

# Cross-Generational Investigation of Ethics and Sustainability. Insights from Romanian Retailing

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**Abstract** When targeting consumers, retailers have to increasingly rely on ethical principles, motivated by the need to achieve a favourable competitive position in their minds, exhibit a sustainable behavior and ensure the aesthetics and durability of sold merchandise. Business practices such as exploitation of labour, environment pollution, enforcing inhumane working conditions etc. are sanctionable worldwide and are key factors for individuals when taking buying decisions.

Based on a cross-generational empirical analysis in an emerging market, the paper examines their perception level towards ethical principles implemented by fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers when defining a sustainable strategy. The results clearly show that retailers concerned about respecting ethical principles on emerging markets, where consumers tend to be even more rigorous in their judgments of retailers actions and strategies. Regardless of their age, consumers select retailers which implement sustainable strategies, e.g. regarding reduction of pollution, selling green or environmentally friendly products, respect employees and working conditions etc.

## 1 Introduction

As early as the eighteenth century, Malthus (1798) called attention to the effect of resource depletion on the future of the human society. His writings may be thought of as precursors of the modern concept of sustainable development. In order to secure the sustainable future of the planet, public and private organizations worldwide make sustained efforts to define and implement development strategies that go

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better with the process of globalization (Newell 2012). Consequently, the concept of “sustainable development”, as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987), must fall within the realms of “global ecology”.

The lack of a clear and precise legal framework, its biased interpretation, the influence exerted upon the enactment of a legal provision and even its manipulation may create substantial advantages for some multinational corporations (C&A Sustainability Report 2014). Some of these advantages are influence peddling, appropriation of undue (monetary) benefits and/or subsidies, making unauthorized bank transfers, lack of transparency in financial reporting, indirect intervention in the allocation of resources at national level etc. Ensuring adequate life and working conditions for employees and their families, supporting educational, sports and food assistance projects in some Asian countries as well as other similar principles are among the principles of the Kik retailer (HelpandHope 2015).

To create a positive image in consumers’ mind, especially in the young people’s mind, who are much more sustainability-oriented (Barber et al. 2010; Martin and Tulgan 2001; Parment 2013), retailers have to pay greater attention to, and properly manage, the ethical aspects and principles. Employment of minors for various production activities, the extension of working time for employees, failure to consider their rights and the use of materials of questionable quality etc., are ethical challenges that today’s retailer face more and more frequently (McIntyre et al. 1999; Whysall 2000a; Talaulicar 2009). In this context, knowing their own customers’ opinions about their efforts to implement a sustainable and ethical strategy for reaching markets may improve the retailers’ market performance and especially their image.

To assess the extent to which the generations of customers are aware of the ethical actions implemented by fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers, an exploratory and empirical study was carried out among the customers of these retail formats present in Romania. Drawing on the literature, the authors identify the aspects that retailers must carefully pursue in order to improve their positioning strategies. The research findings highlight some managerial implications for fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers, as well as the relationship between sustainable behavior and business ethics.

## **2 Ethics in Fashion, Footwear and Sportswear Retail**

The extent to which a particular type of business behavior may be regarded as ethical in contemporary society represents a theme worthy of a proper debate. Companies have to consider the effects of their own actions on consumers and constantly strive to win consumers’ trust in their products and services and satisfy them. Any failure to do so will prompt customers to shift their interest towards other competitors, which affects the company’s market share, sales and profits (Schramm-Klein and Steinmann 2014). If the company’s approach to target

segments and international markets is marked by unethical behaviour, scandals, environment pollution, exploitation of employees or violation of their rights etc., its relationship with the customers may suffer as these can boycott the company's brands, products and services and reorient towards competitors and/or surrogates (Schramm-Klein and Steinmann 2014). That is why full awareness of all aspects that might translate into breaches of business ethics principles is a challenge for retailers. The retailers' success on the market and image among the target segments can only be boosted by studying consumers' behavior and perception of the sustainability practices adopted.

Unethical practices may question the legitimacy of international businesses and change the customers' perception of, and trust in companies, which may impair the effectiveness of market targeting. Therefore, the question arises whether the application of ethical principles to one's own businesses has or has not a "utilitarian" character intended to maximize the benefits from a business for the members of a society. Moreover, one has to determine the extent to which companies may or may not, in the context of globalization and legal regulations, abide by all business ethics norms and fall in line with the interests of all parties involved. This issue has been widely debated by researchers but their opinions are divided (Dunfee et al. 1999; Schramm-Klein and Steinmann 2014).

Several theories have been advanced by the literature for analysing the relationship between ethics and business in general (Whysall 2000b; Roberts 2005; Pretious and Love 2006; Iamandi and Filip 2008; Iamandi 2012; Elbeltagi and Agag 2016; Frunzã et al. 2016). Carr (1968) believes that, when fighting for competitive advantage, companies take any steps they deem necessary to maximize their profits and do not think about ethics at all. Friedman (1962) maintains that international businesses should be conducted with maximum legal responsibility and in compliance with ethical norms. Etzioni (2002) reached that conclusion that a company is ethically responsible towards all its stakeholders (business partners, society, customers, etc.). Ethics concerns a wide range of aspects and phenomena within the framework of international business. Regardless of society, culture, subject, organization (Roberts 2005; Pretious and Love 2006; Iamandi 2012), the principles of ethics must be applied with respect to corruption in its various forms (bribery, bureaucracy etc.), labour exploitation of employees, use of minors for profit, discrimination against various social categories, environmental pollution, exploitation of natural resources, deceptive advertising, product or brand counterfeiting, compliance with ethical principles by the company's stakeholders etc. The compliance with, and implementation of various codes of ethics by multinational corporations is so important that many international bodies and organizations have been set up to regulate the manner in which companies should approach the social issues related to employment (ILO 2006), international investments (OECD 2000; ICC 2012), pursuit of the common good (Caux 1994) etc.

## 2.1 *Proper Life and Working Conditions for Employees*

Offshoring the production of fashion, footwear and sportswear articles to third countries, other than the company's countries of origin and/or destination, which are mainly in Asia (Ternaux and Kolarova 2007; Totev and Sariiski 2010) often leads to the dissolution of all production capacities in the traditional markets. This raises serious questions about the ethical behaviour of retailers in targeting international markets. Instead of supporting the economy of their countries of origin, retailers opt for increasing their profits by delocalizing their production to countries with low labour costs per hour, to the detriment of countries where such costs are high (Pretious and Love 2006). The wages in Asia are often very low, amounting to an average of about 25–30 euros per month, for a working time that exceeds 8 h/day, 7 days a week (Ausbeutung 2015). According to a recent study, only 1% of the all-in price of a clothing article produced in some Asian countries represents costs for wages and salaries. 11% of the price represents logistics expenses and taxes, 15% is manufacturing costs, 25% is advertising expenses and 50% is the retailer's profit (Arbeitskosten 2015). Therefore, the question arises whether such business is ethical from the viewpoint of international regulations and whether it is fair that corporations in the fashion, footwear and sportswear industry turn huge profits from the extremely low paid work or that their finished products be sold at dumping prices to the "poor" European population (Dabija et al. 2016).

The "Ethical Trade Initiative" association recommends retailers and companies in the fashion, footwear and sportswear industry, which have production units in Asian countries, to define their own ethical behavior standards and norms, which should be strictly followed by employees across all activities, with a view to implementing a market-targeting strategy based on ethical principles (Eti 2015). As they want to produce with minimal costs incurred, retailers often overlook the safety of their employees. For example, a fire that broke out in 2012 in the factory building of a Bangladeshi supplier of fashion articles for the international retailer Kik killed about 300 people because the windows had security bars, the exit corridors were reduced or blocked by piled up raw materials, and the safety regulations were not complied with (Brandopfer 2012). Such poor working conditions translate into serious breaches of deontological ethics. Other Asian retail partners use various devices to watch employees when they work and when they take breaks, record various personal data without the employees' prior consent, prevent them from belonging to, joining or setting up unions while forcing them to sign employment contracts with unfavourable terms (forcing them to work overtime, unpaid time off etc.). There are many examples of breaches of ethical behavior norms, even to the point of forcing employees to buy unsold, expired or defective goods (Pretious and Love 2006; Schramm-Klein and Steinmann 2014).

In order to help the poor families of the Asian workers employed in the company's factories, Kik sells the goods manufactured by these workers through its own stores. The return thus generated is used to support various social projects. Kik also runs blood donation campaigns as well as campaigns for informing people

about the dangers and risks faced by consumers when buying counterfeit products etc. (Kik 2014; HelpandHope 2015).

## ***2.2 Relationship with Providers of Raw Materials***

Among the ethical measures adopted by fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers in the field of sustainable consumption is drop in the purchase of raw materials and the increased use of old materials, channelling investments in raw materials or organic origin or obtained by fair trade (Martin and Shouten 2012; Dabija and Pop 2013). In this way companies operating in fashion, footwear and sportswear industries contribute to the support of farmers in the poor areas, who obtain a fair price for the raw materials sold, which amounts to a decent standard of living for them (Dabija et al. 2014b).

In order to implement an ethical and sustainable strategy, some companies, such as C&A, strive to overcome such challenges by their efforts to improve the lives of Indian farmers who provide them with certified organic cotton necessary for producing fashion articles. Through its cooperation with various social foundations and organization, the company wanted to provide all farmers and their families with adequate education and training so that these may acquire or improve the knowledge about production processes (Crişan-Mitra et al. 2015). The company believes that, to approach sustainability holistically, it must cooperate with farmers and other stakeholders in the production markets to plan and develop the most “sustainable” fashion articles (C&A Sustainability Report 2014).

## ***2.3 Environmental Protection (Pollution Reduction)***

Within their sustainability strategy, some companies run specialized programs for collecting used fashion articles to reduce the consumption of raw materials and natural resources during the production processes and prevent the accumulation of textile wastes which need considerable time to decompose and get neutralized. It is estimated that, depending on their degree of wear, up to 95% of used fashion or sportswear articles may be reused or recycled, an aspect that is in compliance with business ethics (Shen et al. 2012). In order to increase the attractiveness of this strategy, H&M offers shopping vouchers to customers in exchange for their used clothes, depending on weight and number of articles. The articles collected are reintroduced in the process of manufacturing or used for insulation purposes in the auto industry (Rabla H&M 2015). The objective of H&M Foundation is to find the most innovative solutions for the use of textile materials and support the concern’s various social products (Conscious 2015).

## 2.4 *Deceptive Advertising*

To promote its own collections of underwear and swimwear, H&M decided to use virtual models with computer-generated faces of real, famous people. As the public was not informed of these changes, a serious ethical issue arose: the images displayed a fake female body, which misled potential customers. For example, one of the models was actually very slim, but in the computer-generated image clothed with H&M fashion articles, the hairstyle and make-up made her look cadaverous, attracting trenchant criticism from human rights organizations (Colectie Marni 2015). H&M stated that the purpose of the campaign had been to sell fashion articles, not to advertise female body shapes (Modele virtuale 2015). Another ethical concern was the fact that the body shapes of the models whose faces were displayed on posters were significantly different from the body shapes of the real person, marring the person's public image. H&M was also criticized by skin cancer organizations which attempt to inform the public opinion about the danger of long-term sunlight exposure, especially in the context of excessive suntan images promoted by the company. The retailer countered the criticism by stating that its sole objective was to better spotlight the summer colors of its collections (H&M Bronz 2015).

## 2.5 *Helping the Disadvantaged (Charity)*

Textile retailers are faced with image problems caused by the breach of ethical principles not only in the production stage but also in the distribution (marketing) stage. Despite H&M's belief that its sustainability strategy is marked by corporate ethical behavior based on integrity and respect (Strategia H&M 2015), in 2010 the company exhibited irresponsible behavior in a shameful episode harshly mauled by society. On a cold winter night, several trash bags with cut up new clothes were found in the neighbourhood of its Manhattan outlet (New York, USA) (Haine H&M 2015). Instead of being given to poor or homeless people, the unsold fashion articles were ignobly slashed, the sleeves were torn and the shoes pricked to prevent people from wearing them. H&M "skimped" on paying a modest amount for recycling these clothes and changing them into reusable fibres and also refrained from donating them to charities. The company would likely have produced more positive outcomes by running a "green" campaign rather than by dumping the fashion clothes (Kawalek 2015; Haine H&M 2015). Such behavior reflects the company's interest in preventing the creation of a negative image of its own brand if poor people, who usually cannot afford to wear such clothes, were seen or photographed wearing expensive fashion clothes. By destroying the clothes, the company virtually attempts to avoid competition with itself and maintain the exclusivity of its own collections.

## ***2.6 Reduction of Consumption (Quality over Quantity)***

The promotion of ethical values in the textile, footwear and sportswear industry contributes to the extension of the product lifecycle and helps companies find possibilities to reuse and/or recycle their products (Niinimäki 2010). Therefore, the aesthetic appeal of a pair of trousers, a blouse, shoe or sports suit etc., is of paramount importance as their design may drive customers to use them for a longer or shorter period of time. A major challenge for the fashion, footwear and sportswear retailer is finding some attractive classic designs suitable for each generation of consumers, which can be worn in multiple seasons. The materials must be wear-resistant and styles (designs) must be sober and modern, so that the fashion articles may be worn in multiple seasons (Niinimäki and Hassi 2011). It is, therefore, recommended that all fashion articles be properly maintained timely repairing, airing, cleaning and less frequent washing and, whenever possible, reconverted to keep pace with the latest fashion trends. Paradoxically, a greater number of fashion articles in the wardrobe of each individual and the less frequent use of each article may represent a viable model of sustainable and ethical consumption in the clothing industry (Niinimäki and Hassi 2011).

## ***2.7 Observing Customers' Consumption Traditions and Customs***

When targeting international markets, retailers have to take into account the national traditions, customs and conventions of the various local communities. Europeans and Americans are constantly in search of new models of fashion articles, changing their clothes several times a season. This suits perfectly the fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers as they annually launch several collections as part of their fast-fashion strategy (Swoboda et al. 2010b). On the other hand, the Japanese consumers are more traditionalist and perfectionist, having higher standards when choosing what to wear and preferring to wear a clothing article in multiple seasons. It was especially the fashion retailers that had to adapt to this trend in the Japanese market and pay increased attention to details (design, aesthetics, seams, stitches etc.). To increase their attractiveness and acceptance among consumers, fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers often cooperate with famous fashion designers to promote clothing articles in accordance with the cultural characteristics and traditions of a particular market (Masters 2015).

H&M is another outstanding example of adaptation to the characteristics of various targeted markets. Having to comply with the "Sharia" legal system, the Swedish company decided to open stores in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, UAE etc.) for women only and where women alone are employed to attend (H&M Orient 2012). Some images in the communication campaign were modified

accordingly so that the arms, hips, legs, cleavage etc., may be properly covered (Reclame H&M 2015).

## **2.8 Brand Counterfeiting**

Due to the success and recognition of their products and brands among target segments on the international markets, much famous fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers are confronted with the increasingly frequent ethical challenge related to brand counterfeiting and piracy. It is often the Asian companies that resort to large-scale counterfeiting of original products. Consumers face risks related to the quality of raw materials, comfort and durability of products, health while the company owning the original brand faces legal and ethical risks as well as damage from loss of profits, sales etc. (Dabija et al. 2014a).

Counterfeiting falls short of consumers' expectations as they are not necessarily aware that they were misled, putting the lower product quality down to the producer or distributor. This increases the risk of consumers' shifting attention towards the products of competitors (Swoboda et al. 2010a). To win the customers' trust, counterfeiters use symbols, names and brands very similar to the original ones (Dabija et al. 2014b). Jolidon, producer and retailer of sportswear articles, had to compete in the international markets with fake products from China and Vietnam. To prevent the counterfeiting of its products, the company sent a description of the products along with the visuals that distinguish the original from the fake to the customs authorities of various European states (Jolidon 2015).

## **3 Methodology and Data**

### **3.1 Research Objective and Operationalization of Constructs**

To accomplish the objective of the research, the authors used the survey method and the face-to-face questionnaire as the working tool. The statements were framed to operationalize the theoretical concepts presented in Table 1.

The questionnaire was administered to the representatives of the four contemporary generations: Baby Boomers (born between 1945 and 1964), Xers (1965–1979), Millennials (1980–1994) and Generation Z members (1995–2010) (Barber et al. 2010; Parment 2013). Since the research was only concerned with assessing the consumers' perception of the ethical actions of fashion, footwear and sportswear stores, only the Gen Y member older than 15 were surveyed as these have developed proper tastes and, to a certain extent, make independent shopping decisions. The respondents were approached in various public places, at their home, at the workplace or in front of the visited stores. The persons surveyed were asked



**Table 1** Operationalization of concepts

The favourite fashion/sportswear/footwear store ...
... establishes rigorous ethical standards.
... exhibits ethical behaviour when doing business.
... is socially responsible.
... is concerned with improving the welfare of society.
... supports noble causes.
... shows concern for the future of society.
... protects its employees.
... makes sustained efforts to create new jobs.
... informs its customers about the characteristics of the brands sold.

Adapted from Walsh and Beatty (2007); Niinimäki (2011); Martin and Schouten (2012); Dabija and Pop (2013); Schramm-Klein and Steinmann (2014); Dabija et al. (2014b)

to assess their agreement towards the statements presented in Table 1 on a five-point Likert scale.

The selection of the assessed store was made randomly. Respondents were actually asked to name three fashion, sportswear or footwear stores that they frequently visit or know very well. The interviewers were instructed to randomly choose one of the stores previously named by respondents and ask respondents to express their opinion in response to the questionnaire statements. A pre-established quota sampling plan typical of exploratory research (Plăiaş 2008; Dabija 2013) was used to select respondents according to a number of representative socio-demographic variables: age, gender, number of people in a household, net income per person (according to the data from the Romanian Statistical Yearbook 2014). Efforts were also made to ensure territorial representativity in the survey.

Following the collection of answers, these were systematized and subjected to some SPSS tests (checking data accuracy, trustworthiness and internal consistency). Then the Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ) and the “item-to-total” correlation (Churchill 1991; Dabija 2010) were determined for the previously operationalized statements (Table 1). The results of these tests show a high level of trustworthiness, with values ranging between 0.857 and 0.933.

### 3.2 Sample Structure

Given its exploratory and experimental nature, the questionnaire was administered through the survey method. Out of about 1500 collected questionnaires, only 952 were validated. These questionnaires contain assessments of independent (mostly Romanian) textile (623 answers), sportswear (187 answers) and footwear (142 answers) stores as well as of producer outlet stores belonging to (mostly foreign) retail chains and hypermarkets (Table 2). The apparently unbalanced structure of the sample, two thirds of which are fashion stores, is accounted for

**Table 2** Breakdown of fashion, footwear and sportswear stores by their status (own computation)

Store	Retail chains		Independent store		Outlet		Hypermarket/ Cash&Carry		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Fashion	487	51.16	64	6.72	58	6.09	14	1.47	623	65.44
Sportswear	127	13.34	5	0.53	55	5.78	–	–	187	19.64
Footwear	125	13.13	9	0.95	8	0.84	–	–	142	14.92
Total	540	77.63	78	8.19	121	12.71	14	1.47	952	100.00

by the fact that responses were randomly obtained—respondents were invited to name the favourite store—and the fashion stores far outnumber other categories of stores in the fashion, sportswear and footwear retail.

Among the stores that carry fashion articles are the international retail chains Inditex (Zara, Bershka, Massimo Dutti, Stradivarius, Pull & Bear), New Yorker, C&A, H&M, Kenvelo etc., the independent Romanian stores such as Bigotti, Guara, Effect, Eponje, IQ etc., the outlets Calvin Klein, Hugo Boss, Lee Cooper etc., and the large-area food and non-food stores such as Auchan, Cora, Carrefour or Lidl. Some of the international sportswear retail chains are Decathlon, Intersport, Hervis, the Romanian stores DH Sport, Fashionsport etc., the outlets Adidas, Puma, Nike, Reebok and many others. The footwear stores where Romanian consumers frequently shop are the international chains Humanic, Ecco, Deichmann, the Romanian stores Benvenuti, Ameli etc., as well as the factory outlets such as Marelbo and Clujana. The international chains have an incomparably greater number of stores in Romania than the Romanian distributors and producers, a fact that was confirmed by the 952 answers received. 88.7% (844) of answers were assessments of international chains (64.8% for fashion stores, 13.6% for footwear stores and 21.6% for sportswear stores) and only 11.3% of answers were assessments of Romanian stores (12.2% for fashion, 19% for footwear and 4.6% for sportswear stores).

As far as respondents' socio-demographic characteristics are concerned, the survey took into account their gender, county, residence (urban or rural), household size, education, generations of consumers and income. Initially, the authors wanted to insure the territorial representativeness of the sample but this could not be achieved because of the high costs incurred. The answers were finally collected from several counties of Romania (Alba, Arad, Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Brașov, Cluj, Harghita, Hunedoara, Maramureș, Mureș, Neamț, Prahova, Sibiu, Sălaj, Satu Mare, Suceava, Timiș). 53.9% of respondents (513 persons) were women and 46.1% (439 persons) were men (Table 3). Given the nature of the study and the fact that the assessments were made for non-food stores, most respondents were selected from urban areas (87.3%) and only 121 people from rural areas. It is likely that many respondents from rural areas may actually live in the neighbourhood of large urban areas and visit the city dwellers' shopping destinations (Table 3).

18 respondents did not state their income and 32 (3.45% of the sample) said they did not have any income, probably because they were students. At the moment of

**Table 3** Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (own computation)

Store	Fashion		Footwear		Sportswear		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Gender</i>								
Male	267	28.0	55	5.8	117	12.3	439	46.1
Female	356	37.4	87	9.1	70	7.4	513	53.9
Total	623	65.4	142	14.9	187	19.6	952	100.0
<i>Residence</i>								
Urban	546	57.4	115	12.1	170	17.9	831	87.3
Rural	77	8.1	27	2.8	17	1.8	121	12.7
Total	623	65.4	142	14.9	187	19.6	952	100.0
<i>Generations of consumers</i>								
Z (1995–present)	149	15.7	26	2.7	41	4.3	216	22.7
Y (1980–1994)	244	25.6	37	3.9	73	7.7	354	37.2
X (1965–1979)	149	15.7	52	5.5	47	4.9	248	26.1
Baby Boomers (1945–1964)	81	8.5	27	2.8	26	2.7	134	14.1
Total	623	65.4	142	14.9	187	19.6	952	100.0
<i>Net income (RON)</i>								
No income	18	1.99	3	0.33	11	1.22	32	3.45
Below minimum wages (925 RON)	58	6.42	4	0.44	17	1.88	79	8.74
Average minimum wage (925–2065)	273	30.20	68	7.52	86	9.51	427	47.33
2× average wage(2066–4130)	165	18.25	52	5.75	83	9.18	300	33.19
4× average wage (4131–8260)	29	3.21	11	1.22	11	1.22	51	5.64
Over four average wages	9	1.00	1	0.11	5	0.55	15	1.66
Total	552	61.06	139	15.38	213	23.56	904	100.00

conducting the research, 8.74% of Romanians had an income below the net national average wage (EUR 206) while most of them (47.33%) earned an income between the national minimum wage (EUR 206) and the net average wage (EUR 459). One third or respondents earn had a monthly income of up to twice the net average wage (EUR 918) and 5.64% of them up to four times the net average wage (EUR 1836). Only 1.66% of respondents win over four times the net average wage (Table 3).

A relative uniformity was noticed with regard to generation representativeness in the sample (Table 3). Thus most respondents belonged to the Millennials (born between 1980 and 1994: 37.2%) but quite a great number of them belonged to Gen Z (born after 1995: 216 persons) and Xers (1965–1979: 248 persons), respectively. Given the nature of the research and the demographic decline, there were fewer surveyed people belonging to the Baby Boomers generation, born between the Second World War and 1964. Overall, the number of Baby Boomers who took part in the survey amounted to 134 persons (14.1% of the total number of respondents) (Dabija et al. 2017).

The interviewees were also invited to state the frequency with which they make purchases in the visited stores. Most persons stated that they visited the fashion

**Table 4** Respondents' purchase frequency (own computation)

Store	Fashion		Footwear		Sportswear		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Once a year	47	4.9	17	1.8	18	1.9	82	8.6
Several times a year	261	27.4	69	7.2	94	9.9	424	44.5
Monthly	163	17.1	34	3.6	46	4.8	243	25.5
Twice or three times a month	133	14.0	18	1.9	25	2.6	176	18.5
Several times a week	19	2.0	4	0.4	4	0.4	27	2.8
Total	623	65.4	142	14.9	187	19.6	952	100.0

(27.4% of the sample), footwear (7.2%) and sportswear (9.9%) stores several times a year. About one quarter of respondents (Table 4) visit the three types of stores at least once a year, which bespeaks their constant search of new products and articles. The “heavy” consumers, those who visit almost on a daily basis the analysed stores, are few (2.8% of the total number), most of them preferring the fashion stores. There is, however, quite a great number of respondents (176) who stated that they visited the fashion, footwear and sportswear stores twice or thrice a month to discover the latest assortments and brands.

## 4 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 *Romanian Consumers' Perception of Retailers' Ethical Standards*

The respondents belonging to the four generations (Baby Boomers, Xers, Millennials, Generation Z) were asked to assess various actions which, according to the theory and practice in the field, international fashion, footwear and sportswear retail chains should undertake to show evidence of ethical behaviour that supports sustainable development. The first aspect pertained to interviewees' perception of the extent to which retailers have their own ethical standards, which should be sufficiently rigorous, in implementing their daily activities and strategies (Table 5). The data reveal that the various categories of respondents share relatively similar opinions, stating that their favourite fashion, sportswear and footwear stores have sufficiently clear sets of standards which people are properly informed about. However, the most sensitive to, and critical of these standards seem to be the Generation Z members (people born after 1995) who show the least trust in the capacity of the three types of retail formats (average assessment of 3.11) to really apply such standards. Millennials are less demanding in their assessment than those in the next generation (Z) but more demanding than the representatives of the previous generation (X). This was confirmed by individual assessments of fashion (3.15), footwear (3.33) and sportswear (3.15) stores as well as by general average assessments (Table 13). Interesting is the fact that Xers, the parents of today's

**Table 5** Retailers’ own enforced ethical standards (own computation)

The favourite ... store enforces rigorous ethical standards				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Overall
Z	3.13	3.08	3.10	3.11
Millennials	3.15	3.33	3.15	3.26
Xers	3.29	3.49	3.34	3.36
Baby Boomers	3.30	3.22	3.23	3.28
All generations	3.22	3.30	3.19	3.23

children, are the only ones to believe that the analysed retail formats enforce sufficiently stringent standards (general average assessment of 3.36), which was also confirmed by the individual assessment of footwear (average assessment of 3.49) and sportswear (average assessment of 3.34) stores. Baby Boomers are slightly more critical (overall average assessment of 3.28) as their assessment is generally closer to the grandchildren’s assessment (Millennials overall average assessment of 3.26) than to their own children’s assessment (overall average assessment of 3.36). This may be accounted for by the fact that Baby Boomers, who generally are distrustful, are influenced by their grandchildren when polishing their perception according to the standards of the younger generations (Table 5).

Respondents’ concern for the aspects related to business ethics in the fashion, sportswear and footwear trade is more than obvious (overall average assessment of 3.38). Respondents ranked fashion retailers (overall average assessment of 3.41) as the most ethical companies (Table 6) followed by sportswear retailers (overall average assessment of 3.39) and footwear retailers (overall average assessment of 3.39). The most concerned with the ethical behavior of retailers seems to be the older generation, Baby Boomers (overall average assessment of 3.50), most likely because their life experience makes them more demanding with the stores where they shop and think more deeply about sustainability and what they leave behind. On the other hand, at the opposite end is the younger generation, Generation Z (average assessment of 3.27) for whom the business ethics of the analysed stores is not an important factor. This may be accounted for by their youthful inexperience, greater willingness to make and accept compromises as well as their education which is way more permissive than that of other generations. As Table 6 indicates, the other generations have much higher expectations regarding retailers’ ethical behavior. Therefore, the generation of Generation Z (young students) or newly employed Millennials is more critical than their predecessors (overall average assessment of 3.32) but less demanding than the Xers (overall average assessment of 3.43). We find interesting the fact that business ethical behavior is very much expected by Millennials from footwear retailers (average assessment of 3.52) and by older people from fashion retailers (average assessment of 3.56). This is generally explained by the fact that these generations are more demanding with the retailers that provide them with the articles of which they are in greater need. We believe that, as generations grow older, they will become increasingly demanding with respect to the ethical behavior retailers have to exhibit within their businesses.

**Table 6** Respondents' concern with retailers' ethical behaviour (own computation)

The favourite . . . store exhibits ethical behavior in business				
Generation	Fashion. . .	Footwear. . .	Sportswear. . .	Overall
Z	3.29	3.24	3.32	3.27
Millennials	3.26	3.52	3.30	3.32
Xers	3.45	3.40	3.44	3.43
Baby Boomers	3.56	3.47	3.46	3.50
All generations	3.41	3.35	3.39	3.38

## 4.2 Retailers' Ethical Behavior Towards Society

Respondents were also asked to express their opinion about retailers' level of social responsibility, as presented in Table 7. Their opinion was quite good as they largely agreed that retailers were very much socially responsible (overall average assessment of 3.31). The Romanian generations do not differ significantly in their assessment of retailers' ethical behavior, only Gen Xers seeming to be slightly more critical (average assessment of 3.29). According to the opinion of this generation, namely, today's parents, footwear retailers in particular seem not to be sufficiently responsible (average assessment of 3.14). Several reasons may account for this situation. Gen Xers are poorly informed about the analysed retailers' social responsibility actions or they faced difficulties when looking for footwear articles for their families. Moreover, due to their active participation in the workforce, Gen Xers are generally more critical of society in general and of various companies and organizations (Table 7) "fighting" for the best position in consumers' mind.

The retailers should also be concerned with finding opportunities to improve the welfare of society as a whole. In this context, all generations of customers stated that their favourite fashion, sportswear or footwear stores (overall average assessment of 3.27) were making major efforts to this effect (Table 8). Although being the most critical with respect to this issue (average assessment of 3.22), Generation Z members believe that the greatest contribution to the welfare of society is made by sportswear stores (3.39), followed by fashion stores (average assessment of 3.15) and footwear stores. Gen Z members are likely to be more familiar with the sportswear stores as many of them do quite a lot of sport or are keen amateur sportspeople, which qualifies them to express a more informed opinion. A possible explanation for this phenomenon stems from the fact that sportswear retailers often have casual collections and the Millennials and Gen Z members buy fashion sportswear articles for daily wear as well. On the other hand, the older generation, Baby Boomers, are of the opinion that all types of retailers, be they fashion (average assessment of 3.32), footwear (average assessment of 3.35) or sportswear (average assessment of 3.34) stores, make remarkable efforts to improve the welfare of society as a whole. It is likely that these stores have managed to develop an attractive offer for this age group whereby they best fulfill their expectations,

**Table 7** Retailers’ social responsibility (own computation)

The favourite...store is socially responsible				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Overall
Z	3.38	3.27	3.32	3.32
Millennials	3.32	3.32	3.15	3.31
Xers	3.21	3.14	3.34	3.29
Baby Boomers	3.44	3.24	3.46	3.37
All generations	3.31	3.30	3.28	3.31

**Table 8** Retailers’ concern with the welfare of society (own computation)

The preferred ... store is concerned with improving the welfare of society				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Overall
Z	3.15	3.04	3.39	3.22
Millennials	3.26	3.25	3.14	3.24
Xers	3.05	3.29	3.30	3.25
Baby Boomers	3.32	3.35	3.38	3.34
All generations	3.19	3.20	3.27	3.27

bring them complete satisfaction and hold a favourite position in their mind (Table 8).

The generation X of active, mature people is more critical than the generation of grandparents (Baby Boomers) but less carping than that of young people (Generation Z), as they believe that retailers make a meaningful contribution to the progress of society (overall average assessment of 3.25). The same opinion, albeit with small variations across retailers, is shared by Millennials (overall average assessment of 3.24). It is likely that these generation segments generally identify the efforts made by retailers to support and improve the welfare of society as a whole (Table 8).

Retailers’ contribution to the welfare of society cannot be ensured unless they further various good causes, such as the landscaping of parks or other public places, organization of collections for charity, making donations to hospitals, schools etc. The members of all four generations were asked to assess the extent to which their favourite retailers took concrete actions/measures for the benefit of society as a whole, called “good causes”. As can be seen in Table 9, the members of all generations agreed that their favourite retailers were successful in carrying out such actions, taking advantage of various opportunities to support the “good” causes on behalf of society (overall average assessment of 3.25). The assessments by the generation members are extremely similar, with slight variations across the types of retail formats. Thus, the Gen Z members (average assessment of 3.30) and Baby Boomers (average assessment of 3.32) believe that fashion retailers are the most frequent and strongest supporters of good causes while Generation X (average assessment of 3.27) and Millennials (average assessment of 3.40) members seem to be convinced that the strongest supporters of such causes are footwear retail stores.

**Table 9** Retailers' support of good causes (own computation)

The ... store supports good causes				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Overall
Z	3.30	3.15	3.14	3.23
Millennials	3.23	3.27	3.15	3.25
Xers	3.19	3.40	3.17	3.26
Baby Boomers	3.32	3.07	3.12	3.28
All generations	3.28	3.25	3.16	3.25

Quite interestingly, none of the generations believe that sportswear retailers play any major role in supporting various “good” causes (overall average assessment of 3.16). The reason behind this situation may be the fact that fashion and footwear retailers try to a certain extent to raise public awareness about their concrete actions on behalf of society and the number of fashion and footwear stores is greater than that of sportswear stores. Therefore, sportswear retailers may very well carry out specific actions for the welfare of society but the number of such actions is likely smaller than the number of actions by fashion and footwear retailers. To set the matter straight, sportswear retailers should either raise greater awareness about such actions or increase their number so as to win a better position in Romanian consumers' mind (Table 9).

One of retailers' great concerns should also be for the future of society (Table 10). Respondents believe that the analysed retailers are sufficiently concerned with this aspect (overall average assessment of 3.91). They make sustained efforts so that their actions and campaigns (building public parks and playgrounds, supporting environment protection initiatives etc.) may help improve the living conditions within the society in general and within the society where they run production units (factories) or retail stores (distribution). Similar assessments were recorded among Millennials (3.83) and Generation Z (3.87) as well as among Baby Boomers (4.09) and Gen Xers (3.97). While younger persons seem to be more skeptical about the credibility of retailers' efforts and strategies for making a better future for society in general, persons with longer life experience believe that the analysed retailers have good sustainability policies and strategies and are greatly concerned with the future of society, in compliance with the principles of sustainability. On the other hand, sportswear retailers seem to be closest to the principles of sustainability (overall average assessment of 3.99), followed by fashion (overall average assessment of 3.88) and footwear (overall average assessment of 3.74) retailers. This difference in perception may stem from the fact that sport creates new dynamism in society and sportswear retailers are the most willing to innovate for increasing people's sports performance, thus exhibiting sustainable and ethical behavior (Table 10).

Retailers provide their customers with information about the characteristics of their products so that these may be able to distinguish the original products from counterfeit/fake products. As Table 11 shows, the overall average assessment of this action by all four generations is 3.71, which demonstrates a fairly great effort



**Table 10** Retailers’ concern for the future of society (own computation)

The favourite ...store shows increased concern for the future of society				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Overall
Z	3.83	3.67	3.92	3.87
Millennials	3.82	3.60	3.85	3.83
Xers	4.01	3.68	4.14	3.97
Baby Boomers	3.91	4.13	4.24	4.09
All generations	3.88	3.74	3.99	3.91

**Table 11** Perception of how much customers are informed about product characteristics (own computation)

The favourite ...store enforces proper policies for informing consumers about its own product/brand characteristics				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Total
Z	3.43	3.67	3.56	3.55
Millennials	3.82	3.60	3.85	3.74
Xers	3.67	3.68	3.54	3.65
Baby Boomers	3.91	3.83	3.87	3.86
All generations	3.68	3.73	3.77	3.71

on the part of retailers. Table 11 also presents some variations in perception. Thus, the generation of older people (average assessment of 3.86) believes that fashion; sportswear and footwear retailers have done their best to inform people about the symbols, designs and names of their brands. No matter the context, they can identify the retailers’ products and avoid the counterfeit ones. At the opposite end of perception are the Generation Z members (average assessment of 3.55) who state that retailers do not make enough efforts so that their customers may properly identify their original brands. This apparent paradox may be caused by young people’s shallowness in retaining information as well as by their distributive attention, which prevents them from remembering all the details.

On the other hand, Millennials who are either newly employed or complete their education (average assessment of 3.74), is more aware of the information provided by retailers for properly identifying their products. Gen Xers, represented by mature, employed people (average assessment of 3.65); believe that retailers could provide them with more information about the design, name and characteristics of the marketed products. This may be due to the fact that Gen Xers would rather knowingly buy fake products to satisfy their desire to wear “brands”. However, the price of some fashion or sportswear articles may often be so high that consumers prefer cheaper, no-name products (Table 11).

According to the data presented in Table 11, one can state that retailers make sustained efforts to properly inform consumers about the characteristics of their products and that there is plenty of room for improvement in this respect. Some

**Table 12** Retailers' protection for their employees (own computation)

The favourite...store protects its employees				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Overall
Z	3.37	3.25	3.54	3.42
Millennials	3.36	3.24	3.21	3.28
Xers	3.27	3.40	3.38	3.35
Baby Boomers	3.43	3.26	3.22	3.31
All generations	3.35	3.32	3.36	3.34

retailers choose to send customers personalized emails in order to inform them of their products but this is not a uniform practice.

### 4.3 Retailers' Ethical Behavior Towards Employees

The fashion, sportswear and footwear retailers also implement an employee-oriented sustainability strategy. In respondents' opinion, retailers are very successful in showing great care and protection (Table 12) for their employees (overall average assessment of 3.34). The most delighted with retailers' dealings with their employees are Generation Z (average assessment of 3.42), followed by Gen Xers (average assessment of 3.35). This may be especially due to the fact that many employees of fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers are young and get along well with most of their peers. However, it is interesting that Millennials, undergraduate or newly employed young people, are less delighted by the manner in which the analysed retailers treat or protect their employees (average assessment of 3.28). Various aspects may account for this situation, such as the experiences these young people went through during some seasonal work or internship when they had first-hand contact with the way in which retailers use their employees for various activities. This is likely the reason why Millennials are less delighted with the way in which retailers select and protect their employees. Baby Boomers are also of the opinion that the analysed retailers are less successful in protecting their employees (Table 12).

With regard to the efforts made to create new jobs (Table 13), the Romanian consumers believe that fashion; sportswear and footwear retailers have generally developed a proper strategy (overall average assessment of 3.35). The respondents of all four generations are fairly satisfied with this action, the most favourable opinion being that of Gen Z members (average assessment of 3.51) for the fashion retailers (overall average assessment of 3.36). This is evidence that Gen Z envisage good employment opportunities with the fashion retailers. The action of creating new jobs is not positively assessed by the generation of older persons in the case of footwear retailers (average assessment of 3.07) likely because the members of this generation are not regarded as potential employees. Respondents' assessment of sportswear retailers is less positive, with the exception of the generation of older

**Table 13** Perception of retailers' efforts to create new jobs (own computation)

The favourite...store makes sustained efforts to create new jobs				
Generation	Fashion...	Footwear...	Sportswear...	Overall
Z	3.51	3.35	3.10	3.39
Millennials	3.39	3.46	3.12	3.31
Xers	3.24	3.21	3.21	3.26
Baby Boomers	3.21	3.07	3.42	3.37
All generations	3.36	3.27	3.18	3.34

people who believe that these stores make real efforts (average assessment of 3.42) to create new jobs. Paradoxical as it may seem, their perception is justified by this generation's many years of experience with sportswear articles. Last but not least, Baby Boomers are not frequent shoppers of sportswear articles so that their knowledge about sportswear retailers is likely based more on the retailers' communication with customers or the information obtained from grandchildren and less on their own experience with these stores (Table 13).

## 5 Conclusions

Many fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers have lately laid down various corporate codes of conduct in which they often refer to ethical principles, social responsibility issues, sustainable consumption, environment protection, human and employee rights, supporting the education of communities in which production facilities are located, punishment for corruption, recycling and/or reusing of goods, the enforcement of strict environment protection standards. Such norms and regulations also stipulate the relationships to be established with business partners (suppliers of raw materials and other goods, producers, transporters, distributors etc.) which, in turn, are required to strictly abide by their own standards (Rehbach 2010; Niinimäki 2011; Kruger et al. 2012; Schramm-Klein and Steinmann 2014; Water 2015).

As the research clearly shows, the fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers always try to apply ethical standards when doing regular business, satisfying their customers' desires and developing their own offers. The ethical behavior of the analysed retail formats is properly perceived by the Romanian consumers as they generally agree that retailers carry out specific ethical actions. Certainly, there is plenty of room for improvement in this regard. Moreover, the retail chains develop strategies that are as socially responsible as to enable the companies to be concerned to a great extent with improving the general welfare of society. All analysed retailers are concerned with the future of society by supporting various good causes, such as environmental preservation, supporting local communities in which production facilities are located, ensuring protection for their employees etc.

The fashion, footwear and sportswear retailers' ethical behaviour goes one step further as companies are willing to ensure protection for their employees and create new jobs.

The twenty first century consumers will "sanction" any retailer that conducts activities contrary to the principles and norms of ethical behavior, cooperates with business partners that indulged in morally wrong or unsound practices or pursue and implement actions contrary to sustainable consumption by shifting their interest towards competitors that constantly apply ethical standards and abide by the "rules of the games", making negative recommendations, ceasing to visit the retailer's store chains and purchasing fewer products in general and its own brands in particular.

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