


YOUNG CONSUMERS IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGES OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN CLOTHING MARKET – CASE OF POLAND

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Abstract: The fashion industry depletes the earth's natural resources. It consumes large amounts of water, oil, and chemicals for production, generates enormous amounts of pollutants, and often contributes to the irreversible destruction of nature. Recent developments in the apparel industry, particularly fast fashion strategies, have encouraged the rapid production of clothing to meet consumer tastes and preferences. These products often quickly end up in landfills. In the European Union, about 2 million tons of clothing end up in landfills yearly, and less than 1% of clothing is recycled (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Growing awareness of the environmental and social issues in the apparel industry has led to the concept of sustainable fashion coming to the fore in recent years. Moving the clothing sector towards a circular economy requires responsible, smart, and creative choices to be made in every aspect of the garment life cycle. Collaboration between consumers, industry and government is necessary to effectively drive the change towards a sustainable fashion industry.. Most importantly, however, consumer behavior must change. The aim of the study is to assess the level of awareness and attitudes of young consumers towards circular fashion. The findings indicate that young consumers approach decisions about unused and new clothing rationally. Nevertheless, their understanding of the industry's environmental impact and the influence of personal purchasing choices remains limited. Increasing this awareness will require targeted educational programs and initiatives that engage young consumers in environmentally-friendly practices for managing their wardrobes. Because of the sample size and the selected method of sampling, the results cannot be treated as representative for the general population of Polish consumers.

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Introduction

The environmental issues associated with the textile and clothing sector have long been a subject of public debate, with increasing urgency to adopt a restrained and holistic strategy in clothing production. Textile manufacturing, encompassing the creation, processing, utilization, and disposal of garments, exerts a substantial impact on environmental health (Karpova et al., 2022). In Europe, the textile industry is noted as one of the most environmentally damaging sectors (Jimenez-Fernandez et al., 2023), consuming vast amounts of clean water, land, and raw materials. In recent decades, individual clothing consumption in the EU has increased by 40%, contributing between 2% and 10% to the environmental impact of the total EU consumption (European Environment Agency, 2022). Alarming, of the billions of garments in use worldwide, less than 15% are recycled, with the majority ending up in landfills. This collection rate is even lower in the European Union, where less than 50% of used clothing is reused or recycled, and only 1% is converted into new textiles (European Commission, 2022).

Addressing these pressing issues requires the collective involvement of various stakeholders: the textile industry to invest in cleaner technologies, fashion companies to adopt innovative business models, consumers to alter consumption patterns, and policymakers to implement regulatory measures. Initiatives have been introduced, such as promoting slow fashion – encouraging consumers to purchase fewer garments but of higher quality – as well as developing business models for clothing rentals and designing products with reusability and recyclability in mind. While these steps represent progress, they are not sufficient to achieve a transition to a circular economy. A significant barrier remains – a lack of consumer awareness and engagement (Kirchherr et al., 2018; Gonzalez, 2015).

Given the scale of the challenge, the circular economy model has become a prominent focus for governments and international organizations worldwide. Many countries, along with multinational agencies, are exploring ways to incorporate circular economy principles into their economies, with the fashion industry as a key area of interest. The European Union has taken concrete steps through its Green Deal, an extensive political agenda addressing climate change and fostering sustainability. Integral to this agenda is the Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP), which includes the Sustainable and Circular Textiles Strategy. This strategy aims to establish a new sustainable framework for the EU textile market by 2030, wherein most textile products will be durable, repairable, recyclable, free from hazardous substances, and ethically produced (European Commission, 2022).

Fashion industry transformation from fast fashion to sustainable fashion

There is no doubt that with fast fashion, the amount of clothing produced and thrown away has skyrocketed. Fast fashion has revolutionized the process of buying and disposing of clothing. Fast fashion is a dominant business model that causes great harm to the planet, exploits workers, and harms animals (Siddhartha, 2024). The first fast fashion business model emerged about 30 years ago. Fast fashion refers to inexpensive, stylish attire that replicates high-end fashion trends inspired by runway shows or famous personalities to promptly satisfy customer needs. (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). The concept involves swiftly introducing the most current trends to the market so that consumers can purchase items at the peak of their popularity before discarding them shortly after wearing them a few times. The fast fashion sector is based on ever-increasing production and sales figures, rapid production, low product quality, and short product life cycles (Bick et al., 2018). The result of these factors is excessive consumption, the quick use of materials, substantial disposal, and a considerable negative effect on the environment. (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The increasing popularity of fast fashion brands is the direct consequence of consumption that exceeds the actual needs, and at the same time, alters the state of the environment as the main provider of resources.

As a result, many brands are now rejecting the principles of fast fashion and opting for a more sustainable approach to clothing production. Slowing down fashion is crucial for creating an industry with a smaller footprint, ensuring a more sustainable future for coming generations. Slow fashion is the opposite of fast fashion; it is a philosophy, a design approach, and a consumption method that emphasizes the relationship between the wearer and the clothing, local production and resources, in addition to the ethical treatment of workers (Clarke, 2008; Tama et al., 2017). It is an awareness and approach to fashion that carefully considers the processes and resources required to produce clothing. Slow fashion advocates the purchase of higher-quality clothing that lasts longer and stresses the fair treatment of people, animals, and the planet. The slow fashion philosophy primarily focuses on reducing both consumption and production. It harkens back to the pre-fast fashion era, when clothing was viewed as a long-term investment rather than a disposable commodity. As consumers increasingly demand higher sustainability and ethical standards, slow fashion has grown in popularity. With rising awareness, the planet and all its inhabitants can benefit from this thoughtful and conscious approach to fashion.

In turn, the increasing awareness of ecological and social issues in the apparel industry has led to the concept of sustainable fashion coming to the fore in recent years. The topic of sustainable fashion emerged in management literature a few years ago, around 2008. The definition of sustainable fashion is still difficult to grasp. It encompasses a variety of means by which a fashion item or behavior can be perceived as more sustainable, including (but not limited to) environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free and anti-consumer practices, as well as production. Sustainable fashion refers to approaches that aim to reduce the environmental impact and increase social responsibility at all stages of a fashion item's life cycle

(Henninger et al., 2016; Mukendi et al., 2020). Some academics believe sustainable fashion is an integral part of the slow fashion movement that has developed in recent decades and is often used interchangeably with terms such as eco-fashion, green fashion, and ethical fashion (Carey & Cervellon, 2014). Sustainable fashion utilizes the most sustainable methods and materials possible in all the stages of a product's life cycle, whereas slow fashion focuses on reducing consumption and production. A literature review on sustainable fashion has highlighted the main barriers to developing sustainable fashion. Sustainable fashion is usually more expensive than conventional fashion for many reasons – especially because high-quality production processes and materials increase costs (Haines & Lee, 2022).

Circular economy in the clothing market

The definition of the circular economy (CE) is: “an industrial economy that is restorative or regenerative by design and intention”. In other words, it is an industrial model based on the idea of regeneration and closed material loops to avoid waste generation. CE addresses the problem of excessive resource consumption and environmental pressure. The circular economy is seen as a necessary and pragmatic solution to reconcile the link between the pace of growth and the pressure on environmental resources. The circular economy concept is not new, but it represents a significant challenge for the fashion industry. The transition from a linear to a circular economy is unavoidable. The traditional linear model works on the principle of 'take – make – throw away', which leads to excessive consumption and regular disposal, which in turn means significant waste (Ki et al., 2021; Koszewska, 2018). Those involved in this economy display no consideration for the environmental effects on nature and the climate, leading to decreased biodiversity. A linear economy model believes the resources are infinite. In fact, owing to the earth's finite resources and the ever-increasing demand for consumer goods, production will cease at some point. Figure 1 depicts the linear economy model in fashion.



Figure 1. Linear model in fashion industry

Source: Author's study based on research

The basic idea of a circular economy is that resource flows are optimized, and resources are reused in a closed loop, reducing the need for new materials and resources. There are three steps to achieving a circular economy: 1) slowing down resource use, 2) minimizing resource consumption, and 3) closing the resource loop between reuse and production. The first step focuses on reducing the rate at which new resources are extracted and used in the production of clothing. The idea is to extend the lifespan of garments and other fashion products to avoid the constant demand for new materials. The second step aims to reduce the total amount of materials and energy consumed during the use phase of a product's life cycle. It encourages

consumers and companies alike to minimize their impact during the product's time in use, ensuring that the clothing is worn for longer and used more efficiently. The final step in achieving a circular economy involves ensuring that the end-of-life of a garment is not the end of its material value. Rather than ending up in a landfill, clothing and textiles should be reused, repurposed, or recycled to create new products, effectively “closing the loop”.

To transition the fashion industry to a circular economy, responsible, smart and creative choices must be made in every aspect of a garment's life – from choosing the right (renewable, regenerative, sustainable, eco-friendly) materials to the waste-minimizing design and construction of eco-friendly production, retail and use, to reuse (to extend the life of the product and return it to the economic cycle) and recycling (de Aguiar Hugo et al., 2021). A circular approach considers waste and pollution at all product stages and aims to extend the life cycle of materials used in clothing by facilitating recycling and reuse (Lissaman, 2019). The circular concept aims to ensure that the industry is not reliant on resources (Seidu et al., 2024). Circular business models offer the potential to bring significant benefits to the environment, society and the economy (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2022). Increasingly more clothing brands in the world are trying to redesign their business model by adopting the concept of a circular economy (Koszewska et al., 2020; McDowall et al., 2017; Ghisellini et al., 2016). Figure 2 shows the circular economy model in fashion.

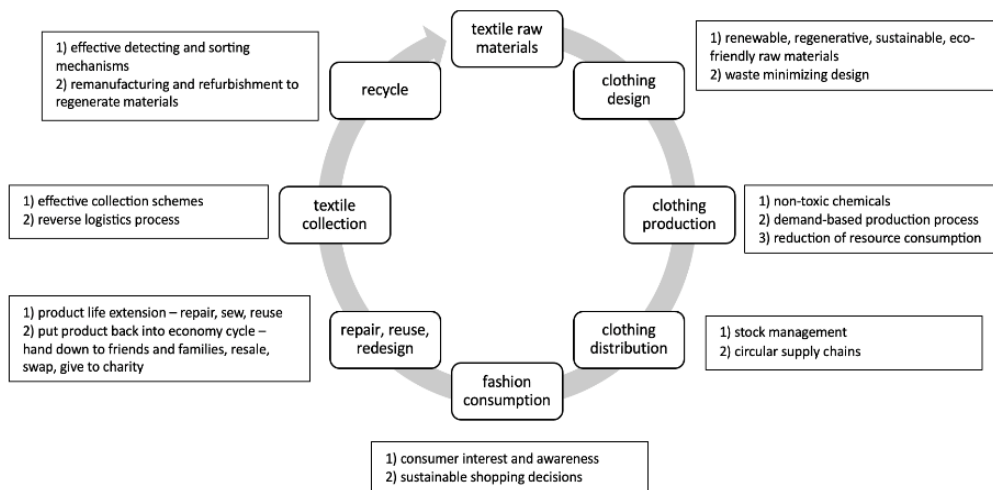


Figure 2. Circular model in fashion industry

Source: Author's study based on research

One of the most innovative and environmentally conscious companies in the world is Patagonia. This company is often seen as a role model when it comes to sustainable clothing manufacturers. Patagonia is an outdoor clothing company that is committed to sustainability and environmentally friendly products worldwide. Patagonia offers a Worn Wear program that repairs and resells used clothing to extend

the life of its products. The company encourages customers to return worn-out products, which are then recycled into new items. Patagonia incorporates recycled polyester, organic cotton, and other eco-friendly materials into its products to reduce the environmental impact. By integrating circular economy practices, Patagonia is positioning itself as a leader in the transition toward more sustainable, responsible, and regenerative fashion systems.

In summary, the circular economy offers fashion a way to reduce its environmental impact, optimize resource use and become more socially responsible. It is an important driver of innovation, sustainability and positive change for the future of fashion. It is therefore not just a trend, but a necessary shift towards a regenerative and equitable fashion industry.

Methodology

The main aim of the study was to assess the level of awareness and attitudes of young consumers towards circular fashion. This article addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the expectations of young consumers regarding the involvement of clothing companies in pro-environmental initiatives?
2. How likely are young consumers to engage in behaviors that support circular fashion, such as renting clothes, participating in clothing swaps, or recycling old garments?
3. Which pro-ecological behaviors are most commonly exhibited by the respondents?

Understanding the young consumer's attitudes and opinions regarding circular fashion will be the first step to transforming the apparel industry from a linear to a circular system. This study will mostly benefit organizations that are willing to restructure from a linear to a circular fashion system.

The research used an online survey method. For this purpose, an original questionnaire was prepared, which young customers were given to fill in. Each respondent gave their consent to participate in the study. The questionnaire explained the purpose of the study and emphasized the voluntary and confidential nature of the study. A customized questionnaire utilizing Likert-scale-based questions was distributed online via a Google form between September and October 2024. Questionnaires with missing answers to any question or sent after the deadline were rejected. 240 correctly completed questionnaires were received and considered for the study. The sample size consisted of 62.5% women and 37.5% men. The respondents were aged 18-28. The sample is not representative, hence the results cannot be treated as representative of the general population of Polish consumers.

Results and discussion

The variables were measured using a five-grade ordinal scale. In all the calculations, it was assumed that there are equal intervals between the categories on the scale. The respondents generally expect companies in the apparel industry to engage in various environmentally friendly activities (Figure 3). First and foremost, they expect the

introduction of the possibility to repair clothes ($\bar{x} = 4.03$) and the transition of apparel companies from a linear model to a circular model ($\bar{x} = 4.01$). In addition, the participants expect apparel companies to adopt environmentally friendly production practices, such as waste-minimizing apparel design ($\bar{x} = 3.63$), design/production from recyclable materials ($\bar{x} = 3.65$), and the use of recycled materials to manufacture new products ($\bar{x} = 3.67$). Those surveyed also believe that clothing companies should carry out campaigns and activities to educate consumers (how to care for clothes, extend their lifespan, etc.) ($\bar{x} = 3.55$). The effective marketing communication of apparel brands should involve added product values related to sustainability and ethical production aspects. Interestingly, the respondents gave relatively low scores for ecological fashion shows organized by clothing companies ($\bar{x} = 2.81$).



Figure 3. Average values of variables describing respondents' expected involvement of companies from clothing industry in pro-environmental activities

Source: Author's study based on research

The analysis leads to the conclusion that the young consumers who took part in the study deal with used clothing quite rationally at the declarative level (Figure 4). They most often give these garments to family and friends ($\bar{x} = 3.53$) or charitable organizations, e.g. the Polish Red Cross ($\bar{x} = 3.24$). A significant proportion of the respondents regularly sell unused clothes ($\bar{x} = 3.27$). Many of those questioned keep unnecessary clothing items at home. Sometimes, the survey participants throw them away ($\bar{x} = 2.22$) or leave them next to the garbage can ($\bar{x} = 2.18$). The respondents are least likely to give their clothes a second life by selling them at women's markets ($\bar{x} = 1.67$), handing them into a store to get a voucher ($\bar{x} = 2.04$), or refurbishing them ($\bar{x} = 2.10$). The behavior reported by those surveyed suggests that the vast majority of clothes that are no longer needed do remain in circulation for some time, which is a positive development.



Figure 4. Mean values of variables describing respondents' pro-ecological behaviors toward unworn clothes

Source: Author's study based on research

When buying new clothing products, the young consumers who participated in the study are guided by rational considerations (Figure 5). In their purchasing decisions, they are guided by timeless styles which guarantee that the product will not quickly go out of fashion or contradict current trends ($\bar{x} = 3.63$). They also pay close attention to the material composition of the products to ensure a longer lifespan ($\bar{x} = 3.49$). The young respondents also state that they limit the purchase of clothing products ($\bar{x} = 3.20$) and opt for second-hand products (second-hand, second-hand stores, or other resale outlets for clothing) ($\bar{x} = 3.08$). The fewest respondents use clothing rental, which could be because it is not yet sufficiently available in Poland ($\bar{x} = 1.51$).

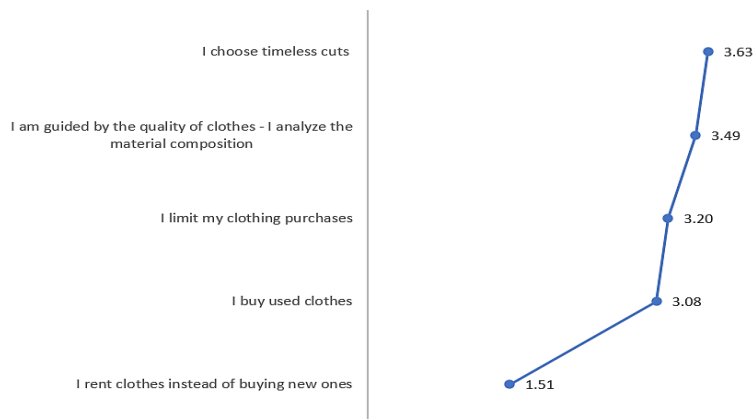


Figure 5. Mean values of variables describing respondents' pro-ecological behaviors toward new clothes

Source: Author's study based on research

The findings indicate that young consumers make rational decisions regarding unused and new clothing. The results of the survey among young Polish consumers are consistent with the findings of other researchers (Masserini et al., 2024; Manley et al., 2023; Koszewska, 2018). The respondents are aware of their personal impact on the environment and demonstrate conscious consumer behavior, paying close attention to how they dispose of old and unused clothing. The survey shows that they are capable of choosing sustainable clothing and reducing consumption. Nonetheless, their understanding of the broader environmental impact of the fashion industry, as well as the influence of their personal purchasing decisions, remains limited, which is consistent with other research (Popowska & Sienkiewicz, 2021; Kovacs, 2021). The participants report that they are mindful of sustainable development in the apparel industry and expect apparel brands to take concrete actions, such as altering product offers, revising marketing strategies, and implementing sustainable business models.

Limitations and future research directions

There are some limitations to the current study. The first one is the small size of the sample. In addition, this sample is not representative, thus the results cannot be treated as representative of the general population of Polish consumers. This research focused on one generation – young customers. It would therefore be helpful to extend the range of the population to other generations to determine whether the knowledge of circular fashion and pro-ecological buying behavior depend on and vary with generation. While the results are relevant to young Polish consumers, cultural differences may result in changing attitudes toward circular fashion behavior in other countries. Conducting transnational research in this area would be valuable.

Conclusions

Considering all the above, we can conclude that the switch to sustainability is no longer optional for companies but necessary. However, the entire industry (from fiber production to retail) must take responsibility for its environmental impact, including water, energy and chemical consumption, CO₂ emissions, in addition to waste production. Furthermore, these changes cannot come from the industry alone – the consumer culture, where fashion is cheap entertainment with no consequences for the consumer – must change. Nevertheless, a successful change in consumer behavior must be accompanied and supported by policies that address the social organization of consumption on a social, cultural, economic, and material level.

One of the most difficult challenges for the future will be to change consumer behavior and the meaning of fashion. Consumers must understand fashion as a functional product rather than an entertainment item and be prepared to pay higher prices that consider the environmental impact of fashion. It is important to get the consuming public to accept and contribute towards reducing environmental waste. Additional research must focus on analyzing the behavioral tendencies of Generation Z as they represent a significant portion of the consumer market, which can contribute to reducing environmental waste. Increasing consumers' awareness of circular fashion will require targeted educational programs and initiatives that engage young generations in

environmentally-friendly practices for managing their wardrobes. Educating young consumers about product values and environmentally friendly alternatives should be core elements of the messages used by apparel brands. Understanding all the aspects of the perceptions and attitudes can help marketing managers build more effective strategies and campaigns with respect to their sustainable products and product lines.

From this, we can conclude that effective ecological education should strengthen the environmental awareness of society. It would be beneficial to include ecological education in school programs. Teachers could integrate sustainability topics into their curricula in ways that resonate with the younger generation. This would enhance students' knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy, promote environmental awareness, as well as support individual and collective well-being. Programs of this nature could encourage environmental activism and improve sustainability at the local level, which in turn would foster the entrepreneurial potential of youth.

A united approach involving researchers, industry representatives, governmental bodies, and consumers is essential to cultivate a favorable perspective and advance the movement toward sustainability in the clothing sector. In turn, fashion industry companies are forced to move away from strategies based on the number of clothes produced, the growing number of collections and sales based on price reductions, towards a strategy of building value for the customer based on quality, simplicity, a limited number of collections, greater personalization and modularity of products.

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MŁODZI KONSUMENCI WOBEC WYZWAŃ GOSPODARKI O OBIEGU ZAMKNIĘTYM NA PRZYKŁADZIE RYNKU ODZIEŻOWEGO W POLSCE

Streszczenie: Przemysł modowy wyczerpuje zasoby naturalne Ziemi. Zużywa duże ilości wody, ropy i chemikaliów do produkcji, generuje ogromne zanieczyszczenia i często przyczynia się do nieodwracalnego zniszczenia przyrody. Ostatnie wydarzenia w branży modowej, w szczególności strategii fast fashion, zachęciły do szybkiej produkcji odzieży, aby sprostać gustom i preferencjom konsumentów. Odzież ta często szybko trafia na wysypiska śmieci. W Unii Europejskiej około 2 milionów ton odzieży trafia na wysypiska śmieci każdego roku, a mniej niż 1% odzieży jest poddawane recyklingowi (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Rosnąca świadomość problemów środowiskowych i społecznych w przemyśle modowym doprowadziła do tego, że w ostatnich latach koncepcja zrównoważonej mody wysunęła się na pierwszy plan. Przejście sektora odzieżowego w kierunku gospodarki o obiegu zamkniętym wymaga odpowiedzialnych, mądrych i kreatywnych wyborów na każdym etapie cyklu życia odzieży. Konieczna jest współpraca między konsumentami, przemysłem i rządem, aby skutecznie doprowadzić do zmiany w kierunku zrównoważonego przemysłu modowego. Co najważniejsze, zachowanie konsumentów musi się zmienić. Celem badania było określenie poziomu świadomości młodych konsumentów oraz ich postaw wobec mody cyrkularnej. Wyniki pokazały, że ich podejście do nienoszonych i nowych ubrań jest racjonalne, choć świadomość wpływu przemysłu odzieżowego na środowisko pozostaje niewystarczająca. Aby zwiększyć zaangażowanie młodych konsumentów w działania proekologiczne, konieczne jest wdrażanie programów edukacyjnych oraz inicjatyw, które promują odpowiedzialne gospodarowanie odzieżą. Ze względu na wielkość próby oraz wybraną metodę doboru próby wyników nie można traktować jako reprezentatywnych dla ogółu populacji polskich konsumentów.

Słowa kluczowe: gospodarka o obiegu zamkniętym, moda cyrkularna, odzież, zachowania konsumpcyjne

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