perception and influence whether the consumer is satisfied or not with the ambiance. In classical retail, there are physical stores which are responsible for this, in online this role lies on websites. Ranganathan and Ganapathy (2002, p.460) have identified some important aspects in the design of B2C (business to consumer) websites: ease of navigation, the time taken for navigation and the use of multimedia to improve the visual appeal. A direct impact on the consumer behavior and user satisfaction was argued by David Szymanski and Richard Hise (2000). They found that satisfaction with e-commerce increases as attitudes towards website design are positive. Related to website design, we have the concept of usability proposed by Jacob Nielsen (1993) and refers to the ease to navigate a website, how efficient the interface is, how easy to remember the system is, low error rate and how pleasant is it to be used. Based on this concept, a study was conducted which added other factors in relation to usability: navigation, consistency, learnability, user guidance, and perception (Roy, Dewit, & Aubert, 2001). The results showed that there is a strong connection between website design and trust.

Still, beyond the quality of the online experience, anxiety is a subject frequently approached in the context of online consumer behavior. Technology anxiety, in the context of online shopping, is a negative reaction that influences the users to doubt their ability to perform a certain action, or to lower their expectations of the outcome. A recent study (Celik, 2016) showed that anxiety has a negative impact on

performance expectancy and effort expectancy. More exactly, people with less experience with computers and online shopping tend to feel more anxious about e-commerce. A different study (Srinivasan, 2015) aimed to reveal the impact of social norms and online shopping anxiety in the adoption of online apparel shopping by Indian consumers. This study used the online shopping anxiety variable, which refers to a negative attitude toward technology by the user, or the fear the consumer feels when using or interacting with technology. The results showed that the Indian consumer doesn't have online shopping anxiety, but confirmed the importance of the main determinant of the technology acceptance model, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Our assumption is that buying apparel online can accentuate anxiety, as opposed to buying electronics for instance. Users have to deal with the size difference, different measurements units, and other small details. Unexperienced users may feel under pressure and stressed out because of uncertainty.

Security and privacy

The importance of security in e-commerce was confirmed by numerous studies. Steve Elliot and Sue Fowell (2000) proved that security of transactions is an important consumer factor in online purchasing. David Szymanski and Richard Hise (2000, p.319) also demonstrate that "online security plays an important role in e-satisfaction". Another study (Liao & Cheung, 2001) sustained the importance of transaction security in relation to the inclination of Singaporeans to shop over the Internet. In the context of security and privacy, a study by McCole, Ramsey, and Williams (2010) shows that there are still different fears and risks associated with online shopping and that they have a direct impact on consumer behavior. This study identifies several levels of trust: trust in the Internet, trust in the vendor (the online store), and trust in third parties (for example payment processors). The study used three main control variables: experience, perceived risk, and age. The results of the study confirmed that trust has a positive impact on the attitude towards online shopping or that beliefs related to trust in a vendor, in the Internet and third parties lead to a positive attitude towards online shopping.

Some authors emphasize the role of trust in e-commerce and treat it as an important factor in online consumer behavior. The topic was approached in an article by Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Noam Tractinsky and Michael Vitale (2000) who demonstrate the importance of trust and put it in direct relation with the vendor's size and reputation. Another study by David Gefen and his collaborators confirmed the importance of trust as a determinant, beside perceived usefulness and ease of use (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). The study gives concrete expressions of trust: "a belief that the vendor has nothing to gain by cheating, a belief that there are safety mechanisms built into the website, and by having a typical interface, one that is, moreover, easy to use" (Gefen et al., 2003, p.51). A study by Xiaoni Zhang and Victor Prybutok (2008), revealed that potential threats associated with the Internet determine some users to have negative feelings regarding the usefulness of online shopping. According to Saprikis, Markos, Zarmpou, and Vlachopoulou (2018, p.75) trust refers to: "a) the security of mobile payments while shopping, b) the confidentiality of personal data (such as respecting consumers' credit card details), c) the trustworthiness in the results after mobile purchases are conducted, and d) the full compliance with the terms & conditions of each mobile shop". These specific components of trust can perfectly apply to classic e-commerce shops and stores, intended for desktop usage.

Our second assumption is that trust is especially important for apparel e-commerce, as buying clothes online presumes higher risks than buying other types of products: you can get the wrong size, wrong fit, or a different color tone. So, users should have guarantees that they can return and get refunds, in most cases this being a matter of trust.

Online word of mouth

Word of mouth in the context of e-commerce (e-WOM) was researched by Manuela López and María Sicilia (2014). The concept of e-WOM refers to an online conversation between users about a product or experience, which usually can be negative or positive. The authors examine two main determinants from traditional word of mouth (WOM), which are valence (the nature of information, positive/negative) and volume (number of posts for example). Additionally, to consider the particularities of the online environment, three more determinants were used and divided into three main groups: information source (source credibility), communication process (perceived valence, perceived volume, type of website), and the receiver (internet experience). Also, those determinants were correlated with e-WOM influence. The study showed that source credibility has a serious impact of e-WOM influence. Also, it has been found that the more sources one reaches, the more influence e-WOM has on the buying decision.

As an example in the context of buying apparel online, one can consider the act of interaction between two users talking about their experience of ordering a certain piece of clothing from a specific vendor. Usually, online stores provide feedback forms, where users can leave ratings or comments about their experience. At the same time, there are other platforms which are not moderated by the vendors, such as forums, blogs, social networks, where users can write about their experience, complains or observations. Our third assumption is that the positive or negative feedback on a vendor may have a serious impact on the consumer intention to buy apparel online, especially with the rise of Web 2.0 which facilitated the two-way interaction. In the same time, the more credible the source of the review is, the more influence it might have on the consumer's buying decision.

Methodology

The goal of this paper is to find out what are the factors of influence on the online consumer behavior towards apparel e-commerce in Romania. Starting from this goal, we have established the following research objectives and research questions:
RO1. To identify the attitude of individuals towards online shopping for apparel in Romania.
RO2. To find out what are the factors of influence on the consumers' attitude towards buying apparel online.
RO3. To identify the advantages and disadvantages perceived by consumers toward buying apparel online.
RQ1. What is the attitude of individuals towards online shopping for apparel in Romania?
RQ2.What factors contribute to the creation of consumer intention and influence their attitude to buy apparel online? What are the motivations of consumers to consider

online shopping of clothing items and to place online orders? How they react to potential barriers, which traditional shopping doesn't seem to have (lack of physical products that can be touched, inability to try before buying)?

RQ3. What are the advantages and disadvantages perceived by consumers toward buying apparel online?

In order to answer these research questions, 14 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with university students, living in Bucharest. The participants are young people, with experience using online stores and shops, both employed and unemployed, aged between 22 and 25 years old (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants at study

No.	Participant	Age	Sex	Studies	Occupation
1.	Andrei	24	M	Master's degree	Student, Unemployed
2.	Amalia	23	F	Master's degree	Student, Unemployed
3.	Ana-Maria	23	F	Master's degree	Employed-Manager
4.	Cristian	23	M	Master's degree	Employed-Marketing specialist
5.	Elena	24	F	Master's degree	Employed-Social media manager
6.	Mihaela	24	F	Master's degree	Employed-Support specialist
7.	Paul	24	M	Master's degree	Employed-Copywriter
8.	Sorin	25	M	Master's degree	Employed-Marketing specialist
9.	Teodora	23	F	Master's degree	Employed-Graphic designer
10.	Andra	24	F	Master's degree	Student, Unemployed
11.	Grigore	24	M	Master's degree	Employed-Marketing specialist
12.	Laura	24	F	Master's degree	Student, Unemployed
13.	Daniela	22	F	Master's degree	Student, Unemployed
14.	Marius	24	M	Master's degree	Employed-Marketing specialist

The interview questions aim to provide clarity on the consumer behavior towards shopping for clothes online, by covering the following determinants: attitude, subjective norm, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, technological anxiety, web quality, security and privacy, trust and risk, online word of mouth, customer service and marketing efforts. The questions are open-ended and are exploring the participants' attitude toward online apparel shopping and what is their experience with this, their technology anxiety, the way respondents perceive online apparel shopping (advantages and disadvantages), the way they perceive and manage their trust and security concerns, what are the most important things they consider in the way the website looks and the way it is structured, how they respond to promotional actions and marketing efforts of the vendors, how they are doing their pre-purchase research (or if they are doing it at all) and how they manage the issues that may arise in the process. The interviews were conducted between May 7 and May 25, 2018.

The attitude of individuals towards online shopping for apparel

All the interviewees who have participated in this study are familiar with online apparel shopping and all of them have tried ordering clothes online at least once. Teodora, 23 years: "Sometimes. I shop online less than five times a month". Some of them buy clothes from online stores even up to 10 times a month when there are special promotions. Mihaela, 24 years: "Yes. Normally, two times per month, but during sales up to 10 times per month."

The interviews explored how the participants describe their experience with apparel online shopping so far. Most of the people were saying that their experience with apparel online shopping so far was "OK". Ana, 23 years said: "Yes, it was ok so far, but still especially, for apparel, I've got a sort of reluctance, as I am afraid that if I buy any clothes it won't fit me or that they don't look as on the internet". Also, following this idea, Andra, 24 years mentioned: "Yes, I would say that every single time I purchased apparel items online, they turned out to be okay. I shopped from both Romanian and foreign online retailers and I can't say that I've been disappointed so far. Some of my purchases even included shoes, which are a pretty risky acquisition, I would say. Even in the case of shoes, I was lucky every single time. I also bought my prom dress online, and it turned out as I expected it to be. It did need some adjustments but overall it was pretty much a great purchase". Others said that they had bad experiences so far, saying that the biggest problem was the sizes and in some cases the smell of the clothes. Sorin, 25 years, said: "My experience with apparel shopping is pretty bad. I tried twice and both times I failed. The size of the shirt or jeans was always not right. From that point on I gave up on shopping online for this branch of online shopping".

Based on these findings, one can conclude that there are mixed attitudes of individuals towards online shopping. While the majority of the respondents have a positive attitude, there were a few cases when the interviewees stated that they would opt for traditional shopping instead. When asked what things they consider important while shopping for apparel, in general, most of the respondents have indicated price, quality, fabric, and sizing. In this regard, Paul, 24 years, said: "It's important that I like how it looks on me, and also if it has a reasonable price, of course". Also, on this topic, Sorin, 25 years, said: "The materials which are used in crafting is really important for me, I usually am really concerned about the quality of the products I buy and for me, that's a priority".

The interviewees were also asked if they shop online due to a necessity to get new clothes or if they like the process itself. The gathered data showed that 7 of the 14 respondents shop online as they like the process of online shopping as such, 6 of them stated they shop due to a necessity, while one of the respondents mentioned both. Ana, 23 years stated: "Honestly, I think both. Most of the times, because of the necessity of not spending time in different shopping centers and sometimes because I just like to look for apparel, prices, sales and so on". There were respondents who have a more critical view over this. Amalia, 23 years, said: "I don't actually like the process as it does not give the same certainty as store shopping gives. Plus, I believe the experience of actually trying the things and getting to experience different styles is more enjoyable".

When asked if there is something specific they enjoy about online apparel shopping, 7 respondents mentioned the discounts, 2 of them mentioned the fact that they can take

all the time they need to do the research and take the decision and 5 of them, the ability to compare different prices. Grigore, 24 years, said: "Discounts, big discounts for high-quality clothes. As well, the thing that it's easier to choose a product. You can open 10 tabs with a similar product, compare them one by one and close those you don't like and the last which remains open is the one to be bought". To the same question, Andrei, 24 years, expressed his point of view: "I enjoy online shopping because every time I order something it is like Christmas. I like unwrapping boxes". Mihaela, 24 years enjoys apparel online shopping as well: "It is easier, if I am looking for a white shirt, I just select the filters and all the available items will appear. As I mentioned before, they are in a perfect condition, I can order them today even if I don't have any money, and in a week or so, by the time I receive the order, I will pay for it. In physical stores, I cannot reserve a product for more than 24 hours so I might not have it because I don't have money at that moment".

What influences consumers' attitude towards buying apparel online?

When asked if the respondents consider family or friends are able to influence their attitude towards online shopping, 9 from 14 interviewees answered negatively. For example, Ana, 23 years, said: "Hmm, not really. Usually, I am very stubborn so if I like something I will buy it anyway, so basically regarding clothes, nobody can influence me so easy". There were 3 interviewees who consider that family and friends had an impact on their decision, while 2 respondents were not sure. Andra, 24 years, said: "Of course they can. If someone that I know warned me to avoid purchasing products from a certain website after having a bad shopping experience, I would probably take that into consideration when deciding to shop for a specific item. Also, a friend's recommendation could probably influence my purchase decision as well". There were neutral answers as well. For instance, Paul, 24 years stated: "Yes, I sometimes ask my girlfriend's opinion on something. I'd say that's the main influence. I don't really ask my parents or my friends' opinions though. Maybe that's more of a women's thing (laughing)?"

During the interview, we were also concerned if the respondents have encountered any technical difficulties during the time with apparel online shopping and how they overcome this. Most of the respondents have stated that they have encountered issues. Andrei, 24 years, said: "Having a package lost. Twice. One time the company refunded me, the other time they sent me the package again". Issues were reported by Ana, 23 years, as well: "Just one time I encountered a problem with a pair of shoes that didn't arrive at the time specified, but all I did was to send that specific site an email and the problem was solved, the next day I got my desired pair of shoes. Anyway, this inconvenience didn't influence me in order to return and buy again. It was just a matter of disorganization, it can happen to anyone, in stores or on online platforms, it doesn't matter".

When asked if they were influenced by the issues they have encountered and if this affected their willingness to continue shopping online for apparel all but one of the respondents stated that they continued to shop online regardless. Cristian, 23 years, said: "Not very much. Of course, it is not a nice situation, but as far as they are open to help, I see no issues. Especially if you trust the online shop". Andrei, 24 years, mentioned: "Not at all. I only shop from reputable shops, where the customer comes

first". In most cases, the respondents said that the customer support was able to solve the problem and have positively influenced their willingness to buy in the future, or in few cases, the experience with customer support didn't influence it in any way. Andrei, 24 years: "In a good way. I've never had bad problems with customer service. I've had more problems in physical stores than in online". Daniela, 22 years: "Yes, because good customer care is important to any business and willingness to help me rectify a situation would definitely bring me back to shop in the site". Therefore, a good customer service experience is very important.

The interview also explored how the respondents deal with risks associated with online apparel shopping such as uncertainty about product size, product fit or receiving the wrong color. In most cases the interviewees were aware of the return policy of the online store, knowing that they can always return a product, or get a refund. In some cases, they read reviews to be sure about the products they buy. For instance, Cristian, 23 years, said: "Usually, serious online shops give you refunds. You can return items. I guess there is even a law for this. So there is no problem". Laura, 24 years, mentioned a slightly different approach: "I don't buy anything that has no reviews. People say there what is wrong with the product and give some advice on the size". When asked if the situations when they ended requesting refunds or returns have made them pay more attention to details while ordering, most of the respondents stated they were not affected by these situations and continued to make online apparel purchases. Andrei, 24 years, said: "You learn to be careful with size and brand with many orders and the risk decreases". Mihaela, 24 years, has mentioned: "Yes, but even so, the size may be correct, but the cut of a dress may not be the one for me, even if it is my size, it might not fit".

Another research dimension was related to the matter of trust, and more exactly, what makes the interviewees trust certain apparel online shops. The majority mentioned the store's reputation and reviews about these online shops. Others said that previous experience would make them more trustful towards an online shop. Some mentioned peers and friends. Amalia, 24 years: "Might be the positive opinions of friend and peers". Teodora, 23 years, said: "Like I said, for me it important to read the reviews of other customers that already bought from that shop. In this way, I can see if the promised quality is what they claim their products have. Also, I can see this way if the orders come in time. Also, besides that, I think it's the price they have for products". Paul, 24 years, said: "First of all, I buy from brands I know from the mall and the online outlets that have products I know from friends, magazines or social media". Also, it was important to investigate what would make customers stay away from certain online shops. A lot of respondents mentioned that bad reviews and bad reputation would make them stay away from purchasing from certain shops, as well as high prices and bad quality. For example, Ana, 23 years, explained: "Hmm, usually I look for reviews. If there are too many bad ones, then I rethink of I buy something or not. Or it may happen that a friend tells me a specific online store is not okay or that the products are not the same as the photos they show".

When asked how comfortable they are with sharing personal data and credit card details while placing an online order, most of the respondents are OK with sharing such information, but they take precautions. Amalia, 24 years, mentioned: "If I make certain online purchases I access the domain of that company. And as a backup plan, I use a credit card that is meant only for shopping and is easy to block in case of any

irregularities". Elena, 24 years, said: "No worries. I already passed the step by being very careful and "paranoid" about this aspect. I see shopping online as an opportunity and trying to enjoy it. Of course, I am aware of which sites I make orders and were I put my personal data". Mihaela, 24 years, is not very comfortable with sharing such data: "I am not very comfortable, I always check if the website is secured".

The gathered data also show that most of the respondents considered the way an online store is built and its ease of use very important. Cristian, 23 years, declared: "For me, it is very important. If the website has a logical structure, with no flashing banners and a design from 90's it inspires trust". Teodora, 23 years, said: "Very important because I prefer mainly a much simple store, with a modern look than a website with too many colors or banners, that sometimes can be so exhausting. Also, I like to access mostly websites that are responsive on the mobile and also, that have many options to see the products from each angle. For me, it's important to easily see the description of each product, so another important thing for me is the way in which the information is placed on the page on that website". For the most respondents, the way a website looks may influence their willingness to shop there. Andra, 24 years: "I think it does, most websites I've ordered from having a simple, easy to navigate design". The features the interviewees most appreciate in an online shop are the discount section, search and filter features, charts with measures (sizes), clothing in motion (video or 360 model), easy navigation.

Lastly, the interviewees were asked if they perform pre-purchase research and where they search for information about the products they want to buy or about the vendor before placing an order. Most of the respondents do pre-purchase research. Elena, 24 years said: "Yes, I do research in order to find the better price. I check all online stores that I usually make purchases and analyze were I can find the better prices". Andra, 24 years, mentioned as well: "This is probably the first thing I do after deciding to shop online. I check out several forums and social media posts to see whether previous customers were satisfied with the services provided by that website". Sorin, 25 years, consults different sources: "I use different sources for this, firstly the reviews from the site I want to buy from and then other forums from users that have the product for some time and are saying their pros and cons for them. I also use YouTube for an even deeper understanding of what I'm buying. I like video reviews because they feel even more real and trustworthy".

Advantages and disadvantages of buying apparel online

In terms of the advantages and disadvantages of online shopping, 9 of the respondents agreed on the fact that the saved time is one of the most important benefits. Amalia, 24 years, said, "Probably you save more time when shopping online rather than going to a store". Mihaela, 24 years, also has mentioned some: "Yes, it saves time. You can buy what you want during a "dead time"- while waiting for the bus, on the subway. You enjoy a better price on your first order". When asked if they consider online apparel shopping as being efficient, most of them said that it is. Sorin, 25 years, said: "It's the efficiency and quickness that makes it so appealing. It's fast and easy and has a variety that can satisfy every taste". Marius, 24 years, stated: "Yes, it is. It is time efficient and you can browse a higher amount of clothing options than you would do in a traditional shop".

Most of the respondents mentioned as potential disadvantages the uncertainty about sizes, about the look (differences between what is displayed on the website and in real life), delays in delivery and inability to try clothes before buying. Ana, 23 years, said: "A disadvantage could be that there is the possibility that what you see in photos on the site, won't be the same in real life, I am thinking here about fabric, color, size and stuff like that". Another perspective comes from Grigore, 24 years: "Sometimes it could be insecure, but c'mon you don't have to be stupid to buy things from websites which sell Ray Ban for $15". Daniela, 22 years: "It actually has its share of major disadvantages. The clothes might not be the same to what was seen online, the fabric of the clothes might be low quality, they might send wrong sizes or clothes with a malfunction like a bad zipper, their delivery might take a while or their returns".

The respondents think the vendors can take some concrete steps to overcome these issues. Amalia, 24 years: "Maybe asking for more feedback. I think people believe the opinions that they read online from the other consumers that already tried or bought what they are looking for". Ana, 23 years, has a slightly different opinion: "Regarding the vendors, all they have to do is to show the exact reality. So for size to put some measures there in order to be able to know what size fits you, for colors, vendors should post photos that express the same color not lighter or darker". Cristian, 23 years, said: "I don't know, they should collaborate closer with shipping companies to make sure the delivery is as fast as possible". Paul, 24 years: "New technologies I guess would be the best way. VR, AR? Maybe then you see exactly how something looks on you at least, even if you won't feel the clothes themselves".

A profile of the consumers of online apparel stores

Based on the results of the study, two main consumer profiles can be identified: *occasional apparel shopping users* and *regular apparel shopping users*. The characteristics of these users were grouped in Table 1.

Table 2. Type of customers for apparel sold online

Occasional apparel shopping users	Regular apparel shopping users
Shop online rarely, usually a few times a year	They shop several times a month
Don't enjoy the process, they shop mainly because of a need	They enjoy the process of online apparel shopping itself
Have faced difficulties with online shopping in the past	Didn't face any issues with online shopping in the past, or these issues were easily solved
They reject uncertainty about sizes and materials, they are not willing to risk	Recognize the sizing issue, but are not afraid of these risks, as they usually request refunds or returns
They are very careful with their privacy (for example they use separate credit cards for online shopping)	They do not have a problem sharing their credit card details and personal data, as long as the online store is trustworthy
Their opinion can be changed if the order will meet their	They are open to new technologies and would like to see VR technology or 360

expectation	videos implemented in all online apparel shops
They are influenced by bad reviews, but they don't do extensive research before buying	They do pre-purchase research by approaching different sources such as online word of mouth, including feedback, YouTube testimonials, reviews
Not very influenced by the website look (though they appreciate a good searching system)	For an online shop, they consider the easiness of navigation and a modern design as being important

Even if all of the interviewees who have participated in this study have experienced online apparel shopping at least once, there are some who still prefer traditional shopping when looking for clothes. As for the result, 6 of the respondents shop both online and offline regularly, 4 of the respondents do their shopping mostly online, and 4 of them do it mainly offline. Still, 5 of those 6 who shop both online and offline have jobs. This may indicate that those who have a job, have a more pragmatic approach and they shop both online and offline, exploring different options due to time restraints. Male prefer doing shopping online, or both online and offline, while for a female there were more cases when the preference was clearly given to traditional shopping. Those opting for traditional shopping like the fact that they can try clothes in stores can have the good right away, invoking issues with sizing and trust in the online vendors, as well as potential delays in delivery. On the other hand, those shopping for apparel online like the fact that they save a lot of time, without being disrupted from their daily activities, they have access to promotions and a wider range of choices. Results show that those who are more familiar with the internet and who perform a wider range of activities online tend to choose online apparel shopping as their primary choice. It was revealed that the most important things, which are taken into consideration while shopping for clothes, both online and offline are pricing, sizing, and quality, website design, and architecture, brand familiarity.

When the respondents were asked directly if they consider their decision to shop online, somehow being influenced by family or friends, we have received, in most case negative answers. However, some of the interviewees mentioned friends as one of the most trusted sources of pre-purchase research, in further questions, while previously saying they were not influenced in any way, by them. Other respondents mentioned peers and friends as impacting their trust in some online shops, but previously, when directly asked, they said they are not influenced in any way. These being said, this confirms the importance of the subjective norm, and attitude, meaning that the influence of family and friends and the attitude towards online shopping are strong predictors of the online consumer behavior. This also confirms the importance of word of mouth. According to the gathered data, online reviews and word of mouth works both ways, both influencing positively online apparel buying decisions and negative ones. These findings reveal an interesting characteristic of the today's consumers – they tend to actively search for opinions but reject advice per se regarding what to buy and where to buy from. This hypothesis needs further testing, however.

The study revealed the fact that respondents perceive the effort needed to perform online apparel shopping as very low. In other words, they described the websites as being easy to use. This was found to be an important factor which influenced the respondents to consider shopping online. The interviewees stated that online apparel

shopping provides them with concrete benefits, and the most important one is saving them a lot of time. This point of view was sustained by both men and women respondents. The aspects mentioned above tested two indicators: perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Their relevance was validated by this study, as it was found that they represent the most important elements motivating those preferring online apparel shopping over traditional shopping. An interesting finding of our research is the fact that in the case of perceived ease to use, the respondents conditioned their answer by mentioning that the online shops should be well designed (modern and appealing) and have a logical structure (easy to navigate and filter options). These being said, one can notice that web quality has a direct influence over the perceived ease of use, meaning that online vendors should pay attention to this aspect.

This research also investigated the way interviewees deal with risks associated with online apparel shopping such as uncertainty about product size, product fit or receiving the wrong color. It was found that the majority of the respondents don't have a problem, dealing with the risks mentioned above, but they are aware of them and usually, they check the privacy policy of the online shop, in order to be sure they can refund the wrong products or get a refund. Others consult online reviews before buying in order to avoid potential issues. Some of the respondents have experienced such issues and they were given refunds or replacements. Most of them have returned wrong items, while several considered giving them to friends or family. Their experience made them more attentive in the future, so they pay more attention to size guides and product details.

What is really interesting regarding this matter is the fact that even if they have experienced such issues, in most cases this didn't influence their willingness to buy in the future. This confirms a statement in a study conducted by Romanian researchers (Sabou et al., 2017), who have found that consumers will continue to buy online even if they have experienced different issues in the past. The findings of the study revealed that the main motivation for this behavior is the fact that in most cases these issues were not critical to the respondents, these were easy to solve, there is a wide range of online shops that can serve as an alternative if there were issues experienced with a particular one, and the benefits offered by online shopping are not shadowed by its disadvantages. The only impact is the fact that such issues experienced by the consumers make them aware, more careful and they pay more attention when buying again from online shops.

Regarding trust, most of the interviewees have indicated that they trust certain online shops due to positive reviews and comments in social media, and because of peers' recommendations. Bad reviews would make them stay away from certain shops. Also, the respondents said they trust popular online stores and avoid those that look like nobody have invested in them. Generally, the respondents do not have a problem with sharing their personal data and credit card information. This study provides value by revealing the fact that Romanian customers tend to pay upon receiving the order, than by using credit cards, or if they use them, they make sure the transaction is processed in a secure environment and that websites have security certifications. This confirms the results of a study by McCole et al. (2010), which states that there are fears associated with online shopping and they have a direct impact on the consumer

behavior. Still, this doesn't influence the willingness to buy online, but the way in which payment is done.

As for the design of the online store, this study revealed that most of the respondents considered it as being important. A high importance was given especially to the navigation of the website and its logical structure, as well as for fast loading, especially by those who shop regularly. The importance of the ease of site navigation was previously indicated in an article by Ranganathan and Ganapathy (2002), who stated that the most important issues for the consumer are: ease of navigation, the time taken for navigation and the use of multimedia to improve the visual appeal. Our findings validate the importance of these factors for the users, especially the navigation and loading speed aspects. Additionally, other important aspects were revealed in this study. The respondents mentioned that they appreciate good search functions, detailed product filters, size charts which are easy to understand, visible contact details, modern and clean look, and a dedicated discount section.

The present study investigated two more research dimensions, proposed by the authors: *customer support*, and *marketing effort*, which weren't addressed in previous studies. In case of an issue with placing the online order, or in receiving the wrong item, or if there were delays in receiving the order, most of the interviewees have stated that the first thing they would do is contact the customer support by email or by phone. Some of them have experience with contacting the customer support and have stated that they were able to solve the problem. In some cases, customer support contributed to the willingness of the respondents to make further purchases. This confirms the validity of this factor, especially in the context of the Romanian market, where the respondents stated that they want to be in touch with real people. In what concerns marketing efforts, most of the respondents have mentioned that they are attracted by newsletters and by relevant ads, but the most important driver is discounts. Again, this confirms the findings included in the theoretical section, of Ronald Goldsmith and Elizabeth Goldsmith (2002), who have stated that discounts are a good way to attract those who need extra motivation. In this regard, the Romanian consumer is price-sensitive, and discounts can play a crucial role in making them purchase more.

In terms of the advantages of online apparel shopping, the respondents have indicated this being a time saver. Other advantages mentioned are the wider range of choices compared to traditional shopping, the convenience of buying anywhere and anytime, the lack of time pressure when taking the decision. Consumers don't have to bother about the transportation of these goods and have the possibility to compare products with one click. As for disadvantages, most of the respondents have mentioned delivery delays and the problem with sizing as being the most critical. What this research brings new, for the Romanian market, is the fact that the problem with sizing is more critical in case of shoes, meaning that even those who shop online regularly, prefer to shop for shoes in physical stores where they can measure them. Some respondents stated that the vendors should ask customers for feedback, they should elaborate proper measure guides, introduce video content, so the customers get a better understanding of the products before buying and accept a wider range of payment options. Some of them have even considered implementing AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) technologies for a better user experience while shopping for the clothes online. This proves the fact that the participants in this study have

advanced digital literacy. When asked what is the most unsatisfying aspect regarding online shopping for apparels, some of the interviewees have mentioned that sometimes the price of shipping is higher than the price of the actual product, and this is an important reason for some to shop offline. Others have reported technical issues, such as annoying pop-ups that drive off their attention. These ideas can help online vendors to improve their services.

Conclusions

The results of this study showed that the perception of the young Romanian consumers regarding the online shopping for apparel, in general, is a positive one. All of the interviewees shop online regularly and have identified concrete benefits of online shopping such as saving time. It was revealed that the interviewees find it easy to shop online, as well as the fact that that they find this useful.

The study also revealed two main consumer profiles: *occasional apparel shopping users* and *regular apparel shopping users*. The two groups have noticeable differences. Customers who shop online for clothes occasionally do this because of a need and do not necessarily enjoy the process. They had bad experiences in the past with online apparel shopping, they are uncertain about sizes and materials and are not willing to risk. They are careful with their private details and credit cards and they are highly influenced by reviews. On the contrary, those who shop online for clothes regularly, enjoy the process of online shopping, they didn't face issues in the past or they were able to easily solve them. They are not afraid of risks associated with online apparel shopping, always counting on refunds and returns. They are not afraid to share their personal data and credit cards if the source is trustworthy, they are open to new technologies and innovation, they consult multiple sources in their pre-purchase phase and they give high importance to the way a website looks and navigates.

Females tend to give preference to traditional shopping, while men prefer online. Also, it was revealed that those who shop online have as their main motivation for the fact that they save a lot of time, without being disrupted from their daily activities. They have access to promotions and a wider range of choices and they have enough time to take the purchase decision without the constraints of time and space. Both online and offline, people pay attention to pricing, sizing and quality, website design and architecture and brand familiarity.

What is especially interesting is the fact that people tend to deny that they are influenced in their buying decision by advice coming directly from family and friends. Still, the results indicated online word of mouth (reviews, testimonials), including those coming from family and friends, as the prime source of pre-purchase research and an important foundation for trust in the online vendor. In another train of thoughts, those who shop online frequently, pay attention to the way a website looks, especially to the navigation system.

In terms of customer support, the study also revealed that people tend to continue buying apparel online, even if they have previously faced different issues in the process. Their motivation can be explained, as these issues were not critical to the respondents, they were easy to solve and they always have a wide range of online

shops that can serve as an alternative. It was found that support contributed to the willingness of the respondents to make further purchases. The respondents stated that they need to know that there is a real person on the other side. On the other hand, marketing efforts, especially e-mail newsletters with discounts, have influenced the respondents to buy more, with cases going from an average of 2-3 orders per month, up to 10 orders. This should be taken into consideration by the online vendors.

The following study investigated the factors that influence Romanian consumers in terms of buying apparel online. While, we worked with a small sample, consisting of young people, with advanced digital literacy, and who know how to conduct pre-purchase online research, this does not allow for the generalization of the gathered results. However, the research offers interesting insights regarding young Romanian consumers and their online buying habits, which invite to further research in this field.

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