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CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES FOR CLOTHING PURCHASES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT. The study explores consumers' interests, attitudes, and purchasing behavior towards sustainable clothing within the framework of circular economy principles. The research used statistical tests, including Pearson chi-square and Spearman's rank correlation, to examine the relationships between demographic factors (gender, age, household income) and aspects of purchasing behavior (willingness to buy sustainable products, actual purchases, and willingness to pay extra for sustainable products). The findings indicated that consumers concerned about environmental issues are more likely to engage in green activities and purchase green or recycled products, even at a higher price. No significant relationship was found between household income and the purchase of sustainable clothing with specific sustainable brands or certificates. The study also revealed a strong consumer inclination towards reducing waste and extending clothing life, with only 24.5% of respondents throwing clothes directly in the bin. More than 65% of respondents pass on clothes to siblings or friends, and more than 62% donate them to charity. These results demonstrate the growing trend in consumer behavior towards sustainability in purchasing and disposing of clothes.

JEL Classification: M31, Q56

Keywords: responsible consumer behavior, sustainable clothing industry, clothing purchases, circular economy, Slovakia

Introduction

Consumers can prevent or reduce environmental damage by purchasing ecological products (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). Such environmentally responsible purchasing is essential, as unplanned purchase of goods can cause severe damage to the environment. Karvan-Kos *et al.* (2015) posited that the modern environmentally responsible consumer is characterized by their focus on decisions that have a broader impact on society. In this sense, such consumers are more altruistic than traditional consumers. They are ready to sacrifice their well-being to realize environmentally responsible and ethical outcomes that will satisfy them in an intangible way (Cerović *et al.*, 2009).

The term *environmentally responsible consumer* is closely related to the term *sustainable consumption*. However, sustainable consumption is most often defined in terms of eco-consumption or from an eco-centric perspective, in other words, in terms of respect for the natural environment regardless of the social context of this issue (Jastrzebska, 2017). Sustainable consumption can be related to lifestyle, shopping habits, and how consumers use and dispose of products (Mishchuk *et al.*, Richterová *et al.*, 2015; 2023; Rizkalla *et al.*, 2022). The essence of such consumption is to use products in a way that causes as minor environmental damage as possible. In addition to merely finding environmentally friendly products, this means acting as a part of a closed cycle, cooperating with other market players, buying products from companies with strong corporate responsibility policies, and separating and recycling waste as per the principles of circular economy (Musová *et al.*, 2021).

The textile industry is currently one of the most resource-consuming and polluting industries worldwide (Riba et al., 2020). In fact, it is the second largest polluter after the oil industry (Musová & Drugdová, 2021). The global clothing industry uses over 60% of all produced textiles (Modak, 2021). As the societal pressure to protect the environment grows, the emphasis on controlling supply chains is increasing and more and more stakeholders realize that the fast fashion model is not sustainable. Thus, an alternative 'slow fashion' model can effectively contribute to increasing the sustainability in the fashion industry (Centobelli *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, the paper aims to investigate the interests, attitudes, and behavior of consumers in purchasing (sustainable) clothing in the context of the circular economy principles. Therefore, the paper aims to investigate the interests, attitudes, and behavior of consumers in purchasing (sustainable) clothing in the context of the circular economy principles. After the short introduction, the next section is the literature review provided. The detailed application methodology is in Section 3. In Section 4, the paper presents and discusses the empirical results. The most significant research outcomes are summed up in the conclusion.

1. Literature review

1.1. Circular economy and its principles

The circular economy (CE) is perceived as an alternative to the linear economy and can bring economic and environmental benefits. The circular economy considers the environmental impacts of resource use and waste. It creates alternative closed loops where resources move

circularly within the production and consumption system, as shown in Figure 1 on the right. According to Malešová (2017), materials circulate within a circle, and waste produced in the circular economy represents the resource itself, so waste does not exist. For example, bio-waste is a resource for agriculture. This economic strategy proposes innovative ways to transform the current, largely linear consumption system into a circular one while achieving economic sustainability with much-needed material savings (Singh & Ordonez, 2016).

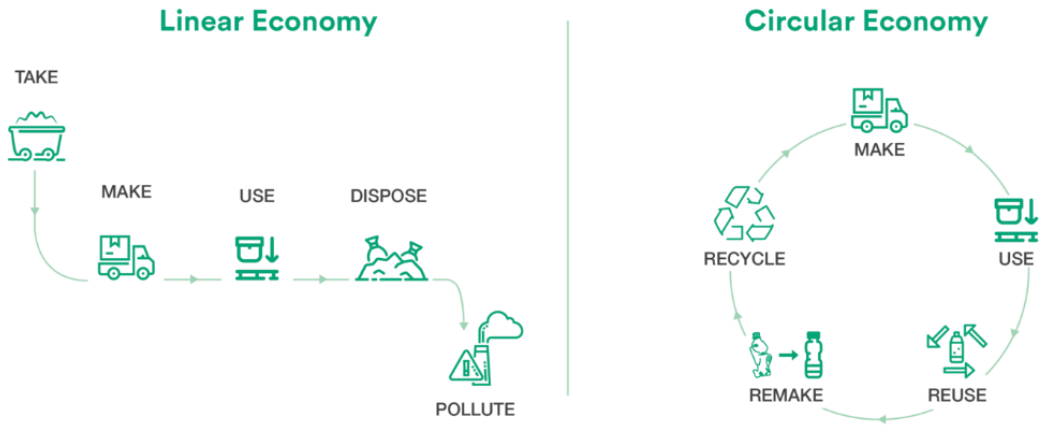


Figure 1 Contrast the concepts of linear and circular economy
Source: Lettieri (2019)

Blomsma and Brennan (2017) and Naustdalslid (2017) describe CE as a closed-loop economic system covering all activities that reduce, reuse, and recycle materials in production, distribution, and consumption processes. In this system, raw materials, components, and products lose minimal value due to using renewable energy sources and the focus on systems thinking. It is a system in which resource inputs, waste, emissions, and energy leakage are minimized by slowing down, closing, and narrowing material and energy loops, which can be achieved through long-term planning, maintenance, repair, reuse, redesign, renovation as well as recycling (Geissdoerfer *et al.*, 2017). These measures can be effectively supported by extended producer responsibility system (Zhidebekkyzy *et al.*, 2024).

CE materials are maintained for as long as possible (The European Commission, 2019). CE aims to achieve sustainable development, creating environmental quality, economic prosperity, and social justice for current and future generations (Kirchherr *et al.*, 2017). In addition to increasing the efficiency of the use of original resources and reducing pollution and waste as much as possible (Potkány et al., 2024; Sauve *et al.*, 2016), the aim of CE, according to Ghisellini *et al.* (2016), is to achieve a better balance and harmony between the economy, the environment and society.

1.2. Consumer behavior when buying clothes according to the principles of the circular economy

The textile industry has long applied the principles of the linear economy. In contrast, nowadays, the application of the principles of the circular economy in the textile industry is increasingly being discussed. According to Ki *et al.* (2020), it is necessary to consider the involvement of consumers in the challenges related to the transition to a circular economy.

Consumers are responsible for protecting the environment by saying "no" to goods that are harmful to them (Mishal *et al*., 2017; Zhidebekkyzy *et al.,* 2022). However, businesses (manufacturers) are responsible for protecting and improving the environment by producing more ecological products. Therefore, it is crucial that businesses and consumers cooperate, engage, and communicate their needs and requirements.

Companies must provide consumers with sufficient information and positive examples of good practices to build trust in this new system. Musova *et al*. (2021) note that up to 62% of respondents to their survey felt they needed to be more sufficiently informed about corporate responsibility. The importance of consumer awareness is also highlighted by Vidal-Ayuso *et al*. (2023), who argue that consumers need to be educated and re-educated about a new way of consuming that is acceptable to the environment and society. This creates a space for companies to react, change their strategy, and communicate clearly to stimulate interest and support consumers in transitioning to CE. Smol *et al*. (2018) consider the availability of information, product quality, potential benefits, and costs as key factors influencing consumer behavior, focusing on the circular economy. In the study, Grębosz-Krawczyk and Siuda (2019) state that respondents are willing to participate in the circular economy and clothing recycling, but the problem is insufficient promotion.

Consumers are an important stakeholder group in implementing CE after transitioning to sustainable development. Despite this fact, we still know very little about the factors that influence consumer behavior in the context of the circular economy (Kulli *et al*., 2023). According to a report by Boston Consulting Group-BSG and Vestiaire Collective (2022), which maps consumer behavior in buying and selling clothes, consumer perceptions and behavior are changing in the context of the circular economy. This is particularly true for used clothing sales, with 50% of respondents stating that its affordability is the main reason for choosing used clothing. In terms of sustainability, respondents said that they perceive that sustainability is increasingly being discussed and that it influences 40% of their purchases. The overall result of the research was that 25% of the average consumer's wardrobe consists of secondhand goods.

Camacho-Otero *et al*. (2019) report that, according to statistics, textile production has doubled in the last 15 years, and reuse has decreased by 36%. Globally, less than 15% is recycled. The textile industry is particularly relevant to the circular economy, as textile waste is mainly preserved, unsold, unworn, etc.

Kulli *et al*. (2018) conducted a consumer behavior survey with an emphasis on CE among a sample of 495 respondents living in Poland, Albania, and Portugal. The questionnaire included questions about awareness of the circular economy, preferred shopping locations, and factors influencing the respondents' shopping behavior. The research results show that nationality, age, or belonging to a particular generation (X, Y, Z) influences knowledge about CE and where to buy sustainable goods. Koszewska's (2019) research, conducted in the V4 region, examined the impact of financial situation on shopping behavior and found a statistically significant relationship between consumers' 'better financial situation' and their willingness to shop for pleasure. The research results did not show a statistically significant difference in the shopping behavior of women, i.e., based on gender, nor the basis of the consumer's age.

2. Methodological approach

The paper investigates consumers' interests, attitudes, and behavior regarding purchasing (sustainable) clothing in the circular economy context.

To achieve this objective, we used two methods: secondary data analysis and quantitative consumer surveys. While preparing the literature review, we focused on investigating the problem's starting points by applying several standard scientific research

methods. The primary quantitative consumer research was carried out in November and December 2022. The survey was conducted using an online Google questionnaire distributed through Facebook, Gmail, and other social media.

The questionnaire consisted of 24 questions, categorized into four sections. The first section covered general environmental attitudes, while the second focused on the purchase of clothing products. The third section explored the relationship between the clothing industry and the environment. The final section of the questionnaire was used to collect selected sociodemographic data about the respondents. Various types of questions were used to construct the questionnaire. These included closed questions with one or more response options and Likert scale questions. The information obtained from the questionnaire was processed using Excel software, tested using the IBM SPSS Statistics program, and then evaluated.

The questionnaire survey was completed by 743 respondents. The sample consisted of all Slovak residents between 18 and 65. The research sample was constructed following the demographic structure of the Slovakians. Quota sampling was used to select participants based on gender and age to ensure representativeness. The sample's representativeness was verified using the Chi-square test in IBM SPSS Statistics with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

The research sample included 393 women and 350 men, with the following age structure: 112 respondents from Generation Z, 240 from Generation Y, 286 from Generation X, and 105 from the Baby Boomer generation (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents.

	Variable	Number of respondents	Percentage
Gender	Men	350	47.11%
	Women	393	52.89%
Generation	Z	112	15.08%
	Y	240	32.30%
	X	286	38.49%
	Baby boomers	105	14.13%
Monthly net household income (€)	0-600€	74	9.96%
	601-999€	149	20.05%
	1000-1300€	152	20.46%
	1301-1700€	132	17.77%
	1701-2000€	87	11.71˘%
	2001-2300€	55	7.40%
	2301&more€	94	12.65%

Source: *own compilation*

Hypothesis development

In the first part, considering the results of the research of D'Souza *et al*. (2007), Zuraidah *et al*. (2012), Koszewska (2019), Musova *et al*. (2021), we investigate only dependencies of various factors of sustainable consumer behavior (willingness to buy products that are "green", environmentally friendly, or made from recycled materials, as well as the willingness to pay extra for the environmentally friendly product or purchase of sustainable clothes/clothes with special labels/certificates) and some sociodemographic indicators (gender, age, and household income).

We formulate the following hypotheses (H1-H7):

H1: We assume that gender influences the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials.

H2: We assume that age influences the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials.

H3: We assume that household income influences the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials.

H4-H6: We assume that gender influences the willingness to pay extra for environmentally friendly products.

H5: We assume that age influences the willingness to pay extra for the environmentally friendly product.

H6: We assume that household income influences the willingness to pay extra for the environmentally friendly product.

H7: We assume that household income impacts the purchase of sustainable clothes/clothes with special labels/certificates.

In the second part of our hypothesis testing, we examine various dependencies among consumer attitudes and behavior (interest in issues of environmental protection; active involvement in various eco-friendly activities; willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials; the willingness to pay extra for the environmentally friendly product; purchase of sustainable clothes/clothes with special labels/certificates; purchase of locally produced clothes with the "made in Slovakia" label).

We formulate the following hypotheses (H8-H10):

H8: We assume that interest in issues of environmental protection influences the active involvement in various eco-friendly activities.

H9: We assume that interest in various environmental protection influences the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials.

H10: We assume that interest in issues of environmental protection influences the willingness to pay extra for environmentally friendly products.

H11: We assume that active involvement in various eco-friendly activities influences the purchase of "sustainable clothes"/ clothes with special labels/certificates.

H12: We assume that the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials influences the purchase of 'sustainable clothing'/clothing with a special label/certificate.

H13: We assume that the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials influences the purchase of locally produced clothes with the “made in Slovakia” label.

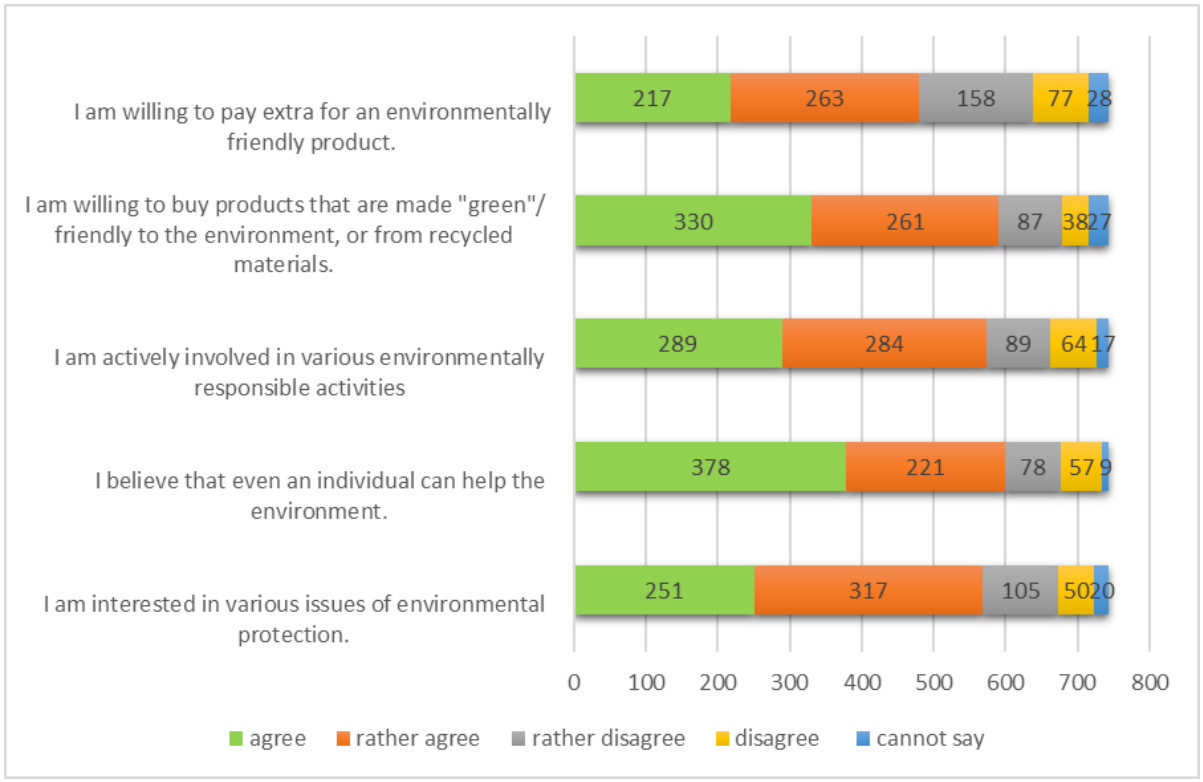
All hypotheses will be tested in the IBM SPSS program at the level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$. We use the Pearson Chi-Square test and Spearman's rho correlation coefficient to test the correlation between the abovementioned factors.

3. Empirical results and discussion

Only five questions from the questionnaire dealing with consumer behavior in the context of circular economy principles were selected for the paper.

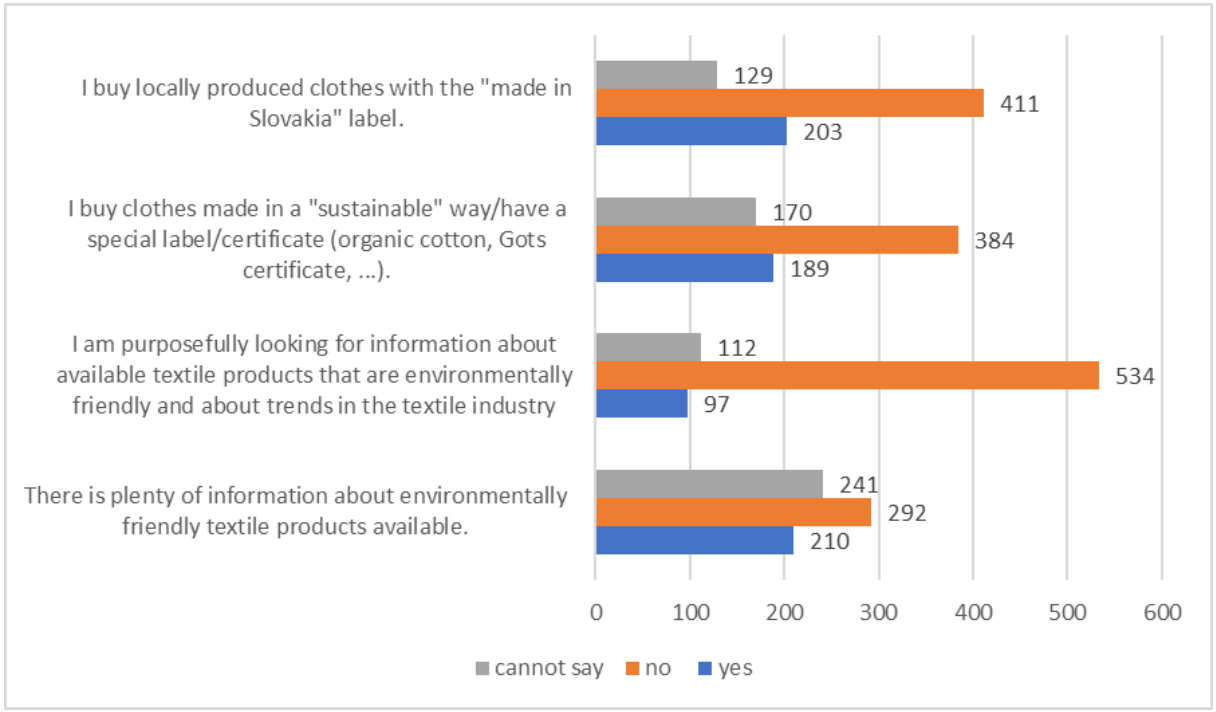
In the first question, we examined consumers' attitudes towards the environment. Using a Likert scale from 'agree' to 'disagree,' we asked them to indicate how they felt about each of the statements listed in *Graph 1*.

From the obtained answers, it can be concluded that positive answers predominate for all options, and therefore, the respondents agree or rather agree with the statements. The most positive responses (80.62%) are noted for the statement that even one person can help. The second highest number of positive responses (79.54%) is observed for the statement: "I am willing to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials."



Graph 1. General attitudes to environmental issues
Source: *own data*

In relative terms, we recorded the lowest number of positively evaluated responses to the statement in which consumers indicated they would be willing to pay more for an environmentally friendly product. 64.60% of the respondents agreed or rather agreed with this statement.



Graph 2. Attitudes of consumers towards the purchase of sustainable clothing
Source: *own data*

We examined consumer attitudes towards buying sustainable clothing (*Graph 2*). The responses show a negative response to all the options on offer. Even though consumers think there needs to be more information about environmentally friendly textile products, up to 71.81% of respondents still need to look for such information.

Table 2. Hypothesis testing H1- H7

Hypothesis	Test	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Spearman's rho	Correlation	Strength	Direction	Hypothesis acceptance
H1	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,002	,116	yes	low	positive	yes
H2	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	-,164	yes	low	negative	yes
H3	Pearson Chi-Square	,036	,078	yes	very low	positive	yes
H4	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	,168	yes	low	positive	yes
H5	Pearson Chi-Square	,004	-,107	yes	low	negative	yes
H6	Pearson Chi-Square	,048	,074	yes	very low	positive	yes
H7	Pearson Chi-Square	,234	,048	no	-	-	no

Source: *own compilation*

Having examined the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, and household income) and their influence on different factors, we can confirm our four hypotheses (H1, H2, H4, and H5) related to age and gender. It follows from the above that age and gender correlate with the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials, as well as the willingness to pay extra for eco-friendly products. We found interesting results in H3 and H6, where we examined the relationship between household income and the willingness to buy "green" and eco-friendly products. We confirm these two hypotheses; however, the correlation results are meagre, so household income only influences these two factors slightly. No relationship was found between household income and the actual purchase of " sustainable clothing "/clothing with a special label/certificate. Therefore, there is also a rejection of hypothesis H7 (*Table 2*).

In the following hypotheses (H8-H13), we examined the dependence between interest in various issues of environmental protection and (H8) active involvement in various eco-friendly activities, (H9) the willingness to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials, and (H10) the willingness to pay extra for the environmentally friendly product (*Table 3*).

Table 3. Hypothesis testing H8-H13

Hypothesis	Test	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Spearman's rho	Correlation	Strength	Direction	Hypothesis acceptance
H8	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	,499	yes	medium	positive	yes
H9	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	,442	yes	medium	positive	yes
H10	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	,478	yes	medium	positive	yes
H11	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	,170	yes	low	positive	yes
H12	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	,166	yes	low	positive	yes
H13	Pearson Chi-Square	< ,001	,293	yes	low	positive	yes

Source: *own compilation*

From the test results, the dependencies for all hypotheses were confirmed. Thus, consumers interested in various environmental issues are more likely to be actively involved in various environmentally friendly activities, buy "green", environmentally friendly, or made from recycled materials, and pay extra for the environmentally friendly product. Similar results were recorded by Pawaskar *et al*. (2018), where the analysis showed that among the investigated elements of consumers' environmental responsibility, opinion, ability to act, and willingness are significant, with willingness being the most crucial factor. Furthermore, a high correlation was confirmed between the ability to act and the willingness of consumers to behave in an environmentally responsible manner. According to Musová *et al*. (2021), two factors influence purchasing environmental products. One group is natural to consumers, such as their environmental responsibility, acquisition of knowledge and information, self-interest, or willingness to act to save natural resources and limit negative impacts on the environment. The second group consists of factors related to the social image of consumers and product characteristics (quality, safety, performance, price, and impact on human health). The research also suggests that socially responsible consumer behavior is not determined by income level but by other factors such as lifestyle, learned behavior, ethics, morals, etc.

Subsequently, we tested the hypotheses (H11), where we examined the dependence between active involvement in various eco-friendly activities and the purchase of "sustainable clothes"/ clothes with special labels/certificates. In this case, we were able to confirm our hypothesis. So, active participation in various environmentally friendly activities impacts the purchase of 'sustainable clothing'/clothing with a special label/certificate.

The last hypotheses (H12-H13) examined the relationship between the willingness to buy products that are "green", environmentally friendly, or made of recycled materials and the purchase of "sustainable clothing"/clothing with a special label/certificate (H12), as well as the purchase of locally produced clothing with the label "made in Slovakia" (H13). Also, in this case, we could confirm both our hypotheses. Consumers who are willing to buy products that are "green", environmentally friendly, or made from recycled materials are buying such products. They also buy locally produced clothes labeled "made in Slovakia".

In the following question (*Graph 3*), we focused on a particular environmental trend in the clothing industry: clothing made from recycled materials (e.g., plastic bottles). We asked our respondents what would stop them from buying such a product. Most respondents (39.84%)

would be deterred by a lack of information about the product and confidence in its health safety (38.22%).

Graph 3. Consumer concerns about buying clothing made from recycled materials
Source: *own data*

Similar research on another specific eco-textile trend (secondhand) was carried out by Paco *et al*. (2020). This research focused on the barriers consumers perceive when buying used clothes in secondhand shops. They also identified the condition of the clothes offered, the difficulty of finding them, or the opinion of the neighborhood as barriers. They identified possible contamination of the clothes as the main barrier, followed by insufficient supply and, finally, the supply of no longer fashionable clothes. Wang *et al*. (2022), based on an analysis of several studies, concluded that consumers are discouraged from buying secondhand clothes by several factors, such as unknown origin of clothes, possible poor hygienic conditions, stigma associated with used clothes, damaged clothes, general "unrefined" appearance of shops

Post-purchase behavior

In the last question, we asked our respondents about their after-shopping behavior - what they do with their clothes when worn out, damaged, too small, or just "sitting in the wardrobe". The circular economy is not only about how clothes are produced and sold but also how clothes are treated after buying to avoid further waste. With this question, we aimed to determine whether Slovak consumers behave responsibly towards nature and do not create unnecessary waste, i.e., whether undamaged clothes are given to others or recycled properly (*Table 4*).

Table 4. Post-purchase behavior of consumers for clothing

Behavior	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Pass them to siblings, friends, and acquaintances	485	65.28
Donate them to charity (e.g., to containers)	467	62.85
I throw them in the bin	182	24.50
Sell them	151	20.32
SWAP	30	4.04
Use them like a rag (within the household)	30	4.04
Stay in the wardrobe	5	0.67
Rent them	3	0.40
Upcycling	2	0.27

Source: *own compilation*

Only 24.5% of respondents throw their clothes directly into the bin, which is a positive development. Consumers are trying to avoid unnecessary waste and to keep their clothes in use. The survey results show that more than 65% of respondents give clothes to siblings, friends, and acquaintances, and more than 62% donate clothes to charity (e.g., in containers). Several consumers said they were also using new sustainable trends in the textile industry. These include SWAP, used by 20.32% of respondents, clothing rental (0.40%), and upcycling (0.27%). Compared to our results, we can note more positive results from Paco *et al*. (2020), who studied the behavior of consumers in the post-use phase of clothing, and how consumers deal with it afterward. The research was carried out on a sample of 203 consumers from 34 countries. According to the results, only 1.55% of respondents throw their used clothes in the bin. The rest donate to charitable and humanitarian organizations or family members.

Conclusion

The textile industry and clothing trade leave a significant environmental footprint. For this reason, producers and sellers of clothes must think about their behavior, as must consumers who satisfy their needs by buying clothes. Greater environmental responsibility on the part of both actors is essential. With the aim of sustainability for present and future generations, the current agenda is to move towards the new circular economy model.

The research in this paper aimed to examine consumer interests, attitudes, and behavior in purchasing (sustainable) clothing. A survey of 743 respondents was conducted to obtain data depicting the purchase of clothing products in the context of general consumers' attitudes towards environmental issues and active involvement in eco-activities.

The research results show that positive answers predominated regarding consumers' environmental attitudes (interest in environmental protection issues, active participation in eco-activities, willingness to buy "green" products, and willingness to pay extra for an environmentally friendly product). On the contrary, the answers to questions about buying sustainable clothing were negative. The higher price of sustainable products is often an obstacle to their purchase. Therefore, we consider it important that both businesses and state institutions communicate the quality and durability of products and make it clear to consumers that in the long term they will save money by purchasing quality clothing compared to low prices of fast fashion clothing. Another of the practical implications for policy makers could be the introduction of a law in which the product of (ultra) fast fashion in the given country is subject to an additional fee. Currently, we can see the example of France, whose parliament is proposing to introduce an additional fee for each piece of clothing that comes from ultra-fast fashion stores such as Shein or Temu. The fee would be between 5 and 10 euros but would not exceed 50% of the price of the garment. In this way, they are trying to combat the excessive

environmental impact of ultra-fast fashion stores and their high ecological footprint. In addition, the "taxes" collected will be used to support and promote slow fashion and slow fashion businesses in France.

Even though consumers think there needs to be more information about environmentally friendly or sustainable textile products, more than two-thirds of respondents still need to look for such information. This is an incentive for businesses to intensify marketing communication in this area.

Sociodemographic variables (age and gender) influence the willingness to buy "green"/eco-friendly products or products made from recyclable materials. There is also a dependency between age/gender and the willingness to pay extra for such a product. On the contrary, household income only slightly affects these factors. From other test results, we can conclude that consumers who are interested in various environmental issues are more likely to be actively involved in various environmentally friendly activities and are more likely to buy products that are "green", eco-friendly, or made from recycled materials, and are more likely to pay extra for the environmentally friendly product.

The results regarding "after-shopping" consumer behavior were positive. Only a quarter of respondents throw their clothes directly into the bin. However, only several consumers said they were also using new sustainable trends in the textile industry, such as swaps, clothing rental, or upcycling.

The research was limited to the selected aspects of consumer behavior only. We investigated consumers' interests, attitudes, and behavior regarding purchasing (sustainable) clothing in the circular economy context. The research was conducted only on Slovak sample and in the future, it would be interesting to extend this research to other European as well as global countries, and to compare these results. Moreover, the results showed a variety of perspectives and views on sustainable and circular behavior that deserve further attention to explore additional factors which influence sustainable consumption such as social norms, perceived behavioral control, or different marketing strategies.

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