



## Research Article

# Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Questions to Define Awareness of Ethical Fashion in Romania

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### Abstract

This research focuses on consumer behaviour analysis of Romanians as there is a lack of knowledge about their awareness of ethical fashion. The fashion industry and its concept of fast fashion, have negative impacts on the environment and society. The concept of slow or ethical fashion evolved, but consumer behaviour is important to reduce the impacts. Research in consumer behaviour aims at identifying consumer attitudes and consumption patterns. To understand customers and their expectations are increasingly important for the fashion business. This approach can analyse consumer awareness of ethics in fashion among Romanians from an everyday perspective. The author conducted a cross-sectional study, a semi-structured focus group discussion with twenty participants during an organised workshop at a Romanian university using the city of Iasi exemplarily to represent a greater urban area. The dynamic panel discussions stimulated the data collection, including the author as a moderator directing the conversation. Simultaneously, a survey containing qualitative items, i.e., six open-ended questions, was carried out. This paper discusses findings from this qualitative analysis, focusing on phrases and words most commonly mentioned by the respondents. Data is based on fourteen participants to gather the perception and knowledge of the ethical fashion concept. Results of this empirical social research show that the responses support the theory of ethical fashion, but awareness is limited, and barriers towards sustainable consumption exist, this aligns with existing literature. This study serves as a preliminary research revealing a variety of conclusions and can be useful for further quantitative survey design.

### Keywords

Consumer awareness; Ethical fashion; Perception; Qualitative analysis; Open-ended questions

## Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the largest polluters globally, and generally, the interest in sustainability has risen in the last decade. Ethical fashion is an emerging concept opposite to fast fashion. Simultaneously, researchers have been increasingly focusing on consumers' interest in ethical behaviour. Customers worldwide care

more about the social and environmental responsibility of companies, according to studies such as the Nielsen report [1]. Ethical fashion is increasingly gaining media attention, especially from social media and their influencers and celebrities, e.g., the documentary *The True Cost*. According to *Vogue*, sustainability has become a key issue in fashion industry over the past year<sup>3</sup>. Many companies are concerned about their impact on society and environment, such as H&M and Kering who have initiated a garment-recycling program [2]. Commonly, companies are incorporating ethics in their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies or departments [3].

### The ethical fashion concepts

Ethical fashion aims not to harm people or the environment; it also improves the working conditions for people, focusing on both, the culture and the environment [4]. Besides ethical, there are many other related terms, such as eco, organic, green, sustainable, or slow fashion. The slow fashion concept evolved from the slow food movement, focusing on local and small producers [5]. According to the definition of slow fashion [6], this concept is about small lines and regional productions, or high quality of products obtained through eco-design, as well as fair labour conditions. Other important aspects of this approach are innovation and transparency. Examples of the use of alternative fibres and production technology are to reduce the environmental impact by creating less waste and pollution [3]. By integrating ethics and sustainability into the design process, ethical fashion can provide more conscious products. Other terms to describe the alternative fashion concept are circular or circular economy [7], sweat-free [5], and social responsibility [8]. In Figure 1, a word-cloud presents most popular definitions of ethical fashion found in the literature.

### Ethical behaviour

The definition of ethical is morally good or correct. In general, ethics affect pro-social behaviour; respondents of surveys about ethics are likely to give socially desirable answers, defined as the attitude-behaviour gap [9-12]. Therefore, even there is more concern about ethical issues, the behaviour is not affected, i.e., it does not drive towards sustainable purchase behaviour [10]. When it comes to fashion shopping, still, there are too many consumers with limited or no awareness of the potential issues regarding the sustainability of fashion products [13]. Hence, there is a need of consumer education for more awareness. It is necessary to understand consumers' perception regarding the concept of ethical fashion, by asking them "What is sustainable fashion?" [14], to reduce this attitude-behaviour gap, and also, to avoid negative perception, such as greenwashing, etc., [15].

### Consumer awareness of ethics

The ethical trend is not entirely new; the first "ethical consumerism" appeared in the late 1980s, when "the retailers adopted codes of conduct to end relationships with suppliers who exploit workers, and set out to improve labour standards" [16]. However, regarding the ethical fashion concept, there is some confusion due to the overload and the continuous upcoming terms and shifting of meanings refer to Figure 1. Concluding, all concepts have the same aim, to improve or change the main existing fast fashion concept. By defining what

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**Table 1:** Open-ended survey questions.

(1)	(Ethical) Fashion	What does the term mean to you? What are the main issues or factors in fashion?
(2)	Fashion & You	What was your most recently bought item of clothing (for yourself or others)? What is its purpose, your reasoning (key factors)?
(3)	Ethical Fashion Purchase	Which ethical indicators do you know? When buying clothes which ethical issues do you consider most?
(4)	Fashion & Ethical Attributes	How important do you think are ethical factors for the purchasing decision? What is the ranking of ethics among other factors?
(5)	Fashion Future	What do you think will be the future development of ethics in fashion? If you would have more money would you be more interested (why/why not?)
(6)	Fashion Retailers	Having good ethics - Which do you know and why? Having absence of ethics - Which do you know and why?
	Demographics	Gender: Male, Female Age Nationality Highest academic qualification obtained Occupation

**Table 2:** Demographics of survey respondents.

Participant (P)	Gender	Age	Academic qualification	Occupation
1	Male	27	PhD Student	Research Student
2	Female	29	High School	Student
3	Female	22	Bachelor Student	Student
4	Female	21	High School	Student
5	Female	32	Master Student	Assistant Student, Artist
6	Male	37	PhD Student	Professor
7	Male	37	PhD Student	University Lecturer
8	Female	32	PhD Student	University Lecturer
9	Female	23	High School	Student
10	Female	22	High School	Student
11	Male	28	Master Student	Assistant Professor
12	Female	22	Bachelor Student	Student
13	Female	32	Master Student	Student
14	Female	22	Bachelor Student	Student
Total	M (4) F (10)	21-25 (6) 26-30 (3) 31-35 (3) 36-40 (2)	High school (4) Bachelor (3) Master (3) PhD (4)	Student (8) Research Student (1) Assistant Student (1) Assistant Professor (1) Lecturer (2) Professor (1)

people more aware of the impact of consumption and the issues in the fashion industry, while maintaining “new products / eco-design / to be you / usage of materials / fashionable” (5). Also, many respondents were aware of the price for (ethical) fashion: “low quality products are more favoured than eco due to cheap price / money we spend, is important / higher costs for eco / expensive” (4). Again, social aspects are discussed, mainly focusing on “worker payment / under minimum payment of workers” (2), which has also been mentioned by researchers [32]. Proposals are made for both, consumers and the industry, such as “training for producers and consumers / ethical management for human resources and resources” (2). Thus, the study shows that the term ethical fashion is familiar to most. Respondents were showing aesthetical awareness and self-consciousness towards the fashion concept, and recognising the fast fashion issues, having some environmental knowledge. Responses to the ethical fashion concept refer mainly to a lower impact due to less consumption, and less waste and pollution, better materials and production processes, as well as appropriate social circumstances.

### Purchase consciousness

The participants were asked to specify their most recently bought item of clothing, as this has seen to be a valid approach in research [30], to identify the primary product attributes regarding purchasing. The mainly bought items in the data set were the T-shirt, followed by the dress, quoted by participants as “T-shirt / T-shirt for my husband / shirt long sleeves” (5), and “dress” (4).

The key factor for the purchase was mainly the quality, connected with “long-lasting” of clothing; clothes are built to last [32]. All of the mentioned attributes are primary product qualities. A gender difference [28] was shown in the group. Men gave more “practical” reasons, such as “easy to use / good performance / need, to replace the old and broken clothes” (4); whereby women were looking for “fashionable” and “colour” in their clothes’ purchases, due to “changing season or occasion” (2), but also for other important factors such as the “price” and “comfort”. Quotations by participants are as follows:

**Table 3:** Factors affecting the purchasing of ethical fashion items.

Eco materials	Environmentally-friendly
recycled material comfort organic	harmless second-hand
Country of origin	Good labour conditions
who made my clothes low wage countries	human rights ethical pay

**Table 4:** Ethical fashion challenges, barriers and solutions identified.

Challenges	Barriers	Solutions
Reduce waste and pollution Improve human rights for workers	Limited awareness No interest; Ethics comes second in consumer choice: too pricey, need for new Low availability of ethical retailers	Aesthetic design Quality and value Made of, made by Training and education More retailers selling ethical fashion

“quality / quality for apparel and shoes (last long period) / long-lasting / fabric quality / stitches” (6) and “colour” (4), “material / natural materials” (3), “need of new and fashionable clothing / fashion / need to replace broken old clothes” (3), “upgrade wardrobe for hot season / summer is coming” (2), “prom ball / party” (2), “design / tailoring” (2), “price” (2), and “comfort / practical” (2).

### Product attribute knowledge

The participants were asked to define the most important ethical attributes to gather the information regarding the product attribute knowledge which was material as well as human rights, along with “second-hand” (2). These attributes are quoted as follows: “materials / eco-friendly materials / eco materials / new and eco-friendly raw materials” (5), and “not harming the environment / respecting environment / environmental friendly” (5), “good labour conditions for workers / not abusing labour / respecting human rights” (3).

Next, participants were asked “When buying clothes which ethical issues do you consider most?” In response to this question, consumers discuss how the product is made of and where it is manufactured. Responses were quoted as follows: “made of / recycled material / comfort and material / organic” (4), and “manufactured in / produced outside countries having problems with labour rights / country of origin / who made my clothes / ethical pay for workers” (5). The importance of recycling, fair trade, made of, and organic has also been found in other studies, referring to the awareness rating mentioned by Shen et al. [20]. Participants knew about the campaign of “Who made my clothes?” (3) (#whomademyclothes) of the Fashion Revolution Week [33], this shows the impact of marketing campaigns and social media. However, from the results of product knowledge, it can be seen that mainly the material side, product origin and human rights were considered. Others, such as natural or low impact dyes, or maintenance criteria were not considered. Therefore, eco-friendly materials and the country of origin could mostly influence the buying process, see Table 3 for an overview.

### Product attribute importance

The importance of the ethical factors regarding the purchasing decision is mainly quoted as “very important / very” (4), “7 out of 10 / some importance” (2). The impact of consumption was considered and quoted as “we can choose to do something good for the environment in a long term / we have to be conscious / aware of the surroundings / have to take care of the planet we have” (4). When the subjects were asked to compare and rank ethics with other factors,

the most common answer was the price. Eco is “more expensive”, quoted as: “depends on the price we want to spend as eco is more expensive / second after price / after quality and price” (3). Follow by “price, quality and functionality”, “comfort” was also found to be more important. As previously mentioned, ethical issues are not always the primary driver; For example, personal needs can be more important than ethics [20]. Even when consumers are aware of ethical issues, but still other factors, such as design, price, availability and the brand can have more importance in buying process [8,11]. Other respondents mention that ethics are not important, or that they are unsure about it, quoted as: “I must admit, not very high / Not very high” (2) and, “I don’t know” (2).

### Future consciousness

When respondents were asked about the fashions’ future development regarding ethics, optimism was expressed. Participants mentioned positive trends such as “recycling, organic, upcycling”, quoted as: “fair trade clothes / ethics in fashion will be hopefully more and more important / in top score / bigger importance of environment / considering environment will have a bigger importance / more fairness towards employees / more and more important / more support of sustainable development in peoples’ communities” (8), and “more recycled plastic-PET-fibres / more organic materials such as bamboo / upcycle your own wardrobe” (3). On the other hand, participants showed uncertainty towards present trends. As defined by Hofstede [22], Romania was categorised as restraint, showing a tendency of pessimism and feeling that social norms constrain actions. However, participants show more optimism towards the future ethical fashion.

The participants were asked if they would have more money they would be more interested to purchase ethical fashion. Almost all said “yes”, namely quoted as: “Yes, because it is important to take care of our environment / Yes, because it is more expensive to buy clothes that are eco-friendly / Yes, I would like to try / I am curious / Yes, due to environment” (6), and “I would buy higher quality products to use them longer / buy quality product which lasts for a long period such as in earlier times” (2). Therefore, a higher price or the perception that ethical fashion is costlier than conventional fashion can be a main barrier of the ethical concept.

### (Un)ethical retailer knowledge

The involved participants could not identify fashion retailers having good ethics, except “H&M”. Along with that, the participants mention in general the term “big brand names” or “no-name brands”. Quoted by participants as: “H&M-sustainable line” (2), and “I’m not aware of this topic / don’t know about this / I don’t know anyone that I could consider having good ethics (from my definition of good ethics)” (3), and “big brands especially/important brands” (2). Also, for non-ethical retailers, no names were found, and the only country of origin and working conditions, in general, were considered. Nine respondents didn’t comment this question. And only five respondents gave the answers, quoted as “poor countries producers / bad working conditions for employees / low priced companies, producers mostly” (3), “No-name brands / H&M and Inditex” (2), “I’m not aware of this topic” (1). From the overall responses, it was observed that there was less or no awareness and uncertainty towards what is unethical or ethical retailers.

### Conclusions

Fashion companies are increasingly implementing sustainable

development, and ethical fashion is becoming more important [1,10]. The study findings show that the participants understand the concept of ethical fashion and the difference to the conventional system. But, other attributes than ethical, are found to be more important, such as mainly the higher price [8,11]. This finding can also relate to the cultural or economic values of Romanians. The knowledge about ethical retailers and the ethical attributes is limited; Retailers and brands need to take more action, especially the big brands such as H&M which are well known, but still, participants were less aware of their ethical practices. Campaigns such as "Who made my clothes?" can help to create more awareness, especially with social media. More education and information is needed [34]. Table 4 summarises the possible challenges, barriers and solutions extracted from the responses.

Demographic differences were not significant. Solely for the purchase decision, men gave more practical reasons in comparison with women who tend to be more aware of fashionable issues. Regarding the retailer knowledge, mostly the older participants mention criticism on brands' ethics. There is a possibility that the workshop about circular economy and demographical factors of the participants might influence the responses to some extent.

Using open-ended questions, this qualitative approach avoids a possible bias, found in closed-ended questions due to limitation of answers. This method allows the respondents to include their understanding of the subject of ethical fashion. In the survey responses, participants have included their opinion that they are not aware of some issues. The workshop event was also used to raise awareness among consumers for ethical fashion. Raising consumers' awareness about clothing sustainability issues can subsequently alter their behaviour and influence the purchasing behaviour [13]. One proposal of participants was that driving the questions throughout the workshop is a better approach instead of continuously interviewing for a period.

Limitation of this research was the small sample size of 14 participants, and findings may not be generalised to the Romanian population. It was suggested to transform the results of the open-ended questions into questions for further quantitative research: This study can be considered as a preliminary approach to establish a closed-ended survey instrument, to develop the multiple-choice question. Concluding, this study intended to extend the general knowledge of the Romanian fashion consumer. The results can be valuable for other researchers to create their research based on the found emerged topics.

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