

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO THE ROMANIAN STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONS FOR ONLINE SECOND-HAND SHOPPING

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Abstract: Online shopping became the main type of shopping in 2020, due to the restrictions posed by authorities to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, who already were digitally literate, easily made full use of the digital platforms for shopping a variety of items, among which clothing. The study focuses on student shopping for a special category of products, second-hand garments, aiming to identify the motivations that animate such purchase in the student population. Also, the study aims to highlight which of the digital channels are used for such purchases. The research is based on a survey, self-administered by the respondents. Results show that students participating in the study display a complex set of motivations for secondhand products purchasing, such as economic reasons, fashion-related judgement, leisure, and ecological reasoning. While feeling 'at home' in the digital world, if given the choice, students prefer social media over websites, and Instagram over Facebook. Findings are useful for understanding student's behavior and motivations in the time of crisis, but also to anticipate the trend in e-commerce, since given the chance, many (small) businesses will need to be creative in promoting their products and/or services.

Keywords: Second-hand fashion; social network; Facebook; Instagram; Romania.

1. Introduction

The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the modus operandi of national and international authorities, disrupted the habitual flow of life, and abruptly forced the acceleration of the digitalization, to avoid physical contact of people (and thus help contain the spread of the virus) and continue social, economic, and political life (Schilirò, 2020). In education, the sudden online transformation placed teachers and students in an unusual isolation from each other, compensated by the screen of telephones, tablets, laptops, or PCs, changing the relationship between the partners in the educational process (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Scientific literature, media, personal experiences – all converge in the opinion that the COVID-19 pandemic affected work, leisure, family life, public participation. Against this background, as a professor of communication sciences, I dealt with my students' stress, concerns, and means of coping with the new realities by discussing their interests in a variety of topics, linking programmed issues for the seminars to their experiences and expectations. Among the activities they missed in the first half of 2020, after meetings with friends and travelling, they mentioned shopping and visiting shopping malls. The idea of this research sprang from them, especially since official statistics showed that in Romania online shopping grew by 75% in the first half of 2020, by comparison to the previous year (Pătrulescu, G., 2020). However, for the purpose of this research we narrowed down the shopping behavior to apparel (clothes and shoes) and only to secondhand items.

Young people are known to be setting the trend in fashion matters, and their interest in secondhand shopping changed, to a significant degree, the way in which even large brands operate (Sorensen & Johnson Jorgensen, 2019). Most of the times the motivations behind secondhand shopping are presented as having to do with financial reasons, desire to look sharp and/or following through the philosophy of protecting the environment (Guiot & Roux, 2010; Hobbs, 2016; Sorensen & Johnson Jorgensen 2019; Yan et al., 2015). The objectives set for this study are to determine the main motivations students identify as predominant in their decision to buy secondhand clothing (economic motivations, recreational and relaxing motivations, motivations on sustainable consumption or motivations related to the fashion field) and to identify their preferred channels for such shopping. This generation is highly literate in the use of digital devices and statistics show that young people use intensively social media not only for personal interactions, but also for acquiring products and services (Business Days, 2020). In the academic life, as professors, we try to understand not only students' behavior related to their performance as learners, but wider, their lifestyles, interests, means of relieving stress, to draw possible topics for practical exercises and enhance their possibility to feel accounted for in the educational process.

2. Methods

The research was carried out in May-June 2020, exclusively online, using a self-administered web-based questionnaire to elicit responses concerning the self-reported motivations and behavior of students (Groves, 2011; Saleh & Bista, 2017). Students were invited to anonymously respond to the questionnaire, distributed via Google forms. To guarantee the anonymity of the respondents, no personal identification data were collected (such as names or contact information). No incentives were used to elicit responses, and students could opt out of filling in the questionnaire. However, students were encouraged to disseminate the link to the questionnaire to peers and friends via social media accounts. Consistent with other studies on second-hand fashion, we included questions concerning their motivation for purchasing such products.

The self-administered questionnaire used for the study contained six fashion-related questions (Appendix A) and two factual questions (gender, and residence). Responses resulted in a total of 90 respondents, 17 males and 73 females. 82 (91.1%) respondents reside in cities, and 8 respondents (8.9%) live in rural areas. Also, the target audience for conducting research is primarily the niche of consumers of second-hand products.

3. Results and Discussion

Respondents in the sample were invited to reflect on the frequency of their shopping habits, regarding secondhand garments. The results are presented in Figure 1. The largest group confesses to do so occasionally (34 respondents), but it seems that the often and very often group prevails (summed up, 43 respondents, almost half of the sample).

The second question represents the main focus of the research. Respondents were asked to choose from a list of motivations the one that animates them in purchasing second-hand clothing. Inspired by Guiot and Roux (2010), we included in the list the following motivations: economic reasons, relaxing and recreational reasons, awareness

of the impact on the environment (sustainable consumption), fashion (alignment with the vintage trend).

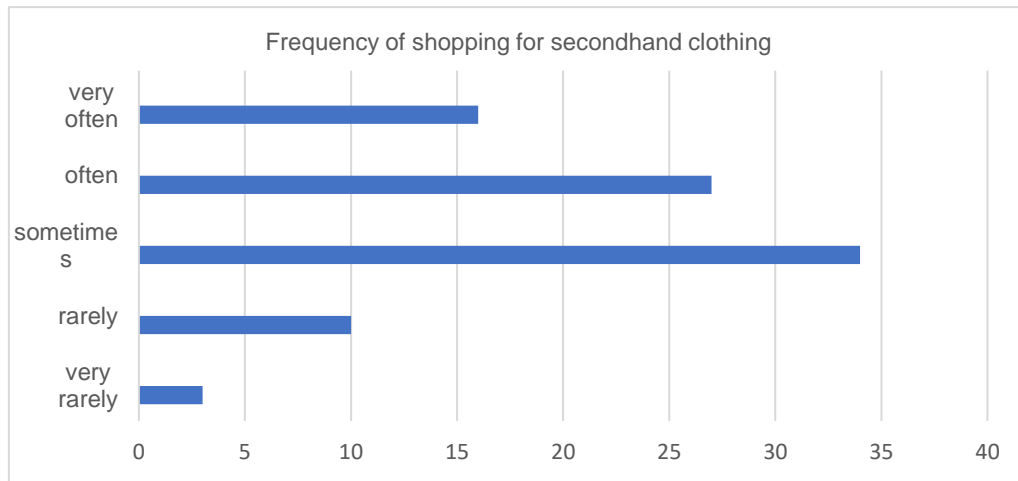


Figure 1. Self-reported shopping frequency

Students are known to be on a tight budget and the cost of products they intend to purchase is always an important factor (Guiot & Roux, 2010; Sorensen & Johnson Jorgensen, 2019; Yan et al., 2015). This sample showed a similar attitude, financial reasons being the main motivator for second-hand preference. Of the total number of respondents, for 41.1% (37 persons), the economic reasons are, to a moderate extent, the driver of the purchase decision. At the extremes, 4.4% (4 respondents) declare that economic reasons weigh very heavily in the purchase decision, while 16.7% (15 respondents) name the economic motivation as being important to a very small extent. Closer to the middle, 24.4% (22 respondents) consider the economic reasons being important to a small extent of the choice of these products, and 13.3% (12 respondents), name economic reasons as being important to a large extent.

Shopping is considered, by young people, a part of leisure time, a relaxing and recreational activity. "Treasure hunting" in second-hand shops is recognized in literature as a feature of the new shoppers (Hobbs, 2016; Sorensen & Johnson Jorgensen, 2019; Yan et al., 2015). Students were asked to express their agreement with the assessment "I find second-hand shopping relaxing". This sample confirmed that overall young people integrate shopping as part of the recreational activities, as seen in Figure 2.

A third type of motivations identified in literature on circular economy or secondhand shopping is associated with the predisposition of this generation to manifest interest in ecologically sound choices or, in other words, to display features of sustainable consumption. Millennials are considered to be more conscious of their impact upon environment, more ecologically conscious than previous generations. Respondents were asked to express their interpretation of preference for secondhand clothing as being (or not) a sign of their concern for environment and a component of sustainable consumption. Positive answers prevail, as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 2. Attitude towards second-hand shopping as part of recreational activities

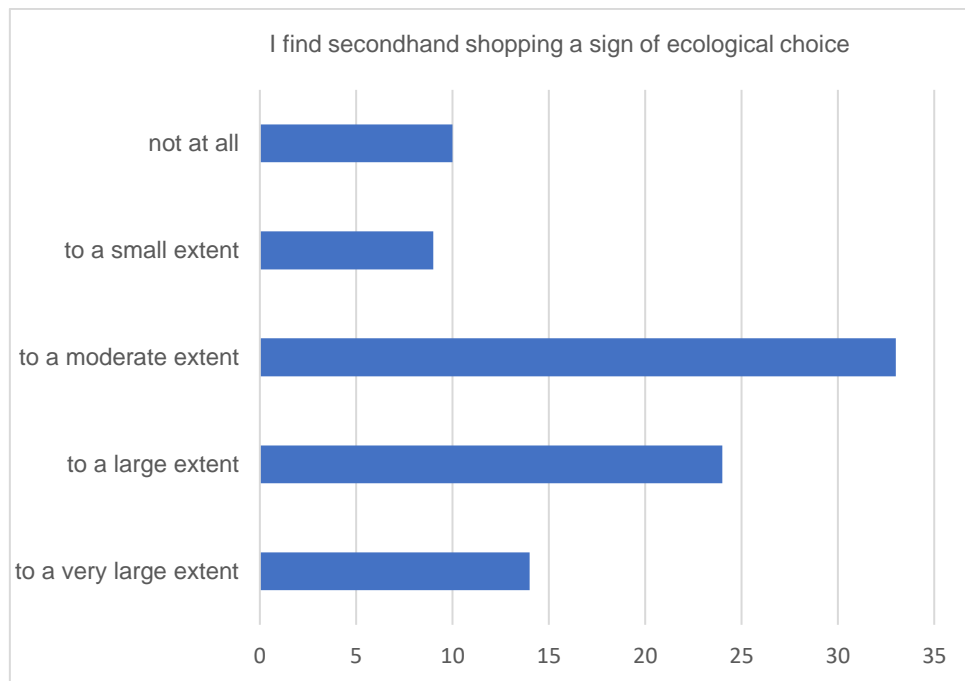


Figure 3. Sustainable consumption

Finally, young people chose secondhand outlets as places where they can find favorite brands, vintage clothing, or high-end products at affordable prices. For such consumers, fashion is the main driver for shopping this type of products. Since respondents had a multiple-choice variant for their motivations, fashion-related motivations also ranked high, as seen in Figure 4.

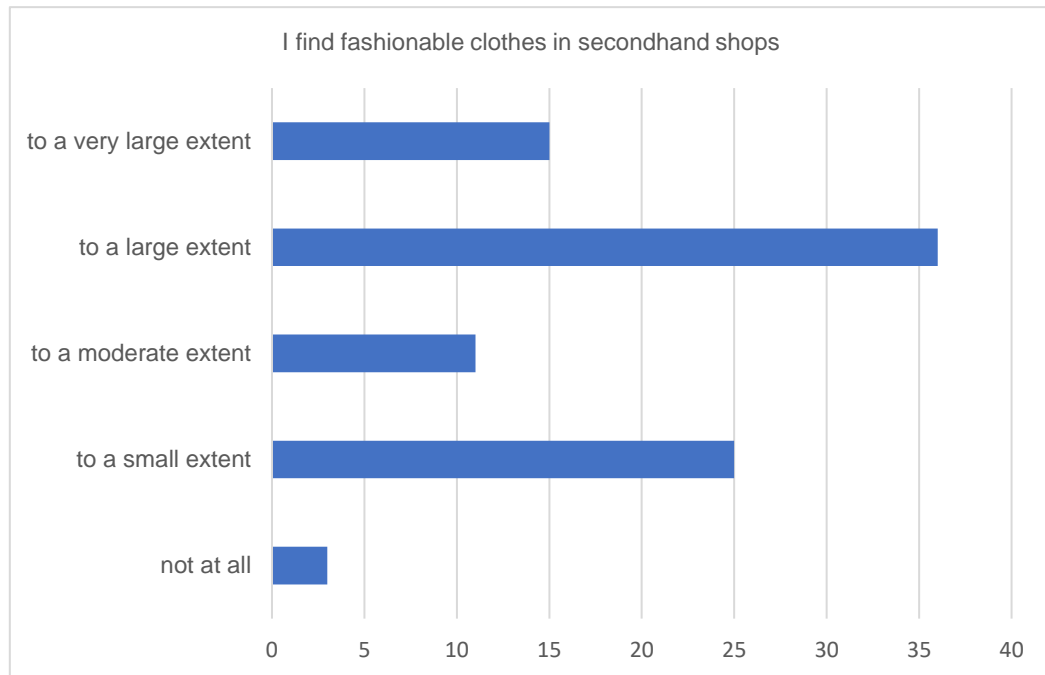


Figure 4. Fashion-related motivations

The next issue under discussion was the choice of the shopping medium. Prior to pandemics, the tendency for online shopping was encountered as growing in importance. The lockdown period in 2020 made it impossible for Romanians to shop for anything else than food, cleaning, and medical supplies in physical outlets. Clothing, footwear, cultural items, electronics were accessible only through digital commerce. However digital means many things. Thus, the question posed targeted the narrowing down of preferences for websites versus social networks, as presented in Figure 5.

Preference or intention do not always overlap with actual manifestation of the behavior, so the next question aimed at revealing whether the respondents used (or not) social media channels for shopping, targeting second-hand (SH) items. Respondents were asked to recall how often they used some sort of social media for shopping in the previous 6 months.

Among the social networks, Facebook and Instagram detach significantly, so respondents were asked to nominate the extent to which they prefer one or the other channel (Figure 7). We decided to interpret the results obtained by comparing the two networks to identify the preferences of the subjects.

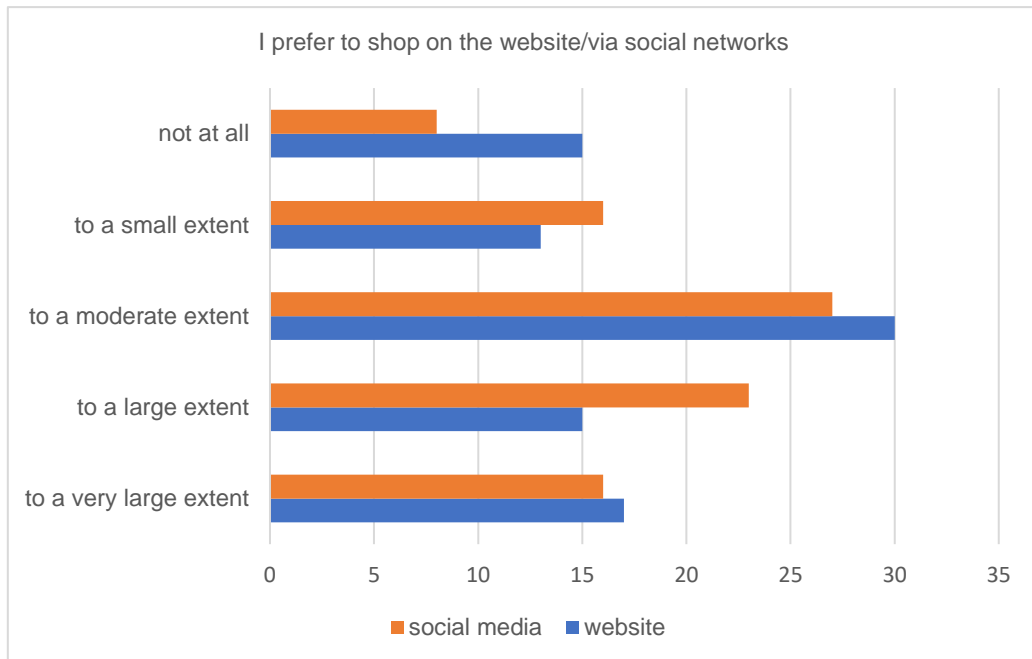


Figure 5. Preference for online medium

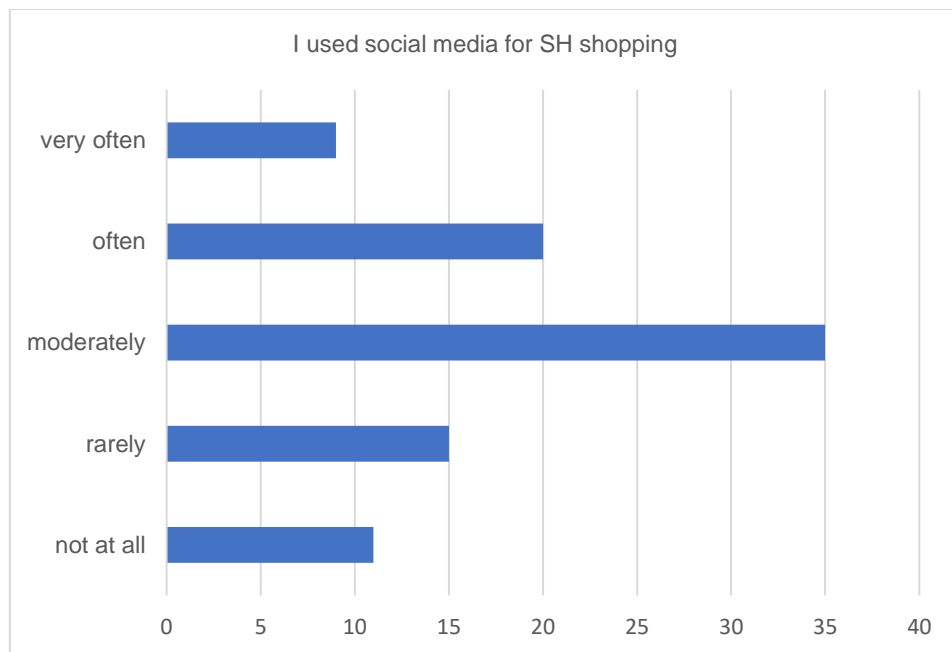


Figure 6. Purchasing behavior in a 6-months timeframe

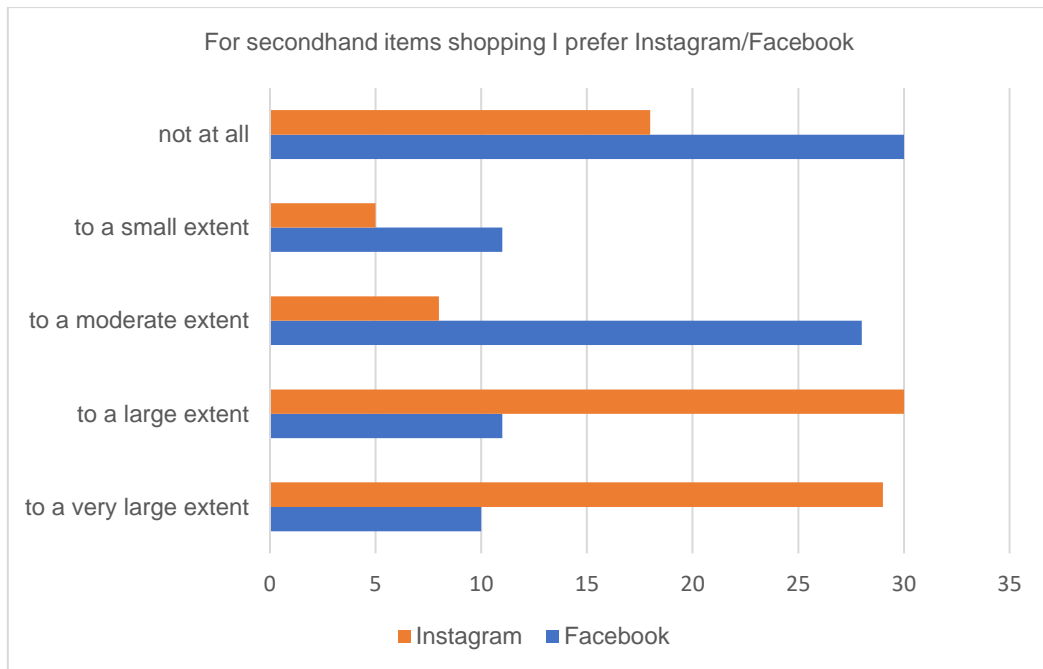


Figure 7. Preferred channel for online shopping

Preference is given to Instagram. According to the answers, we can say that Instagram ranks high in the preferences of consumers of second-hand products. It needs to be noted that during the pandemic Instagram launched an app for small businesses, giving free access to marketers to use this tool. Another explanation may reside in the fact that Instagram established its reputation as a medium open to exploring commercial exchanges.

The last question focused on the purchasing behavior via the social media platform Instagram. Of the total of 90 respondents, more than half of them, 71.1% (64 students) claim to have purchased second-hand products through the Instagram app so far, while 28.9% (26 students) have not yet opted for Instagram shopping, choosing alternative channels.

4. Conclusions

Online shopping is a well-studied topic, most of the existent research focusing on broad areas such as countries or larger regions and mentioning the effect of online shopping on traditional shops. Less attention is given to the effect of digitalization on shopping habits of customers. In the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, shopping in physical stores was not possible for a considerable time, the period varying from country to country. Online shopping became the norm and, as results of the conducted research show, a part of leisure time and relaxation. Students display a mix of motivations for choosing second-hand clothing items, among which sustainability consumption plays an important part. For their online shopping experience, students are more inclined to resort

to social networks, by comparison to the already “old” new media, such as websites. Instagram seems to be the star at the moment, surpassing Facebook in the use for such practical activities like shopping. Such data are important for Romanian e-commerce. According to official data, only 34% Romanian companies have some sort of presence on social media platforms (by comparison to an average of 50% in the EU) (Diaconu, 2020). Merchants and businesses need to be aware that their (future) clients are to be found mainly in the social media sphere and adjust their communication and marketing campaigns accordingly.

There are several limitations in this study. First, the small number of respondents does not allow for generalization to college students, even at the level of one university. Also, the gender structure of the sample (17 males and 73 females) does not reflect the real gender structure of the student population. However, it resonates with other studies that show women’s inclination towards second-hand buying (Guiot & Roux, 2010). Third, the self-reporting technique may bias the results due to subjective factors.

The study represents a pilot attempt to understand the behaviour of students regarding their choice of shopping for clothing. Additionally, the pandemic period caused a shift towards digitization and students recollect pre-pandemic choices as distant memories. It is too early to assess that second-hand item shopping will remain at the present state of intensity in the “new normal”. Also, while the choice for “small data” is legitimate in the frame of this research, a larger sample, with a larger number of respondents, may change the image of preferences for fast fashion versus second-hand clothing. However, the ideas emerging in this study represent diverse students’ viewpoints worthy of further investigation. Future research should expand the pool of respondents and include more variables in the research such as emotion, perceptions, economic status.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

What is your gender? Male/Female

Where do you live? Urban area/countryside

1. Do you usually purchase second-hand products?
2. What are the reasons for purchase second-hand products?
 - economic
 - recreational
 - ecological/sustainable consumption
 - fashion-related
3. What is the preferred online medium for purchasing these products?
 - Websites
 - Social media
4. Have you purchased second-hand products via social media in the last 6 months?
5. What are the social networks you use when you want to purchase such a product? (Facebook vs. Instagram)
6. Have you purchased so far second-hand products through Instagram?