The Case of Omni-Channel Consumers. A Qualitative Study regarding Students' Clothing-Consumption Habits

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Abstract: The article presents the result of a focus-group based qualitative study which was conducted among students from Cluj-Napoca, Romania, regarding their preferred places for clothing shopping. The analysis of the focus-group narratives revealed that having trendy outfits is important for students and they are very involved in selecting fashionable outfits even if their budgets are limited. Students prefer to shop their clothes both from online sites and offline settings. The latter correspond not only to malls, but also for second-hand and outlet shops from where students can acquire their outfits at lower prices and can buy more items than from the more expensive mall boutiques. Thus, second hand shops can be associated with consumerism rather than with frugal consumption. Each of the three locations, i.e. online shops, malls and second-hands/outlets serve not only as places for effective shopping, but also as places where students are doing amateur market research, either in the form of webrooming (i.e. browsing the websites) or in the form of showrooming (i.e. looking out in malls or second hands). Such activities of browsing and window shopping allow them to form a coherent opinion on trends and the price of the products, so that the mixture between offline and online shopping environment contributes to the formation of empowered consumers. Such pre-purchase activities are both forms of hedonistic entertainment and information acquisitions regarding the trends, and utilitarian projects in terms of bargain hunting.

Keywords: *millennials; clothing consumption; focus-group; online shops; mall; second-hand.*

1. Introduction

The article presents the results of a qualitative study which was conducted among the students of two universities from Cluj-Napoca, Romania, i.e. the Babeş-Bolyai University and the Sapientia University. The general aim of the research was to map students' relationship with fashion and with clothing consumption. Some of the questions of the research targeted the most preferred sites of clothing purchase as well as the motivations of such preferences.

The motivation for investigating the preference for specific shopping sites were motivated, besides the lack of comprehensive data on Romanian youth's clothing consumption (Bota, 2009; Sandu, Stoica, & Umbres, 2014; Starcom – Media Vest, 2016) by the followings: 1) The research data (e.g., Eurostat, 2016) on millennials tends to overemphasize the role of online environments. The assumption is that in the case of millennials online shops will overtake offline shops 2) There exist more cautious considerations as well which emphasize the continuing relevance of offline shopping environments and speak about omni-channel consumers (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003; Rigby, 2011; GfK, 2016) who mix easily between offline and online shops. 3) The changing landscape of the Romanian cities, and that of Cluj-Napoca in particular, shows that clothing shops and one-brand shops from old city centres are migrating to the malls, while the empty shops of city centres are taken over by outlets and second-hand shops. Personal observations as well as the *a priori* informal discussions with students suggested that second-hand shops and outlets are preferred by them in order to get fashionable clothing at lower prices to those found in the malls or in typical online shops. This context allowed to study not only the preferences for online shops and malls, but also for second-hand shops in the case of clothing purchase.

In order to explore the research questions, i.e. the most preferred sites for clothing purchase as well as the motivations thereof, I relied on a qualitative methodology, specifically on focus-groups and conducted 8 group discussions with a total of 74 students. The reason behind opting for this methodology was that focus-groups take the form of organized discussions during which participants interact and generate collective understandings and views on the topics under questions by reacting to each other's opinions (Grant & Stephen, 2005).

The research was exploratory and the strategy was inductive so that besides the research questions I did not want to test hypotheses, however

the literature's considerations served as lenses of my research especially in what regards the hedonistic and utilitarian motivations for choosing specific sites for clothing shopping and in terms of the patterns of omni-channel consumption. In the following, I will present a literature review with the intention to clarify the case of fashion shopping in the context of the consumer society, the major motivations of shopping clothes from offline and online sites and the emergence of omni-channel shopping in the case of fashion. As far as the subjects of the research are millennial consumers, the review will outline some consumption-related specificities of this generation and will list some previous research findings in this regard. Then, the article presents the research questions and the methodology and continues with the findings of the empirical study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Fashion consumption in the consumer society

Fashion refers to those kinds of clothing which have social validity, i.e. they are accepted as fashionable, i.e. "in" by the society or by specific groups of the society. Such clothing has and increased value because they carry supplementary aesthetics and additional usefulness (Loschek, 2009); they are labelled as beautiful, functional, trendy. Fashion is thus an added value to clothes in order to make them desirable for the public. In this respect, fashion works with a huge arsenal (e.g. catwalk shows, fashion magazines, photography, advertising, etc.), which all contribute to the creation of an idealized vision of certain dresses and styles (Arnold, 2009). Fashion refers not only to the material side of fashion, i.e. garments, styles, and the seasonal, contextual change in them (i.e. fashion dynamics) but also to the desire to be in fashion, to follow certain trends. Such desires promote consumption and make possible the spread of fashion.

When looking at the desire to be in fashion, one should keep in mind not only the desire for certain garments but also the desire for those meanings and symbols which are encapsulated in/carried by the garment (Entwistle, 2015). The understanding of the motivations of fashion consumption must be approached in the context of the consumer society where the accent is put on the *Homo Psychoeconomicus* (Baudrillard, 1998), whose choices are dependent on external stimuli, on advertising and marketing messages (Slater, 1999). Baudrillard (1998) contends that in the society of consumption we live in a commoditized environment, where we are surrounded by objects which are seen as instruments for satisfying those needs which are manufactured by the media, more specifically, by advertising. As far as such advertised needs are

promoting enjoyment, hedonism, lifestyles specific of rich people, they serve as alibi for consumption. As far as objects represents signs and thus they are part of a communicative process, the language of consumption can be learnt. Baudrillard (1998) assesses that consumer society constantly trains its members to fulfil their roles as consumers, and for this purpose various tools are used such as credit cards (for the impression of financial unfailing), shopping malls (for the impression of spectacle and enjoyment), collection of objects and brand names (for creating a context or chain of signifiers).

All of these tools are promoting consumption as a way of providing instant gratification for the consumers. The shopping mall for instance is frequently referred as a hybrid place where the purchasing of products occurs together with various forms of entertainment. The access into the cathedrals of consumption, i.e. malls (Ritzer, 1999) is not very much dependent on resources. Shopping malls are places for looking around and generating wishes through the display of an infinite arsenal of objects and stimuli for the potential consumers. As Campbell (1987) writes, consumption is a kind of day-dreaming activity, a phenomenon of craving and desiring, and a kind of self-illusory hedonism. This denotes that people are not consuming so much the products but the illusions about specific products. And as far as products rarely correspond to those covering messages which present them in ads, the consumer usually remains unsatisfied, frustrated, disappointed, and continues to look for newer and newer products and, through them, to newer and newer satisfactions. Bauman (2004) in his liquid modernity theory argues we live in a society of consumers where social status is not dependent on the old variables of income, age, etc. but on the consumption of its members - cf. social position is not automatic; it must be earned through consumption (Slater, 1999). In the society of consumers, the slogan is 'show me what you consume, and I'll tell who you are', and consumers are conforming themselves to this by feeding their newer and newer needs generated from outside.

Understandably, in the society of consumption or in the so-called liquid modernity, fashion which is an essentially dynamic phenomenon, starts to develop at even higher speeds than it did at the debut of modern society (Barnard, 2002). We can make reference here to fast fashion, which refers to those low-cost clothing collections which are based on current high-cost luxury fashion trends (Fletcher, 2008). Fast fashion implies a short time gap between production and distribution and provides fashionable, relatively cheap, yet not necessarily high-quality clothes (Gabrielli, Baghi, & Codeluppi, 2013). Fast-fashion items respond to postmodern consumers' needs in terms of self-expression: such products offer freedom, fun, and pleasure for the consumers and, even if they are of lower quality, global, and homogenous as

far as they can be combined in various creative forms, are suitable for expressing various forms of identity (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Fast fashion is particularly popular among young consumers, who can thus easily follow the image of their icons. In this respect, fashion is inseparable from advertising and from the media as far as fashion brand images are associated with attractive lifestyles or celebrity figures, through which we are continuously mobilized to wish to consume and look for gratification (Bauman, 2007; Schwartz, 2005).

The typical places of display for (fast) fashion products are the pedestrian high street's brand shops and the shopping malls, but later there appeared new "online cathedrals of consumption" (Ritzer, 2012) in the forms of gigantic online shops which offer further possibilities for satisfying consumers' need to be in fashion. The access to the old and new cathedrals of consumption is not dependent on consumers' budgets, but the effective purchase of products from such places can be very much limited by consumers' incomes. Thus, even in the context of the more democratic, post-modern approaches of fashion, which prioritize consumer freedom in choosing among the trends in accordance with their personal preferences, the economic resources of the consumers do represent an important structuring force of their relationship with fashion (Aspers & Godart, 2013). Not everyone can have access to the latest fashion, or can engage in hedonist consumption, so that consumers might be in the need to localize cheaper sites for clothing consumption than the typical mall, the high street, or the online sites of fashion retailers. Alternative places like online or offline second hand shops and outlets can offer possibilities to have access to the preferred brands at lower prices (Roux and Korchia, 2006). Such shops can offer for those consumers who are not so better off a form of reward: as far as they are not able to buy pricy, high-fashion clothes, at least they can buy more clothes and the huge amount of clothes can be translated as a form of fashion-possession (Kelemen-Erdős & Kőszegi, 2017).

To conclude, nowadays the mass market, under all of its forms, whether it is the physical mall, the second-hand shop or the online shop, offers a huge range of brands and product alternatives, so that consumers can make comparisons across products, can develop desires and can daydream about the objects (Matt, 2003: 11).

2.2. Shopping in the mall: hedonistic an utilitarian motivations

The term shopping center was firstly referred in 1947 in order to describe "a group of architecturally unified commercial establishments" (Scharoun, 2012: 7) which offered onsite possibilities for shopping and

entertainment. The further evolution of the shopping mall has to do both with the emergence of consumer society and with the suburbanization. As far as city dwellers started to move to suburbs, the commercial establishments followed them, so that the shopping mall became the "natural town center" (Schraoun, 2012: 1). Shopping malls are paradoxical places: they are homogenous all over the world, the consumer finds nearly the same brands and opportunities for entertainment in each of them. However, they are unique places due to the possibilities that they offer for leisure and consumption. Ritzer refers to this paradoxical situation by describing the malls both as "non-places" (Ritzer, 2004) which presents the same range of brands all over the world and "cathedrals of consumption" (Ritzer, 1999) which offer consumers nearly infinite ways of consumption and entertainment.

In the case of malls, the act of consumption is much more than the simple act of buying *per se*: consumers can look around, can compare between different brands, products and can inform him/herself about fashion, so that the mall provides opportunities for "fun shopping" and "experience shopping" (Spilková & Radová, 2011: 569). Not surprisingly, the empirical studies which aimed at mapping the motivations for visiting the mall list various reasons. Gilboa (2009) concluded that people visit this site of consumption for three major reasons: 1) consumption-related activities – which mean not only the act of purchasing itself, but also the act of looking around and getting information and new knowledge about brands, products, fashion, etc.; 2) participation in cultural, leisure and other services offered by the mall, e.g. cinema, sport activities, banking, etc.; 3) taking part in social activities and various forms of hanging out in coffees, restaurants, etc.

Other authors grouped the motivations of mall visitors in two major categories: utilitarian and hedonistic motivations (Babin, Darden, & Griffen, 1994; Patel & Sharma, 2009; Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2011). The utilitarian motivations refer to strictly task-related goals; utilitarian shoppers go to the mall with the clear task to buy a certain product, but do not take part in the other activities offered by the mall (e.g. do not make window shopping and do not take part in the various forms of entertainment offered by the mall). Such utilitarian consumers choose the mall as a place for shopping due to various rational motivations: e.g. the price of the products, hunting bargains during special offers or due to the availability of the mall, e.g. opening hours, short distance, availability of public transport, etc. (Patel & Sharma, 2009; Farrag, Sayed, & Belk, 2010)

For the consumers with hedonistic motivations "the purchase of products may be incidental to the experience of shopping" (Farrag et al., 2010: 101). They visit the mall for having fun, to hang out with friends or family, or for looking out, making window shopping, browsing the products, and getting various forms of information on product alternatives or to get sensory stimulation from the mall (Babin et al., 1994).

Farrag et al. (2010) concluded that the hedonic motivations are more common among teenagers and other people with lower incomes, who cannot effectively buy the products offered by the mall, however they gain new information and ideas through the act of browsing the products. Such consumers "find it very fulfilling just to browse the window displays and feel part of the mall culture and environment" (Farrag et al., 2010: 101). Thus, for people with low income, the mall is not a forbidden place; on the contrary, it offers them the possibility to follow the trends, being informed about products, brands, prices and special sale periods, it allows them to "to keep track of fashions and keep themselves informed of the latest changes in this dynamic world of its own" (Farrag et al., 2010: 103). The authors denominate this group of hedonic consumers as "strivers": even if they rarely buy from the mall, or buy only if they get a bargain, they constantly dream about the consumerist lifestyle of the mall. By making visits to the mall, taking part in certain activities which are free, e.g. window shopping, strivers can create the illusion that they are active participants of the mall culture. In contrast with them, the true hedonist consumers make purchases at the mall and also take part in the various forms of entertainments offered by the mall.

It was also demonstrated that those consumers for whom fashion is more important go more frequently to the mall, not necessarily in order to buy, but in order to keep themselves informed about the latest trends (Rahman, Kwong-Kay Wong, & Yu, 2016). The authors speak in this sense about mall personality: a person who has hedonistic motives for going to the mall and this person is usually a fashion-involved consumer.

2.3. The emergence of online shops and the rise of the omni-channel consumers

In the context of the emergence of the information society and the proliferation of digital tools the importance of the mall as a simultaneous place of shopping and entertainment is more and more questioned, since many consumers started to switch from the mall to the online cathedrals of consumption (Ritzer, 2012). In this shift especially the role of the age variable is referred, since it goes usually together with digital literacy, so that age cohort

is an important segmentation factor in online shopping, especially millennials being the leaders of online purchases (Pate & Adams, 2013). Millennials are referred as "e-commerce generation" (Moreno, Lafuente, Carreon, & Moreno, 2017) and their preference for online shopping is explained both through the integration of the digital technologies into their everyday lives, and through their tendency to spend their income more quickly.

Other authors consider that not necessarily the age, but the preference for convenience is the decisive factor in explaining the preference for online shopping (Pate and Adams, 2013). Indeed, among the advantages of online shops their convenience in terms of 24 hours/day opening is the most frequently referred. This aspect goes hand in hand with more and more professional product-presentations, aided by augmented realities, and with the rapidly growing product choices and instant possibilities for comparing across products, brands and prices. Thus, online sites of shopping offer an "unlimited virtual place" (Ritzer, 2012) which is very appealing for the consumers.

However, it must be noted that such appealing advantages go hand in hand with several shortcomings of online shopping like product misinterpretations, shipping costs, delays in shipping and security concerns (Singh & Meshram, 2016). Consequently, the triumph of the online shops over the offline shops is not quite evident and a more realistic affirmation is that today's shopping and retail is and will continue to be multi-channel.

This is as much true as we refer to the case of fashion and clothing shopping. Indeed, online shops can offer better prices and more convenience in terms of time and money saving, but clothing is a high-involvement product, so that consumers prefer to minimalize the risk of the purchase, and prefer to see and touch the product (Kim & Kim, 2004; Blázquez, 2014). Thus, even if augmented realities and virtual fitting rooms contributed to the fast grow of the online fashion retail, consumers largely prefer to shop their clothes in offline shops, because they feel that in this way they can gain a realistic multisensory input about the chosen clothes. By recognizing the role of sensory inputs, online fashion marketing is strongly focusing on providing possibilities for atmospheric inputs, like playing music while browsing, offer larger and larger possibilities for interactivity, e.g. image enlarging, mix and match between different products, virtual fitting rooms, etc. (Blázquez, 2014).

The growing popularity and professionalization of online commerce created not necessarily a clear shift between offline and online shops, but contributed to the empowerment of consumers: consumers are more informed about the trends and prices (Salonen, Närvänen, & Saarijärvi,

2014) and their expectations have also grown, so that they are more demanding not necessarily in terms of product choices but much more in shopping related experiences. They prefer to explore both the offline and the online channels prior choosing a product and the place of purchase depends very much on the type of the product and by the mood of the consumers. Blázquez (2014) contends that consumers go to the mall when they are driven by hedonic motives: when they want to feel and touch the fashion product, want instant gratification and want to shop in social interactions. However, the consideration that when consumers are driven by utilitarian motives, they prefer to shop their clothes online would be impetuous. Online shopping offers more and more opportunities for entertainment, so that consumers are more and more tempted to search for clothes online, but this means not a shift from offline to online, but the emergence of a multi-channel fashion shopping. Consumer shop their clothes either offline or online, so that "if the Internet was once seen as a threat to the future of stores, it is now becoming clear that each channel complements the other" (Blázquez, 2014: 111).

Other authors contend that consumers' channel choice depends on the stage of the shopping: in the search stage consumers are multichannel, in the purchase stage are utilitarian and select the place which offers the chosen product at the lowest price, while in the post-purchase stage they are also multi-channel since they want to minimize the efforts of using the product (Gensler, Verhoef, & Böhm, 2012). All of these mix and matches between offline and online channels leaded to the introduction of the term „omni-channel" retail and consumption which refer to "an integrated sales experience that melds the advantages of physical stores with the information-rich experience of online shopping" (Rigby, 2011: 67). Omni-channel consumption means the easily switch between the sites of shopping. Consumers use the offline and online environments simultaneously in order to gain information on products, trends and prices, so that they look around both in the mall – "showrooming" (Gensler, Neslin, &Verhoef, 2017) - or on online sites - "webrooming" (Flavián, Gurrea, & Orús, 2016).

To conclude, omni-channel consumption means that consumers diversified their channels of collecting information on fashion and trends, they are more informed and more critical and the products. Consumers are experiencing the online and offline channels together and given the fact that they are always online, they can switch rapidly between channels (e.g. in the physical shop they can check the products online) (Kemperman, Van Delft, & Borgers, 2015).

What remains crucial is the act of purchase, which – in spite of the empowerment offered by omni-channel retail – depends after all on consumers' budgets and is frequently utilitarian. This context (and also given the research questions of the present empirical study), asks for the clarifications of those motivations which are quoted in the literature in connection with fashion shopping from second-hand shops.

The literature on second-hand shops revealed various reasons both for frequenting and avoiding such shops. Roux & Korchia (2006) contend that environmental concern, price-consciousness, especially in the context of economic constraints, socialization (when items are bought from flea markets), nostalgia (e.g. vintage clothes), the rejection of consumerism, smart shopping (getting branded products at a good price), and search for uniqueness are among the major reasons for frequenting second-hand shops. The same aspects were outlined by Xu, Chen, Burman, and Zhao (2014) who all insist on the separation between the need and choice factors when referring to second-hand shopping: indeed, buying from second-hand shops can be a utlitarian necessity in the case of consumers living on small budgets, who do not really have other opportunities for shopping, but it can be also a lifestyle choice in terms of voluntary simplicity and adventure seeking, i.e. a form of hedonistic consumption in situations when consumers are literally digging for treasures in such shops. The already mentioned authors also insist on those obstacles that prevent consumers from buying clothes from second-hand shops, e.g.: contamination, fear from transmitting germs and diseases, lowering self-esteem by wearing clothes previously worn by others, form of dispossession (i.e. borrowing other people's identity (Roux & Korchia, 2006).

2.4. Millennials and Generation Z: some consumption-related specificities

The most well-known classifications (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Reeves & Oh, 2008) contend that the Millennial Generation (called also Generation Y or Net Generation) correspond to youth born between 1981–1995, while Generation Z or post-millennials refer to those born between 1996–present. The subjects of the present research (i.e. students) correspond to millennials and members of generation Z.

Millennials and post-millennials are described as self-confident, highly techno-literate generations which are disposed towards consumption (Colucci & Scarpri, 2013) as much as they were socialized very early to consumption culture and to the world of brands (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003). Millennials and Generation Z are over-protected generations, who were indulged by their parents and were accustomed to instant gratification

(Eastman & Liu, 2012), which then enabled their hedonistic approach of life (Fernandez, 2009). They have an important spending power and influencing power on parents' spending (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009). Due to their spending potential and the potential of becoming lifetime consumers, marketers consider millennials as a crucial category of consumption studies (Pookulangara, Kinley, Josiam, & Spears, 2013).

The literature on fashion emphasized the role of youth in fashion production and adoption. Twigg (2013) considers that fashion rhetoric is centred on change, renewal, and rebirth and the whole language of fashion celebrates youthfulness. In the same register we can refer to Crane (2000) according to whom fashion can be considered a metaphor for youth. Indeed, Millennials' and Gen. Z members' preoccupation with their appearance results in high brand knowledge and in a receptive public towards fashion which are accompanied by the need for instant gratification. Consequently, these generations are the most receptive towards fast-fashion items and vice versa, fast-fashion marketing targets mostly these cohorts (Barton, Fromm, & Eagan, 2012).

It has been demonstrated that that the use of social media influences consumption by generating materialistic values (Kamal, Chu, & Pedram, 2013) and generating needs to follow the image of celebrities and fashion trendsetters (McCormick, 2016). On the other hand, social media can contribute to the development of critical attitudes towards brands and products; users' comments, likes, dislikes, and reviews determine the formation of particular and, to some extent, more trustworthy forms of product and brand images as it happens in the case of other forms of advertisement (Knittel, Beurer, & Berndt, 2016). A recent multinational survey focusing on Generation Z's consumption style (Accenture, 2017) further accentuated this finding, concluding that even if Generation Z prefers to shop in physical stores, they also put higher importance than any other generation on social-media-enabled word-of-mouth marketing, especially in what regards the opinion of friends, family, and social-media-based influencers.

Scholarly literature has already tried to discover the difference between several generations' online shopping habits. A survey conducted among UK-based millennials (GfK, 2016) showed that this generations' shopping habit can be referred as omni-channel – according to Rigby, 2011, they shop both offline and online. They are browsing mostly the website of the high-street shops which offer mass market brands, so that digitalization means a further development for fast-fashion lines (GfK, 2016).

Indeed, youngsters like to use malls as spaces for socializing and entertainment, but online tools are becoming more and more important for

them. The e-commerce statistics of the Eurostat (Eurostat, 2016) show that the most active online shoppers are those aged 16–24 and 25–54 years. Those aged 16–24 years old are the most dedicated e-shoppers of clothes and sports-related goods, 70% of them declaring the online shopping of these products. Given the increasing popularity of online shopping, the recent report on the state of fashion (BoF and McKinsey & Company, 2017) concluded that fashion industry's major challenge is the sophistication of the e-commerce: in order to be successful, fashion industry should explore the opportunities represented by digitalization and by the millennial generation.

In spite of the importance of online shops for clothing purchase, the role of offline environments in clothing acquisition cannot be denied. Bakewell & Mitchell (2003) based on a comparative, multigenerational study concluded that millennials perceive shopping as a form of entertainment and this has to do with the fact that millennials were early socialized into a materialistic and consumer culture, so that the modern shopping mall is an important shopping destination for them. The shopping mall as the example of the leisure society is a particularly important destination for going out in the case of the post-communist societies (Spilková & Radová, 2011). According to the 2016 data of the Cultural Barometer (Despoiu & Matei, 2017), the mall was the most important place of spending active leisure time in Romania: 40% of the Romanians would visit a mall once a month and the popularity of the malls was even higher in the case of younger respondents. The mall is often synonymous with 'going out', people go to the malls not necessarily for shopping, but in order to shop, look around, eat, and watch a movie.

However, the importance of the mall must be judged in conjunction with the rising popularity of the online environments, especially when we refer specifically to the youth. The data of the GfK study (2017) shows that Romanians are very careful shoppers and widely use the Internet (45%) in order to compare the prices of the products. Thus, even if the product is finally bought from on offline shop, consumers use the Internet in order to ensure the best quality vs price ratio. The GfK Global Young Shopper Survey (GfK, 2015) which was conducted in ten different countries demonstrated that this techno-dependent generation will be an omni-channel fashion shopper: i.e. they will not abandon offline shops but will combine online and offline shopping experiences. The majority of the respondents (i.e. 82% in the USA) think they will continue to shop in offline shops the same amount or even more as they do today. The reason for this is that shopping continues to be an important social activity, a form of entertainment with friends. The offline purchase of clothes can be linked also to the nature of clothes as "feel-and-touch products" (Kim &

Kim, 2004: 887), meaning that people like to try how clothes fit them and to feel the composition of the fabric by touching the clothes. However, the case of augmented reality through its virtual fitting rooms (Pantano, Rese, & Baier, 2017) shows that online clothing purchase becomes more and more professionalized and interactive so it increasingly meets consumers' needs when it comes of sizing and fitting.

3. Research questions and methodology

The present research is part of a broader investigation whose concrete empirical endeavour was to study young consumers' attitudes, behaviours, and discourses related to fashion in terms of clothing consumption habits, brand preferences, fashion involvement, fashion adoption, etc. This article presents only a slice from this research, specifically the results obtained in connection with those research questions which investigated youngsters' preferences for specific offline and online sites of clothing purchase and the motivations thereof.

Based on the previously listed literature review, the empirical research intended to answer the following research questions: Do students' clothing purchases resemble the case of the omni-channel fashion shopping activity? How and when students switch between offline and online shopping channels in the case of clothing consumption? Which are the major motivations of visiting the mall and the online sites of fashion retailers for fashion consumption? How the hedonistic and utilitarian motivations for visiting such sites are articulated during the different phases of the purchase? As far as the a priori discussions with students showed the role of second hands shops for clothing shopping, the research intended to clarify why students prefer to visit such shops and what is the role of financial constraints in explaining the role of second-hand shops and outlets for students' clothes shopping. These questions were operationalized in a semi-structured interview guide.

In order to investigate the research questions I opted for focus-group discussions, based on the rationale that compared to individual interviews focus-groups have the advantage of collecting the data in a more natural way. In the interactive situations of focus-groups, the participants are more motivated to argument their opinions, and this allows to study the communicative processes surrounding various debated topics, with pro- and counter arguments (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Focus-groups were conducted on convenience, i.e. non-representative student samples. This means that the results of the research

cannot be generalized, however they have the value of signalling some trends which can be further researched. I conducted a total of 8 focus-groups, 4 with students from the Babes-Bolyai University and 4 with students of the Sapientia University. The number of participants ranged between 6-10 in each group, and there participated a total of 74 students in the research. The research took place in March-May, 2018. Students were recruited via student mailing lists, where I posted a short information on the topic, data and place of the focus-groups. They were informed that their participation is voluntary, their opinions will be anonymous and that they will receive refreshments during the focus-groups, as well as some minor gifts (stickers, pens). Students had to pre-register via e-mail and this step allowed to filter the participants in terms of gender and specialization, in order to create heterogeneous groups.

The focus-grouped were moderated by the author, the discussions were tape-recorded, then the transcripts were analysed manually through the coding method of the Gioia Methodology. The Gioia Methodology (Corley & Gioia, 2004) was developed based on the need to bring rigour to qualitative data. In order to reach rigour, I followed the authors' (Corley & Gioia, 2004) recommendations: firstly, I collapsed the qualitative narratives into 1st-order concepts, meaning that the transcripts were coded *in vivo*. Later, these 1st-order concepts were linked together in 2nd-order themes; this phase was similar to the axial coding from the Strauss & Corbin (1990) methodology. Finally, in the third phase, 2nd-order themes were collapsed into 2nd-order aggregate dimensions with the aim to create integrative concepts through which the findings can be summarized.

The analyses were made on the Romanian, respectively Hungarian narratives (in the case of the focus-groups from the Sapientia University where the language of teaching is Hungarian) and for the sake of the present article the *in vivo* codes and the excerpts from the focus groups were translated in English.

4. Results and discussions

The focus-groups showed a tripartite model in terms of the preferred sites for shopping. This means that shopping malls together with second-hand shops/outlets and online shops are the three most important sites of clothing purchases. These three sites are not mutually exclusive: students make use of each of them simultaneously, so that their shopping resembles the case of omni-channel consumption (Rigby, 2011). Once students decide to buy a clothing item they firstly research the market: for this purpose both the mall -

cf. showrooming (Gensler et al., 2017) and the online sites of mostly fast fashion retailers - cf. webrooming (Flavián et al., 2016) are used. Such activity enables them to track the trends and the price of the products. Then, if their budget allows, students buy the items from the mall or from the online retailers; otherwise they prefer to look for similar clothes in alternative places such as outlets and second-hand shops. As it appears from the data structure of Figure 1, each of these sites have both positive and negative attributes, and once the negative attributes are perceived as being dominant, the consumers will switch towards a different shopping environment.
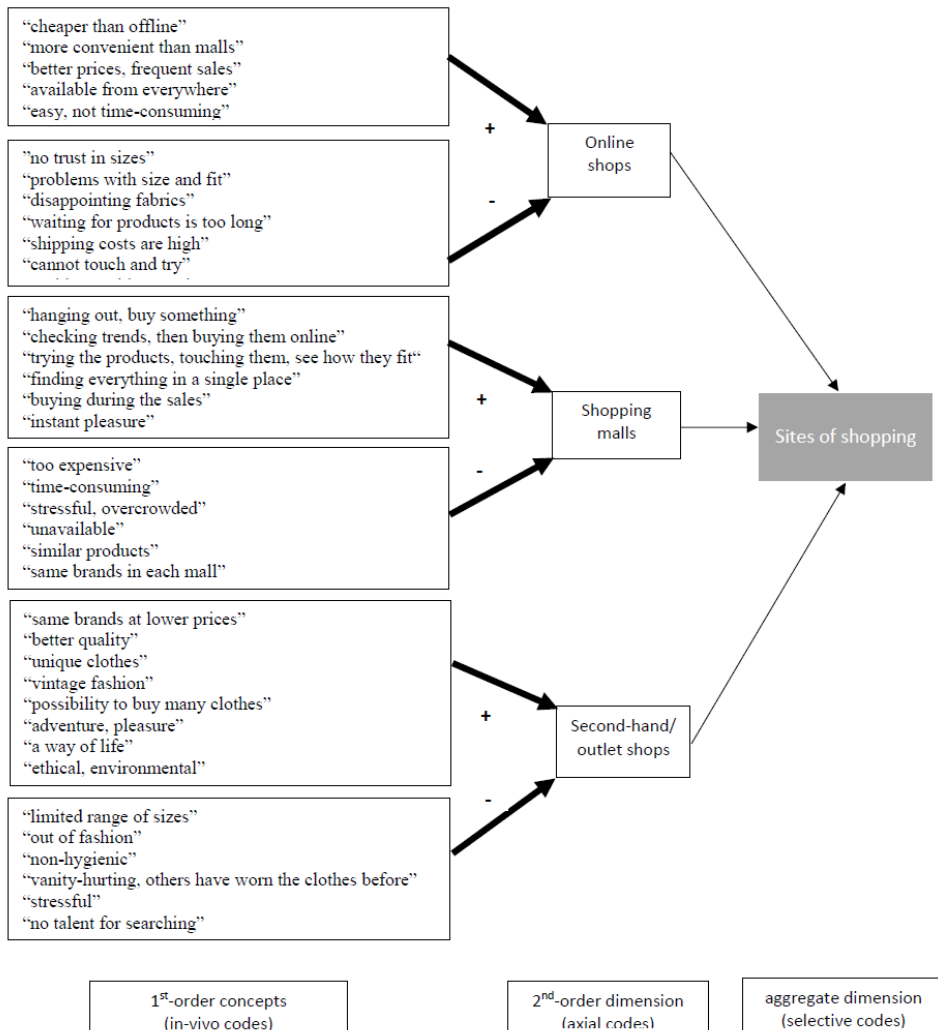

Figure. The narrative data structure for the most preferred sites of shopping for clothes

Notes: For the sake of simplicity only some illustrative in vivo codes are presented.
Source of figure: author's own creation based on the focus-group narratives

Online shops are preferred for clothing shopping because of their convenience: they are always open and can be accessed from everywhere, from various devices (Ritzer, 2012). The browsing of the sites allows to select the favourite items, zooming the pictures to see the clothes in detail, etc. Online shops are also perceived as being more economical alternatives compared to malls as far as they offer more frequent sales, so that the utilitarian motivations can be quoted as frequent motivations for online shopping. Online shops are thus referred as sites for effective shopping especially in situations when online platforms are perceived as being more convenient (in terms of prices, time saving, etc.) than other offline shopping sites. The narratives also revealed that those who shop online tend to be active shoppers and more fashion-interested in general than their counterparts who use only a single channel for shopping. Those who rely on online shops are active followers of promotions and trends (both online and offline), and once they consider that the online environment is more appealing either because of the price or the availability of the products they order the desired products online. This finding is in line with those previous data which revealed that online shoppers of fashion are heavy shoppers in general (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2002).

The narratives concerning the preference for online shopping are thus consistent with the international literature: the millennial subjects of my research are open-minded towards online shopping and they prefer the online environments for its multiple convenience (Dawson & Kim, 2010). However, interviewees are still much more predisposed to buy their clothes offline, in malls, or in other offline shops considering the clothes in terms of a "feel-and-touch product" (Blázquez, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2004: 887).

These latter claims have become widely referred to especially in situations when online shops are blamed for some important practical issues: several participants related about their disappointment in terms of sizes (although they ordered their regular sizes, the products turned to be smaller or bigger), fit (in reality, the clothes did not fit them as they did the models on the websites), or fabric (the material looked way too cheap). Problems associated with the difficulty of returning and high shipping costs are also deterring the students from online shopping (Singh & Meshram, 2016). Another important remark in connection with online shops was that the consumers have to wait until receiving their order, so that such shops cannot provide instant gratification.

Comparatively, in offline shops shopping for a garment is a "see-it-and-buy-it" procedure. Thus, it comes not as a surprise that one thing which interviewees want from online shops is shorter delivery time, since they want to experience the selected items instantly, in accordance with the logic of the liquid modern times (Bauman, 2007). Once such negative attributes are experienced in connection with online shops, the interviewees tend to consider these sites only in terms of information channels about fashion (i.e. webrooming). By browsing the websites of clothing retailers students gain information about the trends or prepare themselves for the effective buying situations which will occur in physical stores, through the act of browsing they become more aware about the prices of the products and will form an idea about which types of clothes to try later in the physical stores. Thus, in accordance with the literature (Blázquez, 2014), e-commerce contributes to the empowering of the consumers. Browing the websites is not, however, a strictly utilitarian project: students browse such sites not only in order to fulfil a particular task in connection with fashion shopping. Webrooming is, similarly with hanging out in the mall, a leisure activity, a spectacle which provides excitement for the students. Thus, my findings are in **line with those revealed previously** by Salonen, Närvänen, and Saarijärvi (2014), the authors suggesting that checking for fashion-related information online can have various functions, including here practical reasons like checking prices, availabilities, etc., but can also represent activities of "daydreaming" (Campbell, 1987). In this latter respect, youngsters related about the act of browsing across online shops just for fun; in order to look around and select favourites in order to prepare their further shopping list; or just in order to daydream about what they would buy if they had the money for that:

> "I usually check the online shops of H&M, Zara, Bershka… This does not mean that I shop from these sites. I just simply look at the products, and in this way I form an idea about what kind of products are fashionable. I also make a wish list for further shopping, like to see what to check later in the mall."
>
> "Me too, I also do this… I do this also in order to verify if some people are indeed fashionable. For instance, if one of my colleagues is dressed in a way which is very strange to me, I visit the websites of the shops and if I see there a certain type of product which is similar to my colleague's, than I conclude that, indeed, she's bought the latest trend for herself."

"This was my case when I was not sure if distressed jeans are in or out. Then I went on the site of Zara and H&M, I saw there a lot of distressed jeans, and I made a conclusion."

"The same is about skinny jeans as well. My roommate tried to convince me that skinny jeans are out of fashion… I said she is not right… Then we started to argue and then checked the sites of some shops. I was right, she was right. Skinny is trendy, but there were other types of jeans as well."

(excerpt from a focus-group discussion with students from the Sapientia University)

The following excerpts from the focus-groups further illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of using online shops for clothes shopping:

"[I shop] mostly from online shops… They are easy to use, I have had good experiences with them so far. I also think that they offer more frequent sales than the shops from the malls. Usually, I wait for the sales, then I grab those clothes that I browsed previously…"

"I do not trust these shops so much. I think that you never know if a size is good for you. It happened to me that I ordered a size, which is typical for me, but it was way too big… And I had to pay for the returning as well. So, it was a huge failure for me…"

"I do not agree with you. I think that if you buy always from a brand, you know which your size is; so, if you order a product from that brand, that size must be good for you… And many of them offer free return…"

"I think that online shops have frequent promotions, and it is worth buying in such periods. I usually order once or twice a year, mostly at the end of the seasons, so that I buy more at lower prices…"

"To me, it happens sometimes, but I am not a regular online shopper. I prefer the malls because there you can touch and try the products, you know if they fit you or not. But when I do not find something in the shop because it is out of stock, I order them online…But I hardly order things which I have not tried before."

(excerpt from a focus-group discussion with students from Babeş–Bolyai University)

These excerpts show that online shops are articulated in conjunction with the offline shops, particularly with the malls: students speak about such sites not in terms of exclusion, but in terms of conjunction, in accordance

with the logic of the omni-channel consumption (Blázquez, 2014; Kemperman et al., 2015).

Malls are the typical places for hanging out with friends or family in order to look around. They are places for leisure as revealed by other previous studies regarding the role of the malls in youngsters' leisure and entertainment (Pentecost & Andrews, 2010). Looking out and gathering information about trends (i.e. showrooming) and checking how certain clothes fit are important motivations for visiting the mall. Getting information from boutiques and shop windows does not necessarily lead towards buying the item or does not necessarily lead towards buying the item from that particular shop. Obtaining information from offline shops is a conscious or unconscious process of collecting information about the trends, styles and about the extrinsic qualities of the clothes, so that the mall can thus be considered a site which offer the possibility to avoid some imminent risks of clothes purchases, e.g. improper fit, inadequate quality of the fabric, etc. (Blázquez, 2014).

Besides this, the interviewees related about the role of the malls in offering them instant gratification: if they see something they like, they can buy these items straight away. Malls are thus typical places not only for rational shopping, but also for hedonistic consumption as revealed by the literature (Kim et al., 2011). The focus-group discussions provided also narratives for the existence of the so-called 'strivers' (Farrag et al., 2010), i.e. those consumers who live on a budget, so that rarely buy from the mall, however through the act of hanging out in the mall and through bargain hunting they feel that are not becoming excluded from the fashion and consumption related lifestyle:

> "I don't necessarily go to the malls in order to buy something. It happens that we go together, as a group of friends, just to have a look, spend some time together. Obviously, we enter the shops as well, and even if I cannot buy the most expensive things we usually buy something… An accessory, a top, small things…"
>
> "My case is similar, especially in the periods of sales, I can hardly resist buying. Once you enter the mall, you will buy something. For me, this is true. I always buy something from there even if I know that it would be more rational to buy those items online or from outlets… But… I don't know. Just being there… influences me to buy."
>
> (excerpt from a focus-group discussion with students of Babeș–Bolyai University)

The negative claims in connection with malls are referred to in terms of expensive and similar products, stressful and overcrowded environments. The perceived high prices of the products from the malls are usually pushing the students towards outlets and second-hand shops, while the overcrowded environment of the malls pushes them towards online shops:

> "I do not have patience in the malls; for me, it is very stressful to go in and out of shops, as much as I know that I won't buy anything. They are just making me nervous. I prefer to stay comfortably at home and order the clothes online."
>
>> (participant from a focus-group discussion with students of Sapientia University)

> "Prices are too high in malls, they are not made for our pockets. I am a fan of outlets. And I think that many of us are. You can get almost the same things from outlets. I even observed that it happens that you can find in outlets things with minor defects but which are from the current season. So, the thing that outlets offer clothes from previous seasons alone is not quite true."
>
>> (participant from a focus-group discussion with students from Babeṣ–Bolyai University)

As suspected before the research, second-hand shops and outlets are typical sites for shopping for clothes. As described in the literature (Roux & Korchia, 2006), they are preferred for various reasons, out of which the lower price of the products represent the major slice. This means that second-hand shops and outlets provide instant gratification for the users by offering them the possibility to buy the clothes due to their affordable prices. We can thus conclude that in the case of the interviewees the option to shop in such places can be explained through the so-called need factor, rather than through the choice factor (Xu, Chen, Burman, & Zhao, 2014). Even if to a lesser degree, choice is also a motivation: in such cases, the preference for second-hand shops is tied to the need for uniqueness, better trust in imported products, adventure seeking (i.e. treasure hunting), or lifestyle options in terms of ethical and environmental motivations.

> "Second-hand shops are very good options for buying better-quality clothes compared to those which can be found in malls. I think that the same brands make better-quality products for the West… Thus, outlets and second-hand shops sell products which come from the Western market; so, you can get better products from there…"

"This is one thing only. The other issue is the price. I do not have a budget to afford to buy the clothes from the mall. I often find branded products, such as Hilfiger, which are very highly priced otherwise…"

"Plus the uniqueness. You can find there unique clothes; I mean, not those mass-produced items from the mall… And if you don't like these generic brands, you can find vintage there which is in fashion now."

> (excerpt from a focus-group discussion with students from Sapientia University)

Second-hand shops are also linked to narratives in which they are rejected based on reasons of vanity and hygiene associated with previously worn clothes (Roux & Korchia, 2006), but also due to respondents' incapacity for hunting treasures. Outlets, on the other hand, are blamed for having pieces from past seasons, which are thus not so fashionable, but they do not fit the criteria of vintage either.

"I do not have enough luck… I've tried several times to buy something from a second-hand shop, but I did not find anything. Others probably have a talent. I do not have a talent for searching."

"Me neither. But when I think that someone else has previously worn that piece of clothing, I am imagine that person, his/her environment, and… I do not want to wear those clothes."

> (excerpt from a focus-group discussion with students from Sapientia University)

Obviously, the interviewees also mentioned in their narratives sites like online consignment stores, vintage markets, yard sales, etc., but these were sporadic and cannot be considered typical sites for shopping. What can be concluded is that the preferred places for shopping are not mutually exclusive; so, interviewees mix between these sites in accordance with their preferences. The research thus succeeded to reveal the existence of omni-channel consumers: during the different stages of fashion consumption, students mix between each of the three major channels of shopping (malls, offline second-hand shops and online shops), but once the pre-shopping and the effective shopping is considered there are two dominant segments which mix between specific channels. 1) Those for whom brands and latest trends are more important (i.e. the more fashion-involved consumers) have a tendency to narrate about their preference for malls and online shops

(especially the online shops of the fast fashion retailers). These fashion involved consumers are hedonistic and the price of the products rarely retains them from the buying of the wished product. However, the selection of the site of effective purchase is usually utilitarian: they prefer to shop the selected item from that shop (either offline or online) which offers the most available price. 2) Price-conscious shoppers opt for outlets and second-hand shops for effective buying, but the pre-purchase stage of their shopping is prepared based on extensive webrooming and showrooming activities. This is also the case of those students for whom fashion and brands are important, but due to their limited budgets cannot afford other sites for shopping except outlets/second-hand shops.

Besides these clear types, there exists the general tendency of open-mindedness in connection with each of these three places of shopping; interviewees tend to combine them usually based on the criteria of price and availability, but situational factors like hanging out in a mall, browsing online, seeing if they find something in a second-hand shop are also important motivations for shopping from one place or another.

5. Conclusions

The exploratory research succeeded to reveal that in the case of clothing purchase, students combine three dominant sites: online shops and offline sites like malls and second-hands/outlets, so that they resemble the case of omni-channel consumers. The online sources are preferred not so for shopping per se, but also for their information potential: by accessing the webshops, youngsters check the trends, create wish lists and use these platforms as tools of getting access to trends in a much easier way than in the case of malls. In the majority of the narratives, online shops are preferred for offering more advantageous prices than malls. Indeed, malls are preferred for hanging out, checking trends, trying clothes, but they tend to remain the least preferred places for shopping. The majority of the participants, regardless of their university, live on a relatively limited budget; so, following the trends by getting the clothes from the mall can be a heavy burden. In this context, when they need to confront both their price-consciousness and brand preferences, online shops and mostly second-hand shops and outlets offer the most viable alternatives which are in accordance with youngsters' perception on fashion: they do not want to (cannot) follow the latest trends of their outfits in every aspect, but try to acquire (at affordable prices) such pieces which can be integrated in trendy outfits.

Obviously, there were participants in each group for whom the price criterion is less important and who are very involved fashion followers, but the narratives of the focus groups mostly accentuated the ways in which youngsters put in balance their budgets and their fashion and brand preferences. Consequently, outlets and second-hand shops are preferred throughout the groups: even if students have plenty of possibilities for hanging out in malls, they prefer to shop in outlets and second-hand shops because in this way they can buy more clothes at more affordable prices. Thus, visiting these shops can be interpreted mostly as a form of consumerism and self-gratification rather than in terms of frugal consumption. There were also narratives which confirm that such sites offer more heterogeneous products, "treasures", or better-quality brands. However, 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.

Both the case of the malls and that of the online shops seem to resemble the situations of a so-called amateur market research. As described in the literature, malls are places of showrooming (Gensler et al., 2017), while online shops are places of webrooming (Flavián et al., 2016). Youngsters visit these sites in order to look around, to form an opinion on the available trends and the prices of the products, the pre-purchase stage is absolutely omni-channel and leads to the empowerment of the consumers (Blázquez, 2014) who became very well informed about the trends and the prices of the products. Later on, the effective purchase can be made either from online or offline shops, depending especially on the price of the products. However, the mood of the consumers, i.e. impulse buying or situational factors like finding a bargain can lead to effective buying even in situations when the selected physical or online site is not considered, in general, budget friendly option. All in all, each of the referred sites of fashion shopping reveal a mixture between utilitarian and hedonistic motivations: both the mall, the online sites or the second-hand shops can be conceived as places for fashion-related entertainment and spectacle, while each of these sites can be quoted in terms of utilitarian shopping projects, in accordance with the logic of the omni-channel consumption.

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