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Factors influencing the purchase of fashion products before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: the example of Serbia*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the factors that most influenced consumers in purchasing fashion products and the factors the most important to consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as whether there are any differences between the period prior to the pandemic and the period after it. The available research on the correlation between the pandemic and consumer buying habits and the factors influencing the purchase of products mainly dealt with consumer goods stimulated by the initial stockpiling of hygiene materials and food, books, recreational equipment, etc. On a purposive sample of 1,002 adult respondents in the territory of Serbia, the quantitative empirical research applying an online survey was conducted within the March-June 2021 period. The SPSS was used for data processing and analysis and for the interpretation of research results. In addition to descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation), comparative statistics (χ^2 -test, ANOVA, t-test) was used as well. The change in the attitude to consumption has led to the introduction of a new value system for consumers when purchasing fashion products. Understanding these factors will help the fashion industry find new approaches to satisfy the changed buying habits of consumers.

Keywords: fashion industry; fashion products; consumer behavior; purchase factors; COVID-19 pandemic

JEL classification: D9, L67, M31, M37

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1. Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing industries in the world, which comprises the production, distribution and promotion of various types of fashion products, including clothing, footwear, jewelry, bags, cosmetics and other fashion accessories (Slijepčević, 2016). The fashion industry contributes about USD 3 trillion globally, which is estimated at 2% of the world's gross domestic product (Moreno-Gavara and Jiménez-Zarco, 2019). Buying fashion products is a complex process involving various factors that can influence consumer decisions, including their preferences regarding design, quality of materials and workmanship, price, discounts and promotions, as well as the place and method of purchase.

The pandemic caused by the spread of the corona virus (COVID-19) and the subsequent lockdowns have had a major impact on people's quality of life and have significantly affected collective and consumer behaviors (Milanović and Stamenković, 2022), including the way consumers perceive, evaluate and purchase fashion products. Moreover, said have also changed the choices accessible to consumers (Esposti et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2020). The prolonged fear of the disease, the uncertainty, and the unavailability of healthier coping strategies, e.g. considerable reduction in social interactions, as well as restrictions on travelling, all impacted well-being.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a significant impact on consumer behavior by changing choices regarding everyday products and the most widespread habits (Mamula Nikolić et al., 2022). The unusual consumer behavior was noted during the initial stages of the pandemic, wherein consumers were hoarding staples and food (Laato et al., 2020). Sneath et al. (2009) highlighted that changes in consumer behavior often represent self-protective strategies aimed at managing depression and negative emotions by restoring a positive sense of self.

According to a study conducted by Nielsen (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a globally expressed change in consumption levels related to consumer behavior. The duration of the pandemic has led to changes in lifestyle and consumption practices. It has unpredictably changed our way of working, communicating and shopping, and it has profoundly impacted consumer attitudes and behavior. In response to the spread of the virus, consumers have implemented practices to change their consumption behavior and reorganize their shopping strategies in accordance with the quarantine and social distancing conditions imposed by the authorities (Cohen, 2020). Likewise, job insecurity and a life of insecurity experienced during the pandemic have had a negative impact on consumer behavior. The pandemic has changed consumer patterns, reducing sales of some product categories (e.g. apparel) and improving sales of other categories (e.g. entertainment products) (Baker et al., 2020). Although varying across nations,

consumers have reorganized their shopping strategies, changed established habits, and experimented with creative and innovative practices (Nielsen, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the results of a quantitative research project aimed at investigating habits in the purchase of fashion products before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, the authors intended to examine whether and to what extent the pandemic changed the factors influencing the purchase of fashion products in Serbia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding these factors is crucial to gaining insights into consumer behavior and decision-making, particularly in the rapidly evolving environment of the fashion industry, where consumers are constantly exposed to changing trends, styles and promotional messages. Also, it is essential for marketers to understand the impact of these factors, as it is based on the fact that marketing strategies can be developed to correspond to the preferences of the target market. By identifying and understanding the factors that influence the customers, brands have the opportunity to develop a strategy, a unique value proposition (as a promotional message), and advertising campaigns that are more effective and more in line with the needs and mindsets of their target consumers, providing a real benefit to better satisfy the demands of customers and boost sales (Rani, 2014).

With an insight into certain factors that influence the purchase of fashion products in Serbia before and during COVID-19, the gap in knowledge would be filled, given the relevance of the current phenomenon. By comparing two different contexts, the examination can foreground potential shifts in consumer behavior and patterns that transcend contextual factors, with important implications for further research and practice that support the design of new strategies for businesses to navigate the *new normal*.

Based on the following literature review and factors that influence purchase of fashion products (quality of materials and workmanship, product design, product originality, geographical origin, brand awareness, packaging, price, discount and promotion, method of payment, place of purchase, how and by whom the product is promoted, that the product is promoted by the influencer, recommendation from friend), the research hypotheses were defined: *null hypothesis (H0)* – there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia in relation to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic; *alternative hypothesis H1* – there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia according to *gender* in relation to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic; *alternative hypothesis H2* – there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia according to *age categories (generations of consumers)* in relation to the degree of importance of the

examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic; and *alternative hypothesis H3* – there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia according to *the percentage of monthly income allocated to the purchase of fashion products* in relation to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of said products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

This paper examines the degree of importance of a certain factor for the purchase of a fashion product in Serbia, for the period before the COVID-19 pandemic and during this pandemic, in order to determine which factors had the most influence on consumers in the purchase of fashion products before the pandemic, and which have been most important to consumers in Serbia during the pandemic.

According to the Nielsen researchers, as the *pre-COVID-19* benchmark falls further into the past, it has become difficult for consumers to understand exactly what the *new normal* is (NielsenIG, 2023). The changed attitude towards consumption has resulted in a new value system among consumers. Being uncertain about the future and preparing for extremes, consumers are in a constant state of skepticism, remaining wary of all forms of spending, suggesting hedging, contingency planning and hopeful strategizing around socio-economic barriers. This makes it all the more important to know the factors that influenced consumers' purchasing decisions before and during the pandemic.

Consumer Outlook 2023 survey (NielsenIG, 2023) shows that consumers are increasingly cautious about their purchasing decisions – and unsure of what's next. According to a fashion industry research report by McKinsey and Company in collaboration with the Business of Fashion (Amed et al., 2022), the global fashion industry has faced exceptionally challenging conditions. The pandemic has only served to exacerbate inequalities in performance: the proportion of companies generating negative economic profit in 2021 was higher than ever. Moreover, the losses of the bottom 80 percent in terms of value creation more than offset the profits of the top 20 percent. In the BoF-McKinsey State of Fashion 2023 survey (Amed et al., 2023), 84 percent of industry leaders said they expect market conditions to decrease or remain the same in 2023, but foresee a continuation of the casualization trend that took hold during the pandemic as more shoppers switch to work from home. Understanding these factors will help the fashion industry find new approaches to satisfy the changed buying habits of consumers.

As noted by Amatulli (2015), fashion marketing is characterized primarily by symbolic and hedonistic, rather than concrete and utilitarian consumption of

products, and therefore the behavior of buyers of fashion products is emotional and ambitious rather than rational and functional. Shopping determinants can be related to either personal motivation (i.e., individual style) or interpersonal motivations (i.e., status, symbolic value).

In general, consumer behavior is a complex process influenced by a variety of factors that shape consumers' perceptions, attitudes and purchase decisions in the context of fashion products (Slijepčević, 2019). Consumer behavior in the purchasing decision process is influenced by various factors and influences, which cause consumers to develop preferences regarding products and brands, and generally consumer and purchasing habits. These factors can be divided into several groups of factors: psychological factors (motivation, attitude, learning and memory), social factors (reference groups, family, individual's role and position, status), personal factors (age, profession, gender, financial situation, life style, values and beliefs), cultural (culture, social class), economic (price – monetary and non-monetary aspects, income, quality), as well as situational factors related to the time and place of purchase (physical environment – location, equipment; social environment – seller influence, time related to seasonal influences, days of the week, etc.; as a special situational factor, the pandemic situation and decisions on lockdown rendered by authorities were taken into consideration in authors' research), individual differences and environmental influences (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018; Shankar, 2011). The following was defined as the initial, null hypothesis of authors' research (H₀): there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia in relation to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic.

The personal factors, which are among the most important factors determining consumers' clothing purchase behavior, are age, gender, profession, level of education, level of income and marital status (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018; Solomon, 2020). It has been suggested that male and female consumers demonstrate considerably different approaches in their decision-making and purchasing behavior when shopping for clothing for a variety of different reasons (Koca and Koc, 2016). Findings from various studies (see e.g. Gupta and Gentry, 2015) show that when shopping for fashion products in rare settings, men and women tend to exhibit gender-oriented behavior that is considered more consistent with their traditional gender norms. Men are said to adhere to compulsive shopping behavior, which helps them maintain part of their traditional masculine identity, while women are said to be more likely to engage in fashion hoarding, which is said to be more consistent with their feminine identity. Some research shows that after the outbreak of the pandemic, there were subtle changes in male consumer purchasing groups, in which the purchase of certain necessities, especially everyday ones, increased (Vázquez- Martínez et al., 2021). Based on the above, the authors presented the

alternative hypothesis H1: there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia according to gender in relation to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic.

There are several studies on the propensity to purchase fashion products among different generations of consumers (Fine et al., 2022; Wijaya and Paramita, 2021; Nielsen, 2020; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017), which, among other things, confirm the appeal of fashionable but sustainable products among younger generations as well, i.e. Millennials (born between 1980 and 1994) and Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010). According to ESW (2022), Millennials (39%) and Generation X (37%) show the highest preference rates for online vs in-store shopping. Baby Boomers and Generation Z follow them with 30%. The pandemic lockdown increased consumer concern about a possible drop in income, so some research (Gu et al., 2021) reported that affordable brands were more popular at that time. Assuming that the consumer basket previously included a wide range of goods and services, during the pandemic the focus was on basic products, such as medicines, antiseptics, and disinfectants, and on delivery services, etc. Based on these studies, the authors propose the alternative hypothesis H2: there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia according to age categories (generations of consumers) in relation to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic; and H3: there is a statistically significant difference in the responses of consumers in Serbia according to the percentage of monthly income allocated to the purchase of fashion products in relation to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of said products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic.

3. Methodology

Empirical, quantitative research was conducted by way of a test method. An online survey was prepared specifically for the purpose of this research and was distributed to respondents. The importance of certain factors was examined in terms of their relevance for the consumers to buy fashion products before the pandemic and during the pandemic, in the period from March 24 to June 21, 2021, in the Republic of Serbia. The sample is purposive. It consists of 1,002 respondents – consumers of both genders (male: 26%, female: 74%), aged 18 to 72. According to age categories, the structure of the sample is as follows: 18-25 (Generation Z), 18%; 26-40 (Generation Y), 31%; 41-55 (Generation X), 35%; 56-72 (Baby Boomers), 16%. According to the amount of monthly income, the structure of the sample consists of the following structure of respondents: up to RSD 50,000 (EUR 420), 43%; RSD 50,000 – 70,000 (EUR 420 – 590), 20%; RSD 70,000 – 100,000 (EUR 590 – 850),

14%; over RSD 100,000 (EUR 850), 7%. The sample includes respondents from all regions of Serbia. The statistical error of the sample is 3%. The SPSS was used for data processing and analysis. The following quantitative statistical methods were applied: descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, arithmetic mean, standard deviation) and comparative statistics (χ^2 -test, t-test, ANOVA). Some questions in the questionnaire were formulated in the form of a five-point Likert scale. The questions in the questionnaire, which refer to the examination of the degree of importance of certain factors for the purchase of fashion products for the period before and during the pandemic, contained five offered answers: it is (was) very important to me, it is (was) important to me, sometimes it is (was) important, it is (was) not so important to me, it is (was) not important to me at all, and were assigned values of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1, respectively.

4. Empirical data and analysis

For consumers in Serbia, the quality of materials and workmanship became more important during the pandemic, compared to the period before the pandemic (85% of consumers stated that the quality of materials and workmanship was important to them before the pandemic, and even 90% of consumers stated the same thing regarding the pandemic period). The importance of product design to consumers has declined slightly during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, 93% of consumers said that design was important to them, and during the pandemic 89% of consumers highlighted the importance of product design. For 60% of consumers, product originality was important before the pandemic, and for 57% of them, product originality was important during the pandemic. In the period before the pandemic, prices, discounts, and promotions were also important to consumers in Serbia. The price of a fashion product was important for 75% of consumers before the pandemic, and for 79% of them, it has been important during the pandemic. This shows that consumers in Serbia have become slightly more price sensitive during the pandemic. A discount or sale of a fashion product was an important factor for 65% of consumers before the pandemic, and for 71% of them, it has been important during the pandemic. This also confirms that consumers have become slightly more price sensitive during the pandemic. During the period of the pandemic, the percentage of consumers for whom the place and method of payment became important increased, which was expected. When the percentages for the period before and during the pandemic are compared, it is evident that the two factors are very close as regards the following: the geographical origin of the fashion product, brand awareness, packaging, and the fact that the fashion product is promoted by the influencer. The following Table 1 shows the percentages of respondents who highlighted the listed factors as important for purchasing fashion products before and during the pandemic.

Table 1: Percentages of respondents to whom surveyed factors were important for purchasing fashion products before and during the pandemic

Tested elements that influence purchase	Before pandemic	During pandemic
quality of materials and workmanship	85%	90%
product design	93%	89%
product originality	60%	57%
geographical origin	22%	22%
brand awareness	18%	17%
packaging	14%	15%
price	75%	79%
discount and promotion	65%	71%
method of payment (online, card, cash on delivery)	45%	60%
place of purchase (physical store, online store)	49%	58%
how and by whom the product is promoted	18%	10%
that the product is promoted by the influencer	3%	3%
recommendation from friend	38%	34%

Note: The percentages shown in the table refer to the sum of respondents' answers with values of 5 and 4.

Source: Author's calculation

Based on the results shown in Table 2, it can be concluded that the factors important for purchasing fashion products in Serbia before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic are: product design, quality of materials and workmanship, price, discount or promotion, and originality of the product, respectively.

Table 2: The importance of factors for buying fashion products (clothing, shoes, accessories) before the pandemic

Tested elements that influence purchase	N	Std. Deviation	Mean
product design	1,002	0.653	4.44*
quality of materials and workmanship	1,002	0.808	4.28*
price	1,002	0.822	3.98*
discount and promotion	1,002	0.930	3.84*
product originality	1,002	1.057	3.68*
place of purchase (physical store, online store)	1,002	1.210	3.36
method of payment (online, card, cash on delivery)	1,002	1.289	3.18
recommendation from friend	1,002	1.044	3.16
brand awareness	1,002	1.047	2.54
geographical origin	1,002	1.181	2.53
packaging	1,002	1.050	2.45
how and by whom the product is promoted	1,002	1.167	2.41
that the product is promoted by the influencer	1,002	0.805	1.45

Note: Mean values with the higher value than 3.5 are marked with an asterisk, because values 4 and 5 refer to the factors that respondents marked as important for the decision-making process of buying fashion products.

Source: Author's calculation

Based on the results shown in Table 3, the factors important for purchasing fashion products during the COVID-19 pandemic are quality of materials and workmanship, product design, price, discount or promotion, place of purchase (physical store or online store), originality of the product and method of payment (online card, cash on delivery), respectively. It is noted that the factors important for the process of purchasing fashion products during the pandemic have become the place of purchase and the method of payment. As for the least important factors for the decision-making process in the purchase of fashion products, both in the periods before and during the pandemic, consumers in Serbia indicated: that the product is promoted by the influencer, how the product was promoted, who promoted it, product packaging, brand awareness and the geographical origin of the fashion product.

Table 3: The importance of factors for buying fashion products (clothing, shoes, accessories) during the pandemic

Tested elements that influence purchase	N	Std. Deviation	Mean
quality of materials and workmanship	1,002	0.727	4.32*
product design	1,002	0.733	4.27*
price	1,002	0.825	4.07*
discount and promotion	1,002	0.938	3.95*
place of purchase (physical store, online store)	1,002	1.057	3.65*
product originality	1,002	1.069	3.56*
method of payment (online, card, cash on delivery)	1,002	1.220	3.55*
recommendation from friend	1,002	1.060	3.10
geographical origin	1,002	1.158	2.53
brand awareness	1,002	1.074	2.49
packaging	1,002	1.096	2.39
how and by whom the product is promoted	1,002	1.052	2.01
that the product is promoted by the influencer	1,002	0.777	1.43

Note: Mean values with the higher value than 3.5 are marked with an asterisk, because values 4 and 5 refer to the factors that respondents marked as important for the decision-making process of buying fashion products.

Source: Author's calculation

For the period before the pandemic, the t-test found a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers according to gender concerning the following factors that influence the purchase of fashion products: quality of materials and workmanship, product design, product originality, geographical origin, brand awareness, product packaging, place of purchase, payment method, how the product was promoted and who promoted it, and recommendation from friends (Table 4). According to the same table, for the period during the pandemic, the t-test found a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers according to gender concerning the following factors that influence the purchase of fashion products: product design, product originality, geographical origin, brand awareness, product packaging, product price, place of purchase, payment method, how and by whom the product is promoted, and recommendation from friends.

Table 4: Examination of the statistically significant difference in respondents' answers according to gender in relation to the degree of importance of factors for the purchase of fashion products, before and during the pandemic (t-test)

Tested elements that influence purchase	Before pandemic			During pandemic		
	t	df	p	t	df	p
quality of materials and workmanship	-2.599	998	0.009*	-1.993	998	0.047
product design	-5.266	998	0.000*	-4.820	998	0.000*
product originality	-2.972	998	0.003*	-3.173	998	0.002*
geographical origin	-3.572	998	0.000*	-3.026	998	0.003*
brand awareness	4.558	998	0.000*	4.985	998	0.000*
packaging	-3.165	998	0.002*	-2.089	998	0.037*
price	0.673	998	0.501	-2.237	998	0.026*
discount and promotion	-0.041	998	0.967	-1.424	998	0.155
method of payment (online, card, cash on delivery)	-4.102	998	0.000*	-5.427	998	0.000*
place of purchase (physical store, online store)	-3.224	998	0.001*	-6.436	998	0.000*
how and by whom the product is promoted	-2.265	998	0.024*	-2.661	998	0.008*
that the product is promoted by the influencer	-0.807	998	0.420	-0.401	998	0.688
recommendation from friend	-2.835	998	0.005*	-4.827	998	0.000*

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Source: Author's calculation

According to the results shown in the Table 5, the extent to which any factor, marked by male and female genders as important for the purchase of fashion products, was important in the periods before and during the pandemic. In the pre-pandemic period, the following factors were more important to female than to male consumers: quality of materials and workmanship, product design, originality of the product, geographical origin, packaging, method of payment, place of purchase and recommendation from friends. On the other hand, the following factors were more important to male consumers: brand awareness, and the way in which the product was promoted and who promoted it. During the pandemic, the following factors were more important to female than to male consumers: product design, originality of the product, geographical origin, packaging, price, method of payment, place of purchase, the way in which the product was promoted and who promoted it, and recommendation from friends. During the pandemic, the factor most important to male compared to female respondents was brand awareness.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents according to gender and the importance of the mentioned factors for the purchase of fashion products, before and during the pandemic

The importance of tested elements that influence purchase of a fashion product	Before pandemic		During pandemic	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
quality of materials and workmanship	80%	87%	88%	90%
product design	88%	94%	81%	91%
product originality	51%	63%	48%	59%
geographical origin	20%	23%	19%	23%
brand awareness	27%	15%	26%	15%
packaging	13%	17%	13%	17%
price	75%	74%	76%	80%
discount and promotion	66%	65%	70%	71%
method of payment (online, card, cash on delivery)	36%	48%	45%	65%
place of purchase (physical store, online store)	38%	52%	45%	63%
how and by whom the product is promoted	19%	16%	9%	12%
that the product is promoted by the influencer	3%	3%	3%	2%
recommendation from friend	33%	40%	27%	37%

Source: Author's calculation

Through the ANOVA test, the existence of a statistically significant difference in the answers of respondents according to age groups (18-25, 26-40, 41-55 and 56-72) was examined in relation to the degree of importance of the analyzed factors for the purchase of fashion products, before (Table 6) and during the pandemic (Table 7). Accordingly, a statistically significant difference is marked by an asterisk.

Table 6: Examining the statistically significant difference in respondents' answers according to age groups in relation to the degree of importance of factors for purchasing fashion products before the pandemic (ANOVA)

Tested elements that influence purchase of fashion products	Before pandemic				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
quality of materials and workmanship	16.355	3	5.452	8.536	0.000*
product design	6.552	3	2.184	5.190	0.001*
product originality	32.392	3	10.797	9.928	0.000*
geographical origin	162.943	3	54.314	43.967	0.000*
brand awareness	12.044	3	4.015	3.694	0.012*
packaging	1.878	3	0.626	0.567	0.637
price	14.077	3	4.692	7.079	0.000*
discount and promotion	3.078	3	1.026	1.186	0.314
method of payment	10.632	3	3.544	2.141	0.093
place of purchase	4.074	3	1.358	0.927	0.427
how and by whom the product is promoted	2.339	3	0.780	0.571	0.634
that the product is promoted by the influencer	2.434	3	0.811	1.253	0.289
recommendation from friend	8.725	3	2.908	2.683	0.046

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Source: Author's calculation

Table 7: Examining the statistically significant difference in respondents' answers according to age groups in relation to the degree of importance of factors for purchasing fashion products during the pandemic (ANOVA)

Tested elements that influence purchase of fashion products	During pandemic				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
quality of materials and workmanship	4.823	3	1.608	3.060	0.027*
product design	7.011	3	2.337	4.391	0.004*
product originality	33.968	3	11.323	10.190	0.000*
geographical origin	78.501	3	26.167	20.676	0.000*
brand awareness	12.446	3	4.149	3.626	0.013*
packaging	20.010	3	6.670	5.634	0.001*
price	5.831	3	1.944	2.873	0.035*
discount and promotion	2.529	3	0.843	0.959	0.411
method of payment	5.553	3	1.851	1.244	0.292
place of purchase	5.238	3	1.746	1.564	0.196
how and by whom the product is promoted	5.716	3	1.905	1.725	0.160
that the product is promoted by the influencer	12.073	3	4.024	6.773	0.000*
recommendation from friend	7.185	3	2.395	2.140	0.094

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Source: Author's calculation

Tables 8 and 9 show the distribution of respondents according to age groups in relation to the importance of a certain factor for purchasing fashion products, before and during the pandemic. According to those results, the older the age category, the greater the percentage of consumers who take the quality of materials and workmanship as an important factor for purchasing fashion products, both in the periods before and during the pandemic. Product originality, brand awareness, and product packaging were marked by the smallest percentage as the factors important for members of the Baby Boomer generation. As regards geographical origin, the older the generations, the more important this factor becomes. Before the pandemic, product price was a more important factor for members of Generation Y compared to other generations of consumers, and during the pandemic it is a more important factor for Generation X. During the pandemic, the fact that the product was promoted by an influencer became most important for the greatest percentage of Generation Z.

Table 8: Distribution of respondents according to age groups and the importance of the mentioned factors for the purchase of fashion products before the pandemic

Importance of tested elements that influence purchase of fashion products	Before pandemic			
	18-25 (Gen Z)	26-40 (Gen Y)	41-55 (Gen X)	56-72 (Baby Boomers)
quality of materials and workmanship	79%	82%	89%	90%
product design	93%	94%	94%	87%
product originality	63%	60%	66%	42%
geographical origin	5%	15%	31%	33%
brand awareness	17%	16%	22%	13%
packaging	18%	15%	17%	12%
price	78%	79%	71%	76%
discount and promotion	57%	70%	65%	64%
method of payment	35%	50%	44%	50%
place of purchase	48%	48%	49%	62%
how and by whom the product is promoted	17%	21%	17%	19%
that the product is promoted by the influencer	3%	3%	4%	3%
recommendation from friend	34%	34%	39%	46%

Source: Author's calculation

Table 9: Distribution of respondents according to age groups and the importance of the mentioned factors for the purchase of fashion products during the pandemic

Importance of tested elements that influence purchase of fashion products	During pandemic			
	18-25 (Gen Z)	26-40 (Gen Y)	41-55 (Gen X)	56-72 (Baby Boomers)
quality of materials and workmanship	87%	88%	89%	92%
product design	89%	90%	87%	88%
product originality	65%	60%	61%	31%
geographical origin	11%	17%	29%	26%
brand awareness	16%	15%	22%	13%
packaging	23%	14%	15%	9%
price	78%	79%	81%	74%
discount and promotion	70%	70%	73%	68%
method of payment	57%	60%	56%	67%
place of purchase	56%	55%	61%	68%
how and by whom the product is promoted	11%	10%	10%	10%
that the product is promoted by the influencer	6%	3%	3%	3%
recommendation from friend	30%	33%	37%	37%

Source: Author's calculation

When it comes to the percentage of monthly income spent by consumers before and during the pandemic, according to the research results, less than 10% of monthly income was spent by 26% of consumers before the pandemic and 53% of consumers during the pandemic; 10-15% of monthly income was spent by 32% of consumers before the pandemic and 27% of consumers during the pandemic; 15-20% of monthly income was allocated by 22% of consumers before the pandemic and 12% of consumers during the pandemic; 20-25% of monthly income was spent by 12% of consumers before the pandemic and 4% of consumers during the pandemic, and over 25% of monthly income was spent by 8% of consumers before the pandemic and 5% of consumers during the pandemic. It is noticeable that the percentage of monthly income spent by consumers on fashion products dropped during the pandemic.

According to the results shown in Table 10, for those consumers who allocated the least amount of their monthly income for the purchase of fashion products (less than 10%) before the pandemic, the price and discounts, and promotions are the

most important factors, as assumed. For consumers who set aside 10-15% of their monthly income, the most important factor for buying fashion products was the place of purchase (physical or online store). For those consumers who allocated 20-25% of their monthly income to fashion products before the pandemic, the following factors are the most important concerning other groups of consumers: quality of materials and workmanship, product design, how the product is promoted and who promotes it, whether the product is promoted by an influencer and recommendation from a friend. For those who spent the most on fashion products (over 25% of their monthly income), the following factors were the most important for purchasing fashion products before the pandemic: product originality, brand awareness, geographical origin, packaging, and payment method, compared to other groups of consumers who spent less.

Table 10: Mean values for the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products in relation to the percentage of monthly income that was allocated for the purchase of fashion products before the pandemic

Importance of tested elements that influence purchase before the pandemic	Less than 10% (N = 257)	10-15% (N = 325)	15-20% (N = 220)	20-25% (N = 122)	Over 25% (N = 78)
quality of materials and workmanship	4.09	4.33	4.26	4.62*	4.18
product design	4.27	4.42	4.52	4.61*	4.54
product originality	3.46	3.61	3.80	3.93	4.00*
geographical origin	2.33	2.54	2.70	2.46	2.72*
brand awareness	2.20	2.56	2.64	2.82	2.92*
packaging	2.11	2.36	2.75	2.57	2.90*
price	4.12*	3.98	3.95	3.80	3.92
discount and promotion	3.95*	3.88	3.83	3.66	3.62
method of payment	2.99	3.19	3.25	3.30	3.41*
place of purchase	3.36	3.42*	3.28	3.30	3.41
how and by whom the product is promoted	2.26	2.35	2.49	2.62*	2.59
that the product is promoted by the influencer	1.41	1.40	1.54*	1.54*	1.44
recommendation from friend	2.99	3.25	3.24	3.28*	2.97

Note: The highest values were highlighted for each question regarding the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products in relation to the percentage of monthly income allocated to the purchase of fashion products before the pandemic.

Source: Author's calculation

The χ^2 -test found a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers according to the percentage set aside from the monthly income for the purchase of fashion products before the pandemic, in relation to the degree of importance of almost all examined factors (quality of materials and workmanship, product design, product originality, geographical origin, brand awareness, product packaging, product price, discount and promotion, place of purchase, product promotion, recommendation from friends, where $p < 0.05$), except for the following factors: method of payment, that the product is promoted by the influencer, where $p > 0.05$.

For the period during the pandemic, for consumers who set aside less than 10% of their monthly income the most important factors are the price and discounts, and promotions, but a recommendation from friends has also emerged as a new factor for this group of consumers. For consumers who spend 15-20% of their monthly income, the most important factors for purchasing fashion products are geographical origin and product packaging, and for those who spend 20-25% of their monthly income on fashion products, the following factors stand out as the most important compared to other consumer groups: quality of materials and workmanship, product design, originality of the product, method of payment, place of purchase, how the product is promoted and who promotes it, and the importance for the product to be promoted by an influencer. For those who spend more than 25% of their monthly income on fashion products, the most important factors for purchasing fashion products are brand awareness and place of purchase, compared to other groups of consumers who spend less for the mentioned purpose. Before the pandemic, the following factors were also important to the group of consumers who spend the most on fashion products: product originality, geographical origin, product packaging, and payment method. For details see Table 11.

Table 11: Mean values for the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products in relation to the percentage of monthly income that was allocated for the purchase of fashion products during the pandemic

Importance of tested elements that influence purchase during the pandemic	Less than 10% (N = 257)	10-15% (N = 325)	15-20% (N = 220)	20-25% (N = 122)	Over 25% (N = 78)
quality of materials and workmanship	4.29	4.32	4.45	4.68*	4.04
product design	4.21	4.25	4.50	4.53*	4.29
product originality	3.40	3.59	3.88	4.26*	3.75
geographical origin	2.50	2.52	2.78*	2.47	2.38
brand awareness	2.33	2.49	2.90	2.74	2.92*
packaging	2.27	2.39	2.75*	2.47	2.67
price	4.12*	4.06	4.02	4.00	3.75
discount and promotion	4.00*	3.92	3.88	3.79	3.75
method of payment	3.43	3.58	3.68	4.32*	3.75
place of purchase	3.66	3.56	3.73	3.79*	3.79*
how and by whom the product is promoted	1.87	2.05	2.35	2.47*	2.08
that the product is promoted by the influencer	1.32	1.49	1.62	1.68*	1.54
recommendation from friend	3.16*	3.09	3.12	2.42	3.08

Note: The highest values were highlighted for each question regarding the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products in relation to the percentage of monthly income allocated to the purchase of fashion products during the pandemic.

Source: author's calculation

The χ^2 -test found a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers according to the percentage allocated from the monthly income for the purchase of fashion products during the pandemic, in relation to the degree of importance of almost all the examined factors (quality of materials and workmanship, product design, product originality, geographical origin, brand awareness, product packaging, product price, payment method, product promotion, the product promoted by an influencer, recommendation from friends, where $p < 0.05$), except for the following factors: discount and promotion, place of purchase, where $p > 0.05$.

5. Results and discussion

The present results of this empirical research have proved the significant impact of the pandemic on consumer behavior, similar to what other research has shown for everyday products and the most widespread habits (cf. Baker et al., 2020; Cohen, 2020; Koch et al., 2020; Esposti et al., 2021; Mamula Nikolić et al., 2022). Unlike them, in our research, we focused only on fashion products. There is a statistically significant difference in the answers of respondents – consumers in Serbia according to gender concerning the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic, the alternative hypothesis H1 is confirmed. As it has been determined that there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of respondents in Serbia according to age categories (generations of consumers) about the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic, the alternative hypothesis H2 is confirmed. The alternative hypothesis H3 is also confirmed, as it has been established that there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of consumers in Serbia according to the percentage of monthly income allocated for the purchase of fashion products to the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of said products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic. The research null hypothesis H0 is refuted. As all the alternative hypotheses of the research have been confirmed, the null hypothesis is not confirmed, that is, it was determined that there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of respondents – consumers in Serbia concerning the degree of importance of the examined factors for the purchase of fashion products, both for the periods before and during the pandemic.

The research results show that the pandemic has led to a decrease in the purchase of fashion products, which certainly represents a serious blow to the fashion industry and requires maximum commitment and precision in determining the target groups of consumers, their characteristics, habits, and choices. Moreover, certain consumer habits of different groups of respondents have changed to a certain extent during the pandemic compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. This represents an additional challenge for manufacturers of fashion products who must, in a time of recession, show readiness and exceptional motivation to establish communication with their consumers as best as possible to understand their changed needs and provide an adequate response to those needs. Marketing strategy has put the consumer in focus more than ever before. If it is a matter of products for older generations, then the quality of the workmanship and the material offered should be better, while the geographical origin of fashion products should also be considered for these generations. If the focus is on members of Generation Z, then influence marketing is the right choice for marketing strategists. During the pandemic, customers became more price sensitive, paid more attention to prices and discounts, and also to the place of purchase (physical store or online), which

became an important issue for them, as well as the method of payment. To a greater extent, they opted for online shopping, which is a great advantage for manufacturers and sellers of fashion products, since online sales require significantly less costs than sales in physical stores.

The limitation of the paper is reflected in the analysis of only selected factors that influence the purchase of fashion products. Personal affinities, such as for example colors, can influence the choice of a certain fashion product. Also, it would be important to examine how many consumers buy fashion products because they lack them in terms of satisfying a certain need or more out of a desire to follow trends; as well as how important the concepts of sustainable fashion and biodegradable materials are to consumers when making a purchase decision. It would be important to examine the behavior of consumers of fashion products in the region and compare those results, which would be useful for the export of fashion products to the countries of the region.

This research on the topic of factors that influence decision-making on the purchase of fashion products is the first research in this field in Serbia that includes an analysis of consumer behavior, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, the field of the fashion industry is not sufficiently represented in scientific research, and the results of this research offer knowledge of the more important factors and those that are not, for the decision-making process by consumers regarding the purchase of fashion products (clothes, shoes and fashion accessories) for the period before, as well as during the pandemic period, with analyzes by gender, generations of consumers and their average monthly income. This research can be stimulating for further analysis of consumer behavior of fashion products in countries in the region.

6. Conclusion

The factors influencing the purchase of fashion products are multifaceted and interconnected, involving various personal, social, psychological, and situational influences. The quality of materials and workmanship, product design, originality of the product, prices of fashion products, discounts or promotions, geographical origin, brand awareness, packaging, and influencer promotion are among the key factors that can significantly impact consumers' purchase decisions in the context of fashion products. These factors can influence consumers' perception of product quality, value, authenticity, exclusivity, and desirability, and ultimately shape their purchase behavior. It is important for fashion marketers and retailers to understand and consider these factors in their marketing strategies, particularly in the dynamic and evolving landscape of the fashion industry, including the increasing importance of digital marketing and social media influencers. Further research and analysis

of these factors in the context of specific consumer segments, cultural differences, and market trends can provide valuable insights for fashion businesses to better understand and target consumer preferences, and develop effective marketing strategies.

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Faktori koji utječu na kupovinu modnih proizvoda prije i tijekom pandemije COVID-19: primjer Srbije

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Sažetak

Cilj ovog rada je analizirati čimbenike koji su najviše utjecali na potrošače pri kupnji modnih proizvoda, te čimbenike koji su potrošačima bili najvažniji tijekom pandemije COVID-19, kao i postoje li razlike između razdoblja prije pandemije i razdoblje nakon njega. Dostupna istraživanja o povezanosti pandemije i kupovnih navika potrošača te čimbenika koji utječu na kupnju proizvoda većinom su se bavila robom široke potrošnje, potaknuta inicijalnim stvaranjem zaliha higijenskog materijala i hrane, knjiga, opreme za rekreaciju i sl. Kvantitativno empirijsko istraživanje putem online ankete provedeno je na namjenskom uzorku od 1002 punoljetna ispitanika na području Srbije u razdoblju od ožujka do lipnja 2021. godine. SPSS je korišten za obradu i analizu podataka te za interpretaciju rezultata istraživanja. Uz deskriptivnu statistiku (distribucija frekvencija, srednja vrijednost, standardna devijacija) korištena je i komparativna statistika (χ^2 -test, ANOVA, t-test). Promjena odnosa prema potrošnji dovela je do uvođenja novog sustava vrijednosti potrošača pri kupnji modnih proizvoda. Razumijevanje ovih čimbenika pomoći će modnoj industriji da pronađe nove pristupe kako bi zadovoljila promijenjene kupovne navike potrošača.

Cljučne riječi: modna industrija, modni proizvodi, ponašanje potrošača, čimbenici kupnje, Covid-19 pandemija

JEL klasifikacija: D9, L67, M31, M37

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