

## **CONSUMER PREFERENCES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN DEVELOPING AND DEVELOPED COUNTRIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study has taken into consideration the most important factors that influence consumers' choice of clothing by analyzing some of the most popular brands in the market. The study was completed in two countries making a comparison between the preferences of consumers in a developed and developing country. The method used is the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), which, by structuring the problem, makes it easier to classify the criteria that influence consumers' evaluation of clothing brands. Six main criteria, sixteen sub-criteria, and different fast fashion brands were considered. The results of this method revealed different priorities regarding the criteria between the two regions even though the most preferred brand was the same. These results help the companies included in the study to not only improve their products, but to have a better approach to the customer, and strengthen their competitiveness.

**Keywords:** AHP; criteria; fast fashion; consumer preferences

### **1. Introduction**

In the past 30 years, the fast fashion clothing industry has developed significantly, offering favorable prices, quality, and speed in launching new collections to the market (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Through globalization, this industry became more accessible to consumers, but also had environmental and social impacts (Zekri, 2021). In the choice of clothing brands, cultural factors, such as traditions, and social norms, undoubtedly play an important role; therefore, brands must match their strategies with the cultural values of the target consumers (Chegini, Molan, & Kashanifar, 2016). Anyanwu and Chiana (2022) analyzed the behavior of university students in purchasing clothes and showed that culture, social class, family, and ethnicity had the greatest influence on decision-making. The relationship between economic development and fashion consumption was the focus of the study by Rocha, Hammond, and Hawkins (2005). The

authors analyzed the behavior of British, Brazilian, and Chinese consumers in the choice of clothing brands, thus comparing a consolidated market, and developing western and eastern markets.

This study aims to determine the factors that most influence the choice of clothing as well as the most preferred fast fashion brands by consumers in two countries with different economic development such as Albania and Italy. There are various types of research regarding how to approach consumers in the fashion industry (Jaskulska, 2013; Ceylan, 2019), but taking into account the constant changes in both fashion trends and consumer preferences, efficient decision-making is required from clothing brands to know how to best approach their customers.

As the fashion market is global (Ledezma, 2017), it is essential to understand consumer behavior in countries undergoing socio-cultural change. Customer preferences play an important role in the growth and survival of fashion businesses, and the fashion sector offers customers many options and is extremely competitive and dynamic (Aldilax & Pfoertsch, 2020). This article aims to help both consumers and fashion firms through a detailed analysis of the factors that affect consumers the most.

To achieve this goal, the following questions will be addressed in this article:

- What criteria are most important to people when choosing a clothing brand?
- Do these criteria differ between individuals in countries with different economic and cultural development?
- How do preferences for the most popular fast fashion brands differ in these regions?

The main importance of this article lies firstly in the information it provides for fashion brands because by understanding the preferences of consumers of the fashion industry, businesses and retailers can modify their approaches to effectively address their targeted audience (Lamasi & Santoso, 2022; Lamçe & Braimllari, 2023). With the industry's rapid development and intense rivalry, understanding consumer preferences is critical to the long-term viability of fashion firms. Second, the findings of this article can help the fashion industry improve its development strategies and better meet consumer demands. Third, researchers or experts in the field can consider the results of this study for their future articles or applied research work.

The purpose of this article is to analyze decision-making regarding the choice of clothing for young people in Albania and Italy, in order to see the preferences of consumers in countries with different development. Also, this analysis was carried out using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method, which is one of the most popular multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) methods. First, this method is efficient as it structures decisions, however complex, by breaking them down into simpler decisions (Chan & Chan, 2010). When it comes to buying clothes, we refer to both qualitative factors such as quality, style, etc., as well as quantitative factors such as price, and the AHP method accepts both types of factors. Second, this method has not been applied to the fashion sector from the point of view of consumers in the Balkan region.

## **2. Literature review**

Decision-making with many criteria has been realized through the analysis of the AHP method in different fields of study (Costa, Borges, & dos Santos Machado, 2016; Kaftandzieva & Cvetkoska, 2021; Sooksaksun & Chanta, 2023). The literature review was done to show the application of this method in the fashion industry and to understand the various factors influencing consumers considered in previous studies. In this way, the criteria and sub-criteria analyzed in this article were decided.

The purpose of the study by Chiang and Li (2010) was to use the AHP method, as a structured technique for analyzing complex decisions, to understand consumer preferences regarding distribution channels. The AHP breaks down the decision-making problem into a hierarchy of criteria and alternatives, and then compares and prioritizes them through pairwise comparisons and mathematical calculations. The most valued criteria in comparing online fashion stores with traditional ones were convenience, price, quality, service offered, and variety of products. Chiang and Li (2010) concluded that this method was quite efficient in assessing consumer preferences, and helped retailers and merchants be more effective in meeting consumer needs and preferences.

This study does not specifically refer to in-store or online shopping, but shopping in general. Convenience in shopping is one of the factors examined with two sub-factors, physical shopping and online shopping. In this way, when we refer to the literature, we are particularly interested in the factors that most influenced consumers in the purchase of clothing and more.

Through statistical methods such as multiple regression analysis and ANOVA variance analysis, Andreti, Zhafira, Akmal, and Kumar (2013), analyzed why customers aged 18 to 34 years prefer to shop in convenience stores. This study showed that the factors influencing this preference were the price offered, the type of promotion, and the quality of the service offered. In physical purchases, discount and return policies were the most important factors; therefore, the authors suggested that more discounts and liberal return policies from online sellers would attract customers. Hotamışlı, Aydın and Altıntop (2014) studied the importance of factors that influence the purchases of consumers aged 16-24 years using the AHP method. Brand, price, quality, color and design, advertising, availability, promotions and discounts, fashion conformity, and after-sales service were the criteria taken into consideration. The study focused on three product groups including food and beverages, clothing and accessories, and technology products. The results showed that quality and individuality were very important to consumers when choosing clothing brands.

Is fast fashion sustainable? To answer this question, Chang and Jai (2015), considered the strategies used by fast fashion retailers to influence consumers. The ten most important factors influencing fast fashion purchases were cited as price, style, comfort, color, quality, brand, income, discounts, reviews, and loyalty. The results showed that purchases are significantly influenced by price value and brand equity. Valaei and Nikhashemi (2017) analyzed the behavior of Gen Y consumers during the purchase of fashion clothing and concluded that for this generation, the factors that most influence the purchase of clothing are brand and self-identity. Lohan, Ganguly, and Kumar (2020) evaluated the factors influencing the preferences of Indian consumers for foreign

products using the fuzzy AHP method. The study identified and ranked factors such as perceived quality, brand reputation, novelty, price, and cultural influences on the choice of foreign products. The factor that most influenced the selection of foreign clothing products for the Indian consumer was the quality of the product. The findings of this article can help companies that want to enter or expand into the Indian market by fulfilling the needs of consumers.

Pande and Gupta (2020) studied the choice of brand by young Indian consumers as a multi-criteria decision-making problem. They utilized the AHP method to find the relative weights of the 12 factors that most influenced consumers in their choice of a garment, and as an alternative, they specifically considered three well-known clothing brands among young people, including Zara, Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) and Marks & Spencer (M&S). Among the factors considered in the study, the results showed that brand experience was the most important factor for young Indian consumers. Since quality is the factor that affects the evaluation of a product, Liu and Rodriguez (2021) used the AHP method to measure the quality value of a luxury product through craftsmanship, material, country of origin, and brand image. The study showed that when purchasing luxury bags Gen Y Chinese consumers viewed factors such as product craftsmanship and material quality as more important than brand image. Environmental sustainability in the clothing industry and the growing interest in eco-friendly fashion were the goals of the study conducted by Aidos (2022). The preference for online shopping and the recommendation for increased sustainability in fashion retail were some of the results achieved. The role of sustainability has yet to be examined in the context of brand choice, so this will be an innovation in this study.

The AHP method was also used by Morsi (2023) in his study on retail sales in the online fashion industry in Egypt. The five main factors considered were website design, product attributes, tangible information, website tools, and post-order services. The most important success factor for Egyptian online fashion retailers was website design. The facilities of this site and the services after the order were also important. Style, quality, durability, and brand heritage were some of the main criteria that influenced the choice of a clothing brand. Moreover, the author suggested the application of the method in different cultures to increase the applicability of the model in different markets for future research. Table 1 shows and defines the criteria and sub-criteria examined in this article.

Table 1  
Criteria and sub-criteria for choosing a clothing brand

<b>Criteria &amp; Sub-criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>
1. Price and value	
1.1 Price	Reasonable and economical price
1.2 Value for money	The price of the garment matches its value
1.3 Discounts and promotions	Discounts with added value, various promotions
2. Style and fashion	
2.1 Trendiness	Trendy and fashionable clothes
2.2 Individuality	Distinctive style through clothing
2.3 Versatility	Suitable clothes for different occasions and cases
3. Quality and durability	
3.1 Product quality	Durable clothing with high functionality
3.2 Material quality	Very good quality of the material
3.3 Craftsmanship	Attention to detail and skill in the manufacturing processes
4. Sustainability and ethical practices	
4.1 Environmentally friendly	Sustainable practices, organic materials, opportunity to recycle, and low pollution
4.2 Ethical production	Ethical labor practices and safe working conditions
5. Online presence and social media	
5.1 Engaging content	Engaging content and audience interaction on social media
5.2 Influencer collaborations	Collaborations with influencers or celebrities to attract customers
5.3 Social media interactions	Engages with and responds to the audience's comments and manages customer requests on social media
6. Convenience and shopping experience	
6.1 Online shopping	Easy online shopping, fast shipping, and product returns
6.2 Physical shopping experience	Pleasant, personalized in-store experience

Source: Author

Through the literature review, we identified six main criteria for evaluating clothing: price, style, quality, durability, ethical practices, online presence, social media, comfort, and purchase experience. Additionally, we opted to conduct a cross-cultural review and sensitivity analysis.

### **3. Research methodology**

Using the AHP method, the factors influencing the decisions of consumers of different cultures when choosing a clothing brand were evaluated. Fashion-conscious participants

aged 18-43 years were randomly selected from two regions that are at different stages of development. The data collection was carried out through a questionnaire distributed by email in Albania and through the Prolific platform in Italy during the period from April-November 2023. Simple random sampling was used to select the samples in the survey. The application of the AHP method includes several steps (Sooksaksun & Chanta, 2023):

*Determination of criteria and alternatives:* An initial study based on periodical articles and consultation with experts served to evaluate the criteria and sub-criteria that influence the choice of a clothing brand, which is the main goal in this decision-making. Also, based on the opinions of experts, six brands were considered as alternatives in the Albanian market including, Zara, H&M, Bershka, New Yorker, Intersport, and LC Waikiki, and four in the Italian market, including Zara, H&M, Bershka, and Pull & Bear.

*AHP model development:* Using the survey data, an AHP model was developed. The sub-criteria were grouped into six main criteria that reflect the respondents' preferences. Three hundred and fifty surveys were distributed in Albania, mainly in Tirana and Vlore, and the same amount were distributed in Italy through the Prolific platform, which enabled a wider distribution in this region.

*Pairwise comparisons and judgments:* Saaty's relative importance scale (Saaty & Vargas, 2012) was used by respondents for pairwise comparisons between sub-criteria, main criteria, and alternatives. The AHP determines the importance of the considered factors by comparing them in pairs, which is simpler than comparing them simultaneously.

*Consistency check:* The AHP method consists of successive pairwise comparisons, whose answers can sometimes be contradictory. For this reason, it is important to check the data for stability; a deviation of up to 10% is allowed by the method. R software was used for data analysis and consistency checking.

*Sensitivity analysis:* The decision-making process ends with a sensitivity analysis. This involves changing the importance of the criteria slightly to see the impact on the final results. Since complex decision models are often uncertain, a sensitivity analysis allows the creation of different scenarios that may lead to new results. If the ranking does not change, the results are considered robust; otherwise, they are sensitive to changes. Super Decisions software developed by Adams, Rokou and Saaty (1996) was used for the sensitivity analysis.

The AHP solves complex problems by organizing them in the form of a hierarchy, consisting of no less than three levels, in our case four levels. The first level represents the main purpose of the decision, the second level includes the criteria, the third level includes the sub-criteria and the fourth level refers to the alternatives for which the decision is made.

## **4. Result and discussion**

### **4.1 Respondents profile**

In Albania, 77.4% of correctly completed questionnaires were done by women, while in Italy, 57.4% were completed by men. The online platform Prolific was used in Italy to administer the questionnaires, enabling a wider distribution in the region. In this region,

the largest concentration of respondents was in Sanremo (14.95%), followed by Genoa (11.5%), Rome (9.2%) and Turin (9.2%). In Albania, the respondents were mainly in Tirana (51.96%) and Vlora (25.5%). Regarding employment, 49% of respondents in Albania and 36.5% of respondents in Italy reported having a full-time job. In Albania, 33.3% of respondents were students, while in Italy, 32.2% were students. Income between the two regions varied significantly, with 57.8% of respondents in Albania reporting a monthly income of less than \$544, while 31.37% belonged to the \$545–1088 income, group. In Italy, 56.5% reported monthly income up to \$1,089, 30.4% in the range \$1,090-2,175, and 9.6% between \$2,176-3,265.

Only 40.2% of the participants in Albania reported that they had made their last purchase online and in these purchases, Zara leads with 33.66%. In this region, consumers prefer shopping in physical stores. It is different with Italian consumers, where 64.35% declared that they had made their last purchase online, with Zara leading the way with 20.7%. In Albania, the other brands in online shopping were Bershka, H&M, Guess, Mango, Nike, and Adidas, while in Italy the survey participants also mentioned local brands such as Benetton, Diesel, Tezenis, etc., along with others such as Adidas, Zalando, Calvin Klein, Levi's, and others.

The above information was obtained from the responses to the first part of the questionnaire distributed to the surveyor. These data were not used in the AHP analysis, but provide general information of the individuals participating in the study.

#### **4.2 Results of AHP method**

The AHP method showed that each factor had a score that indicated how important it was in making decisions (see Table 2). The observed consistency ratio, which was 0.0985 for the analysis in Albania and 0.0907 for the analysis in Italy, is smaller than the allowed limit of 0.10. This result confirms that responses in each group were consistent and reliable in their judgments. Correct completion of the questionnaire by 102 individuals in Albania and 115 in Italy resulted in response rates of approximately 34% and 38%, respectively.

Table 2  
Relative weights of selected criteria and sub-criteria in Albania and Italy

Criteria & Sub-criteria	Weight		Sub-criteria global weight	
	Albania	Italy	Albania	Italy
<b>1. Price and value</b>	<b>0.182</b>	<b>0.241</b>		
1.1 Price	0.287	0.323	0.052	0.078
1.2 Value for money	0.324	0.360	0.059	0.087
1.3 Discounts and promotions	0.389	0.317	0.071	0.076
<b>2. Style and fashion</b>	<b>0.140</b>	<b>0.148</b>		
2.1 Trendiness	0.295	0.342	0.041	0.051
2.2 Individuality	0.335	0.354	0.047	0.052
2.3 Versatility	0.370	0.304	0.052	0.045
<b>3. Quality and durability</b>	<b>0.218</b>	<b>0.168</b>		
3.1 Product quality	0.318	0.382	0.069	0.064
3.2 Material quality	0.380	0.312	0.083	0.053
3.3 Craftsmanship	0.302	0.305	0.066	0.051
<b>4. Sustainability and ethical practices</b>	<b>0.105</b>	<b>0.103</b>		
4.1 Environmentally friendly	0.487	0.516	0.051	0.053
4.2 Ethical production	0.513	0.484	0.054	0.050
<b>5. Online presence and social media</b>	<b>0.215</b>	<b>0.192</b>		
5.1 Engaging content	0.458	0.481	0.098	0.092
5.2 Influencer collaborations	0.219	0.218	0.047	0.042
5.3 Social media interactions	0.328	0.300	0.070	0.058
<b>6. Convenience and shopping experience</b>	<b>0.140</b>	<b>0.148</b>		
6.1 Online shopping	0.372	0.560	0.052	0.083
6.2 Physical shopping experience	0.628	0.440	0.088	0.065

Some differences were observed in the analysis of the criteria that influenced consumers in Albania and Italy choice of a clothing brand. Changes in development, culture, and economy influenced their decisions. In Albania, the most important criterion is ‘quality and durability’ (0.218). This criterion affects the longevity of clothing and helps create a sustainable wardrobe. Its sub-criteria, ‘material quality’ (0.380) and ‘product quality’ (0.318) were rated the highest for the comfort, durability, and overall satisfaction they provide. ‘Craftsmanship’ (0.302), was the least valued sub-criterion. The ‘price and value’ criterion is the third most important in this region. It is different in Italy because the most important criterion is ‘price and value’ with the ‘quality and durability’ criterion is third place.

‘Price and value’ (0.241) is the most important criterion for Italian consumers, with the most valued sub-criterion being ‘value for money’ (0.360). In this region, individuals indicated that it is important to pay for the real value of the product. In Italy, ‘quality and durability’ (0.168) is the third most important. The score for ‘product quality’ (0.382) and ‘material quality’ (0.312) in this criterion underlines the importance attached to product integrity. For Albanian consumers, the third most important criterion is ‘price and value’ (0.182), with a special focus on ‘discounts and promotions’ (0.389) and ‘value for



money' (0.324). The second most valued factor by Albanian and Italian consumers is 'online presence and social media'; this shows the growing influence of digital platforms on consumer decisions. Through digital platforms, individuals can stay updated on the latest fashion trends. With their online presence, brands influence customer choices. By paying attention to this factor, individuals can adapt their clothing to the current fashion trends. The need for communication and interaction of the brand with customers is shown by the most valued sub-criterion in both regions being 'engaging content'.

However, there are differences between consumers in Albania and Italy, related to the fourth rated criterion 'style and fashion'. By creating different combinations, the wardrobe becomes more versatile and functional, so the Albanian consumer values the 'versatility' sub-criterion more (0.370). Unlike in Italy, where individuals value 'individuality' (0.354) and 'trendiness' (0.342). Expressing their unique personality and style preferences is most important to them. The priority of 'trend' allows them to be current with fashion trends and always have a stylish and contemporary element in their clothing. Shopping preferences are also different in these populations. In Albania, buying in physical stores is more preferred (0.628). These stores enable real-time clothing quality assessment, item testing, and personal assistance, contributing to a satisfying decision-making experience. This corresponds to the fact that quality was the most valued criterion for Albanians. In contrast, in Italy, online shopping has a slight advantage (0.560). Online shopping saves time, enables the exploration of stores regardless of their location, and tests the quality through the experiences of other consumers. These results correspond to the achievements of Aidos (2022).

In both regions, individuals are less attentive to the environment and social issues, because the least valued criterion is 'sustainability and ethical practices' (0.105 in Albania and 0.103 in Italy). Attention to this factor would ensure that the production of clothing is by ethical standards, and ecological pollution is reduced. Choosing an outfit based on sustainability and ethical practices would promote conscious consumerism. However, there are differences in specific preferences between Albania and Italy. In Albania, the sub-criterion 'ethical production' (0.513) is more important; therefore, individuals are more attentive to responsible production practices, fair working conditions, and social responsibility. On the other hand, in Italy, 'environmentally friendly' practices (0.516) are preferred. Choosing clothes made with environmentally friendly practices shows the responsibility and commitment of customers to the environment.

Sub-criterion 'engaging content' has the greatest importance among the 16 sub-criteria in the two regions with a global weight of 0.0985 in Albania and 0.0924 in Italy. 'Physical shopping experience', with a global weight of 0.0879, and 'material quality', with a global weight of 0.0828 are the other two sub-criteria most valued by Albanian consumers. In Italy, the two other most valued sub-criteria were 'value for money', with a global weight of 0.0868, underlining its importance, and 'online shopping' with a global weight of 0.0829.

Table 3  
Summary of results for the alternatives in Albania and Italy

Sub-criteria	Zara		H&M		Bershka		New Yorker	Pull & Bear	Inter sport	LC Waikiki
	Albania	Italy	Albania	Italy	Albania	Italy	Albania	Italy	Albania	Albania
1.1	0.198	0.303	0.147	0.248	0.149	0.195	0.146	0.254	0.125	0.234
1.2	0.234	0.332	0.156	0.223	0.167	0.181	0.113	0.263	0.179	0.151
1.3	0.224	0.310	0.157	0.269	0.140	0.185	0.128	0.236	0.150	0.199
2.1	0.286	0.358	0.168	0.216	0.168	0.184	0.111	0.242	0.135	0.133
2.2	0.276	0.337	0.176	0.206	0.170	0.194	0.116	0.262	0.140	0.123
2.3	0.250	0.330	0.173	0.257	0.161	0.178	0.123	0.235	0.134	0.159
3.1	0.250	0.341	0.153	0.208	0.164	0.179	0.107	0.272	0.200	0.126
3.2	0.248	0.343	0.148	0.216	0.165	0.182	0.114	0.258	0.204	0.121
3.3	0.273	0.352	0.156	0.218	0.165	0.189	0.115	0.241	0.171	0.120
4.1	0.235	0.328	0.166	0.233	0.157	0.193	0.119	0.246	0.171	0.152
4.2	0.226	0.334	0.159	0.231	0.154	0.193	0.126	0.242	0.185	0.148
5.1	0.267	0.347	0.158	0.225	0.161	0.192	0.119	0.236	0.161	0.134
5.2	0.271	0.362	0.175	0.229	0.145	0.193	0.114	0.216	0.164	0.131
5.3	0.253	0.359	0.166	0.232	0.154	0.195	0.123	0.213	0.164	0.141
6.1	0.286	0.328	0.162	0.244	0.156	0.175	0.113	0.273	0.151	0.133
6.2	0.245	0.340	0.152	0.236	0.146	0.171	0.117	0.253	0.177	0.163
<b>Overall priorities</b>	0.251	0.336	0.160	0.232	0.157	0.186	0.119	0.246	0.166	0.147

In Albania, the analysis of the questionnaires showed that Zara is the most liked clothing brand (0.251), followed by Intersport (0.166) and H&M (0.160). Only slightly lower is Bershka (0.157) which ranks fourth. LC Waikiki (0.147) and New Yorker (0.119) are the least preferred brands. Even in Italy, Zara is the most liked brand (0.336) in the tested age group, followed by Pull & Bear (0.246) and H&M (0.232). There is less interest in Bershka (0.186). This shows the preferences of young people in Italy, where Zara is the most preferred among the options offered. In both cultures, Zara emerged as the most favored brand among those considered. Table 3 shows that the Albanian consumer values Zara more for trend and online shopping (0.286), closely followed by individuality (0.276) and craftsmanship (0.273). On the other hand, the Italian consumer prioritizes Zara for influencer collaboration (0.362), social media interaction (0.359), trendiness (0.358), and craftsmanship (0.352).

#### 4.3 Sensitivity analysis

Since the AHP relies on individuals' opinions about pairwise comparisons, a sensitivity analysis helps understand how changes in these opinions affect the final decision (Kaftandzieva & Cvetkoska, 2021). Also, this analysis helps determine the factors with the most significant influence on the final decision, making it possible to obtain more accurate and reliable information and improve the main elements in the decision-making process. Regarding the data received from Albanian consumers, if the weight of the 'price and value' criterion increases above 0.3368, LC Waikiki will be positioned in

second place, unlike the initial ranking where it was in fifth place. When the weight of the 'style and fashion' criterion increases above 0.3368, Intersport, which was in second place, would move to fourth place, while H&M would be the second most preferred brand. If the weight of the criterion 'quality and sustainability' increases above 0.33, the alternatives positioned in the third and fourth place in the initial ranking change positions. The results obtained in the Italian region remain stable as a change in the weight of these criteria does not affect them. Also, the results obtained in both regions remain stable when changing the weight of the 'sustainability and ethical practices' criterion. This criterion had the least impact among all other criteria on the choice of a garment by consumers in both regions. During this analysis, the ranking of the alternatives in the Italian region remained unchanged; therefore, the results are considered stable. On the contrary, in Albania, the results are more sensitive to changes, even though the first and last preference did not change during the sensitivity analysis.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

In the process of choosing clothing brands, individuals are often influenced by different factors, including price, quality, style, comfort, production practices, and the promotion of brands on social media. Their choice is influenced not only by the above factors but also by the cultural and economic level of individuals.

The purpose of this study was to highlight the differences between consumers in Albania, where fast brands have been on the market for about 15 years, and Italian consumers, who are part of a country with long traditions in the fashion industry. There were differences in the factors influencing decision-making, but not in the brand preferences of individuals. Thus, while quality and durability were the most important for Albanian consumers who were more interested in the longevity of the clothes in their wardrobe, price and value were the priority for the Italian consumer, who gave more importance to purchasing a product that was worth the price paid.

The results in the Albanian region coincided with the findings of Hotamışlı et al. (2014), and Lohan et al. (2020) who indicated that quality was the most important factor in their studies. According to Braimllari et al. (2021), even though individuals in Albania increased their preference for online shopping after the 2019 COVID pandemic, they still prefer shopping in physical stores. This corresponds to the results shown by Andreti et al. (2013). Albanian individuals focused on the quality of the material of the clothing, while Italian buyers were more careful about the quality of the product and especially about the craftsmanship of the clothing; this corresponds to the result shown by Liu and Rodrigues (2021). Also, the evaluation of most factors such as price and value or individuality by Italian consumers coincides with the results shown by Chang and Jai (2015) and Hotamışlı et al. (2014). The results showed that the presence of brands on the Internet has a great impact on consumers; therefore, brands should invest more in their online presence. These results are consistent with the achievements shown by Shkeer, Sharabati, Samarah, Alqurneh, and Ali (2014). The findings of this article help retailers and clothing brand companies to understand consumer preferences, especially those companies that want to enter or expand in the Albanian or Italian market by meeting consumer needs.

There were several limitations in this study. First, the judgments were not made by experts in the field, but by consumers drawn from the population of the two countries under consideration. The sample was small and from limited areas, which did not cover

the entire territory. Even within an individual country, different regions have different cultures, and therefore different consumer approaches. Second, the study only focused on the clothing industry and the results may not be the same regarding other products in the fashion industry. Finally, 16 sub-criteria which may have the greatest impact on consumers were examined, but others could also have been included.

Constantly changing fashion trends require repeated adjustments of criteria and sub-criteria for further studies. Also, the TOPSIS method (Technique for ranking preferences according to similarity to the ideal solution) could be used to rank the alternatives, and then the results compared with the AHP. Finally, the study could be extended to include the entire Balkan region.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this article, through a detailed analysis, the criteria and sub-criteria influencing consumers from 18 to 43 years old to buy a garment in two different regions and cultures have been examined. Considering some of the fast fashion brands as alternatives, it was also possible to rank them according to consumer preferences. The results draw attention to the interactions between market-specific and cultural factors, influencing consumer purchase decisions. In both regions, the sub-criterion with the largest global weight is 'engaging content', even though it belongs to the least valued criterion. For the Albanian consumer, the criterion 'quality and durability', especially the sub-criteria 'material quality' and 'craftsmanship' are of particular importance. In the Italian context, economic factors take precedence, with the criterion 'price and value' and the sub-criterion 'value for money' ranking the highest. The second most important factor in both regions is 'online presence and social media', which reflects the growing influence of online platforms. Meanwhile, the least valued criterion in both cultures is 'sustainability and ethical practices', which indicates a lack of ethical awareness among consumers. Zara's dominance in brand preference in both regions shows that this brand follows the right policies for the market and the consumer.

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