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ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF LABOR EXPLOITATION PRACTICES WITHIN THE FASHION INDUSTRY ON CONSUMER LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the impact of employee exploitation in the fashion industry on consumer loyalty, considering the growing interest in ethical and sustainable practices. The study analyzes the relationship between working conditions and purchasing intention. Through quantitative market research, the authors found that although most consumers are aware of the reality of employee exploitation and reject non-transparent companies, only a fraction of them responsibly verify their sources of information, which highlights the need for a more proactive behavior in supporting ethical organizations within the fashion industry. Nevertheless, the present study highlights the importance of a responsible approach in the sector, with direct implications for consumer perception and behavior.
KEYWORDS: fashion industry, purchase decision, consumer behavior, labor exploitation practices, consumer ethics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Taking into account the current context, it can be observed that organizations are under great pressure from both communities and governmental organizations to carry out their activities with as little environmental impact as possible, in an attempt to reduce or even suppress climate crises, by promoting a sustainable lifestyle. According to European Union statistics, the textile manufacturing sector ranks sixth [1] regarding the greenhouse gas emissions it generates, and the rise of the fast fashion industry, marked by a high global competition, emphasizes the need for a global change to protect the planet.

But not only the environment is affected by the immoral and unsustainable practices of fashion organizations, these practices also have a substantial impact on the employees working in this sector. In many emerging countries, garment workers often have to endure poor working conditions for very low wages [2], a fact confirmed by the 2023 report of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) on the global state of workers' rights, which analyzed employees' rights, such as freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, and the right to strike, rights and freedoms that have also been violated in developed countries.

Cases of exploitation and abuse of workers within the fashion industry have been frequently reported over the past few decades, starting with the tragedy in Bangladesh in 2013, where inadequate safety conditions in a textile factory contributed to the death of over 1,000 workers [3], and more recently, the release of the documentary Brandy Hellville & The Cult of Fast Fashion in 2024, which revealed the poor conditions of workers in the United States, as well as their exploitation and overwork, are just a few examples of violations of fundamental human rights.

The author Sven Beckert states: "our journey through the empire of cotton has shown that civilization and barbarity are linked at the hip" [4], thereby emphasizing the fact that from the beginning, the garment industry has relied on immoral methods and procedures, some of which are also found in today's business practices. In this entire vicious cycle it is important to analyze how customers relate to these incidents: are they informed about the labor practices of the companies they buy from? Is their purchase decision affected or not?

Starting from the presented context, it can be observed the necessity and actuality of the study, the analysis of the existing literature becoming relevant, as well as conducting a more profound research of the presented phenomenon.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact that the exploitation of employees within the fashion industry has on consumer loyalty and on their future purchase intention.

Starting from the stated purpose, the proposed objectives are:

- O1: Carrying out an analysis of the phenomenon of the exploitation of employees in the fashion industry on a global and european level.
- O2: Identifying the factors that influence consumer loyalty and purchase intention.
- O3: Conducting a market research to identify consumers' opinions on the impact of employee exploitation on consumer loyalty.

The main hypothesis of the research is that the exploitation of workers in the fashion industry has a negative impact on consumer loyalty.

Finally, the significant contribution of this research lies on identifying the major impact that the exploitation of employees in the fashion industry has on consumer loyalty.

Considering the previously mentioned premises, this paper is structured into four sections. After the literature review, the research method is presented, followed by the research results, while the final section describes the conclusions and recommendations of the study, including the analysis's limitations and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Globalization and the fashion industry at global and European level

For several decades, there has been a noticeable global shift with production units moving from developed countries to emerging ones, as globalization has radically changed the nature of the global textile trade [5]. With the main goal of reducing production costs by employing cheaper labor compared to that in the country of origin, this process has also caused problems by increasing supply chain complexity and reducing transparency [6], these practices having negative effects not only globally, but also locally, affecting the environment, especially the worker communities.

According to the European Union Agency for Human Rights, the definition of employee exploitation can take the following forms: working every day of the week for a salary paid at irregular intervals or not at all, living in uncomfortable conditions, substandard, isolated from the rest of the community, or working without a contract, as well as being permanently threatened with expulsion [7], while the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary (DEX) defines exploitation as the appropriation without equivalent of a part of the work of direct producers labour by those who own the means of production [8]. Both definitions emphasize the same thing, that employees are having their rights violated by the companies they work for, and the freedoms they should normally have are being revoked. Globally, the United Nations established the International Labour Organization (ILO), whose purpose is to create a legal framework through the adoption of various conventions and to promote decent working conditions for employees around the world [9]. At the European Union level, there are also several directives in force, such as Directive 2003/88/EC [10], which refers to working time, or Directive 2019/1152 [11], which focuses on ensuring transparent and predictable working conditions for employees. Non-compliance can lead to penalties, ranging from fines, business suspension, or even imprisonment for the owners of those organizations.

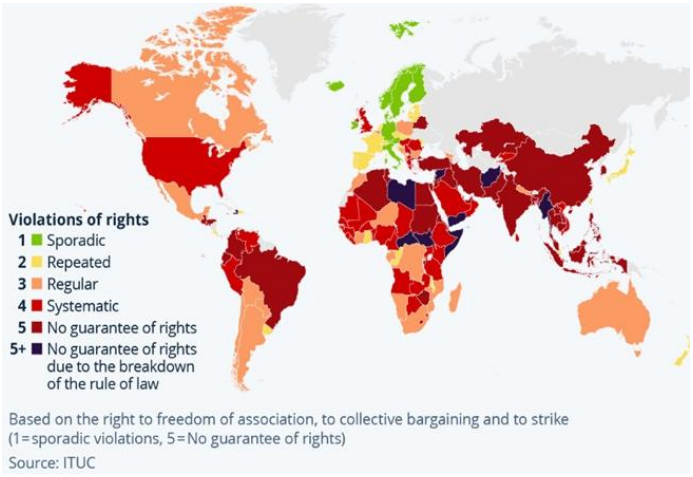

Figure 1. The global state of workers' rights in 2023

As can be seen in fig. 1, the countries that violate the regulations on employee freedoms are less often located on the European continent, which indicates a high, above average level of organizations that fully respect their employees and their fundamental rights, offering them adequate working conditions. However, the global situation can be worrying, with the most affected areas being found in the South Asia, as well as in the majority of the African continent. Therefore, human rights violations are common in all these areas, with employees being denied the right to associate and form unions against the management of the organizations that exploit them, to negotiate more favorable working conditions or even to iniate strikes.

Regarding the worldwide textile industry in 2019, the countries with the lowest wages paid by textile production companies to their employees (fig. 2) were mainly from Asia, although the first two places, with a difference of only 25 euros [2], are

Ethiopia and Madagascar, both of which are African countries. Despite the fact that these countries are developing and investments are made annually to increase the production capacity of textile companies in those areas, „the reality is that many Ethiopian garment workers cannot support their families" [2]. This reflects the interest of major companies to increase their turnover and satisfy the needs of a large number of consumers, without trying to improve the production capacities that for decades have worked on the same principles, still neglecting the needs of employees.

Even China, which remains the world's largest exporter of garments [2], and which ranks eighth worldwide in terms of wage levels, only compensates in a small amount the efforts of workers in this sector, indicating that success in the textile industry, at least in the short and medium term, does not lie in providing decent working conditions or fair remuneration to employees, but rather is based on cost-cutting procedures, and thus the prices of final goods, to encourage as many fashion brands as possible to use the services offered by them.

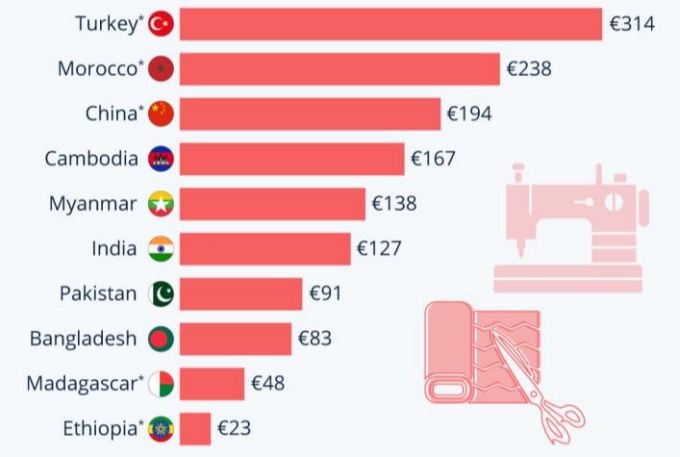

Figure 2. Global ranking of countries offering the lowest wages in the garment industry in 2020

According to the data provided by the same source [2], regarding the situation of the fashion industry within the European Union, Italy ranks the first in terms of the workforce, where 24% of the population is employed in this sector, and the exports of textile products represent 30% of the total exports, all these activities ultimately generating 30% of the total turnover across all industries. In Romania, 8% of employees work in the fashion industry, a sector that generates 3% of the country's total turnover.

Returning to the fashion industry in Italy, it can easily be seen that it is truly successful, considering the ratio between the level of employees and the turnover it generates. Correlating this information with the data regarding respecting people's rights in the fashion industry, and represented in fig. 1, where Italy is among the few countries marked with the green color, which represents the fact that isolated cases of exploitation of employees are encountered, it can be stated that respecting employees' rights has a positive trend in relation to the company's financial situation.

More specifically, the fact that the Italian workers in the textile factories are treated properly and are not exploited in any way by their employers, contributes to a high productivity of the labor force, which ultimately results in a substantial profit at the end of the period, dispelling the myth still followed by many textile companies, according to which only by applying subjugation procedures on employees, can one achieve increased productivity, and thus high financial performances.

The exploitation of employees within the fashion industry is not a completely new case, this phenomenon has been intensifying ever since the beginnings of the cultivation of cotton. However, the extreme cases that have been presented to consumers have created a desire to reduce or even stop the exploitation that thousands of people worldwide suffer. Despite the existence of a well-structured regulation, both globally and at the European level, many cases of exploitation remain unpunished, which is why transparency and proper auditing of production factories are some of the most valuable methods to combat this phenomenon. Also, the situation of the textile industry in Italy has shown that high performance can be achieved by avoiding immoral practices and respecting the fundamental rights of people, which gives hope to future generations in a better world, guided by ethical principles.

2.2 The dynamics of influential factors on consumer loyalty

Customer satisfaction is a crucial process that organizations of all sizes and across all industries have as a primary goal in their relationship with consumers, because it generates a mutually beneficial dynamic that ultimately reflects back on the company, and consists in maintaining a connection with the company and repeating the purchase of new products launched by it in the future [12].

Consumer behavior and their intention to purchase products and services are influenced by both internal and external factors. These factors can be classified based on a multitude of defining characteristics, however, according to Philip Kotler the buying behavior of a consumer is influenced by cultural,

social and personal factors [13], of which he considers cultural factors to be the most important, while other studies mention the importance of external environmental factors in influencing the buying behavior of consumers [14].

Cultural factors include the environment in which consumers were brought up, the values, attitudes, and behaviors transmitted through the family circle, all of which are strongly influenced by the culture of the country, thus revealing the strong impact that culture has on consumer behavior.

Social factors consist in the existence of reference groups, defined more precisely as the totality of people who directly or indirectly influence the behavior of an individual. In the category of reference groups are included aspiration groups, those circle people seek to join, as well as opinion leaders, defined as people who offer advice or information about a certain product or category of products. These leaders can be easily identified as today's celebrities or influencers, who promote various products and services through online platforms and who are ultimately paid for their advertising activities. Despite this type of contract between a company and an influencer, as well as the general public's recognition of this business model, followers and fans on social media trust their influencer, who finds it easier to promote various products or services and ensure a high return on investment [15], which is why more and more organizations turn to influencers for promotional services.

The **personal factors** is the last factor previously mentioned which affects the behavior of consumers, varying according to age, occupation and financial condition. These factors may overlap with psychological factors, recalling Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory [16]. Therefore, regarding purchases and the shopping experience, individuals initially fulfill their basic, fundamental needs, and as they develop personally and materially, their personal needs will also evolve, while certain stimuli will cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction, depending on each individual.

By analyzing these factors, it can be concluded that consumer behavior represents a complex amalgam of attitudes, values, opinions, and highly individualized behaviors. However, by recognizing these factors and creating distinct behavior categories based on different aspects such as culture, age, or general preferences, organizations try to attract potential customers through various campaigns or, alternatively, to persuade them to complete a purchase from them.

2.3 Consumer loyalty in the digital age

Nowadays, fashion brands often use social media to promote their products and new collections, relying on celebrities and influencers to capture consumers' attention and convince them to buy those clothing items. To do this, companies need to be convincing to customers and be credible, so that they encourage and sustain the purchasing process all the way through.

Credibility is considered to be one of the greatest assets of an organization, as it influences consumer loyalty, opinions, attitudes, beliefs and purchasing decisions [17], this being promoted through various platforms by the company itself. Despite this fact, consumers have a limited insight into the organizational activities, which is limited to the information that companies disclose voluntarily, usually within the framework of their corporate social responsibility campaigns, which is also a reason why at the time of purchase, consumers perceive less risk and gather less information during the decision-making process [18], a process that in reality has serious implications on how fashion organizations manage to exploit their employees without being caught.

According to the latest report on the transparency index of organizations operating within the textile field, Puma ranked first in 2024, with a total transparency score of 75% [19], followed closely by a difference of only 1% by the luxury brand Gucci. The leading organization within the fast fashion category is H&M, which achieved a score of 61% [19]. It is worth noting that luxury brands, such as Hermès, Balenciaga or Saint Laurent, did not exceed the critical threshold of 50%, highlighting the fact that transparency within the fashion sector does not take into account the company's market segment, since both fast fashion companies and large fashion houses deliberately withhold essential information regarding the workforce employed or the working conditions.

According to the non-governmental organization Fashion Revolution, responsible for launching the transparency index to the market, the opacity of fashion organizations allows unsafe working conditions, as well as exploitation and environmental degradation to thrive [20], thus demonstrating the vulnerability that customers may face in their relationship with the brands they purchase from, when fashion companies choose not

to disclose relevant information about their internal operations.

Another psychological factor that, along with credibility, strongly influences consumer loyalty and behavior in the digital age, is suggestively named fear of missing out, or FOMO for short, and refers to a strong desire to stay constantly connected to what others are doing [17]. Fashion companies once again rely on partnerships with various influencers to evoke a sense of anxiety through social media campaigns, which are designed to encourage customers to complete the purchase process as quickly as possible in order to keep up with the latest trends. However, inducing this kind of feeling in consumers also implies that they are less likely to pay close attention to whether the organization is aligned with their own moral values, they will not thoroughly research into the organization's internal procedures, and they will not find out whether it treats its employees fairly.

Given that several studies have suggested that social media activity has a positive influence on purchase intention [17], some organizations use FOMO syndrome and online social platforms to manipulate people who develop trust in them, in order to secure economic benefits that result from completed customer transactions.

In conclusion, achieving consumer loyalty is a process that requires in-depth knowledge in the field, as it can be viewed through a set of triggering factors, each of which has an important role in creating the first impulse intended to foster purchase intention among individuals. However, it can be observed how dependent today's organizations are on sustaining this process through social platforms, which, on the one hand, incites in consumers the desire to learn and know more details about the practices in the field of fashion, and, on the other hand, it represents an agile instrument in diverting people's attention and even concealing possible non-compliances related to the way employees in this industry are treated, a fact demonstrated by a study carried out in 2021 on approximately 400 of respondents, revealing that consumers lacked knowledge about social and environmental practices in the clothing industry [21].

Despite this fact, consumers are the only ones who can make a difference in terms of practices in the fashion industry, to the extent that, on one hand, they can advocate for the enforcement of stricter governmental sanctions and regulatory frameworks aimed at reducing or even eradicating labor exploitation and on the other hand, they can choose to research and educate themselves regarding the practices of companies within the sector, and ultimately change their current purchasing behavior, to encourage change in the fashion industry.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The *purpose* of this research is to identify consumers' opinions regarding fashion companies that exploit their workers, to determine their consumption habits, and to analyze the impact that abuses in the fashion industry influence their purchasing decisions, in order to obtain an accurate represenatation of current consumer behavior in relation to the phenomenon of worker exploitation.

In order to fulfill the stated objective, an opinion survey was developed, consisting of a quantitative market research, with the questionnaire serving as the instrument for data collection [22]. The developed questionnaire contained 23 items, the sampling being non-probabilistic. Out of the total 23 questions included in the questionnaire, 5 questions served to identify the respondents. The CAWI method was used in the creation and distribution of the questionnaire, resulting in a total of 132 recorded responses.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, the first included *General Consumer Habits*, the second *General knowledge of consumers regarding the phenomenon of exploitation of employees in the fashion industry*, the third, *Consumers in relation to fashion companies*, and the last one was dedicated for the identification of respondents.

The questionnaire was distributed online and shared on different social media channels and e-mail addresses to Romanian respondents. The structure of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample structure

Gender	Masculine 15.9%			Feminine 84.1%	
Age	16 – 25 years 50%	26 – 35 years 20.5%	36 – 45 years 25%	46 – 55 years 4.5%	Over 56 years 0%
Background	Urban 68.2%	Suburban 14.4%		Rural 17.4%	

Monthly income	Under 1.000 lei 18.2%	Between 1.001 –3.000 lei 28.8%	Between 3.001 – 5.000 lei 22.7%	Between 5.001 – 7.000 lei 26.5%	Between 7.001 – 9.000 lei 3.8%
Highest level of completed education	Lower secondary education (middle school) 4.5%	Upper secondary education (high school) 18.9%	Post-secondary education 1.5%	University education 58.3%	Postgraduate education 16.8%

As illustrated in Table 1, the vast majority of subjects are women, aged between 16 and 25 years, who come from urban environments, with a monthly income ranging from 1,001 to 3,000 lei (≈ 612 €), and holding higher education degrees.

4. RESULTS

Regarding the purchasing behavior of the research sample, more than half of the respondents reported buying clothing items on a monthly basis, approximately 40% of them allocate between 50 and 200 lei (≈ 10-40 €) for these purchases, meaning that almost half of the subjects spend around 4% of their monthly income on clothing, based on the average net salary of 5,328 lei [23].

It can be observed that regarding the preferred purchasing channel, both physical and online stores were equally favored. This indicates that respondents value not only the opportunity to try on and inspect clothes before completing a purchase and the overall shopping experience, including here the atmosphere and services of physical stores, but also the ability to choose from the wide assortment of clothing items available online.

Also, the main characteristics that customers consider during the purchasing process are the quality of the items, the price of the products, and the material from which they are made, while the brand of the their products and the country of origin are not of particular interest to them. But precisely these aspects represent a valuable indicator in identifying and fighting against the exploitation of workers: on the one hand, brands that already have a history and reputation for mistreating their employees are much more likely to continue illegal and immoral practices within their own organizations, as highlighted in chapter two, which presented the global situation regarding labor rights in different parts of the world, certain geographic regions, such as Africa and Asia, have been among the most hostile and harmful environments for workers, whereas in these countries abuses against workers in manufacturing facilities have been thriving for generations, without significant improvements in employees' quality of life over the years.

It is also noteworthy that only 8% of respondents indicated that they purchase clothing based on the latest trends, which demonstrates that, for the sample in this research, the main reason they choose fast fashion brand is the affordable prices, and not the desire to be fashionable. When this is correlated with the responses of approximately 72% of participants, who stated that they wear their clothes for more than a year after purchase, it can be concluded that the respondents demonstrate a responsible attitude toward the clothes they buy, avoiding fabric waste and also contributing to reducing the phenomenon of mass production, and thus the exploitation of workers.

More than 60% of respondents agree that government authorities are the most important factor that currently sustains the high level of employee exploitation in the fashion industry, despite the existence of numerous regulations, such as those mentioned in the chapter that included the literature review, for example, Directive 2003/88/EC on the working hours for employees, or Directive 2019/1152 on the imposition of transparent contractual conditions.

There is a strong sense of civic responsibility among the participants in this study, who consider that ordinary consumers posses the collective power to make a difference and successfully combat this phenomenon, without the need for further intervention from governmental bodies, as demonstrated by the fact that approximately 55% of the participants stated that they will no longer purchase products from companies they know systematically exploit their employees.

Regarding the respondents' forecasts, more than 55% believe that in the future organizations will behave responsibly and ethically towards their employees, especially since over 50% of them state that their loyalty is significantly influenced by the immoral practices that organizations support. Respondents who had a negative reaction to the future prospects employees in the fashion industry identified the main factors responsible for perpetuating the phenomenon of exploitation as being: excessive consumerism, low production costs, and the failure to sanction responsible organizations.

It can be stated that the research hypothesis was supported by the application of the questionnaire, as 46.2% of the participants reported that the exploitation of employees in the fashion industry has a significant negative impact on their loyalty, while slightly more than 75% said that they would stop purchasing clothing items from these companies.

In conclusion, the research results highlighted that the vast majority of customers are aware of what employee exploitation entails and display a negative attitude toward organizations that are not transparent with their customers.

As the subjects of this research stated, supporting organizations that adopt ethical and legal practices is one of the most effective ways to encourage companies operating in the fashion industry to put an end to this devastating phenomenon and to begin prioritizing the well-being of their employees, who represent the key to success in the years to come.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Conclusion and discussions

From a managerial perspective, the phenomenon of employee exploitation has serious implications both on the internal organizational performance and on the manner stakeholders, especially consumers, relate to the company. All organizations are subject to the mandatory compliance with the general legislative framework imposed by government bodies, and non-compliance negatively affects the organization's long term activities, negative publicity also having a significant impact on the company's customers, who tend to avoid being associated with the illegal and unethical practices of fashion brands. Managers within the fashion industry, as well as those in other adjacent industries, must not only comply with the minimum standards imposed, but also to constantly consider moral and ethical rules, in order to strengthen their organizations, so that they can prosper through the satisfaction and well-being of their employees, and thereby become the promoters of a new movement in the industry, wherein worker exploitation is completely eradicated.

Regarding organizations in the fashion industry, where employee exploitation is very high, one possible proposal is to reorganize the way major brands outsource their production capacities, as well as impose regulations and sanctions designed to prevent the perpetuation of abusive practices toward employees. For example, Shein, one of the largest fast fashion brands globally, collaborates with over 5,000 manufacturers worldwide [24] [25], which makes it almost impossible to maintain and monitor the same operating rules and safety standards across all production units. Despite this fact, social pressure has exerted a significant influence on the organization, which is why in 2023 approximately 4,000 internal audits were carried out, only at at its facilities within China. Although these measures may currently appear insufficient, the purchasing power of customers can radically change the way manufacturing companies carry out their operational activities.

In addition to enforcing strict rules for the supervision of the operational activities carried out in the outsourced production units, these entities can be financially rewarded in accordance to the manner and the proportion in which they adopt ethical practices on a large scale and actively contribute to the well-being of their own employees, stimulating people in management positions to take decisions that support vulnerable categories of employees and to work towards improving the working conditions they offer.

Another approach that fashion companies can adopt, specifically those organizations that already display ethical behavior towards employees, is to correlate the major impact that influencers have on consumers everywhere, as was outlined in chapter two of this paper, where it was emphasized the major role that influencers in collaboration with fashion brands have on consumers, both by inciting the feeling of FOMO, but also in building the trust and loyalty that people feel towards their favorite influencers [15].

Therefore, fashion companies can choose to establish partnerships with various influencers, to develop marketing campaigns in which these public figures actively promote brands that comply with the legal framework and adopt ethical practices in their operational activities. Thus, consumers will be informed about the existence of these organizations that not only comply with a set of rules, but also try to make a difference and are committed to ethical and sustainable values, these companies standing in contrast to the large corporations that are driven primarily by financial gain and place little value on the efforts or well-being of their own employees.

Another critical aspect, this time directed towards government authorities, but serving as a useful means to ensure that organizations within the global business environment enjoy equal rights and opportunities without discrimination, is to establish and support autonomous unions and organizations, that monitor compliance with legal frameworks and sanction companies that exploit their employees.

Additionally, companies that outsource their operational activities should also be vigilant against such cases, and refuse to engage in business with companies that have violated these laws.

5.2 Limitations of the study

The present study presents a number of limitations. A first limitation is the inability to perform random sampling, due to the small number of respondents and the research method chosen by the authors. At the same time, the method of distributing the questionnaire invitation constitutes another limitation of this research. Furthermore, this study was carried out exclusively within the Romanian population, whereas administering the questionnaire to respondents from various cultural backgrounds might generate different results compared to those currently obtained.

5.3 Future research directions

Consumer behavior constitutes a complex mix of values, attitudes, and perceptions, which can change over time under the significant influence of external factors. As a result, conducting a longitudinal study would be of interest for a future research, as it would offer insight into how customers relate to this phenomenon over time, to analyze and discover whether the same set of stimuli and psychological factors will continue to influence future purchasing behavior, whether this behavior will remain consistent regarding employee abuse, or on the contrary, if customers will no longer place the same importance on ethical standards in production facilities.

Furthermore, the in-depth analysis of consumer behavior patterns remains a relevant research topic both now and in the future, as it can uncover critical insights into how, on one hand, influencers influence neural processes to induce compulsive states that motivate consumers to complete purchases and foster loyalty, and on the other hand, how large fashion corporations design campaigns that manipulate customers' perception of product value, thereby artificially enhancing their economic gains.

In conclusion, the present study successfully achieved its stated objectives by identifying consumers' opinions regarding fashion companies that exploit their employees, examining consumption patterns, and analyzing the impact of labor abuses in the fashion industry on purchasing decisions.

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