

# Perceptions of clothing and physical appearance among young men and women from Split

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**Aim:** To assess whether young people are influenced by social and fashion trends related to body, physical appearance, and clothing, as well as to explore their understanding of fashion, styles, and trends.

**Methods:** We used a mixed methods approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The first phase of the study included a survey among a convenience sample of 200 young men and women from Split. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with nine young women.

**Results:** Most participants considered their physical appearance to be average (77.5%). More than half were satisfied with their physical appearance (59.5%), while women tended to be more preoccupied with their body, appearance, and beauty. Participants mostly prioritized the quality of their garments (77%), minimalism (69%), and their personal style (86%) rather than eye-catching cuts or statement pieces. The majority of participants stated that what they wear is not limited by the opinions of society, as well as that they do not place importance on other people's opinions (72.5%). The analysis of semi-structured interviews showed that female interviewees follow fashion trends and consider them an indispensable part of their lives. They mostly follow fashion through social media, namely because they want to follow trends, wear beautiful clothes, and improve the way they present themselves. They associate trends with transience and fitting the mold, whereas they consider style to be an expression of one's personality. Regarding their clothing, they are focused on quality, functionality, and the feel of the materials on their body, and they support the concept of 'slow fashion'.

**Conclusions:** The results from our survey point to the importance of personal style and the quality of garments, while the interviews build on these findings, as female interviewees further emphasized the importance of garment functionality and quality. They also state that they are mindful when choosing materials, as well as that they are interested in the concept of sustainable fashion. Although young people follow fashion and fashion trends, their limiting influence in their own clothing is not overemphasized.

**Keywords:** body; physical appearance; clothing; social and fashion trends

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## Introduction

The body can be viewed as a social and cultural phenomenon, and interest in it is widespread both in popular culture and in scientific and sociological research (1). Sociological analyses of the body can give new meanings to the traditional issues of the body as a source of cultural (and not just biological) diversity through which we experience the world around us (2). In modern society, greater emphasis is being put on physical appearance, which is viewed as a way of defining the body and expressing identity. In this sense, while appearance expresses how bodies are evaluated and perceived in a certain social context, it also shows the practices that an individual applies to their body to express how they experience their identity (3). Given that the clothing process includes social and individual body-oriented practices, it is important to understand the relationship between the body and clothing (4).

Fashion represents a cultural phenomenon that influences people's choice of clothing and styles over a certain period of time (5). A holistic approach to fashion can therefore provide an overview of a whole range of clothing practices, from the creation and distribution of fashion to its consumption, identity, and meaning (6). Style, meanwhile, refers to the way one expresses oneself and pairs garments (7), which is used by an individual to construct their own identity in everyday life, and thus to consciously participate in the world of fashion. Fashion as a social system is based on communication between an individual with their environment (8, 9), whereas as an autonomous system, it is expressed through the imposition of fashion trends (10, 11). In everyday life, this means that fashion takes place in an interactive process between one's personal style and the social standards pertaining to clothing or fashion trends (9). Fashion trends, which are promoted by designers, brands, individuals, and the media, represent styles that are currently popular in society (12). The fashion industry strives to successfully position and set fashion trends (11). At the same time, the construction of identity and fashion are also becoming significant aspects of personal styles (9). Although certain current issues, such as the sustainability of fashion, require a more comprehensive approach, sociological studies still focus on researching meanings attached to fashion and clothing, as well as the relationship between identity and fashion (6).

Theoretical and research insights point to the relationship between the body, fashion, and identity (3, 4, 9, 13), while gender remains embedded in the "body styles" and is reproduced through the way women and men dress (4). Given that there is a gap in the existing literature in Croatia on the subject of fashion and identity, as well as the lack of sociological empirical research, we wanted to conduct a survey on the perceptions of the body, physical appearances, and clothing of young women and men in Split. Therefore, our goals were to determine the impacts of social and fashion changes/trends on body and physical appearance, as well as on clothing style among young women and men; assess their satisfaction and preoccupation with body and physical appearance; and examine the aspects they consider important in their clothing. The second part of the research focused on understanding fashion, style, and trends pertaining to the way young women from Split dress. Although changes in physical appearance reflect broader social and cultural shifts, clothing enables the production of personal aspirations (3), and the body becomes

a characteristic determinant of identity (14). Therefore, we wished to investigate the role of fashion and the style (or trends) of clothing of young women in more detail through semi-structured interviews.

## Methods

### *Participants and research design*

We used an explanatory sequential design in our study based on two phases – the collection of quantitative data (survey) in the first phase followed by the collection of qualitative data (interviews) in the second phase. This was in order to obtain more detailed insights through qualitative analysis of interviews. We analyzed both types of data separately and subsequently interpreted them together in the discussion (15).

### *Research sample and selection of interviewees*

For the survey, we used non-probabilistic convenience sampling of young people between the ages of 18 and 34 who study or work in the city of Split. The final sample included a total of 200 participants who filled out an online survey from April 22 to May 8, 2020, either via Facebook groups or a link sent directly to students whom the first author was acquainted with and who fit the inclusion criteria. Given that quantitative data showed that certain aspects related to fashion and bodies were more prevalent in women, we selected nine young women between the ages of 22 and 30 for the interviews. The interviewees were acquaintances of the first author and did not participate in the previous quantitative research phase. The interviews were conducted between July 25 and August 18, 2020, took place outdoors in places chosen by the interviewees as the most comfortable, and lasted 35 minutes on average.

### *Questionnaire*

We surveyed our participants attitudes and opinions on their clothing and personal appearance. It was delivered through Google Forms by way of a link posted in the 'FFST', 'Sociology 2015/2016', and 'Bruno Bušić Student Dorm' Facebook groups, or forwarded by the participants. We chose these Facebook groups because their members are either young people from different faculties of the University of Split, or those who had graduated from college or dropped out, but decided to remain members in order to stay informed.

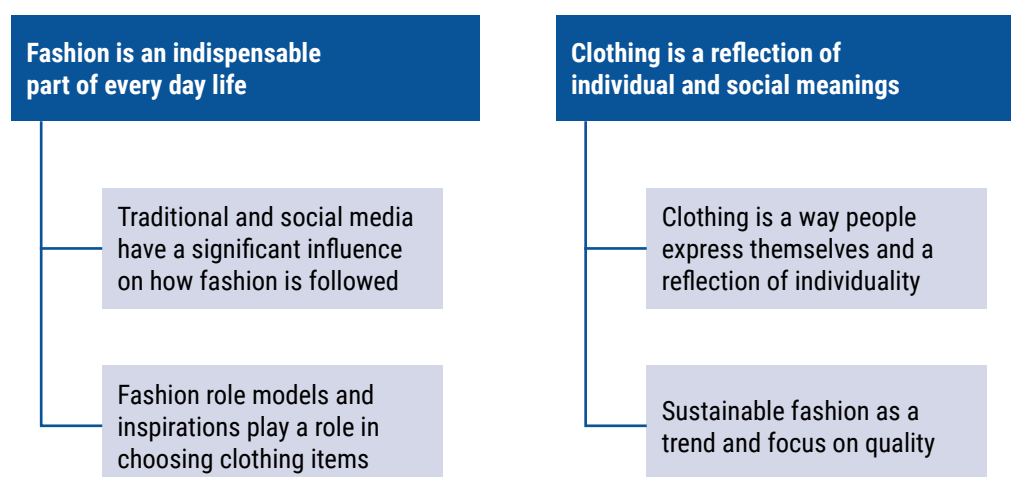
The survey comprised three sets of questions. The first collected the participants' socioeconomic characteristics (monthly income, level of education, field of work/study, and work status) and their perception of bodies and fashion. The second set of questions investigated how young people understand social changes that influence perceptions of the body and how the body is evaluated, as well as the ways men and women think of their own bodies and physical appearance. The third set of questions investigated the opinions that young people hold about fashion trends (whether they see them as something temporary and transient) and their influences, as well as their own style (the way they express them-

selves through clothing) (**Appendix 1**). Data were entered, processed, and analyzed in SPSS, version 26 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

### Interviews

The semi-structured interviews aimed at more deeply exploring the role of fashion and clothing styles and trends among young women. The first author, a graduate sociology student with prior research experience, conducted all the interviews in-person using a pre-developed protocol (**Appendix 2**), recorded them, and transcribed them manually. The protocol was revised in collaboration with the second author prior to the interviews.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews involves determining, analyzing, and presenting topics, which requires clarity of the data analysis process (16). Preliminary data coding was performed by the first author. The codes were then continuously developed and sorted into sub-topics in consultation with the second author. In this phase, the focus was broadened and placed on topics instead of codes, with the codes being formed into individual sub-topics (16). We also discussed data saturation while conducting our analysis. We present the topics and sub-topics that had emerged from the inductive-deductive coding process below (**Figure 1**), and substantiate them with quotes from the interviewees (anonymized through numbers). We did not use any qualitative computer software for data analysis.



**Figure 1.** Overview of the topics and sub-topics obtained by coding data from the conducted interviews.

### Ethical aspects

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split approved our study protocol. The ethical standards of anonymity, confidentiality of information, and voluntariness were observed when conducting the survey and during semi-structured interviews. The research participants were familiar with the purpose and goals of the research, the methods used, and the way the research was conducted, while the interviewees also consented to the conversations being recorded.

## Results

### Findings from the survey

Overall, 48.0% of the participants were men, while 52.0% were women. Most (60.0%) were 18–24 years old, while the rest were 25–29 years old (27.0%) and 30–34 years old (13.0%). Almost half (49.0%) had a monthly income of up to HRK 3,000.00 (HRK 7.51 = EUR 1), followed by the HRK 3,001.00–5,000.00 group (24.5%) and the HRK 5,001.00–7,000.00 group (14.5%). Regarding education, 38.0% had a bachelor's degree, 32.5% have completed secondary school, and 28.5% had a master's degree. At the time of the research, most of them were studying or working in the fields of social sciences (48.5%), followed by natural sciences (26.5%) or humanities (22.0%). Just under half of participants were students (48.5%), 39.5% were employed, and 12.0% were unemployed.

### Body and physical appearance

Society shows its dynamism through ideals of beauty and physical appearance that are applied with regard to different gender, age, ethnic, and other social groups. The influences of society reflected in the changes in body perception were viewed as frequent (42.5%), standardized (48.0%), functional (49.0%), applicable (49.5%), and specific with regard to gender (51.0%) (Table 1). Meanwhile, social influences on perceptions of beauty were viewed as imposed (65.0%), frequent (59.0%), fickle (54.5%), and also specific with regard to gender (51.0%) (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Participants' assessments of the impacts of social changes on body care (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Body changes                   | Disagree  | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree      |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|------------|
| Standardized                   | 20 (10.0) | 84 (42.0)                  | 96 (48.0)  |
| Frequent                       | 48 (24.0) | 67 (33.5)                  | 85 (42.5)  |
| Fickle                         | 67 (33.5) | 80 (40.0)                  | 53 (26.5)  |
| Functional                     | 30 (1.05) | 72 (36)                    | 98 (49.0)  |
| Imposed                        | 27 (13.5) | 94 (47.0)                  | 79 (39.5)  |
| Applicable                     | 18 (9.0)  | 83 (41.5)                  | 99 (49.5)  |
| Specific with regard to gender | 28 (14)   | 70 (35)                    | 102 (51.0) |

**Table 2.** Participants' assessments of the impacts of social changes on beauty (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Beauty changes                 | Disagree  | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree      |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|------------|
| Standardized                   | 29 (14.5) | 118 (59.0)                 | 53 (26.5)  |
| Frequent                       | 21 (10.5) | 61 (30.5)                  | 118 (59.0) |
| Fickle                         | 34 (17.0) | 57 (28.5)                  | 109 (54.5) |
| Functional                     | 81 (40.5) | 96 (48.0)                  | 23 (11.5)  |
| Imposed                        | 14 (7.0)  | 56 (28.0)                  | 130 (65.0) |
| Applicable                     | 29 (14.5) | 118 (59.0)                 | 53 (26.5)  |
| Specific with regard to gender | 23 (11.5) | 75 (37.5)                  | 102 (51)   |

When it comes to their own bodies, most participants expressed interest in sports (72.5%), and the least in permanent makeup (80.0%) and cosmetic procedures (65.5%) (Table 3). More than half (59.5%) were satisfied with their physical appearance, despite most perceiving it as average (77.5%). There was no statistically significant difference in the satisfaction of women and men with their bodies and physical appearance.

Table 3. Degree of attractiveness of different ways the body can be changed (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Ways                             | Not attractive at all | Neither attractive nor unattractive | Very attractive |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Diet                             | 85 (42.5)             | 69 (34.5)                           | 46 (23.0)       |
| Permanent makeup                 | 160 (80.0)            | 33 (16.5)                           | 7 (3.5)         |
| Tattoos                          | 66 (33.0)             | 66 (33.0)                           | 68 (34.0)       |
| Non-surgical cosmetic procedures | 53 (26.5)             | 68 (34.0)                           | 79 (39.5)       |
| Sports                           | 12 (6.0)              | 43 (21.5)                           | 145 (72.5)      |
| Cosmetic procedures              | 131 (65.5)            | 55 (27.5)                           | 14 (7.0)        |

The participants' needs pertaining to beauty (84.0%) and body care (71.0%) were successfully balanced with their other daily activities (Table 4), with less than one hour per day being invested in beauty (84.0%) and body care (60.0%) (Table 5). They estimated that they were sometimes preoccupied with their own physical appearance, and that they played sport for a rather great amount of time (Table 6). Women were more often preoccupied with beauty, non-surgical cosmetic procedures, makeup, and body care compared to men (Table 7).

Table 4. Participants' assessments regarding the balancing of their needs pertaining to beauty and body care with their other daily activities (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Balance achieved                            | Beauty needs | Body care needs |
|---|--------------|-----------------|
| Yes, no problem                             | 82 (41.0)    | 59 (29.5)       |
| Yes, but it depends on good time management | 86 (43.0)    | 83 (41.5)       |
| No, I don't have enough time                | 18 (9.0)     | 24 (12.0)       |
| No, I don't have such needs                 | 6 (3.0)      | 23 (11.5)       |
| I can't estimate                            | 8 (4.0)      | 11 (5.5)        |

Table 5. Participants' assessments of the time invested in their needs pertaining to beauty and body care (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Time invested | Beauty needs | Body care needs |
|---------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <1 hour       | 168 (84.0)   | 120 (60.0)      |
| 1-2 hours     | 30 (15.0)    | 72 (36.0)       |
| 2-3 hours     | 2 (1.0)      | 6 (3.0)         |
| >3 hours      | 0 (0.0)      | 2 (1.0)         |

**Table 6.** Frequency of the participants' preoccupation with their body, appearance, and beauty (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Preoccupation                                  | Never     | Rarely    | Sometimes | Often     | Always    |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| With own physical appearance                   | 30 (15.0) | 64 (32.0) | 69 (34.5) | 31 (15.5) | 6 (3.0)   |
| With following changes pertaining to beauty    | 69 (34.0) | 63 (31.5) | 37 (18.5) | 23 (11.5) | 9 (4.5)   |
| With following changes pertaining to body care | 44 (22.0) | 66 (33.0) | 47 (23.5) | 33 (16.5) | 10 (5.0)  |
| With dieting                                   | 94 (47.0) | 47 (23.5) | 48 (24.0) | 7 (3.5)   | 4 (2.0)   |
| With playing sports                            | 14 (7.0)  | 34 (17.0) | 74 (37.0) | 47 (23.5) | 31 (15.5) |
| With non-surgical cosmetic procedures          | 83 (41.5) | 48 (24.0) | 40 (20.0) | 19 (9.5)  | 10 (5.0)  |
| With using makeup                              | 76 (38.0) | 24 (12)   | 21 (10.5) | 46 (23.0) | 33 (16.5) |

**Table 7.** Differences in preoccupation with the body, appearance, and beauty between women and men (n = 200), presented as median and interquartile range\*

| Preoccupation with the body, appearance, and beauty | Women (n=104) | P†     | Men (n=96) |
|---|---------------|--------|------------|
| With own physical appearance                        | 3.00 (2–3)    | 0.630  | 3.00 (2–3) |
| With following changes pertaining to beauty         | 2.00 (1–3)    | 0.012  | 2.00 (1–3) |
| With following changes pertaining to body care      | 3.00 (2–4)    | 0.006  | 2.00 (1–3) |
| With dieting  | 2.00 (1–3)    | 0.810  | 2.00 (1–3) |
| With playing sports                                 | 3.00 (3–4)    | 0.365  | 3.00 (3–4) |
| With non-surgical cosmetic procedures               | 2.00 (2–3)    | <0.001 | 1.00 (1–2) |
| With using makeup                                   | 4.00 (3–5)    | <0.001 | 1.00 (1–1) |

\*The following answers were provided: never, rarely, sometimes, often, always. They are coded with numbers from 1 (never) to 5 (always), and their frequencies are included in the statistical analysis.

†Mann-Whitney U-test.

## Fashion and clothing

Fashion trends were perceived through influences on the standardized fashion style (uniform and accepted by society), the physical appearance of men/women, desirable physical appearance, dissatisfaction with one's own physical appearance, and the development of one's personal clothing style (Table 8). However, the participants' own fashion style was not limited by the opinions of others (72.5%).

**Table 8.** Participants' assessments of the impacts of fashion trends on physical appearance (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Impacts on physical appearance                     | Never    | Rarely    | Sometimes | Often     | Always    |
|--|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Desirable physical appearance                      | 6 (3.0)  | 22 (11.0) | 65 (32.5) | 81 (40.5) | 26 (13.0) |
| Standardized fashion style                         | 6 (3.0)  | 23 (11.5) | 71 (35.5) | 74 (37.0) | 26 (13.0) |
| Limited possibility of developing a personal style | 12 (6.0) | 38 (19.0) | 68 (34.0) | 64 (32.0) | 18 (9.0)  |
| Dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance     | 8 (4.0)  | 15 (7.5)  | 53 (26.5) | 88 (44.0) | 36 (18.0) |
| Standardized physical appearance of a man          | 9 (4.5)  | 27 (13.5) | 63 (31.5) | 76 (38.0) | 25 (12.5) |
| Standardized physical appearance of a woman        | 5 (2.5)  | 18 (9.0)  | 54 (27.0) | 84 (42.0) | 39 (19.5) |



Women and men did not differ in a statistically significant way in their assessments of the impacts of fashion trends on physical appearance. The participants did not consider fashion trends (65.5%), statement pieces (68.0%), or eye-catching cuts (75.0%) to be important when it comes to their fashion style. On the other hand, personal style (86.0%), minimalism (69.0%), and the quality of clothing (77.0%) were pointed out as important (Table 9).

Table 9. Participants' opinions regarding the aspects they consider important in their clothing style (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Aspects of own clothing style | No         | Yes        |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Fashion trends                | 131 (65.5) | 69 (34.5)  |
| Personal clothing style       | 28 (14.0)  | 172 (86)   |
| Minimalism                    | 62 (31.0)  | 138 (69.0) |
| Statement pieces              | 136 (68.0) | 64 (32.0)  |
| Eye-catching cuts             | 150 (75.0) | 50 (25.0)  |
| Quality of garments           | 46 (23.0)  | 154 (77.0) |

Women put more emphasis on their personal clothing style, minimalism, and statement pieces than men (Table 10). Clothing styles were considered to be a reflection of practicality (81.0%), aesthetics (85.0%), the wish to change one's own appearance (79.0%) and stand out (78.0%), as well as a reflection of belonging to a certain social group (68.0%). On the other hand, body modification was considered to be a reflection of belonging (65.0%), aesthetics (79.5%), wish to change one's own appearance (86.0%), and stand out (86.0%), but not a reflection of functionality/practicality (17.5%) (Table 11).

Table 10. Differences in the importance of different aspects in one's personal clothing style between women and men (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses\*

| Placing importance on   | Responses | Total (n=200) | Women (n=104) | Men (n=96) | df | $\chi^2$ | P†     |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------------|---------------|------------|----|----------|--------|
| Fashion trends          | No        | 131 (65.5)    | 72 (55.0)     | 59 (45.0)  | 1  | 1.33     | 0.248  |
|                         | Yes       | 69 (34.5)     | 32 (46.4)     | 37 (53.6)  |    |          |        |
| Personal clothing style | No        | 28 (14.0)     | 4 (14.3)      | 24 (85.7)  | 1  | 18.55    | <0.001 |
|                         | Yes       | 172 (86.0)    | 100 (58.1)    | 72 (41.9)  |    |          |        |
| Minimalism              | No        | 62 (31.0)     | 21 (33.9)     | 41 (66.1)  | 1  | 11.83    | <0.001 |
|                         | Yes       | 138 (69.0)    | 83 (60.1)     | 55 (39.9)  |    |          |        |
| Statement pieces        | No        | 136 (68.0)    | 62 (45.6)     | 74 (54.5)  | 1  | 7.00     | 0.008  |
|                         | Yes       | 64 (32.0)     | 42 (65.6)     | 22 (34.4)  |    |          |        |
| Eye-catching cuts       | No        | 150 (75.0)    | 76 (50.7)     | 74 (49.3)  | 1  | 0.42     | 0.513  |
|                         | Yes       | 50 (25.0)     | 28 (56.0)     | 22 (44.0)  |    |          |        |
| Quality of garments     | No        | 46 (23.0)     | 22 (47.8)     | 24 (52.2)  | 1  | 0.41     | 0.518  |
|                         | Yes       | 154 (77.0)    | 82 (53.4)     | 72 (46.8)  |    |          |        |

\*df – degrees of freedom.  
† $\chi^2$  test.



**Table 11.** Participants' opinions on clothing and body modifications (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses

| Reflection of                       | Clothing    |            | Modifications |            |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|------------|---------------|------------|
|                                     | No          | Yes        | No            | Yes        |
| Functionality/practicality          | 38 (19.0)   | 162 (81.0) | 165 (82.5)    | 35 (17.5)  |
| Aesthetic needs                     | 30 (15.0)   | 170 (85.0) | 41 (20.5)     | 159 (79.5) |
| Wish to change one's appearance     | 41 (21.0)   | 158 (79.0) | 28 (14.0)     | 172 (86.0) |
| Wish to stand out                   | 44 (22.0)   | 156 (78.0) | 28 (14.0)     | 172 (86.0) |
| Belonging to a certain social group | 64 (32.0)   | 136 (68.0) | 70 (35.0)     | 130 (65.0) |
| Masculinity                         | 54 (27.0)   | 146 (73.0) | 95 (47.5)     | 105 (52.5) |
| Femininity                          | 39 (19.5.0) | 161 (80.5) | 87 (43.5)     | 113 (56.5) |

Men viewed clothing styles as a reflection of functionality and practicality, whereas women viewed them as a reflection of the wish to change one's appearance (**Table 12**). Women and men did not differ in a statistically significant way when it came to their opinions on body modifications.

**Table 12.** Differences in opinions regarding fashion choices between women and men (n = 200), presented as n (%) of responses\*

| Reflection of                       | Responses | Total (n = 200) | Women (n = 104) | Men (n = 96) | df | $\chi^2$ | P†    |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|----|----------|-------|
| Functionality/practicality          | No        | 38 (19.0)       | 27 (71.1)       | 11 (28.9)    | 1  | 6.82     | 0.009 |
|                                     | Yes       | 162 (81.0)      | 77 (47.5)       | 85 (52.5)    |    |          |       |
| Aesthetic needs                     | No        | 30 (15.0)       | 14 (46.7)       | 16 (53.3)    | 1  | 0.40     | 0.526 |
|                                     | Yes       | 170 (85.0)      | 90 (52.9)       | 80 (47.1)    |    |          |       |
| Wish to change one's appearance‡    | No        | 41 (20.6)       | 15 (36.6)       | 26 (63.4)    | 1  | 4.76     | 0.029 |
|                                     | Yes       | 158 (79.4)      | 88 (55.7)       | 70 (44.3)    |    |          |       |
| Wish to stand out                   | No        | 44 (22.0)       | 20 (45.5)       | 24 (54.5)    | 1  | 0.96     | 0.325 |
|                                     | Yes       | 156 (78.0)      | 84 (53.8)       | 72 (46.2)    |    |          |       |
| Belonging to a certain social group | No        | 64 (32.0)       | 34 (53.1)       | 30 (46.9)    | 1  | 0.04     | 0.827 |
|                                     | Yes       | 136 (68.0)      | 70 (51.5)       | 66 (48.5)    |    |          |       |
| Masculinity‡                        | No        | 53 (26.6)       | 33 (62.3)       | 20 (37.7)    | 1  | 3.193    | 0.074 |
|                                     | Yes       | 146 (73.4)      | 70 (47.9)       | 76 (52.1)    |    |          |       |
| Femininity                          | No        | 39 (19.5)       | 23 (59.0)       | 16 (41.0)    | 1  | 0.94     | 0.331 |
|                                     | Yes       | 161 (80.5)      | 81 (50.3)       | 80 (49.7)    |    |          |       |

\*df – degrees of freedom

† $\chi^2$ test.

‡One of the participants did not provide an answer for these variables.

### Findings from the interviews

In order to better understand fashion, style, and trends pertaining to young women's clothing, two key topics emerged from the analysis of the conducted interviews (**Figure 1**). The first topic shows that fashion is an indispensable part of everyday life for young women; traditional and social media significantly influence how it is followed, and fashion icons

and inspirations play a role in the selection of clothing items. The second topic shows that clothing reflects individual and social meanings, as well as the way one expresses oneself and young women's personal style. It also shows that social changes and trends affect how young women understand fashion.

### Fashion is an indispensable part of everyday life

The first topic describes the role of fashion in everyday life, which was evident in the way the interviewees place importance on beautiful clothing, fashion trends, and the way they presented themselves. However, they were not overly preoccupied with fashion, considering that they tended to associate their interests in it more with their given circumstances, i.e. their own desire to buy a certain item of clothing or their intention to spend money on what they like.

According to our participants, fashion and various fashion contents are most often followed through fashion sites or online shopping apps, with social media having a significant influence on them. They find inspiration in fashion trends and certain people when it comes to clothing and choosing clothes, and their fashion role models are famous movie stars, fashionistas, and social media influencers.

#### *A) Traditional and social media have a significant influence on how fashion is followed*

Fashion is followed in different ways, but mostly through social media such as Instagram or Facebook. The interviewees mostly followed fashion sites (Fashion.hr, Cromoda.com, Zadepna.hr) and the aforementioned social media or used shopping apps (Zara, Mango, Asos, H&M). Some interviewees also followed fashion by observing the people they meet on the street.

(...) I mostly follow fashion by looking around me on the street. I mostly find inspiration in everyday life, from the people I meet, as well as through the shows and movies I watch. (S2)

(...) and so, I follow it by checking out Instagram. I occasionally also check out online fashion magazines. (S4)

Well, the way I follow fashion is by seeing if something catches my attention while I'm walking on the street or on social media (...). (S5)

Mostly on Instagram profiles or some fashion sites. (S9)

The interviewees who used shopping apps checked the availability of clothing items before going to the store or order directly through them.

I check what is available in stores via apps, then I go to those stores to try it on, and if it suits me, I just buy it. (S3)

Yes, I always order from the app. (S4)

It depends on my mood, but most of the time, I find clothes via apps and then go to the store to try them on. (S9)

The interviewees followed fashion mainly because of their desire to dress and present themselves well, own beautiful things, and because they liked to follow trends. Some consider fashion to be an essential part of their everyday life.

As for fashion, I follow it, I see it as a representation and expression of my identity (...). (S1)

Well yeah, I follow it, I believe that fashion is part of everyday life. (S2)

I like to dress nicely, I like to follow trends (...). (S4)

Well, I like to follow trends, I like to wear and try new things (...). (S7)

I also like to express myself in that way, so to speak. (...) I usually find ideas on a daily basis. (S8)

Some interviewees showed an interest in fashion and clothes on a daily basis. While they generally did not believe that they are preoccupied with fashion, and their interest in fashion often stemmed from the desire to buy certain items of clothing or spend money on clothes. A few of them also associated their interest in fashion with following fashion content on social media; however, even they did so purposefully.

Well, as I said, I personally can't say that I'm preoccupied with it, in the sense that I'm focused on it and that I'm looking for sources of some kind of fashion inspiration, but I'm inspired literally by what I see around me, what I'm surrounded by (...). (S2)

Well, I'm not, I mean it depends, if I decide that tomorrow I'm going to go shopping, I visit some sites and read a little, and then if I like something, I'll intentionally go to try it on. (S3)

Well, yes, I check something out a couple of times a week. I'm often on Instagram, so I come across that (...). (S4)

I would say that, for a woman, I am not at all preoccupied with fashion, although I have to admit that lately, I spend more money on certain items that I like, which wasn't the case before (...). (S5)

I can't say that I'm too preoccupied, but I like to wear nice clothes, I like to buy new things when I feel like it, like once a month, or less often, I feel like I want to buy everything I like (...). (S7)

#### *B) Fashion role models and inspirations play a role in choosing clothing items*

Most interviewees found their inspiration in various ways, but most often through social media such as Instagram, which is connected to fashion trends, whether through general fashion content or specific individuals. Some, however, were inspired by passers-by on the street, as well as movies or shows, magazines, and shopping apps, where they can see ready-made outfits when choosing their clothes.

Well, to be honest, first, when it comes to social media, I don't know, I think Zara is the number one thing currently, for all women and even for men. (S1)

Well, I would say it's Instagram. I rarely flip through fashion magazines, and I mostly do it on the beach. But I use social media daily. (S5)

Instagram is a great inspiration, I mostly find my inspiration there. (S6)

I have store apps, for example Asos and Zara. Most often, I find my inspiration there because they already have ready-made combinations with models, so I take ideas from there. (S9)

Although the interviewees also found fashion role models among people close to them, they mostly mentioned famous fashionistas, movie stars, or social media influencers who they found interesting or who had a certain style they like. Fashion role models were mostly found among foreign fashion icons and influencers, and somewhat less frequently among currently popular Croatian influencers.

(...) but if I really have to choose a specific person, I don't really know, but let's say I really like Audrey Hepburn's style, she is an eternal icon in everyone's mind and you can't go wrong with her. I don't know, Coco Chanel and that whole era between the two world wars is like, very interesting and inspiring to me. (S2)

Paula Sikirić, she has that alternative style and I like that about her, that inspires me. (S4)

Well, when I was younger I used to follow Sonja Kovač for a while, haha. Lately, I find Victoria Bonya interesting. I find Maja Malnar interesting as well. (S5)

Bianca Jagger, for example, is a great fashion role model for me, with her big hats, clean style, blazers, suits, and so on. (S6)

### Clothing is a reflection of individual and social meanings

The second main topic described the individual and social meanings attributed to fashion and expressed by the interviewees through the way they dress. Our participants saw clothing as an expression of individuality and considered it to be a way to express one's self by adapting fashion trends to their personal clothing style, with their current mood also playing an important role, it is also a reflection of social trends which influence how young women understand fashion. Although they care about aesthetics, they focus more on the functionality of clothes and the quality of products and prefer cotton over synthetic materials. They are familiar with the concept of 'slow fashion', but point out the unavailability of such brands in Croatia, difficulties with online shopping, and unaffordable prices.

#### A) Clothing is a way people express themselves and a reflection of individuality

The interviewees focused on individuality in their approach to clothing and defined their clothing styles differently. They mainly saw clothing as a way to express themselves, but they also tried to incorporate fashion trends into their style by using different details and accessories.

(...) that classic clothing style, I can complement it with some details that won't affect my style that much, I'm not that into fast fashion. (S1)

Well, my personal style leans more towards vintage. I like to mix that vintage style with the modern one, so to speak, but umm, it's mostly vintage, I like old-fashioned clothes and stuff like that. But at the same time, I like to follow trends. (S3)

I like to follow trends sometimes, but I don't want to buy a shirt that doesn't feel like me. I don't want to buy a shirt because it's trendy, I want to buy something that I really like, and I want it to be in line with my style. (S4)

For me, it is definitely more a reflection of my personality because I like to buy different things that not everyone has, precisely because not everyone has them. (S7)

I think it's definitely a reflection of my personality. (S9)

However, some interviewees believed that they expressed themselves in other ways, so when it came to clothing, they selected what was the most appropriate for the occasion and most trendy. However, even then, they tried to dress in a way that reflected their personality:

All in all, I would say that when it comes to clothing, I believe that it is best to wear neutral, classic, timeless clothes that can be worn for different events and situations, and I kind of express my style with accessories, always with some high-end products that of course, last for a longer time and that I take care of, and the rest just doesn't matter. (S5)

I would maybe say both, even though it's hard to admit because my mom and everyone else always say that you shouldn't just fit the mold, but sometimes it's hard not to when you have all these styles that are imposed on you. Let's say that I try to have my own style in all of that, I try to find something among what is now new and popular that I can fit into my style. (S6)

The interviewees attached sentimental value to certain accessories, mostly to jewelry they associated with certain people. Sometimes, such a value was also attached to more expensive garments that they bought themselves.

Yes, you see this little ring of mine, haha, it was my grandmother's, then my mother's, and now it's mine. (S3)

For example, my first bag that was expensive, as well as my first dress that was expensive, etc. (S5)

Just old jewelry. Jewelry is something sentimental, something that is passed down. (S6)

I have some necklaces, bracelets, and similar things that I associate with certain people and events that are very dear to me. (S8)

There are also purses that I am very attached to, especially if they were expensive, haha. (S9)

Mood can be an important aspect of clothing, and the interviewees express it in different ways. While they tried to improve their (bad) mood with their clothing, with some placing importance on comfort and practicality on such occasions, others preferred mixing and matching clothes when they were in a better mood.

There are days when I don't feel like doing anything, I'm tired, I wake up and I just put something on and that's it, as long as it's comfortable. (S3)

Well, for example, when I'm really in a bad mood and I make plans to go somewhere, I counter the bad mood and dress nicely, to cheer myself up. (S4)

Yes, mostly when I feel really, really bad, then I do the exact opposite. I put on even more makeup and put even more effort into dressing, and that helps me. (S5)

Well, yes, it's all connected, when I'm really in the mood to play around with fashion, you can immediately tell. Then I have, I don't know, an outfit that is a little different, I try to find jewelry that goes with it, and I match my shoes and bag, which I normally don't have time for, haha. (S2)

(...) when you're in a good mood, then yeah, you'll stop and put some thought into it, you'll simply be happier, you will add some color or something like that. You will try harder and put on a little more makeup. (S6)

### *B) Sustainable fashion as a trend and focus on quality*

The interviewees mostly highlighted the functionality and the comfort of their clothes as important, but did not deny the relevance of the aesthetics of their clothes, especially when it came to formal occasions.

I focus more on functionality, and that's why I prefer the classic style of clothing because I like to feel good regardless (...). (S1)

When I was younger, how I looked was perhaps the most important thing, and how the clothes fit me. Now I really care about comfort and the quality of clothes. (S2)

Well, it depends on the occasion, but I mostly focus on functionality. For example, if there is a special occasion, like someone's wedding. I'm usually not too fond of high heels and stuff, or tight dresses, and I always care more about aesthetics. (S3)

The first thing that attracts me is definitely the aesthetics, so at first, aesthetics is number one. (S6)

I have hundreds of high heels that I really can't even walk in, haha, because the heels are too tall and they are really uncomfortable, but they go well with the dresses I plan to wear, or with my purse or nails. (S7)

The interviewees cared about the materials they choose, focusing on the quality and feel of the material on their bodies, choosing cotton, and avoiding synthetic materials or real fur and leather.

So I've been very mindful since I started going to the shops, of course, I always went with my mom who has a classic style and who would always say: 'Please check if it's 100% cotton, don't buy viscose under any circumstances'. (S1)

Well yeah, more and more over the years, as I said, probably because I now pay attention to the quality and functionality of a garment, and what perhaps bothers me about today's commercial clothing sellers is precisely the lack of quality, a lot of synthetic and similar materials that feel less than pleasant on the body (...). (S2)

I would say that I definitely avoid real fur, leather, and so on. (S5)

(...) you get to a certain stage where you want to buy quality clothes, you don't want to buy something made of polyester, but you want to avoid it as much as possible. I want to buy cotton, I'm trying to focus on it, and now I definitely pay more attention to all that. (S6)

The interviewees were mostly familiar with the concept of 'slow fashion' and its core principles, such as sustainable development, product quality, humane working conditions, and environmentally-friendly production. However, they noticed that such brands were not available in Croatia, that they had to wait for a long time if they order them online, and that their prices were unaffordable. They also listed some concrete examples that they believed support this concept.

When it comes to slow fashion, the first thing that came to my mind was the company Patagonia, an American company. From the very beginning, they have been one of the most well-known companies that care about sustainable growth. They have quite expensive but high-quality products based on organic cotton, and their entire business model is based on sustainable growth. (S1)

I have, and I definitely think that it's a great thing and a great idea, and I would say that it's what the majority of people want, something that you know is made of good and quality material, in a good way and under humane conditions, something that doesn't pollute the environment and such things, that is something that, in an ideal world, everyone would want, but I am aware that the concept of slow fashion is hardly sustainable when compared to the existing commercial concept. (S2)

I know that they are working on preserving the environment and take care of their workers, I'm familiar with that and I know about Guliver, which always highlights that it is a 100% Croatian product, they actually say that in their advertisements. (S7)

Yes, I have heard of that concept, however, those are small stores where the prices are quite unaffordable, i.e. much higher than those in average stores, so I think they are still too expensive. (S8)

## Discussion

In a world where appearance is an important way in which we present ourselves, caring about it provides a sense of reflexivity and enables adaptation to rapid social and economic transformations. It also involves reflection on what is achievable and applicable to one's own physical appearance (7). The young people who participated in our survey were not frequently preoccupied with their physical appearance. The women and men in our sample were equally satisfied with their physical appearance, but the former were more active when it comes to following changes pertaining to beauty and body care. These young people considered changes pertaining to body care to be mostly functional and ap-



plicable, whereas they saw changes pertaining to beauty as fickle and imposed. They were frequently met with both said aspects, as well as with the division according to gender. When it came to their own bodies, our participants found sports activities and body modifications such as tattoos or non-surgical cosmetic procedures more attractive than surgical cosmetic procedures. They considered clothing to be a reflection of different needs (functional, aesthetic, etc.) and desires (to belong, stand out, or change one's appearance). Similarly, they also saw body modifications as a reflection of various aesthetic needs, the desire for change, to belong and/or to stand out, etc., but they do not see them as functional or practical. Compared to men who associated clothing with functional and practical needs, the young women in our sample associated clothing with needs for changes in appearance.

Braizaz (17) points out that, in a society where beauty standards constrain dressing practices, appearance provides women with a way of expressing themselves (whether or not they thereby accept these standards). Our survey findings showed that young people do not put as much emphasis on fashion trends as they do on personal style when it comes to clothing. The women in our interviews, meanwhile, followed fashion trends through social media and fashion sites. These findings are in line with prior research which showed that women follow fashion trends more than men, as well as that websites are the most frequent source of information on fashion and fashion trends (18). Other studies also showed that women are more influenced by the media than men, but they are also more fashion-conscious, which is reflected in their clothing and appearance (19). It is also worth noting that, by choosing how to dress, women adapt to gender-based beauty standards or distance themselves from them, so clothing is either way a central in the process of identity building for women (17). This can explain the fact that, although we observed no differences between women and men in satisfaction with their body and physical appearance, as well as in assessing the importance of fashion trends in their own style of clothing, women tended to be more preoccupied with their own body, appearance, and beauty compared to men. The fashion world leads to the widespread following of fashion trends in modern society (7), which can create consumer identities that can be found in the ever-changing dressing styles (9). However, everyday fashion is also an interactive process where individuals consciously communicate through their clothing (9), which can also be seen from some of our findings. The role played by various 'fashion authorities' (the media, certain persons, etc.) in the everyday life of young people also determines their attitude towards fashion. However, although the young people in our study followed fashion and fashion trends, their influences on clothing styles were proven to be mostly inspirational. This would suggest that their own clothing style is mostly complemented by the fashion trends.

According to young people in our study, fashion trends often influence the desirable and standardized physical appearance and one's dissatisfaction with physical appearance. They believe that fashion trends make it impossible for one to develop a personal style, although they do not consider themselves to be limited by society when it comes to their personal styles. The success of fashion trends depends on how society interprets them, with modern youth being the ones who decide how long such trends will last given their proclivity for shopping and experimenting (9). Yet as personal identity and its develop-



ment have been gaining importance (9), with the body having a key role in the process (14), the youth began using fashion as a way to express themselves, leading to their choice of clothing style being mainly influenced by certain degrees of freedom between social restrictions and the desire for authenticity (13). Our survey results show that women put more emphasis on their personal clothing style than men. According to Vingilyte and Khadaroo (20) women perceive personal clothing style as a representation and expression of their authentic (knowing themselves, feeling comfortable, etc.), ideal (seeking self-actualization), and creative (resisting to social pressure) selves. Although the interviewed women defined their clothing style in different ways, they perceived clothing as a way to express oneself. In a world of transient short-term fashion trends, they aim to hold on to a certain degree of individuality.

In modern society, young people try to interpret fashion trends and adopt a clothing style that matches their values and personality (9). However, clothing items are also connected to aesthetics, which attracts the youth, so the 'aesthetic experience' proved to be important as well when it comes to clothing and accepting fashion trends. Communication through fashion leads to the expression of emotional experiences through clothing and garments even though trends change (9). That was confirmed by our interviewees, who highlighted functionality, comfort, and the quality of products as important, with some emphasizing the importance of the aesthetics of clothing and physical appearance as well. Some research shows that young people prefer comfort and are not inclined to experiment when it comes to changes in their clothing style (18). In this context, we observed that the young people in our study expressed different needs and desires with their clothing, which do not have to be mutually exclusive. Although they strived to maintain individuality in their clothing styles while focusing on quality and functionality, they considered clothing styles to be a reflection of aesthetic needs or desires for changes in physical appearance. In other words, clothing represents one's own desires with regard to their body and physical appearance.

Given the limitations of our study (the use of convenience sampling) and validity issues (selection of new interviewees in the qualitative phase), we cannot offer general conclusions, but the results point to some interesting aspects of the youth's attitudes towards fashion. It is clear that the interviewees are aware of sustainability in fashion, as evident from their knowledge of the approach during the interviews (from production methods and materials used to the impacts on the environment, etc.). Sustainable fashion also encompasses the concept of 'slow fashion', a relatively new movement in the industry that the interviewees have heard of, although only in the context of the importance of quality materials and knowing the term. What should be considered here is that our sample includes young women and men, more than half of whom have higher education, meaning that this strata of the population might be more critical toward fashion industry. However, as the participants who filled out the questionnaire did not participate in interviews, we cannot conclude that awareness of sustainability in fashion and familiarity with the concept of 'slow fashion' is reflected in their everyday clothing practices among young people.

As fashion is associated with appearance and women, there has not been much academic interest in the subject (Kawamura, according to Rukhadze (18)). Despite this, understand-

ing fashion is important in the analysis of various social issues (18), so this paper not only contributes empirically to existing knowledge in the sociology of fashion, the sociology of the body, and the sociology of youth, but also provides an incentive for further research. The scientific and practical interest of future research could involve expanding the results regarding sustainable growth while focusing on the familiarity with and application of 'slow fashion when choosing what to wear. It would be interesting to define the extent of the youth's awareness of ecological issues and whether they are able to recognize different materials when choosing and buying garments. This could contribute to the development of new empirical and theoretical knowledge and potential solutions pertaining to the balance between economic and environmental goals in the fashion industry. However, it is also necessary to raise people's awareness of recycling in fashion and expand their knowledge regarding responsible consumption in society. Thus, further empirical studies could also focus on finding out whether there are significant changes in the youth's understanding of fashion compared to our results. Despite the recognized external influences and rapid changes in fashion trends, young people show a certain level of self-awareness when it comes to their style. Therefore, our findings can serve as the basis for future research and analyses of the role that young people play in contemporary social and environmental matters, which would clarify whether sustainable fashion is just one of the trends expected to be accepted by young people, or whether they truly aspire to adhere to it and to a more mindful clothing style.

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