Generation Z’s online shopping behaviour towards clothing in a pandemic era

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Abstract

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Generation Z's older cohort has reached adulthood and is expected to become a powerful economic force, playing a pivotal role in the future of shopping. As a generation that was born after the advent of the internet and has never seen a world without smartphones, they are considered to be more technology-savvy and feel more comfortable in an online environment than other, older demographics . Conversely, previous studies suggest that even cohorts that are considered digital natives, such as Generation Z, are still more inclined to shop at physical stores rather than online, especially for products carrying a sensory experiential attribute in nature like clothing. However, the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak has caused disruption in society worldwide and accelerated a move towards online shopping. This research explored Generation Z's online buying behaviour towards clothing in Ireland in a pandemic context wherein three main topics were discussed: the changes that occurred, the perceptions regarding online shopping for clothing, and predictions for a post-pandemic era. The study was conducted using qualitative methods of one-on-one in-depth interviews with individuals aged between 18 and 25. The findings suggest that Generation Z's urge for processes that are more convenient timewise and products that are advantageous pricewise, combined with the constraints provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns, have led this cohort to be more open to the experience of online shopping for clothing as they become more trusting of and accustomed to the process.

Declaration

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to provide the reader with the research topic addressed, helping them become familiar with the subject and understand the need for the study. The chapter starts with an explanation of the research background in which the researcher approaches the main topics covered in the literature review. The chapter finishes with a presentation of the study's structure to guide the reader throughout the work. Throughout this paper, the researcher used the terms 'Generation Z' and 'digital natives' interchangeably, following the terminology used in previous research (Wood, 2015; Gutfreund, 2016; Priporas et al., 2017; Southgate, 2017; Scholz and Rennig, 2019; Talmon, 2019).

1.1. Research Background

It is common knowledge that the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused significant disruptions worldwide, dramatically changing how individuals interact. While some people see these changes in behaviours as temporary, where life would revert to "normal" as soon as the shock is passed, others believe that the notion of hysteresis is applied to the current context, meaning that the impact caused by a change on a system cannot be reversed by simply removing the force (Birkinshaw, 2021). In this regard, changes could be enduring and sometimes even permanent. Recent research showed that consumer behaviour had been disrupted due to numerous constraints caused by the pandemic, such as social distancing restrictions, lockdowns, and mobility shortage, accelerating trends and leading consumers to develop and adopt new habits, referred to as the 'new normal' (Roggeveen and Sethuraman, 2020; Ward 2020; Zwanka and Buff, 2021). In this context, technological innovations have played a pivotal role, helping both businesses and consumers to overcome the barriers imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, where Sheth (2020) claimed that consumer's massive migration to online shopping had been one of the immediate changes adopted as a means to overcome some of the limitations. However, one may argue that products carrying a sensory experiential attribute in nature can face more barriers to adapting to the 'new normal', which could be the case of clothing articles.

Rajani and Nakhat (2019) depicted the difficulties faced by products that carry sensory experiential characteristics, such as clothing. According to the authors, even the youngest consumers, referred to as digital natives, presented the need to use their touch to feel products before purchasing certain items. They argue that this need has led some consumers to prefer purchasing at physical stores rather than online, reinforcing the obstacles in the migration process. On the other hand, despite the existing hurdles, Darley, Blankson and Luethge (2010) outline that severe economic downturns may result in individuals considering new or alternative ways of shopping. That would be the case of our current pandemic context, which is surrounded by uncertainty and has negatively affected the economy worldwide, including Ireland (Burke-Kennedy, 2021). However, a question is posed about whether the 'new normal' will become permanent or revert, where Sheth (2020) claims that many of these new habits will not endure in a post-pandemic era.

The massive accelerated migration to online shopping has significantly changed consumer behaviour, being part of the 'new normal'. There has been a dramatic increase in Irish eCommerce during the pandemic, where currently, 68% of consumers purchase online (ecommerceDB, 2020). Alongside food & drinks and shoes, clothing articles are among the top three interests of consumers regarding online shopping. Furthermore, additional growth of 8.1% can be observed in the fashion category's revenue forecast compared to the beginning of the pandemic. Figure 1 depicts the Irish top ten interests by product categories where Clothing was the main interest of most consumers, representing 78% of the population surveyed. However, 19% of the respondents pointed that they missed the shopping experience when purchasing online, reinforcing the idea that some consumers prefer buying at bricks-and-mortar. Although in terms of numbers, the most representative cohort in the report was the group aged between 35 to 44 years old, this paper focused on the youngest cohort, previously referred to as digital natives.

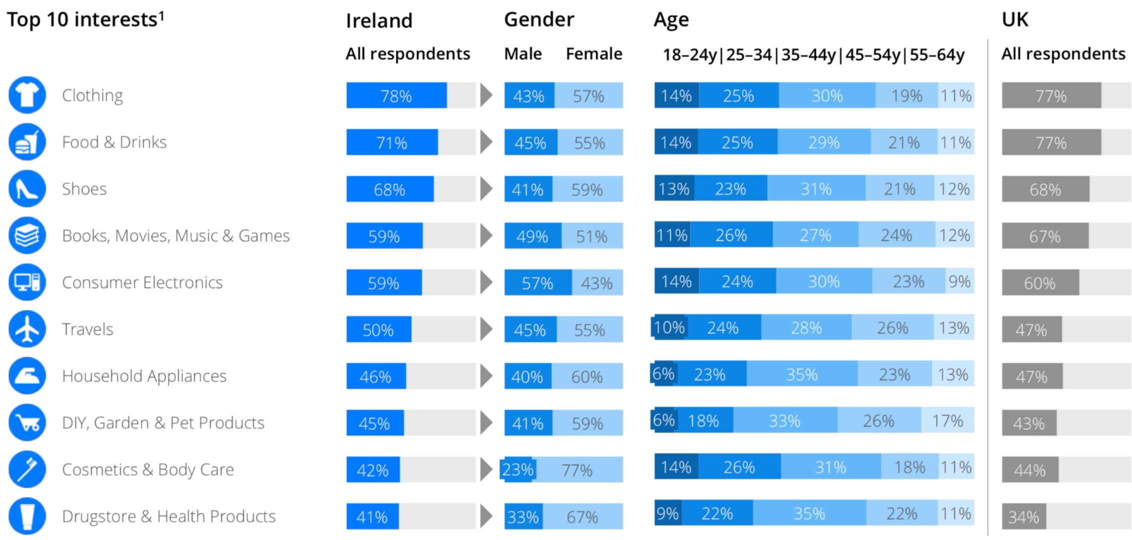

Figure 1. Online behaviour: interest in product categories (Source: ecommerce DB, 2020)

Also referred to by the term 'Generation Z', this youngest cohort is identified as digital natives since they were the first generation to be born and grow up with the technology of smartphones (Southgate, 2017). Preceded by Generation Y, Generation Z individuals are born between the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Figure 2) and aged between 9 and 24 years old. Accounting for approximately 12.5% of the Irish population (Irish population by age 2019, 2020), Generation Z is technology-savvy, highly educated, and has the influential power to redefine consumption and production more than its previous generations (Priporas, Stylos and Fotiadis, 2017). In addition, Gutfreund (2016) points out the increased interest in studying the consumer behaviour of Generation Z's older cohort as they reach adulthood and become an economic force, playing a pivotal role in shopping.

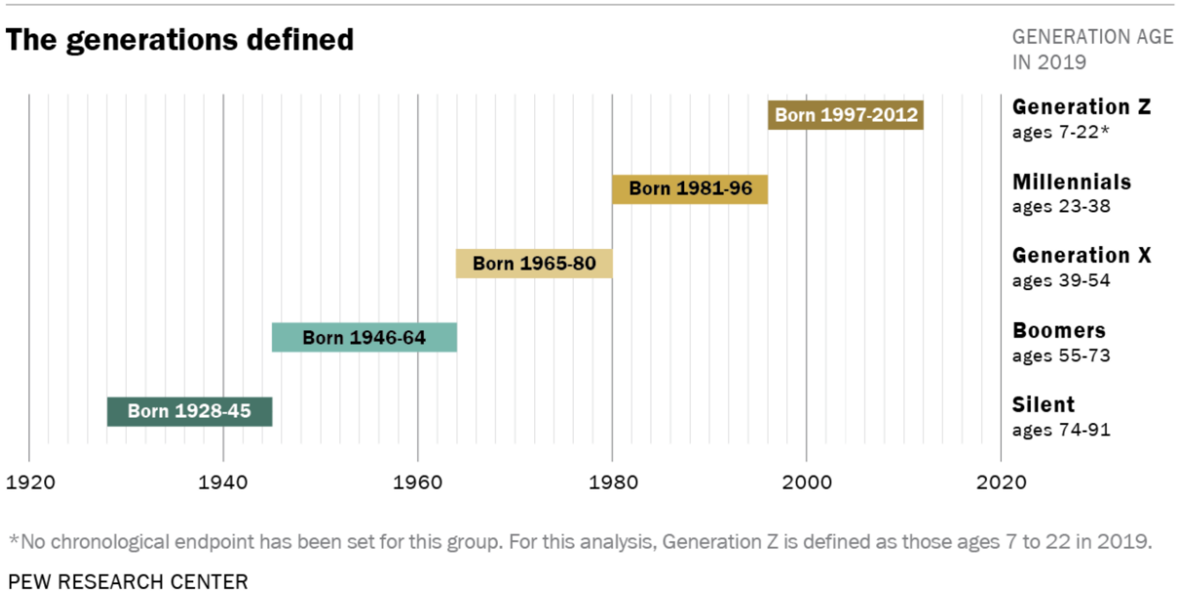

Figure 2. Generations defined by years (Dimock, 2019). Source: Pew Research Center

Generation Z is expected to become a vital economic force within the next few years, making the cohort a target for marketers. Consequently, issues related to their interests and behaviour regarding online purchasing will be raised. However, previous works have either only focused on Generation Z's consumer behaviour as a general subject or been limited to addressing online shopping behaviour. Although it is well known that the young generations had already adopted online shopping before the pandemic, Generation Z's online shopping behaviour towards a sensory experiential market like apparel has not been explored from a COVID-19 pandemic perspective. Furthermore, previous research has not established what changes were caused by the pandemic and which are more likely to remain in a post-pandemic era. Therefore, this research aimed to broaden current knowledge of Generation Z's online buying behaviour, addressing how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed or affected their shopping behaviour towards clothing, a category with a strong sensory experiential characteristic.

1. 2. Research Structure

The first chapter of this research introduced the topic studied with the objective to present to the reader key theories about the topic under examination and explain why it is worthy of study. Chapter two reviewed the literature related to the research topic. In the second chapter, the researcher discussed consumer behaviour in a COVID-19 pandemic era, moving on to online shopping behaviour towards clothing and then Generation Z as online consumers.

Chapter three presented the research question and objectives, whereas the following chapter described the methodological approach applied in the study. In the fourth chapter, the researcher explained how the problem was investigated, providing details of the sample population, the research instrument used, and the data collection and analysis. The chapter also presented the limitations of the methodology and ethical considerations.

Chapter five depicted the research findings. This chapter presented the findings divided by the themes that emerged during the data collection and analysis and related to the literature. In chapter six, the researcher reflected on and discussed how the findings connected to previous studies. In addition, it also discussed what the new insights would mean for marketing practitioners. Finally, chapter seven is the conclusion of the research, providing answers to the questions posited. In addition, it discussed this study’s reliability and validity, providing the reader with suggestions for future research possibilities. At the end of this work, the reader is provided with a reference list and appendices.

Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The second chapter aims to review the literature that addresses the main subjects of this research. The study shed light on the Irish Generation Z online shopping attitudes towards clothing in a pandemic era. Therefore, the literature review provides an in-depth analysis of the topics related. The researcher started by exploring consumer buyer behaviour and the factors that influence consumers' choices, followed by a further study on online buyer behaviour and narrowing it down to attitudes regarding clothing. Afterwards, the literature review addressed the Generation Z online shopping behaviour, which is the population included in this study, where the focus is the Irish digital natives. The last sub-chapter approaches Generation Z online buyer behaviour from a COVID-19 pandemic perspective, wherein the researcher explores some of the significant changes in online consumer behaviour caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of this chapter, the researcher summarised the topic, identifying existing gaps.

2.1. Consumer Buyer Behaviour

The study of consumer behaviour in marketing encompasses the processes of purchase, use, consumption and disposal of ideas, experiences, services or products by consumers (Tetteh, 2021). It involves the study of when and how individuals take actions to fulfil their needs. Furthermore, it studies the reasons that lead to a decision to consume a product or service and its impacts on society and consumers (Tetteh, 2021). According to Kotler (1965), consumers are subjected to a variety of stimuli that follow a convoluted path through their minds, finally leading to clear purchasing responses. From his perspective, the buyer's psyche is a "black box whose workings can be only partially deduced" (Kotler, 1965, p.37). The author presented five distinct models of buyer's black box that shed light on human behaviour, later classifying them into psychological, personal, social and cultural. Rajagopal, Castano and Flores (2016) argued that consumer behaviour is influenced by socio-cultural factors. They outlined that individual and group behaviour are governed by culture, the underlying value system, frequently manifested in the behaviour learned over timeindividuals gradually understand when an individual gradually understands their cultural demands. Buttle (1998) highlighted the idea that individuals are enmeshed in numerous systems encompassed by their own rules of action and meaning, wherein buying episodes can be thought of as settings for the expression and (re)construction of resources. Moreover, due to consumption being time and location bound, new habits about what, where and when to consume are developed over time (Sheth, 2020).

Consumers' buying behaviour is influenced by a set of personal, cultural, economic and social factors, such as the product's uniqueness, consumer's culture and ethnicity, technology and innovation, leisure, ambience and facilities (Rajagopal, Castano and Flores, 2016). An important aspect that impacts consumer buyer behaviour is the notion that any purchasing activity implies risk. Raymond Bauer conceptualised perceived risk in 1960, in which consumers feel the uncertainty of whether they will be able to accomplish their buying goals through the intended purchase due to the perceived risks associated with shopping (Guru et al., 2020). Researchers have identified a range of risks that consumers associate with the shopping activity on traditional channels (offline): time or convenience, regarding the time lost in retaining or buying a product; psychological, related to mental stress and dissatisfaction; product performance, with relation to the product's most essential aspect; and financial, related to the loss of money (Wani and Malik, 2013). Conversely, there are also perceived benefits associated with a product, which respond to perceived or actual risks, beliefs regarding positive outcomes (Chandon et al., 2000). Tingchi Liu et al. (2013) highlighted that previous research identified that perceived benefits could be influenced by nonfunctional and functional motives. While nonfunctional are hedonic motivations linked to emotional and social needs, functional relate to utilitarian functions, such as price, quality, variety, and convenience.

An important theory in consumer behaviour that explores the hedonistic aspect of shopping motivations and helps one understand how the buying decision process is influenced is the 'self-concept'. Holman (1981 cited by Sirgy 1982) claimed that three primary conditions differentiate products as means for communication: personalizability, variability and visibility. Personalizability is what leads the use of a product to be related to a stereotype of a user, whereas variability allows individuals to differentiate themselves based on the product's use. Visibility is what makes the product associable with personality since the product has to be consumed or purchased conspicuously. An individual's concept of self is a combination of their ideal self (whom they would like to be) and their actual self (whom they think they are). It is governed by two principles: the impulse to enhance one's self-esteem and the impulse to achieve self-consistency, meaning that individuals embody various 'selves' acting according to their concept of actual self (Surugiu and Surugiu, 2012). The self-concept, also referred to as self-image, is intrinsically connected to how individuals consume clothing items since the articles are used as a tool to build a particular image, wherein other individuals' perceived opinions can motivate and moderate one's choices (McNeill, 2018). According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992 cited by McNeill 2018), an individual's clothing helps them communicate their personality as a representation of self. In a recent study, Jeong and Ko (2021) identified that fashion consumption has a symbolic meaning as a self-expression process for current generations of consumers, particularly Generation Z, and an influencing relationship between a product's perceived value and consumer buyer behaviour.

The idea of analysing behavioural patterns from a generational cohorts approach was explored in-depth by Schuman and Scott (1989). They claimed that consumers could be divided into different groups of generations based on the impact of significant events, collective experiences and collective memory. Furthermore, the authors explored the concepts of one of the pioneers in determining the effects of biological ties and political and social events experienced by a specific group, Karl Mannheim (1952 cited in Schuman and Scott 1989). Although he posited that it is not completely clear at which point a generational cohort begins to emerge and develop unique characteristics, the author specified the late adolescence (around 17 years old) as the start point. On the other hand, the age of 25 (early adulthood) was claimed to be the endpoint of generational development. For this reason, the researcher has chosen to explore consumer buyer behaviour from a generational approach, focusing on consumers aged from 18 to 25.

2.2. Online Buyer Behaviour

The advent of the internet has brought new perspectives to consumer buyer behaviour since its use as a platform for shopping has allowed consumers to shift from offline to online gradually. The online consumer behaviour research encompasses social network and psychological theories to analyse consumer behaviour on the internet. Previous research argued that the complexity of the online consumer behaviour phenomenon is what has led to a growing number of studies that propose to analyse and interpret how the evolution of the internet has affected consumer behaviour (Darley et al., 2010; Cummins et al., 2014; Martinez-Ruiz and Moser, 2019). Furthermore, since interactions between consumers, shops and products or services occur in a different environment and at different levels, it has also resulted in added perceived risks, such as privacy, social, delivery and after-sale (Hong et al., 2019). In recent research, Bashir et al. (2021) proposed a new framework of perceived online shopping risks that encompasses eleven dimensions of consumers' concerns: prior-purchase time delays, post-purchase time delays, displeasure, unease, isolation, transaction failure, illegitimacy, high price, incapable e-servicing, deception and product dissimilarity. On the other hand, Haji Ahmad et al. (2020) posited that the benefits perceived and received by online shoppers motivate them, which usually includes the variety of options and prices, better deals, comparing the risks involved in online shopping with their trust in the benefits provided.

As a multi-channel medium in constant evolution, the internet has allowed consumers to seek information and share it with other consumers. Based on previous literature, Cummins et al. (2014) proposed categorising online consumer behaviour according to eras, where three eras were identified and labelled as Incubation (1993 - 2004), Exploration (2005 - 2008), and Explosion (from 2009). According to the authors, these labels reflected changes in topics and scholarly attention across years, positing that we are currently standing in the third era, defined by user-generated content, such as social media networks and review websites like TripAdvisor. On the other hand, broadening the study of consumer behaviour in an online context, Martinez-Ruiz and Moser (2019) argued that each of the web's evolution stages distinctly impacted consumer behaviour. According to the authors, the first stage, referred to as Web 1.0 or Basic Web, was primarily intended for exchanging data and executing basic commercial transactions. The second stage, referred to as Social Web or Web 2.0, represented a remarkable evolution as an enabler of collaboration and social interaction at a global level. The Semantic Web or Web 3.0 was the third stage and combined artificial intelligence and human, providing more accessible and relevant information targeted at specific consumer groups. Finally, Web 4.0, referred to as Symbiotic Web, is characterised by connecting people in real and digital worlds, real-time and at any time, providing a different level of analytic services and user-generated content.

While we are currently standing at Web 4.0, there has been a call for looking to a next stage where interaction with consumers and reading of emotions will be propelled by technological advances, driving us to Web 5.0, the 'Sensory Web' (Martinez-Ruiz and Moser, 2019). Kambil (2008) had already anticipated how the fifth stage of the web's evolution would present itself, stating that it would be emotionally responsive, aware of users' feelings. The author claimed that, for businesses, Web 5.0 carries the challenge to tailor interactions to provide emotionally resonant experiences, which represents the urge for eCommerce to adapt to real-time and customised communications with consumers. With the most recent technology innovations comes an exponential surge in web-based interactions across numerous channels, with adaptive technologies that forecast and shape interactions and real-time responses.

Darley et al. (2010) outlined that previous research acknowledged the complexity of the online consumer behaviour phenomenon and that there has been an urge to focus on satisfying human needs. This idea seems to be reinforced by the web's next stage, wherein responsive experiences are more important than simply emphasising technology. This urge is also reflected in the fact that even younger cohorts, such as Generation Z, still need to touch and feel when buying certain products (Rajani and Nakhat, 2019). According to Dutta and Das (2017), the need for touching and feeling leads some consumers to prefer shopping for particular items at brick-and-mortar instead of online and use traditional search instead of online search. Despite the hurdles, technological innovations, such as the evolution of the web, have been changing how people consume goods and services, seek information and shop, increasing online purchases and the likelihood of online shopping (Morewedge et al., 2021). Besides, Rajagopal, Castano and Flores (2016) hold that individuals buy at different stores for both experiential and goal-oriented reasons, wherein experiential motives were found more common among online shoppers.

In Ireland, the digital commerce penetration rate grew from 65.1 in 2019 to 68 in 2020, and the forecast for 2021 is that this number will reach 70.7 and keep increasing within the next four years, reaching 77.5 in 2025 (see Figure 3). These numbers represented growth from 3.2 million in 2019 to 3.4 million users in 2020 and expected growth of 17% until 2025, reaching 4 million users in Ireland. In a country where the internet penetration is 91% (Digital in Ireland: All the Statistics You Need in 2021, 2021), 68% of eCommerce penetration is a significant figure showing how online shopping has evolved and become an essential part of Irish online consumer behaviour. As one may notice, since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the Irish online consumer behaviour, and another trend that has been identified is the increased preference for local shops. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 53% of consumers have shopped with Irish SMEs versus 47% purchased from international retailers, figures that were the opposite before the crisis (More consumers buy Irish when shopping online - report, 2020).

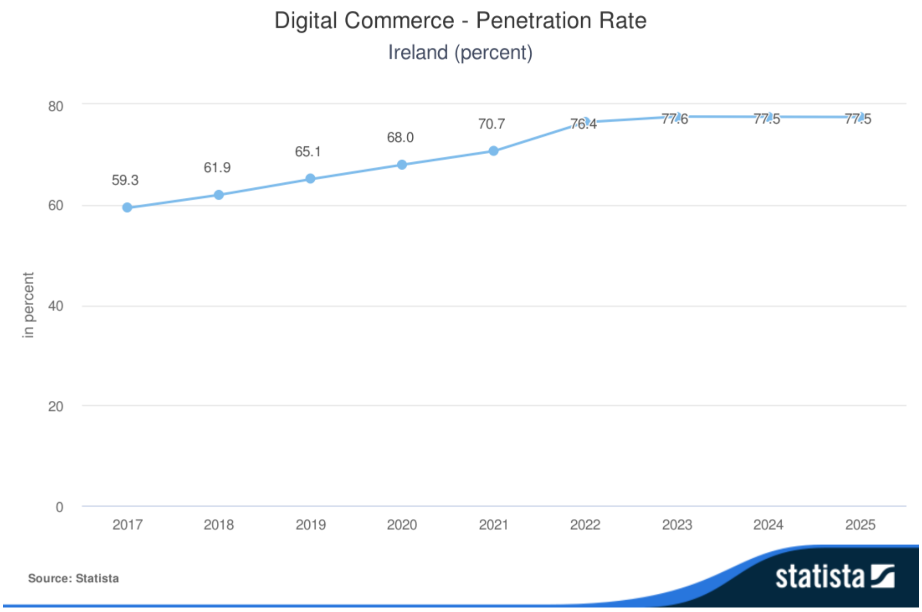

Figure 3. Digital Commerce - Penetration Rate in Ireland. Source: Statista, 2020

The shift from consumers of online information to content providers has been one of the most significant changes in the web's evolution process. It has represented a tremendous advantage for users in providing content in the form of experiences, facts, instructions, opinions, recommendations and evaluations, which has positively impacted consumers' trust. For instance, according to recent reports (ecommerceDB, 2020), 62% of Irish consumers research the internet before purchasing. This phenomenon involves more than a simple consultation of prices; it encompasses the pursuit of information generated by other users who have already experienced the products, wherein 48.5% of Irish online shoppers consider consumer reviews when researching a brand (Digital in Ireland: All the Statistics You Need in 2021, 2021). However, a further vital concern continues to be the online consumer's inability to touch and feel products, which leads e-shoppers to perceive more risk when purchasing items like fashion apparel that offer a specific fabric, feel or fit (Bashir et al., 2021). Besides, consumers also experience other particular interactions that may be perceived as a risk in this process, negatively affecting them, such as physical products not matching the expectations created based on online ads' perceptions or even issues with the payment process and return policy.

One of the industries affected by some of these perceived risks and considered part of a touch-and-feel environment is the apparel market. However, due to the increased competition in a globalised world, clothing retailing is challenged by a range of distribution channels, driving brands like Zara, H&M, Pull&Bear, Bershka, Mango, River Island, and others to migrate online in order to create new omnichannel strategies. A recent report (ecommerceDB, 2020) has pointed to 'Fashion' as the most prominent category based on Irish digital commerce net sales, wherein Clothing is amongst the top 3 interests of Irish online consumers. For this reason, the following sub-chapter focuses on exploring online shopping behaviour towards the apparel market.

2.3. Online Buyer Behaviour Towards Clothing

Goldsmith and Goldsmith (2002) identified in their study that online apparel buyers and non-buyers presented one significant difference in their behaviour: buyers were accustomed to spending more time browsing online. Later, Goldsmith and Flynn (2004) claimed that innovators represented most online apparel shoppers and argued that this characteristic implied the phenomenon's future growth, confirmed by the current increasing adoption of online shopping. Features like a clear return policy, a wide range of good fits and a secure system are primary factors influencing consumers' decisions regarding online purchase of apparel products (Young Kim and Kim, 2003). According to Kim et al. (2007), offering ways to examine the products' attributes more effectively could enhance the online clothing shopping experience. In this regard, converging physical and online worlds through an omnichannel strategy has become a challenge for many retailers. Patodiya and Birla (2016) argued that apparel companies willing to invest in omnichannel strategies to meet consumers' needs should focus on user experience design and interaction, developing better websites, feedback systems, and service delivery quality. According to the authors, it would help increase users' level of trust and comfort to the extent that the touch feel-hear aspect would be reduced. In Ireland, 20% of online shoppers reported issues related to the speed of delivery in 2019, while 9% of shoppers pointed out the technical failure of the website (Internet Purchases - CSO - Central Statistics Office, 2019). Issues with damaged or wrong goods, poor customer service and fraudulent activity were cited by 8%, 7% and 3% of users, respectively.

Considering the apparel products sensory experiential characteristics, purchasing online has always been a challenge for consumers. According to Mróz-Gorgoń and Szymański (2018), clothing size and different standards, differences between colour on the screen and the actual product, and the lack of possibility to try it have led to the Research Online Purchase Offline effect (ROPO), also referred to as Research Online Buy Offline (ROBO) and 'webrooming'.

The ROPO effect has been fostered by Web 2.0, which enabled consumer-generated content. It occurs when people gather substantial information online to qualify their buying decisions, but the purchase takes place offline, in-store. Baldwin (2019) pointed out that Fashion is a particularly vulnerable category to the ROPO effect since consumers want to try on clothes prior to purchasing. According to the author, despite the massive growth of online fashion retail, physical stores will still be high-traffic sites for two main reasons: consumers want to see and feel the products, and they also want to avoid the hassle of returning items via post. On the other hand, the opposite practice of examining products and gathering data in-store but purchasing online, referred to as 'showrooming', has also become common in omnichannel consumer behaviour. Flavián, Gurrea and Orús (2020) argue that while consumers are still more attracted to physical shops to complete their purchase, their distrust of online shopping tends to decline as consumers gain more familiarity and experience with the process.

With the increasing rise of the use of mobiles, retailers started to include mobile as part of their omnichannel strategies to bridge the gap between eCommerce and physical stores. Companies such as Zara, H&M, Pull&Bear, Bershka, Mango, Stradivarius, and others have developed branded apps that allow users to shop and scan products in-store to find their available sizes and colours in the online store. Recent data show that 65.8% of internet users aged 16 to 64 have used shopping apps, wherein Shein, an online fashion shopping platform, figures as the 9th most downloaded mobile app (Digital in Ireland: All the Statistics You Need in 2021, 2021). The report shows that, in 2020, the total amount spent on consumer eCommerce of fashion and beauty items was US$991.2 million, representing a 25.3% growth compared to 2019.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, Ireland registered a decrease in online purchase of clothes, dropping from 52% in January to 38% in March, following the emergency measures implemented by the Government (Impact of COVID-19 on ICT Usage by Households - Internet Purchases, 2020). However, these figures have changed in the past twelve months since Clothing represents now the main category for online shopping. Recent data shows that 64% of online consumers have purchased clothing articles within this period (ecommerceDB, 2020). In the apparel segment, online sales represented 17% of total market revenue in 2020, and the forecast is that it reaches 19% by 2023 (Apparel - Ireland | Statista Market Forecast, 2020). Another relevant aspect identified was the preference for Click & Collect amongst the shipping methods and providers, reinforcing the growth of the emergent phenomenon Buy Online and Pick-up In-Store (BOPIS). Due to the lockdown constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, 18% of shops started to work on a BOPIS basis after being closed, and the online apparel penetration increased 13%. Furthermore, 76% of the apparel companies aim to improve their online integration post-COVID-19 (Adhi, Davis, Jayakumar and Touse, 2020). In this context, demographic characteristics may significantly impact how consumers behave concerning online shopping. These characteristics involve gender differences, online experience, and geographical location, mainly reflecting consumers' life stage, which is intrinsically related to their age, a factor of extreme importance for understanding digital behaviour.

2.4. Generation Z Online Buying Behaviour

In this subchapter, the researcher focused on the online shopping behaviour of the cohort referred to by the term 'Generation Z'. Generation Z consumers were born between the late 1990s and early 2000s and are currently aged between 6 and 25. Considered the new generational cohort, this group is also identified as 'digital natives' since they were the first generation to be born and grow up with the technology of smartphones, and characterised by a mobile dependency, spending a massive amount of time on their smartphones (Southgate, 2017). Accounting for 12.5% of the Irish population (Irish population by age 2019, 2020) and born in an era of the widespread emergence of the internet, Generation Z, or digital natives, is technology-savvy, creative, innovative, more global, more cautious, more pragmatic and less focused on their work that its previous generation (Priporas et al., 2017; Scholz and Rennig, 2019).

According to Wood (2015), Generation Z is Generation X's children and carry strong influence from this cohort, mainly hit by the recession in 2008. Born between 1966 and 1980, Generation X grew up during the years marked by economic recessions, the escalating issue of AIDS and higher divorce rates (Lissitsa and Laor, 2021). As a result, Generation X experienced additional social and economic instability in their lives, which influenced the way they raised their children to be more sensible and conscious about money. Furthermore, Generation Z shares some common characteristics with their previous generation, referred to as Millennials or Generation Y, such as being more technology-savvy (Rue, 2018). Born between 1981 and 1994, Millennials grew up in the years when the internet and social media were introduced to society. Unlike their predecessors, their generation was marked by economic growth and the effects of globalisation, accelerated technological development, and a change in communication dynamics that impacted their lifestyle and culture with the presence of social media (Pandey, Chopra and Karve, 2020).

These differences between generations also lead to changes in consumer behaviour. Priporas et al. (2017) posited that this new generational cohort has the power to redefine consumption and production more than any previous generation. The authors also highlight that due to Generation Z’s mobile dependency, a vast majority claim to make frequent use of their mobile for shopping purposes, which they believe speeds up transactions and offers more convenience and flexibility. Research shows that mobile dependency has influenced Generation Z’s consumer behaviour making this generation high-demanding since they prefer obtaining everything immediately and are more consumer-oriented (Wood, 2015).
In this regard, Generation Z becomes a great challenge for businesses and, as a generation who has seen their parents suffer from the crisis in 2008, they are likely to be more scarcity-oriented and pragmatic in where and how they spend money, which is manifested in their aversion to risk and financial frugality (Talmon, 2019).

Gutfreund (2016) outlined the increased interest in studying the consumer behaviour of Generation Z’s older cohort as they reach adulthood and enter the workforce, becoming an economic force. According to the author, the younger generation plays a pivotal role in shopping as they know what and how to research factors that affect their purchase decisions, such as quality and price. KPMG estimates that Generation Z accounts for 40% of the world’s consumers, influencing US$600 billion of consumer spending, and with a global buying power of $150 billion (Reaching Gen Z in the time of COVID-19, 2020). Rajani and Nakhat (2019) shed light on some critical aspects to be considered regarding how Generation Z’s online purchase decision is affected. They highlight how other customers’ experience influences their buying decision to the extent that consumers’ reviews and pictures are critical factors in this process where bad reviews were found to be more genuine. Simultaneously, detailed description and easy return (although most users do not read the return policy) reduced perceived risks and increased trust levels. Kim and Ammeter (2018) explore digital natives online consumer behaviour and argue that some factors are critical for enhancing experiences and attracting this new cohort, such as having a variety of products presentations that allow customised experiences, offering interactivity, clear and straightforward after-sales services, and offer fun rather than just easy and effective websites or apps.

In Ireland, the oldest cohort of Generation Z (18-25 years old) represents 13% of digital commerce consumers, whereas the most representative group is aged between 35-44 years old, encompassing 29.3% of consumers (ecommerceDB, 2020). However, Generation Z is expected to become a vital economic force within the following years, which will result in marketers driving more efforts onto them. Consequently, issues related to their interests and behaviour regarding online purchasing will be raised. Hanbury (2021) claims that Generation Z is largely sceptical due to their ability to check nearly everything online, which has made them more obsessed with price and less loyal to brands (see Figure 4). The author also reinforced the idea that these spending habits were shaped by the recession faced by the generation's parents and teachers. Another important factor outlined is the constant pressure to wear new clothes since social media channels and influencers foster the sharing of photographs, wherein Generation Z is undoubtedly the most photographed generation. In this regard, nontraditional ways of shopping take place and favour the more sustainable ideals of this generation, such as clothes thrift, resale or rental. Hoffower (2021) posits that these nontraditional types of shopping help Generation Z consumers to wear unique outfits they have not yet shared on social media keeping it on a budget simultaneously. According to the author, secondhand clothing is the future of fashion, and this new generation is fueling the trend.

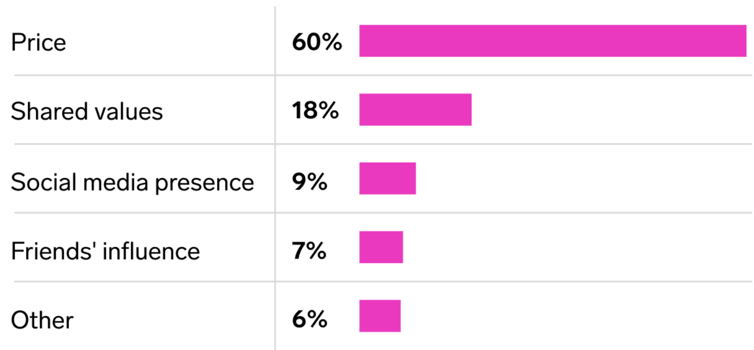

Figure 4. How Generation Z picks from which brands they buy. Source: Business Insider, 2021

Priporas et al. (2017) stated that shopping is more than just the act of purchasing for Generation Z; it is a social event, which the virtual environment cannot replicate yet. Fitting rooms have become a space for fun where digital natives are accompanied by friends and take pictures, not necessarily aiming to buy fashion items. Moreover, technology also plays a more sociological role for this young cohort other than simply enabling the purchase. It allows them to display and share their new acquisitions in order to influence others' perceptions about them. Although eCommerce may not cause as much concern or lack of trust to Generation Z than to previous generations, online shopping is a world yet to be explored in-depth while marketers learn how to join online and offline experiences. Miller and Washington (2020) outlined some significant Generation Z shopping preferences identified in a survey by Euclid Analytics, wherein 66% showed their preference for in-store experiences as they like touching, seeing and trying on products before purchasing. Conversely, 31% of the participants said it is hard to find the products they are searching for in physical stores, encouraging them to shop online.

2.5. Generation Z Buying Behaviour in a COVID-19 Pandemic Era

According to Sheth (2020), four major contexts can disrupt consumer habits: technology and breakthroughs, rules and regulations, life events that change the social context and ad hoc natural disasters (e.g. Great Recession and global pandemics). In March 2020, the worldwide spread of COVID-19 was characterised as a worldwide pandemic. Unlike what had been forecasted, it has lasted longer than expected, resulting in job losses and economic contraction, inevitably and immediately impacting consumers' behaviour (Roggeveen and Sethuraman, 2020).

Due to the mobility shortage and location constraint caused by social distancing and the lockdown, alternative habits have been adopted and are expected to become the "new normal" (Zwanka and Buff, 2021; Roggeveen and Sethuraman, 2020; Ward 2020). One of the immediate effects observed on consumer behaviour is the acceleration and increase of digital technology adoption in multiple sectors, such as educational institutions that shifted classes to online platforms, and shopping from home, as is the case of grocery shopping or even apparel items due to temporary closure of shops. This statement is reinforced by Baig, Hall, Jenkins, Lamarre and McCarthy (2020), who exemplified digital technology adoption with the shift to remote-working models by numerous organisations and claimed that significant changes have occurred in customers' preferred interactions and will continue to change. Figure 5 depicts the digital adoption by industry in the US, which is considered a global trend, reflected in other regions across the globe. Ireland has also registered a shift from offline to online regarding shopping behaviour, where an increase of 8.9% is expected in the Irish eCommerce revenue (ecommerceDB, 2020).

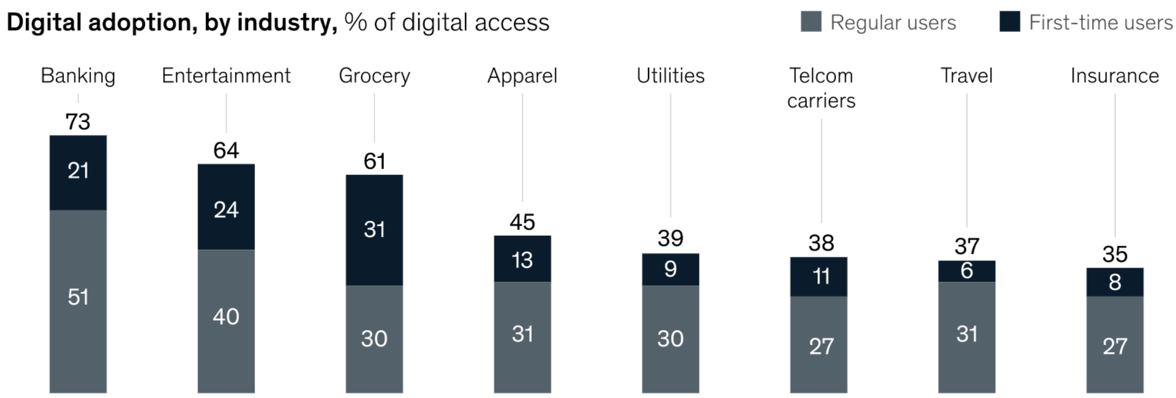

Figure 5. Digital adoption, by industry, % of digital access (Baig et al., 2020). Source: McKinsey COVID-19 US Digital Statement Survey, 2020.

Embracing digital technology in activities usually carried out mostly offline, especially for technology-savvy users, has had a considerable influence on consumers' habits. Shopping from home enhances what in-store experiences cannot always offer, such as convenience and personalisation, increasing its likelihood of being broadly adopted and enduring. Based on the immediate effects observed so far, Ward (2020) has predicted that some of these shifts would last in the long-term, such as the limitation of in-store interaction like the emergent phenomenon Buy Online and Pick-up In-Store (BOPIS) or Click & Collect. Most likely to be mainly adopted by the digital natives' cohort, BOPIS is an omnichannel service wherein a product available in-store can be purchased online and collected at the physical store. According to Saha and Bhattacharya (2020), it offers the customer the flexibility and convenience to book items in advance, avoid waiting for delivery by mail, and complete purchase formalities. The authors outlined that omnichannel strategies enhance the shopping experience as they allow the consumer to have a smooth journey across digital and physical channels, increasing levels of convenience. In this regard, Bitar and Rindone (2021) have claimed that the ease of looking up products on one channel and buying in another channel will be a critical factor for businesses' success in the current and future contexts.

The "new normal" carries some expectations and speculations about whether the new habits embraced will endure and what behaviours are more likely to become "new normal"

(Birkinshaw, 2021). Cosgrove (2021) highlighted that the EY Future Consumer Index 2021 shows that 43% of consumers in Europe believe the current pandemic will remain to impact their lives for one more year at least (see Figure 6). On the other hand, Zwanka and Buff (2020) argued that due to the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, increased levels of hedonism and the strong presence of hybrid environments are expected in the aftermath of the crisis. They claim this would result from individuals pursuing the pleasure of experiences missed and, at the same time, taking advantage of the convenient aspects of new habits.

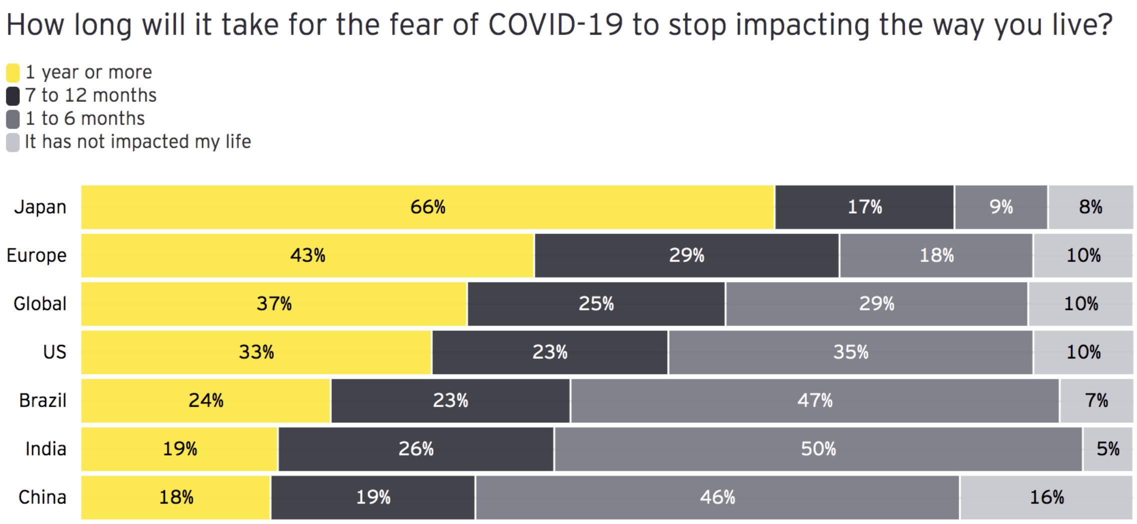

Figure 6. How long will it take for the fear of COVID-19 to stop impacting the way you live? (Cosgrove, 2021). Source: EY Future Consumer Index 2021.

The most recent EY Future Consumer Index showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated trends in consumer behaviour, such as prioritising health, shopping online and moving out of cities. It has also highlighted the importance of redesigning businesses around customers' new habits and, consequently, has demanded the acceleration of businesses' transformation. More than merely forecasting what products consumers want to buy, it is crucial to understand their motivations and journey. Although the pandemic has accelerated changes underway, such as online shopping, according to Bitar and Rindone (2021), the percentage of consumers planning to purchase online items they were used to buying in-store has dropped from 46% in 2020 to 38% in 2021. This shift in the numbers is due to a combination of factors, such as customers missing the social aspect of the experience of buying in-store, frustrating online experiences, and the lack of control and immediacy offered in physical shops. In addition, the 'lockdown' factor must also be considered in this context.

Since consumers were spending more time at home due to constraints imposed by the Government to minimise the spread of the virus, they had to find ways and activities that helped them spend time, such as shopping, which has served as an escapism from the difficult times. According to recent KPMG International's research, 55% of Generation Z consumers worry about the uncertainty the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to their lives, and 48% are willing to spend less and save more (Reaching Gen Z in the time of COVID-19, 2020). Therefore, the current context posits a question about how this generation will use their spending power. As KPMG's research outlines, Generation Z is coming of age during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and the current imperative for frugality may significantly influence their lives and online shopping behaviour.

According to Savage (2021), the move to digital has followed the global trend and has been accelerated in Ireland, where 68% of consumers have been shopping online more than they would before the COVID-19 pandemic. The author argues that having user-friendly and well-established digital channels has brought distinct advantages to businesses since 99% of Irish consumers pointed out the importance of a good website. However, the Irish consumer still values human support more than all else, which means they expect to digitally self-serve and have access to human support simultaneously. Following Maat and Konings (2018) statement about young generations being more likely to embrace new technologies, dominating the online shopper profile, recent research has identified that Generation Z and Millennials have shifted even further towards digital channels due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kibo Study: Younger Generations Show Increased Shift to Long-Term Online Shopping, 2020). According to the study, Generation Z shows they have expectations that the online shopping experience is convenient and enjyable, and that the choice of brands will be based on how much they are aligned to consumers' preferences and values. While price comparison is still considered the top online shopping advantage for most Generation Z consumers, 'unpredictability of fit' and 'waiting for deliveries' are considered the most significant disadvantages.

Salpini (2020) claimed that Generation Z is the most likely to rapidly adapt and deal with the 'new normal' resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. The author posits that this new generation is more prepared for the accelerated transitioning to digital, although they miss going to places and stores physically or interacting with other people in person. Regarding their buying behaviour, the stressors raised by the pandemic could lead to more thoughtful consumption, wherein racial equality and sustainability were noted as critical points of focus. Besides, Kennedy (2021) outlined that a recent report from PwC identified that 36% of Generation Z expects to spend more on fashion over the next months.

2.6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted society worldwide, such as economic contraction and crisis in many public healthcare systems. However, these disruptions have also accelerated trends in consumer behaviour, such as the massive migration to online channels. Due to the constraints imposed by the lockdown, one's home became their workspace, gym, and leisure centre, with no clear boundaries. The fact that consumers were spending more time at home, all the non-essential shops and other leisure centres were closed, and the feelings of stress and boredom were generalised are most likely to have triggered the changes in online shopping. Generation Z is coming of age during a global pandemic, and little research has approached what changes in buying behaviour were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and how it will be reflected in their future consumer choices.

ROPO and BOPIS are not new phenomena, but with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic it is not clear if the digital natives will continue to embrace them in the same way. Moreover, the constant pressure for wearing unique clothes on social media, combined with the adoption of a more sustainable purchasing behaviour, may have impacted online shopping during the pandemic, which could be extended to a post-pandemic period. Although it is well known that the young generations had already adopted online shopping before the outbreak of the pandemic, Generation Z's online shopping behaviour towards a market that is sensory experiential like apparel has not been explored in order to understand if the perceived risks, benefits, disadvantages and advantages related to this market have changed. Therefore, this research aims to address whether and how the pandemic context has disrupted the Irish Generation Z's online buying behaviour towards clothing as it has not yet been established in previous research.

Chapter 3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

This third chapter aims to present the research question and sub-questions that were answered throughout this study. In addition, it outlines the research objectives defined based on the aims of the research.

3.1. Research Question

This research paper shed light on the hypothesis that the COVID-19 Pandemic has disrupted society worldwide and, consequently, accelerated trends in Generation Z's consumer behaviour. The impacts of the pandemic on the Irish Generation Z's online shopping behaviour towards clothing have not been widely reported, and it could be beneficial information for marketers in both online and offline fashion retail. Therefore, this dissertation aimed to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic changed Generation Z's online shopping behaviour towards clothing. This research study used semi-structured one-on-one interviews to explore and analyse consumer behaviour changes and perceptions. The outcomes of this research complemented previous studies related to online consumer behaviour, however, explicitly focused on the Generation Z cohort in a pandemic context, aimed to guide marketers in the clothing industry regarding changes in consumer habits, problems that needed to be addressed, and predictions for a post-pandemic era.

Below are stated the primary research question, and sub-questions addressed through this work.

Main Question:

"How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the Irish Generation Z's online shopping behaviour towards clothing in comparison with the pre-pandemic behaviour?"

Sub-questions:

- What were the benefits and drawbacks perceived by Generation Z regarding online shopping for clothing during the pandemic?

- What were the online shopping behaviours towards clothing considered most likely to endure in a post-pandemic era?

3.2. Research Objectives

Based on the aim of this research study, the following objectives were defined:

1. Examining the most recent reports and statistics regarding online shopping behaviour towards clothing in Ireland over 12 months.
2. Running in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews with individuals aged 18 to 25 years old to identify the changes in Generation Z’s online shopping behaviour.
3. Identifying Generation Z’s changes in online shopping towards clothing during the pandemic period in comparison with the pre-pandemic period.
4. Interpreting and analysing Generation Z’s perceived advantages and disadvantages of shopping for clothes online during the pandemic.
5. Exploring what new habits are most likely to remain in a post-COVID-19 era.
6. Providing marketers in the fashion industry with information on changes in Generation Z’s shopping behaviour and issues to be addressed.
7. Making suggestions for further research in a post-pandemic era.

Chapter 4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodological approach applied in the research process, where the researcher presents the arguments for the methods and techniques chosen. In addition, aspects related to the methodology, such as research sample and instrument, are depicted in this chapter. The reader is also provided with details about the data collection and analysis processes. At the end of this chapter, the researcher approaches the methodology limitations and the study's ethical considerations.

4.1. Methodological Approach

Due to the exploratory nature of this study and the lack of pre-existing research on the topic proposed, the researcher applied a qualitative inductive approach through one-on-one in-depth interviews with semi-structured open-ended questions and non-probabilistic judgement sampling techniques. Data were collected from primary sources where an exploratory cross-sectional, qualitative study was conducted to answer the posited research question. This study, which is interpretivist in nature, aimed to gain in-depth insight into digital natives' online purchasing behaviour regarding clothing in a COVID-19 pandemic context in order to empathetically understand changes that occurred due to the pandemic and how they will affect the market. Secondary sources were used to explore digital natives as consumers and purchasing behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The qualitative method represented a valuable and adequate approach in the context of this study. According to Levy (2005), the pursuit of fully understanding consumer behaviour motivates researchers to employ methods that enable the manifestation of the interaction of multiple forces. In this regard, as outlined by Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest and Namey (2005), qualitative research can offer remarkable contribution due to producing contextually rich and culturally specific data, being notably effective in gathering data about particular populations, social contexts, behaviours, values and opinions. Furthermore, Hair, Wolfinbarger, Ortinau and Bush (2010) posited that achieving a preliminary understanding of research issues is one of the objectives of qualitative research, where the data gathered has proved relevant in identifying and deeply comprehending business problems. The development of this research was guided by the grounded theory approach, wherein the researcher seeks to explore people's experiences in a detailed and rigorous manner to understand how the social phenomena under investigation works (Munsch, 2021).

Epp and Otnes (2020) claim that high-quality qualitative research can benefit underexplored and vital topics, such as service in the age of COVID-19 pandemic. According to Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2017), as qualitative techniques use an unstructured approach using open-ended questions, it allows collecting comprehensive data about the individuals' beliefs, behaviours and experiences, which are significant for building a more profund knowledge of a given topic. The authors highlight the advantages of qualitative techniques in exploratory research and argue that the use of open-ended questions evokes meaningful responses that the researcher cannot anticipate, being exploratory and rich in nature. Besides, the researcher can probate initial responses, which also makes the design more iterative where the study questions and collection are changed based on what is discovered.

4.2. Research Sample

This study used a nonprobability sampling design, where the researcher applied judgement sampling, also referred to as purposive sampling, selecting the respondents that met the study requirements. According to Hair et al. (2010), when correctly applied, this method generates a better sample than convenience sampling as the aim is to have a group that best represents the wider population. The population under consideration was homogeneous and representative of the cohort researched where the participants' specific age range, 18 to 25 years old, was chosen based on the assumption that the oldest cohort of Generation Z is considered a potential economic force (Gutfreund, 2016) and, therefore, of high relevance for this research.

Regarding the sample size, as stated by Sandelowski (1995, cited in Boddy 2016), extensive samples do not allow the researcher to deepen the analysis, which is the purpose of a qualitative approach. Therefore, the researcher opted for a small sample as both the scope of the study and the nature of the topic 'consumer behaviour' demanded in-depth data. Six individuals participated in the interviews wherein subjective data was collected from a purposive sample using an inductive approach, ideal for this analysis since little is known about Generation Z's online shopping behaviour in a pandemic context.

Mack et al. (2005) highlight that theoretical saturation is often used to assess the scale of purposive sample sizes. Given (2008: 195-4) defines saturation as “the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges concerning the newly constructed theory”. In this study, data review and analysis were done simultaneously with data collection, which determined the purposive sample size as the study reached theoretical saturation on the sixtieth interview. The small sample size is also justified by the contact time the researcher had to spend on each respondent and the project timeframe to gather detailed and comprehensive data to answer the research questions and objectives (Marshall et al., 2013).

The criteria for selecting the interviewees were:

- To be an Irish citizen
- Between the ages of 18 and 25
- To have access to the internet

4.3. Research Instrument and Data Collection

The data collection process for this research started in May 2021 (see Figure 7). Secondary research was required to identify what type of research methods was adequate and suitable to find answers to the study question posited and its objectives, where the researcher opted for one-on-one interviews. Therefore, for this study, the researcher conducted a series of in-depth interviews with the specified cohort. Due to location and social distancing constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher opted for interviewing the participants through online video conferencing. In this case, interviews take place synchronously using a device connected to the internet. As stressed by Nehls, Smith and Schneider (2015), video-conference interviews overcome the phone interviewing major limitation, allowing the interviewee to be exposed to audio and visual stimuli and the barrier of geography since participants can engage in the study at any location. The authors also highlight that the video conferencing’s exposure to visual stimuli affords the ability to capture emotional, sensory, and non-verbal cues. All the interviews were carried out informally and recorded using the Zoom platform for posterior analysis.

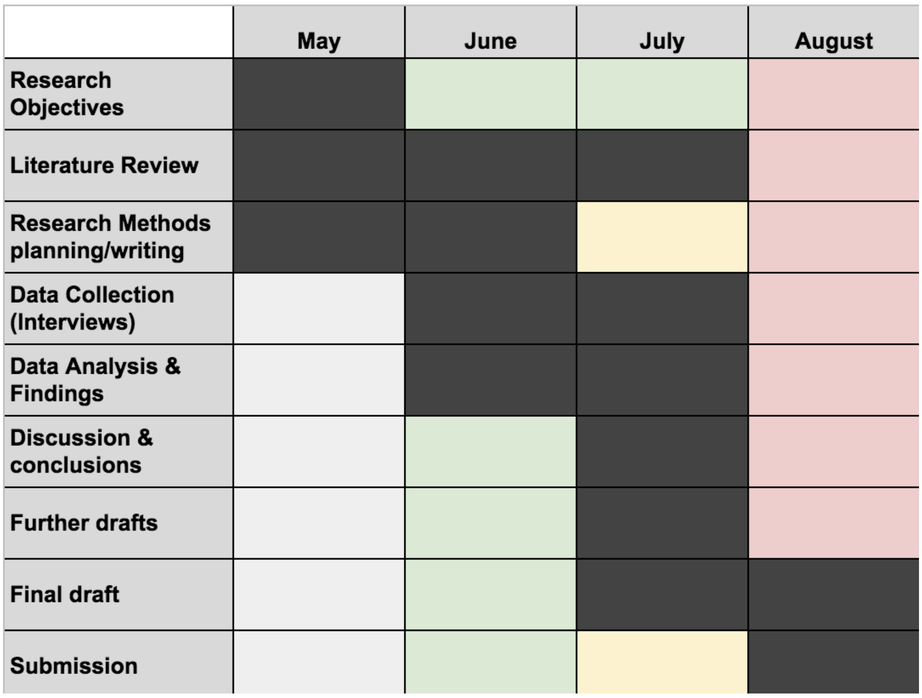

Figure 7. Research Timeframe

According to Austin and Sutton (2014), in-depth interviews in a grounded theory analysis are an appropriate method for when nothing or little is understood or known about a context, situation, or problem, and allows the researcher to elicit the participant's feelings, opinions and experiences, through which an interpretive viewpoint of the topic being explored is obtained. Moreover, Given (2008) outlined the uniqueness of this method since more detailed information can be elicited through the use of probing questions, encouraging the participant to explain their answer further and deepening the discussion. In this regard, Hair et al. (2010) claimed that stimulating the respondents to talk more about the topic increases the likelihood of uncovering hidden behaviours, attitudes, emotions and motivations. Therefore, each interview had a different contact time to gather consistent and extensive data, allowing the researcher to deepen the discussion and explore the subject from various perspectives.

Although focus group research reveals important insights related to group effects, the reasoning behind the choice of in-depth interviewing over focus groups was primarily due to the lockdown that was in place until May 2021 and the COVID-19 pandemic constraints regarding social distancing. Moreover, the researcher aimed to capture subjective experiences without other participants' influence, such as peer pressure or having a dominant member in the group, and allow the interviewees to feel less pressured to respond in a socially desirable way (Kaplowitz and Hoehn, 2001). In addition, focusing on one respondent at a time allowed the researcher to uncover valuable detail. Using this approach aimed to provide data for understanding Generation Z's behaviours, motives, and perceptions, also defining marketing issues related to the current context.

At the beginning of the interviewing process, every respondent was reminded of the research's nature and purpose, and that, in case there was any discomfort on their behalf, they could opt for withdrawing. Data were gathered through online video-conferencing interviews based on a semi-structured questionnaire compound with open-ended questions, of which readability and material relevance had been pre-tested in a pilot interview. The questionnaire consisted of three sections that explored: 1) comparisons between online purchasing behaviour before and during the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) comparisons between online shopping for clothing before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on types of articles, frequency and quantity; 3) exploratory questions regarding online shopping experience for clothing and speculations about the post-pandemic. New questions were added to the questionnaire throughout the data collection process while others were refined based on new subjects that emerged from the previous interviews.

4.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis aims to use the information gathered to address the study questions. In qualitative research, Adams, Khan, Raeside and White (2012) outline that data analysis co-occurs with data collection as an iterative and reflexive process. According to the author, this process of analysing the data in the early stages of the collection provides the researcher with enough information to guide additional data collection, such as exploring new relationships or additional concepts. All interviews were video and audio recorded, then transcripted for analysis through the software Descript. Following the transcription of each interview, the researcher immersed herself within the data to explore the phenomena and gain in-depth insights.

As part of the analytical strategy, the researcher generated a set of codes, developing a coding system. The coding was based on the most prominent topics that emerged from the interviews and the interviewees' responses to each question, categorising the data. As stated by Noble and Smith (2014), categorisation is a central skill and crucial part of qualitative data analysis, in which researchers aim to identify and classify data patterns into themes or concepts that might lead to theory development. The codes were developed through an inductive process where the researcher coded new themes of interest as they emerged when moving through the transcripts (Hair et al., 2010). Therefore, the data analysis strategy for this study was based on thematic analysis to categorise qualitative data gathered from the in-depth interviews.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the thematic analysis method is advantageous for organising and explaining the data collection in great detail. Through the identification, analysis and report of patterns found within the information gathered, called 'themes', this method helped the researcher further and interpret a wide range of aspects of the study. Textual data was managed through computer-assisted software Atlas.ti so that the researcher could analyse the content, listing themes and coding the information. In order to develop an initial template, the transcripts were categorised into major themes based on the study objectives and interview questions and then further modified and converted into theories (Cassell, Symon, Buehring and Johnson, 2006). The outcomes of the thematic analysis were the study findings, themes that can be further developed in future studies, either of qualitative or quantitative approaches.

4.5. Limitations

This research, however, has some potential limitations:

- Sample bias
- Sample size and statistical significance
- Time constraints
- Inexperience of the researcher
- Researcher's bias

Regarding sample bias and sample size, its representativeness cannot be measured in nonprobability sampling procedures, which required cautious interpretation of data gathered from purposive sampling and should be noted in this section as a limitation even due to its small size (Boddy, 2016). Besides, given its qualitative nature, the research cannot have statistical significance. Moreover, the findings might not be generalised to the whole population or representative of populations in different countries. Furthermore, longitudinal effects, such as time constraints, were a limiting factor as the COVID-19 pandemic has not been eradicated yet, and consumers' online shopping behaviour may still be in an ongoing changing process. Despite strictly following the orientations given, the inexperience of the researcher was a limiting factor regarding the application of interviews. Due to the lack of experience, another critical limitation that must be noted is the researcher's bias. Although the researcher attempted to manage bias by being open to alternative interpretations, being mindful of their own beliefs and expectations, and searching for evidence that contradicts their assumptions, some decisions could introduce bias, such as population sampling, research design and other issues related to the methodology chosen.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Regarding ethical considerations, the participants were informed through a consent form about the implications of participating in this study and how the data collected would be stored, analysed and used. In order to ensure that the participants remained comfortable with being part of the research, the researcher confirmed their consent at various stages of the process after they signed the consent form. The document included information regarding the use of direct quotes in the final report. The researcher obtained full consent before the start of each interview process and reminded the participants of the possibility of withdrawal at any time without penalty.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality and protect the participants' privacy, personal identifiers were removed from the research and data were not shared with third parties, complying with the GDPR. Furthermore, privacy and confidentiality were managed carefully during the interview process, and data were password-protected, where the researcher was the only person with access to the information. In addition, considering the ethical implication of biased information, the interviews were recorded, allowing the researcher to have access to and revisit the data gathered to mitigate the risk of bias.

Chapter 5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this fifth chapter, the researcher presents a thematic analysis of the findings of this research. Three main topics emerged from the data analysis of this study, from which sub-topics were developed according to the patterns identified by the researcher. The first main topic is a comparison between Generation Z's cohort online shopping behaviour before and during the COVID-19 pandemic era. In the second main topic, the researcher presents the findings regarding Generation Z's perceptions of online shopping for clothing during the pandemic, wherein perceived advantages and disadvantages are depicted and contrasted with perceived benefits and drawbacks of in-store shopping experiences. Finally, the third and last main topic approaches post-pandemic predictions regarding online shopping for clothing.

5.1 Generation Z's Behavioural Responses: a comparison between pre-pandemic and pandemic eras

The topics that emerged from the one-on-one interviews supported the argument that new consumer habits were developed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sheth, 2020). Three interviewees claimed they would do a lot of their shopping for clothing online even before the pandemic, whereas other interviewees stated they would rarely buy clothes online. The researcher identified three factors as the primary motivators for changes in online buying behaviour, especially towards clothing: location constraints, exercising more, pricewise. The first factor, location constraints, played a major and crucial role in developing new habits. All participants mentioned how being forced to stay at home and having non-essential shops closed due to lockdown restrictions impacted their choices and also generated a feeling of boredom that the shopping activity would fulfil. The second factor was the change in daily habits that made individuals turn to exercise activities and, consequently, look for more appropriate clothes. During the pandemic period, participants also noticed the increased amount of sales online, which, as a result, made them shop online for clothing more than they would usually do. The last factor that motivated the participants to shop online was the pricewise aspect, where shops offered subscriptions, sales and deals. In addition, consumers could subscribe for benefits and advantages, specially related to next day delivery. The following quotations support the three motivator factors for changes.

“ I have bought a few things online because I needed them and the shops were not open. So I bought it, and now I see that it works for me, for clothing.”

“I was working from home. I was studying from home. Most of the time I was in my pyjamas.”

“I would probably just like to walk more to calm me down… I felt like it was great during lockdown to keep yourself busy and get a refresher.”

“Gym clothes because everybody was working, you know, working at home and then I just started exercising more.”

“There were way more sales during the pandemic. So that was one of the reasons that I bought more.”

“They would kind of have a lot more sales than they would have had.”

“There were also a lot more sales on. So everything is a lot cheaper.”

“So, during COVID, I got subscriptions on websites like ASOS, BooHoo, Pretty Little Things and stuff to the ‘next day delivery’, like the subscription for the year.”

“Well, probably mostly shop on ASOS. I get the ‘next day delivery’ for a year.”

The four motivator factors identified justify the changes in online shopping for clothing that emerged from this study, expanded within the following sub-topics: Frequency and Quantity; Trust and Confidence; and Type of Clothing.

5.1.1. Frequency and Quantity

The majority of the participants claimed they would rarely buy clothes online before the COVID-19 pandemic. This activity would be related to searching for an outfit for a special occasion or the lack of time to go to a physical store and sometimes both situations combined. Conversely, since the beginning of the pandemic, those same individuals posited they started shopping online more often, which can be explained primarily by the factor ‘location constraints". Even the participants who claimed they would frequently shop online for clothing argued they started doing it more frequently.

"I definitely would buy a lot of my clothes online. I would rarely go physically and buy some before COVID. I bought, I definitely bought more online during COVID than I usually would."

"I was doing a lot of online shopping for clothes. Yeah, probably the most I have ever done... because normally before COVID, I would just do online shopping if there was an event."

Along with the increase in the frequency of online shopping for clothing and most likely related to both factors, location constraints and sales & deals, participants also pointed out that not only did the frequency increase, but also the number of clothing articles bought. Regarding quantity, it was also possible to observe some behavioural differences between the first and second lockdown. In fact, some participants perceived their own behaviour as excessive or compulsive buying. In addition, some individuals felt more encouraged to purchase more clothes than they would usually do.

"It would be a bit more often, more like in quantity."

"I feel like I bought a lot of stuff. Just to kind of buy."

"I would rarely buy online before the pandemic. And after the pandemic I did buy a bit more."

"I think in the first lockdown. Like, I wasn't working. And then like, I was getting like a payment and stuff and I was like, saving money but If I'd see stuff online, I felt like I needed to get like, like new, still for a walking and kind of like new, like little gym stuff, um, for what I was going to do and exercise or anything."

5.1.2. Trust and Confidence

The gain of trust and confidence regarding online shopping for clothes was the second most relevant change. Participants claimed to be more accustomed to buying clothes online since they started doing it more frequently during the months of lockdown. Becoming accustomed to the activity has also brought them more trust in specific shops and more confidence regarding the possibility of buying clothing items without trying them on. Besides, technological improvements on apps and websites have also positively affected the consumers' trust and relationship with the brands.

"So personally, I just have, you know, had more experience with it during COVID, so I've gotten more used to it now."

"I wasn't used to buying online… So I bought it, and now I see that it works for me, for clothing."

"I think it is more trial and error. You know, you buy one time, and it doesn't fit. It was maybe a bit too big, you can return it and then maybe next time you could get maybe a size small."

"There are a few particular shops that I usually buy from. And I know that they worked for me."

"I have noticed websites and apps are a lot more user-friendly."

5.1.3. Type of clothing

A pattern identified amongst the majority of interviewees was the change in the type of clothing they were buying online. This change can be explained by the motivators location constraints and exercising more. In addition, five out of the six participants pointed out the preference for more casual and comfortable clothes, such as loungewear and gym clothing. Another factor that impacted this specific change was the different seasons of the year in which each lockdown occurred.

"I don't think I was buying jeans and blazers and shirts and stuff like I usually would in normal times. I think I was actually investing more in really good quality loungewear."

"I got to get more casual stuff, like rather than kind of really casual job. Like t-shirts, joggers and stuff like that. Like I, I bought a lot more loungewear."

"Definitely gym clothes, and like loungewear."

"T-shirts, jeans, trousers. Um, that's it, most of the clothing that I bought is just, you know, simple clothing, not anything too fancy… black leggings that I use a lot at home."

5.2. Generation Z's Perceptions on Online Shopping for Clothes during the pandemic

The following six themes are the phenomena that emerged from the analysis of the interviews in regard to perceptions and experiences with online shopping for clothes during the pandemic period. They are also contrasted with participants' perceptions and experiences in-store.

5.2.1. Price-sensitivity

The first and most prominent phenomenon identified in the data analysis was the cruciality of price. According to the data collected, participants perceive the price as one of the major advantages of online shopping for clothing, which encourages them to buy more and more frequently, also overcoming any trust issue regarding sensory experience. Within this topic, online sales, deals and discounts were considered extremely significant motivator factors. Participants perceived online prices as cheaper when compared to in-store. The possibility of comparing prices between shops in a more convenient and faster way was claimed to be a great advantage that allows them to find better deals, resulting in a perception that they are saving money more than if they went to a physical store. Some participants claimed that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been more sales and discounts online than ever before. However, some participants mentioned they perceive small items, such as socks, as more expensive online, which leads them to buy these types of items in-store as there is no apparent attachment to quality or size fitting. Delivery fees is another factor that impacts their choice for online shopping wherein low fees are acceptable as the consumer understands it is the price they pay for convenience, but high fees would change their priority to in-store shopping. Similarly, paying for returning an item creates the feeling of 'missing out', which is perceived as a hassle. In this regard, the participants stated to be very satisfied with free (pre-paid) returns. While some individuals argued they spent more money on online shopping due to sales and deals, others claimed they had more control over their expenditure since they felt that in-store shopping would encourage excessive buying, whereas online they can assess their choices better before taking a final decision.

“Sometimes it is cheaper. I can find some deals easier. There are so many shops that I can buy from, at least one shop would have a deal. Some have the same item.”

“Sometimes it's cheaper because you can get student discounts.”

“The only problem with returning items is that it’s a bit more of a hassle. Sometimes they don't offer you free postage. It’s more expensive than just… It's not as convenient to return things.”

5.2.2. Time-sensitivity

Time was found to be a very sensitive subject among the participants. When asked about the perceived advantages and benefits of online shopping for clothing, most participants stressed how the activity speeds up the process. They pointed out many different ways through which the shopping process is accelerated, such as because they do not need to commute and it is easier to browse in various shops and compare products rapidly instead of going from shop to shop. Besides, the search mechanisms on the websites and apps allow them to look for specific items in an effortless and straightforward way, whereas in-store this type of search is more complex. Although the time for delivery was an issue at the beginning of the pandemic, since, unlike in-store shopping, the consumer does not get the product immediately, some participants claimed to have overcome this problem by subscribing to next-day delivery accelerate the process. Returning items was another topic raised by participants, which can be strictly related to the delivery process since it occurs through the post. While some participants see it as an advantage for not commuting or queueing in the physical shop, others found the experience disappointing due to the long wait, especially at the beginning of the first lockdown. Either way, all participants expressed their concerns regarding time wasted. Another aspect to be observed was the fact that the current context makes the consumer feel under pressure to shop quickly when in-store, whereas shopping online allows them to take their own time. Some participants also mentioned how fashion trends could be seen in online shops before they arrive at physical shops.

"If I don't have time, it's usually quicker to order online rather than actually find time to go to a shop because it will arrive the next day."

"Sometimes it's such a hassle to, you know, have to send everything back and then you have to wait, you know, maybe like a week or ten days sometimes for a refund... Time-consuming."

"I spent half of the time looking online than if I was in the shop for example... So, for me, it's all about saving time."

"I also liked the idea of just being able to, like, if you go on a website, being able to scroll and, you know, really take your time. Like there's no pressure."

5.2.3. Location-bound factor

While shopping in-store demands commuting to where the physical shop is located, online shopping allowed consumers to purchase items from the comfort of their own homes. Participants often used the word 'convenience' to describe how they perceived the perks of shopping online for clothing. An interesting point made by one of the participants was the fact that staying at home due to the pandemic constraints has made them 'lazy', which has led them to look for convenience. Mobile is a factor that plays a crucial role in this regard wherein consumers can easily access online shopping apps and ensure their social media presence and keep up with fashion trends all at one hand, from anywhere. The convenience of online shopping is so perceived as an advantage that Click & Collect was not adopted by any of the interviewees when purchasing clothing. Only one of the participants claimed to have tried this method at the beginning of the first lockdown when deliveries took a long time. However, it is not a practice they intend to carry on as it does not offer the level of convenience expected and, in some cases, the wait may be longer than waiting for a parcel to be delivered.

"You're in the comfort of your own space, and there's more time."

"I think it's the convenience of it. Now I think people have gotten really lazy during COVID. Well, this is just me, and now I've gotten into like, I enjoy just shopping online. So it's become like a habit now."

"I'm really bothered by returning clothes. If I buy them in-store, I am always too lazy to go in and return them."

"I ordered a t-shirt for click and collect on Saturday, and I'm still waiting on a confirmation email to go in and collect it."

"I would probably be on my phone quite a lot. So if I commute into college or if I am kind of bored, I'll just sit there and scroll through. Like, you can save something on your wishlist."

5.2.4. Efficiency

Undoubtedly the experience offered by online shopping was perceived by most participants as more efficient either in comparison with in-store shopping or even the online shopping experience before the pandemic. The fact that websites and apps improved their features contributed to this perception. Participants highlighted that the activities that would be more complex before the COVID-19 pandemic have become more manageable, such as refining searches, sections dedicated to sales and inspiration, description of models' measurements for comparison, and more user-friendly interfaces. The improvements related to efficiency clearly impact individuals' price and time sensitivity, whereas consumers can compare products and choose the best option according to their needs, and the searching process for the right item, colour or size is accelerated. While consumers believe there is more of a selection online, wherein they can find more options of models, sizes and colours, they argue that in-store there is limited selection and sizes. In addition, being able to browse among the vast variety of products influences their perceptions about online shopping efficiency.

" It's definitely better. I think some companies you can refine your search and put in only your size and your height and your weight and what fit you like. So, I think before COVID I didn't

really do that, but then we had so much more time to sit down and really go through websites and stuff."

"There's more information online. So it's just easier to buy things online."

"But when it comes to being more efficient and so, I think online shopping is like, I definitely would pick, like buying clothes online is just much easier."

5.2.5. Lack of standards

All participants stated that the lack of standards at any level is one of the most prominent disadvantages of online shopping for clothing. The differences in sizes were cited as a factor that affects and influences their choices. Not only did they mention differences in sizes from shop to shop, but also among products in the same shop. While some individuals claimed to overcome this disadvantage by adapting to the shop's sizing standards after recurrently buying from the same shop, others perceive the issue as a deal-breaker that can lead the consumer to stop buying at that shop, sometimes escalating to perceived lack of quality and affecting their trust. Another factor encompassed in the lack of standards is the disparity between online and in-store policies, wherein it was pointed out that the same shop has different policies regarding the same subject for each channel (online and physical store). The lack of standards seems to directly affect the type of clothing that individuals perceive as less or more suitable for purchasing online. According to the participants, the articles pointed out as less suitable require a better fit, which is more difficult to achieve due to differences in sizing standards.

"There is a time frame that they could return something. And I, when I was like two or three days over the time and they wouldn't give me a refund, I don't know. I think the policy is different in-store than online. So, I think I would probably avoid using JD for things like shoes and stuff online."

"Shoes and jackets because they don't have to fit too good to be perfect."

"I think it is more trial and error. You know, you buy one time, and it doesn't fit. It was maybe a bit too big, you can return it and then maybe next time you could get maybe a size small."

“One of the main reasons why I would be shopping so much online is because they wouldn't have my size in store.”

5.2.6. Sensorial limitation

Not being able to touch and feel the products is a theme that emerged as a disadvantage of online shopping for clothing during the pandemic. Participants claimed to have missed the experience of going to a shop and touching the clothes, trying them on. They also claimed that even visual senses are limited in a certain way since pictures do not always reflect what the product actually is. The majority of participants pointed out that there are differences between the product on the screen and the actual product or that some products look great on the model but not necessarily the same on themselves. Complaints about differences in colour and fabric were found to be factors that affect their trust, resulting in either in the consumer not considering the shop as a first option or in the individual not buying at that specific shop anymore. Despite the sensorial barrier, the participants stated that other consumers' experiences and opinions positively affect their decisions, helping them overcome the sensorial limitation. Posts on social media, reviews, and videos of other people consuming the products were found to be effective ways of overcoming the sensory barrier. Although the in-store experience offers the advantage of touching and feeling the product, most participants claimed to be comfortable with the resources offered online.

“I like seeing the clothes, touching them, trying the clothes on, and I cannot do that online.”

“Not really before COVID because I liked to be able to try them on… I was a little bit more hesitant before COVID because of that factor that you could not try them on, and you could not see them. And if the picture online was actually, you know, representing what they were.”

“In the shop, I can see the fabric. I know if I like it, if I do not, I can try the clothes on.”

“They would be, you know, sometimes the picture of let's say a t-shirt looks nice, but when it arrives, it doesn't look the same.”

“Sometimes I see stuff on Instagram that other people might have worn. I'd go check it out from there so you can kind of tell sometimes from their pictures the quality or else.”

5.3. Post-pandemic predictions

The interviewees were asked what new habits they believe they would carry on in a post-pandemic era and if they think their behaviour would change after the pandemic and how. Although the researcher acknowledges the limitations of predicting future behaviour, three patterns emerged from the answers to these questions wherein the themes were organised according to an order of relevance: Openness to the experience; Hybrid shopping; and Social Aspect of Shopping.

5.3.1. Openness to the experience

The experience gained during the pandemic and especially the periods of lockdown has given consumers more confidence and trust regarding online shopping for clothing. In contrast, the in-store experience does not seem as exciting or attractive and is not able to offer the same level of convenience. Participants highlighted that online shopping seems easier than going to physical stores now and how they became accustomed to it, which would lead them to choose to buy the majority of clothes online rather than going to physical stores for purchasing a specific item.

"I went into one shop, and I was like, no, it's just easier to shop online. I'm just so used to it."

"I would say I am saving a lot of time buying online, so I will continue to buy online."

"I would favour online shopping, mostly because I have done it for years, so I know what brands I like, and I know that it will be good quality or which places will deliver."

5.3.2. Hybrid shopping (Omnichannel)

Participants demonstrated to be very sensitive to prices, wherein they claimed to perceive online shopping as cheaper than buying in-store. However, the majority also claimed that they might do both online and in-store shopping. Besides, if prices were the same in-store and online, they would be more inclined to buy the product in-store if already at the physical shop instead of waiting to purchase it online. The COVID-19 pandemic is still impacting the in-store experience, limiting the number of customers inside the store, imposing the use of face masks, facing long queues, and making customers feel under pressure. While webrooming is not a common practice among Generation Z consumers, showrooming was found to be a usual activity while browsing in physical shops, wherein the comparison of prices and the search for sizes are the main reasons for the practice.

"I would do both."

"I will buy more online for convenience. But then again, there's always a hit and miss you can buy like t-shirts and stuff."

"Recently I did go into the shops for holiday shopping, and I was trying on the clothes, and it was great. And then you also have the plus side of not having to return… I think I would do both. I'm not leaning towards one or the other. I'm more inclined to do online shopping now than I was before.

"If I've seen something in a store, like JD or Zara. They may have my size, but I know I could get it cheaper online, but it's the same code or special offers there or promo codes I would go on and check and see, can I get a cheap one?"

"I think I will definitely be shopping in-store more when we don't have to wear masks and everything."

"What I do not like is how busy it is now. The queueing, long queues outside as well to get into the shop because they can only let certain amount of people in the shop now, and you have to wear your mask and that part of it, I am like, okay, maybe online shopping is actually just easier right now."

5.3.3. Social Aspect of Shopping

Although online shopping is perceived as more advantageous in many aspects, shopping for clothes in-store was found to have more than the objective of purchasing an item. Participants pointed out the social aspect of going to a physical store for reasons such as observing different styles, being a relaxing activity, enjoying time with friends and sharing opinions, and enjoying the atmosphere at times like Christmas. Therefore, instead of going to bricks-and-mortar exclusively to buy a specific piece of clothing, Generation Z would be more inclined to see it as a social experience and random shopping.

"I used to always just go to shops if I was bored or something. But I feel like I'd probably still do the majority of my shopping online."

"Atmosphere of going into a store and everybody is like, especially at times like Christmas time, everybody is shopping, and everyone is happy, and everyone is buying so many things that they liked and stuff. I think the atmosphere is one thing."

"It would be more like, you're already there. You're right beside the shop. And you are just kind of killing time. Just like an activity... If I'm meeting a friend, I might go to a shop with them, and that's an activity that friends can do together. I've done that before and I like it… I think it's just socialising and having the opportunity to have feedback from your friend."

Chapter 6. DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the study's results presented in chapter 5, 'Findings and Analysis'. Throughout the discussion, the researcher explains how the findings of this study connect to the research base and what they imply in the context of prior studies. The chapter is divided into three sub-chapters, wherein the first one declares the answers to the main research question, and the following two sub-chapters state the answers to the sub-questions.

6.1. Changes in online buying behaviour during the pandemic

The primary aim of this study was to qualitatively analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the online shopping behaviour for clothing of the Irish Generation Z and draw a comparison with the pre-pandemic period. Three topics emerged as the main changes caused by factors strictly related to the pandemic outcomes and influence. First, as supported by recent research (Kibo Study: Younger Generations Show Increased Shift to Long-Term Online Shopping, 2020), Generation Z has shifted even further towards digital channels, increasing the frequency they shop online for clothing, as well as the number of articles bought. The second most significant change in behaviour involves the gain of trust and confidence. The topic has been discussed by Patodiya and Birla (2016) regarding how omnichannel strategies and better websites help. It has also been supported by Flavián, Gurrea and Orús (2020) as the authors argued that gaining more familiarity and experience with online shopping tends to decrease the levels of distrust.

The third change identified in this study was the type of clothing that the Irish Generation Z would buy during the two lockdown periods. The researcher has found that their shopping habits changed to purchasing more comfortable clothes and outfits for exercising outdoors, which is supported by the idea of consumption being time and location bound, and developed over time (Sheth, 2020). In addition, the sudden and rapid change of habits caused by the COVID-19 pandemic associated with the arrival of a new season, Spring, encouraged consumers to buy more clothes to perform activities they would not dedicate time to before. These changes in habits have been discussed and are extensively supported in the existing literature (Roggeveen and Sethuraman, 2020; Ward 2020; Zwanka and Buff, 2021), wherein the acceleration of trends and adoption of new habits has been referred to as the 'new normal'.

6.2. Perceptions about online shopping for clothing during the pandemic

Regarding the perceived benefits and drawbacks of online shopping for clothing during the pandemic, posed as a sub-question of this research, six themes emerged from this study. Following an order of relevance, the first four themes are perceived benefits and can be considered functional motives related to utilitarian functions (Tingchi Liu et al., 2013). The Irish Generation Z has considered 'Price' the most sensitive topic. Consumers demonstrated using online shopping resources to search, compare and purchase the products with the best price. This result is supported by a recent study (Kibo Study: Younger Generations Show Increased Shift to Long-Term Online Shopping, 2020), wherein price comparison was the top online shopping advantage for the majority of Generation Z consumers. Haji Ahmad et al. (2020) also pointed out the variety of prices, deals and options as perceived benefits that motivate consumers to purchase online, which this study also identified as motivator factors for a change in consumers' habits. Moreover, the fact that Generation Z is more sensible about money, pragmatic, and more obsessed with price has been supported in the existing literature (Talmon, 2019; Hanbury, 2021; Lissitsa and Laor, 2021) and justifies the results of this research as 'Price' being the most sensitive matter for them.

The second most relevant theme, 'Time', has been pointed out as a risk associated with the shopping activity in traditional channels in existing literature (Wani and Malik, 2013). The findings of this study support this statement since Generation Z is extremely sensitive to time and convenience perceived benefits linked to online shopping. On the other hand, one of the perceived risks associated with time, the delivery (Hong et al., 2019), was still considered a disadvantage for those who did not subscribe to next-day delivery. Although recent research has shown the growth of the emergent phenomenon BOPIS, or Click & Collect (Apparel - Ireland | Statista Market Forecast, 2020), Generation Z does not see it as an advantage as it demands commuting to the physical store, which represents a perceived disadvantage regarding time and convenience. For this reason, the practice has not been adopted by this cohort. The third most relevant theme was related to 'Location', which has proved to reflect both location constraints caused by the two lockdowns and the frequent use of mobiles for shopping purposes. The impact of mobiles on Generation Z has been supported in the existing literature (Wood, 2015; Priporas et al., 2017) and justifies the cohort being high-demanding in regard to time, convenience and flexibility.

Another factor related to their pursuit for convenience is represented in the fourth theme, 'Efficiency'. Online shopping was perceived as more efficient when compared to brick-and-mortar. The possibility of filtering their searches and having a wider variety of sizes and colours were considered major benefits of purchasing apparel products online, which is supported by Young Kim and Kim (2003), who claimed that these features are some of the primary factors that influence consumers' decisions regarding online shopping. This idea is also supported by Miller and Washington (2020), who outlined the results of a survey by Euclid Analytics with Generation Z wherein 31% of the participants felt encouraged to shop online as they claimed it is hard to find the products in physical stores, whereas online shopping optimises this search. 'Time', 'Location', and 'Efficiency' are all themes that were translated by the participants as 'convenience' and justified by the 'laziness' they have been subjected to due to the new dynamics imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These three themes are highly intertwined and are a clear reflection of Generation Z's consumer profile.

The fifth and sixth themes are related to the perceived drawbacks of online shopping during the pandemic. 'Lack of standards' encompasses the differences in sizes from each shop, either among shops or in items from the same store. Even though the lack of standards related to sizing or policies has not been widely discussed in the literature, Mróz-Gorgoń and Szymański (2018) claim that clothing size and different standards are two of the reasons that have led consumers to practice the 'webrooming'. However, during the two lockdowns, the physical shops were closed, not allowing consumers to purchase in-store. Therefore, although perceived as a risk, the lack of standards did not impede Generation Z to buy clothing online. This issue produces two types of results: preference for specific shops and preference for buying specific items in-store. The lack of standards generated distrust in the shop where the consumer had a bad experience, which did not affect their trust in online shopping as a whole. However, concerning the type of clothing article, the preference for shopping in-store depended on the desired fit and how tailored they expected it to be.

The fifth theme, 'Sensorial Limitation', has been discussed in the literature as Dutta and Das (2017) and Rajani and Nakhat (2019) posited that even younger cohorts have the need to touch and feel and that this need leads consumers to prefer shopping certain items at physical stores. The researcher has identified that, even though Generation Z is extremely technology-savvy, these consumers missed the touch and feel experience during the lockdown periods, where the possibility of trying products on was taken of them. Sensorial Limitation as a perceived risk is also supported by Bashir et al. (2021), wherein product dissimilarities and deception are encompassed in their framework. When compared to in-store shopping, Generation Z perceived the limitation of senses such as touch, feel, and visual as a disadvantage of online shopping, which generates concerns regarding the fabric, feel or fit, also discussed by (Bashir et al., 2021). As stated by Rajani and Nakhat (2019), other customers' experiences influence Generation Z's buying decision, whereas Patodiya and Birla (2016) had pointed out the need for focusing on user experience design and interaction by developing better websites. The researcher identified that sharing experiences through reviews on the apps and websites, or even social media, has been a practice used to overcome the sensorial limitation, which has been supported by recent research where 48.5% of Irish online shoppers say they consider consumer reviews when researching a brand (Digital in Ireland: All the Statistics You Need in 2021, 2021).

6.3. Predictions for a post-pandemic era

The second sub-question posed in this study proposed to explore what Generation Z's online shopping habits for clothing were considered most likely to endure in a post-pandemic era based on their recent changes in behaviour. Three patterns emerged from this study and supported the claims that some habits will not last in a post-pandemic period (Sheth, 2020). Furthermore, the themes identified in the predictions also endorsed the idea posed by Birkinshaw (2021), wherein the impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be reversed by simply removing this force from the system. The first pattern was termed 'Openness to the experience' and related to the increase in frequency, trust and confidence, changes caused by the impact of the pandemic. The idea that familiarity and experience with the online shopping process reduce levels of distrust has been discussed by Flavián, Gurrea and Orús (2020) and supported in this study. Besides, as previously stated by Morewedge et al. (2021), the evolution of the web has been changing the shopping process and increased the likelihood of consumers buying online. In this regard, companies have been investing in more user-friendly apps and websites, which has impacted Generation Z's perception of convenience and trust. Although Miller and Washington (2020) outlined Generation Z's preference for in-store experiences due to sensorial advantages, this study has identified that consumers are more open to the online shopping experience after becoming more accustomed to the activity.

The second pattern identified was termed ‘Hybrid shopping’ and can be related to trust and confidence, reflecting the benefits and drawbacks of online and in-store experiences. This prediction reinforced the importance of omnichannel strategies and has been supported in the literature as Baldwin (2019) poses the sensory experience as an encouragement for purchasing in-store. In addition, Zwanka and Buff (2020) claimed that consumers would seek the pleasure of experiences missed but take advantage of the convenient aspects of new habits. Although Generation Z has gotten more open to the experience of shopping for clothing online, they are still inclined to purchase specific items at physical stores. As we are amidst a pandemic, these consumers do not feel encouraged to go into the stores. Therefore, although Ward (2020) has claimed that Generation Z was the most likely to BOPIS, this study has found that the limitations imposed to contain the spread of the virus discouraged younger consumers from doing so. However, the scenario might change as the Irish government starts slowly dropping social distancing constraints.

The third and last pattern, the ‘Social aspect of shopping’, supports the ‘Hybrid shopping’ prediction and has been discussed in the literature as Priporas et al. (2017) outlined in their research that some Generation Z consumers perceive shopping as a social event that cannot be replicated in the virtual environment. This factor has also been supported by the idea of how considering other individuals’ opinions can moderate one’s choices (McNeill, 2018), contributing to the sociable characteristic of shopping from the younger consumers’ perspective. However, enjoying the in-store experience as a social event seems to occur in specific contexts where the consumer is already transiting near the shop and take the opportunity to browse either alone or while accompanied by a friend, a convenient context. Besides, holiday seasons, such as Christmas and New Year, make the in-store experience more attractive due to its unique social aspect involving the atmosphere.

Chapter 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This last chapter concludes the study by commenting on the theoretical and practical implications of the current research. In addition, the researcher points out the shortcomings and recommendations for future research.

7.1. Theoretical Implications

Many researchers have examined Generation Z consumers' buying behaviour (e.g., Wood, 2015; Gutfreund, 2016; Priporas et al., 2017; Southgate, 2017; Rue, 2018; Scholz and Rennig, 2019; Talmon, 2019; Miller and Washington, 2020). However, the current study extends the theory by examining Generation Z consumers' online buying behaviour in a pandemic setting and focusing on their attitudes towards the apparel market.

As the study indicates, although clothing is part of a sensory-experiential product category (Rajani and Nakhat, 2019), Generation Z's urge for processes that are convenient timewise and products that are advantageous pricewise, combined with the constraints provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns, have led this cohort to be more open to the experience of online shopping for clothing. Regardless of the hurdles related to the lack of standards and the sensorial limitation, the openness to online shopping for clothing has increased once the consumers started shopping more, gaining experience and, consequently, increasing levels of trust (Flavián, Gurrea and Orús, 2020). Regarding trust, the researcher has found out that the perceived risks related to lack of standards in size and the disparity between the screen and the actual product have had more impact on the relationship between consumer and retailer rather than consumer and the online shopping activity itself.

Moreover, the changes that occurred during the pandemic were motivated by the convergence of a generalised fear of the disease, location constraints and home as a new setting for work and gym. However, as the government slowly reopens businesses and allows other social activities, consumers start going out and purchasing items of clothing that are more suitable for these activities rather than focusing on comfort. In addition, Generation Z is technology-savvy and more sensible and conscious about money (Wood, 2015; Priporas et al., 2017; Scholz and Rennig, 2019), which has been supported by this study and extended in the sense that during the pandemic and especially the lockdown periods, these consumers realised how online shopping for clothing could meet their needs and be more efficient.

7.2. Practical Implications

The accelerated digital technology adoption that occurred as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic constraints has had a significant impact on customers' preferred interactions and will continue to shift as society adapts to the ongoing changes and the unpredictability of the pandemic (Baig et al., 2020). Therefore, the findings of the current study have significant implications for the apparel market. They suggest that it is crucial to deal with Generation Z consumers' demands regarding price, speed and efficiency of processes, standardisation of sizes and policies, and omnichannel strategies.

Generation Z perceptions of online shopping for clothing during the pandemic showed that a post-pandemic era would have to deal with a younger consumer force way more open to purchasing clothes online and eager to find better deals, making the competition even fiercer. In this context, retailers that are able to offer means to overcome the sensorial limitations might stand out from competitors. Participants claimed to use social media and other user-generated content to help in this process, such as reviews and videos. In this regard, apparel companies can benefit from creating such spaces in their websites, apps and social media pages.

On the other hand, shopping in-store offers the social aspect of the experience where consumers can spend time together at the shops and going to a store becomes more of a social activity rather than functional. Unlike activities such as going to a park or to the cinema, going to a shop with friends seems to occur in a context of convenience where the group is already nearby. Therefore, it is possible to infer that consumers would be most likely to impulse-buy. Another practical implication for apparel retailers is the prediction for hybrid shopping, which would require better omnichannel practices and further studies about in-store shopping motivations post-pandemic.

7.3. Limitations and recommendations for future research

While this exploratory study might be regarded as adding to the existing literature on Generation Z' shopping behaviour and has extended our knowledge of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their online shopping attitudes toward clothing, it has some limitations. First, as outlined in Chapter 4, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to the entire Irish Generation Z due to its qualitative nature and sample size. Future research could employ quantitative methods with larger samples in order to measure and support the current findings. Second, this study was conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, where changes in consumer behaviour are still ongoing, and future behaviour predictions were speculations based on current behaviour and the participants' opinions. Future research could be undertaken in a post-pandemic era to verify whether the new behavioural patterns match these predictions. Third, this study explored online shopping for clothing without differentiating between digital shops and retailers with a physical presence in the high-street. Future research could analyse in-depth Generation Z's preferences and motivations comparing both types of business. Further research could also compare behavioural patterns of different generations regarding online shopping for clothing in a post-pandemic period.

Glossary

Generation Z. Cohort of individuals born between the late 1990s and early 2000s characterized by never having lived in an era without the technology of the Internet and the mobile.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). An infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus and declared a pandemic in March 2020 (Coronavirus, n.d.).

eCommerce. Commercial transactions carried on electronically over the internet.

ROPO. Stands for Research Online Purchase Offline. Effect where the consumer researches and compares different products online but makes the final purchase in-store.

ROBO. Stands for Research Online Buy Offline. Another term for the ROPO effect.

Webrooming. the practice of looking online at a product one is willing to buy and then purchasing it in a shop later (Webrooming, n.d.).

Showrooming. The practice of looking at a product in a physical shop before purchasing it from an online distributor, frequently using a mobile app to compare its price elsewhere (Showrooming definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary, n.d.).

BOPIS. Stands for Buy Online Pick-up In-Store. Retail strategy that allows the consumer to purchase an item online and collect it at the physical shop.

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Appendices

Appendix A

The first version of the questionnaire used in the pilot interview.

SECTION A

1. Considering the following frequency options, how often would you online purchase these items?

Frequency:

- Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly (approx. every 3 months)
- Every 6 months
- Never

Purchasing Activity on-line	**On-line purchasing before COVID**	**On-line purchasing currently**	**Anticipated future purchasing on-line**
Groceries			
Footwear			
Clothing			
Electronic			
Books			
Other			

2. Are there any items that you'd look up online but buy at the shop?
3. Are there any items that you'd look up at the shop but buy online?

SECTION B

If they have answered NEVER:

1. Will you consider online purchasing in the future?
2. What would make you more likely to consider making an online purchase?
3. Have you had an experience that has put you off shopping online?
4. What do you think are the disadvantages of shopping online specifically for clothes?
5. What do you think there could be any advantages of shopping online specifically for clothes?

[If the interviewee has never bought clothing online, end the interview here]

If you have bought Clothing can you please give me some more detail?

1. Which items of clothing have you ordered (and how frequently) online?

Clothing Items	**On-line purchasing before COVID**	**On-line purchasing currently**

SECTION C

1. What types of clothing do you think are more suitable for purchasing online?
2. What types of clothing do you think are less suitable for purchasing online?
3. What do you like about shopping online for clothes?
4. What do you dislike about shopping online for clothes?

5. How would you describe the experience of online shopping for clothes?
6. What clothing items do you prefer buying online?
7. What clothing items do you prefer to buy in-store?
8. When things are back to “normal” and the pandemic is over, do you think you will do most of your clothes shopping online or in-store?
9. Why do you think this?
10. Is there any particular item of clothing that you would never consider purchasing online?
11. Is there any company that you would never consider purchasing from online?
12. Have you ever had any experience returning an item that didn’t fit you?
13. Would you buy more from local shops or internationally?

Appendix B

The latest version of the questionnaire used in the last interview containing all the modifications

SECTION A

1. How often would you purchase these items online before COVID?
2. Has it changed during the pandemic? [If the interviewee says 'more', ask about quantity]
3. When all the shops reopen and the pandemic is over, do you think it will change for you?

Purchasing Activity on-line	**Online purchasing BEFORE COVID**	**Online purchasing CURRENTLY**	**Online purchasing AFTER COVID**
Groceries			
Footwear			
Clothing			
Electronic			
Books			
Other			

4. Are there any items that you usually research online and purchase offline? Why?
5. And the other way around? Research in-store and purchase online.
6. Are there any items that you usually prefer buying online and collecting in-store? Why?
7. Do you consider keeping any of these practices after the pandemic is over?

SECTION B

If you have bought Clothing can you please give me some more detail?

Which items of clothing have you ordered online and how frequently?

Frequency BEFORE:

- Very Often (every week)
- Often
- Once in a while (every 2 or 3 months)
- Rarely

Frequency CURRENTLY (in comparison):

- Same
- More often
- Less often

Clothing Items	**Online purchasing BEFORE COVID**	**Online purchasing CURRENTLY**

SECTION C

1. What types of clothing do you think are more suitable for purchasing online?
2. What types of clothing do you think are less suitable for purchasing online?
3. What do you like about shopping online for clothes?
4. What do you dislike about shopping online for clothes?
5. How would you describe your experience of online shopping for clothing before the pandemic and during the pandemic? Have you noticed any differences?
6. How would you describe your experience in-store? What do you like or dislike about it?

7. When things are back to “normal” and the pandemic is over, do you think you will do most of your shopping for clothing online or in-store? Why do you think this?
8. What would stop you from buying clothes online after the pandemic is over and life is completely back to “normal”?
9. Is there any particular item of clothing that you would never consider purchasing online?
10. Is there any company that you would never consider purchasing from online?
11. Have you ever had any experience returning an item? Why did you return it and how was the experience?
12. During the pandemic, would you buy clothes more from local shops or internationally?
13. Do you think anything will change for you in regards to shopping for clothing after the pandemic is over?

If you have answered NEVER for CLOTHING in SECTION A:

1. Will you consider online purchasing in the future?
2. What would make you more likely to consider making an online purchase?
3. Have you had an experience that has put you off shopping online?
4. What do you think are the disadvantages of shopping online specifically for clothes?
5. What do you think there could be any advantages of shopping online specifically for clothes?

Appendix C

Participant 5 interview transcript.

Rachel: [00:00:00] Perfect. So the first part of the interview, I just want to understand the online shopping behavior, but not only about clothing, not only about fashion, I'm going to ask about groceries and footwear like shoes, electronic items, or if you buy books. So I want you to tell me how was your behavior, how often you would buy these kinds of items before COVID and then during COVID. So the first one is groceries. Would you buy like groceries? I'm not talking about food, not like Deliveroo, Just Eat, just groceries, like Tesco things or LIDL, Aldi. Would you buy these things?

Participant 5: [00:01:00] I would never shop online for groceries. Never. I haven't ever done that yet.

Rachel: [00:01:07] I haven't. So not even during COVID.

Participant 5: [00:01:10] no, not even during COVID. My parents were shopping online, but me personally, I was not buying groceries.

Rachel: [00:01:18] And what about shoes before COVID would you buy shoes online?

Participant 5: [00:01:26] Shoes online. Um, not really before COVID because I liked to be able to try them on. But during COVID yes, I was, um, online shopping a lot for shoes, like especially runners, because we were like, outdoor so much and walking and yeah. And I was bored.

Rachel: [00:01:49] Now that the shops are open, are back open, what would you say? Would you say that you would prefer, now that you started shopping shoes online, would you say that you carry this on or you would go back to shopping in-store?

Participant 5: [00:02:07] I think to be honest, no, I liked just shopping online so I'm not really, I don't care to go to the shop. I will just probably continue to do it online because it's just easier.

Rachel: [00:02:23] It's easier. And when you say easier, in what sense, it's easier for you?

Participant 5: [00:02:30] So it's just easier. You don't have to, you know, go to the shops and try shoes on. I think online as well, there's more of a selection. I find in shops, there's limited choice where online you have so much choice.

Rachel: [00:02:48] Okay. Got it. And you said before COVID you wouldn't buy online, at least shoes you wouldn't, because you would like to try it on. You like to try them on. What changed during COVID that you say like, now you're going to start buying more online, for shoes. What changed in your mind? Like don't you feel that, that thing about trying it on anymore? Um,

Participant 5: [00:03:21] yeah, no, do you mean like during COVID why I started shopping online?

Rachel: [00:03:26] I understand why you started shopping online. The shops were closed. Like what changed that you said even now that the shops are open, you will. You said, oh no. Now I kind of prefer buying online because it's easier . So what changed in your mind? Because before COVID I understand from what you say that it was much more about trying it on. So what changed?

Participant 5: [00:03:56] Um, I don't know. No, I think it's the convenience of it. Now. I think people have gotten really lazy during COVID. Well, this is just me and now I've gotten into like, I enjoy just shopping online. So it's became like a habit now. Whereas like now I'm more just, I think it's laziness maybe. And convenience.

Rachel: [00:04:19] Okay. I see. And you don't miss the thing about trying it on anymore?

Participant 5: [00:04:24] I do. No, I do, like recently I did go into the shops, um, for holiday shopping and I was trying on and it, it was great. Um, and then you also have the plus side of not having to, you know, return. But, um, no, I think. I think I would do both. I'm not leaning one or the other. I, you know, I'm more inclined to do online shopping now as well than I was before, but I would stop to try on.

Rachel: [00:04:57] Would you say that, um, maybe you're more open to shopping online for shoes now?

Participant 5: [00:05:04] Yeah, that's the word I was looking for? I am more open now. I was, yeah, I was a little bit more hesitant before COVID because of that factor that you couldn't try them on and you couldn't see them. And if the picture online was actually, you know, representing what they were like, but, um, Yeah. Now I'm a lot more open because of how much shopping we did .

Rachel: [00:05:27] And how would it work for clothing like before COVID? Would it be the same or would you buy more clothes online?

Participant 5: [00:05:40] Um, no clothes. I think it's a little bit different for me. I, I just much prefer to actually go into the shops.

Rachel: [00:05:49] You prefer to go into the shops. And how did it work for you during COVID?

Participant 5: [00:05:58] During COVID? Um, I was doing a lot of online shopping for clothes. Yeah, probably the most I've ever done. Online shopping wise, because normally before COVID, I would just do online shopping if there was an event. So if I needed to buy like a dress for something, or if I needed like something quickly and I didn't have time to go into the shop. Um, but yeah, during COVID now, again, I'm more open to the idea of it online.

Rachel: [00:06:33] Okay, but now that the shops are open for clothes as well. Would you say that you would prefer going to the shops and doing most of your shopping in-store or you would balance and do online shopping as well? What would you say?

Participant 5: [00:06:53] I think I would probably balance. Sorry. If that's not a good answer.

Rachel: [00:07:00] No, there's no right or wrong answer, good or bad answer. Like, it's just understanding how you think and how it works for you. The purpose of the interview, and that's why I'm not just running an online survey for a thousand people, I just want to understand. Because each person has a different point of view and it actually enriches the research. So don't worry. Don't worry. There's no right or wrong.

Participant 5: [00:07:29] Okay.

Rachel: [00:07:30] What about electronic items? Would you buy like phones or computers, any kind of electronic item, uh, online before COVID?

Participant 5: [00:07:44] I don't think I'd ever bought something online, electronic before COVID and during COVID I ended up getting a new phone and a new laptop, which I would have probably never done before. I don't know why with electronics. I might, I'd rather go in and like, see it myself before I spend a lot of money.

Rachel: [00:08:06] Maybe because they're more expensive.

Participant 5: [00:08:09] Yeah, exactly. I want to make sure it works.

Rachel: [00:08:15] And are there any items that you usually research online and then you go in-store and you purchase in-store?

Participant 5: [00:08:26] Yes. Jewellery.

Rachel: [00:08:28] Oh, any other items?

Participant 5: [00:08:31] Um, that I would research online before, um, probably clothes.

Rachel: [00:08:39] So some types of clothes.

Participant 5: [00:08:42] Yeah. Like dresses and, you know, sometimes like, I'll go onto Zara on the website and like, look at a few different things, but then it's so hard to tell sometimes online what they've looked like. It's nice to go into the shop. So yeah, I have done that a bit as well.

Rachel: [00:09:00] And the other way around? That you look in-store, but you prefer purchasing online?

Participant 5: [00:09:07] No, I don't think so. I probably would just buy it.

Rachel: [00:09:11] And anything that you prefer buying online and collecting in-store? Because, uh, during COVID we had a lot of this click and collect your stuff. So you buy online and collect in-store. Anything that you like doing it? Have you ever done click and collect?

Participant 5: [00:09:33] I've actually never done the click and collect personally. If I'm online shopping, like it would always just be delivered. But I would be open to it. I just, I haven't done it before.

Rachel: [00:09:46] Okay. So you said you started shopping online more than you used to do before COVID. Like, during COVID you started shopping online more. So do you think you're gonna, you're gonna keep doing it? Even after, as I said, the shops are open now are back open. And you said you still like going to the shops and seeing things, but you said also that you're kind of more open to shopping online.

Participant 5: [00:10:20] I think I will like definitely, even though the shops have been open, um, I have been online shopping still. So I guess because I also liked the idea of just being able to, like, if you go on a website, just being able to scroll and, you know, really take your time. Like there's no pressure. Sometimes when I go into the shop, like, it's like really easy to like impulse buy. Um, but online, like I think you can take your time. There's no rush. You can really search and so, yeah, I do like that element of it. So I probably will keep online shopping.

Rachel: [00:11:02] I was even going to ask later what do you like about shopping online for clothes? But before I ask you this question, and then you have to repeat everything all over again, um, before COVID, what kind of, uh, clothing items did you buy? Like more, more often.

Participant 5: [00:11:25] Before COVID?

Rachel: [00:11:27] Yeah. Before COVID what kind of, you said dresses?

Participant 5: [00:11:31] Yeah dresses. Dresses and like more, uh, dressing up clothes for, you know, like, uh, dinners or a birthday or, you know, special occasions.

Rachel: [00:11:43] Okay. And during COVID what type of clothes did you buy?

Participant 5: [00:11:50] Gym. Gym clothes because everybody was working out and, you know, working at home and then I just started exercise more. So yeah, definitely gym clothes, um, and like loungewear.

Rachel: [00:12:09] Okay. And these are things you wouldn't buy frequently before COVID even like in-store?

Participant 5: [00:12:19] Yeah.

Rachel: [00:12:24] Okay. And what types of clothes do you think are more suitable for purchasing online? Your preferences.

Participant 5: [00:12:38] Probably dresses.

Rachel: [00:12:44] Dresses. Any specific reason why? A particular reason why you would think this is more suitable for you to purchase online?

Participant 5: [00:12:55] I just always think with the, well, this is just me personally, where I would shop online they don't have actual stores and like where I would go to get my dresses, like pretty little thing or any of those kinds of websites, like ASOS. Um, I do a lot of online shopping there. Like they don't have stores, so I've purchased a lot of my dresses there. Um, I never buy jeans online because I think jeans are like, they really something that you have to like go and try on and see.

Rachel: [00:13:34] Yeah, that would be my next question. What kind of clothes are less suitable for you to purchase online? So jeans. So anything else that you don't like purchasing online, that you prefer going in-store?

Participant 5: [00:13:49] So jewellery. Well, yeah, any kind of jewellery. Yeah, I don't like it. Because you can never really tell online how nice it will be or, you know, if you want to invest.

Rachel: [00:14:01] Okay. And, well, what do you like more about shopping online? You said that it's easy. It's kind of more convenient. For you, what is the good thing about buying online?

Participant 5: [00:14:19] So there's more variety and there's more of a selection of like clothes than there would be in shops. Um, and then again, for me, the shops that I'm buying on, they don't have stores. So. I suppose I couldn't go in anyway, but yeah, just that there's a bigger selection of things, you know, you're in the comfort of your own space. And there's more time.

Rachel: [00:14:50] More time. Yeah. You did mention something about not feeling pressured to leave the place and like finish and leave. And anything that you dislike about shopping online, that you think it's a disadvantage?

Participant 5: [00:15:10] Yes. Um, because you cannot try them on. Then return them. And sometimes like it's such a hassle to, you know, have to send everything back and then you have to wait, you know, maybe like a week or 10 days sometimes for a refund. Whereas if it is in a shop it is easier.

Rachel: [00:15:35] So for returning items you would prefer shopping in-store because you don't feel comfortable because for you it's more of a hassle.

Participant 5: [00:15:46] Yeah. It is time-consuming.

Rachel: [00:15:48] So it's time-consuming. . Even if the postage is for free, like even if you don't have to pay for the post to return the item?

Participant 5: [00:15:59] Yeah. That's yeah. If the post is free, I think that does definitely make a difference. Um, yeah, that makes it so much easier. And they gave you the return label and you don't have to like go and print it out because you know if you don't have a printer at home it's like annoying, but if it's free it's okay. But you know, sometimes you buy it and then you have to pay to return it. So I don't like, I don't like that part of it.

Rachel: [00:16:28] Okay. And well, how would you describe your experience with the online shopping thing for clothes specifically before COVID and during COVID, if you had to compare your experiences? Your personal experience. Have you seen any difference on the websites or the apps or, or it was just more about you feeling more comfortable? How would you describe the before and during COVID?

Participant 5: [00:17:04] um, yeah, I think it's a bit of both. So personally I just have, you know, had more experience with it during COVID, so I've gotten more used to it now. And, I just, I like it a lot more than I did before COVID but also that is like a point to buy like websites and the apps. I have noticed they are a lot more user-friendly. And especially Zara. Before COVID I would avoid shopping on Zara. Because of how the layout was, but I think during COVID, especially, Zara and a few of the other ones, they are a lot more user-friendly and there was also a lot more sales on. So everything is a lot cheaper.

Rachel: [00:17:53] And do you think that because it was a lot cheaper you started buying more than you would do like in a normal context?

Participant 5: [00:18:03] Yeah, definitely.

Rachel: [00:18:05] And how would you describe the experience in-store? Like before COVID and now that the shops are open again, do you see any difference in the experience in-store? Is it more enjoyable for you? Or it used to be and it's not anymore? Or it is more enjoyable now because you missed it. How would you describe the experience? Think about everything in the store. The thing about being able to see the things and touch it, or queuing like the, just tell me about your experiences or how you see it and what you missed and what you didn't miss.

Participant 5: [00:18:49] Okay. So, for me, I really, I did really miss that part of being able to go in and touch the clothes and see them on just, you know, you can tell if you'd like them. I really missed that. And I really like enjoyed being able to go back and actually do that and actually walk around the shop. Um, but saying that, what I don't like is how busy it is now. The queuing, the long, long queues outside as well to get into the shop because they can only let a certain amount of people in the shop now. So, and you have to wear your mask and yeah, that part of it, I'm like, okay, maybe online shopping is actually just easy. Right now, it might change, but.

Rachel: [00:19:41] And before COVID when things were like normal. Would you go to the shops on your own or would you go like with friends? How would be the experience of shopping for you? As I said, would you go on your own, would you shopping more like alone or would you go with friends?

Participant 5: [00:20:01] I would do both. Like I do, I would go shopping with my friends definitely before COVID. After COVID I've just kind of been going by myself. I don't know if there's any reason for that.

Rachel: [00:20:17] Back then, when you'd go with your friends, what would be the best part of going with your friends?

Participant 5: [00:20:25] Just like, I don't know, I guess being able to ask each other's opinions on things, and just the whole experience, I guess. I like having someone there to ask, like, do you like this? You know, it helps you make your decisions. But I think now it is like more difficult because sometimes with the queuing and everything it is only one person at a time allowed into the shop. Yeah.

Rachel: [00:20:53] And is there anything that would stop you from buying clothes online? Like all, this is one thing that if it happens, I will never buy online anymore. Or I don't like buying online when the app or the website is like this, or I don't know anything that would stop you from buying online?

Participant 5: [00:21:18] That is a good question. I don't think so.

Rachel: [00:21:30] Nothing that would really bother you? Anything.

Participant 5: [00:21:33] I think if they increased the delivery.

Rachel: [00:21:39] Okay.

Participant 5: [00:21:41] And they had, so if they, yeah, if the delivery fees got more expensive, because some of them online, it's actually really expensive. The delivery cost and the return cost. If that got any more expensive, I probably wouldn't bother because I return a lot because you know, you try things on and you don't like them. I've found during COVID I was returning so much.

Rachel: [00:22:09] So you actually returned a lot of items.

Participant 5: [00:22:14] Yeah, I did, which should make me like, not want to do it, but I think I'm addicted now a little bit, but yeah, that's one thing I find quite annoying. Like I did return quite a lot because it looked a lot different.

Rachel: [00:22:31] Okay. I was going to ask, well, how was the experience and why did you have to return the item?

Participant 5: [00:22:36] I think sizing has really changed in clothing. And it's like varies between shops now. Whereas I felt like before it used to be a little bit easier. If you knew your size, it was fine. It was the same kind everywhere. And then I found, well, this is my experience from online shopping during COVID. Sizing was different everywhere. So I would get my normal size and try it on and it would either be way too smaller or way too big, so I'd have to return it. So that was interesting.

Rachel: [00:23:08] So you're saying that most of your experience with returning an item was because the size was different to what you thought.

Participant 5: [00:23:16] Yeah.

Rachel: [00:23:17] Any other reason? You said that it looked different, anything related to the way it looked on the website and the way the item actually was?

Participant 5: [00:23:27] Yeah, exactly. I think that's another thing. The way it looks on the model isn't necessarily how it's gonna look on you. Obviously. Because I'm really short. So yeah, sometimes if the website doesn't, some of the websites are really good and they will tell you like the measurements of the model and you know, you would know okay that's going to be too long or too short for me. But, yeah, that's another thing. Just how they actually looked on me. I just, yeah, it was very different to the picture.

Rachel: [00:24:00] And did you have any problems with the difference between how the fabric would look like in the big picture and how it actually was when you received it?

Participant 5: [00:24:11] Yeah. Not so much, yeah, not colour. It was the fabric. Yeah. Just looked totally different.

Rachel: [00:24:18] Colors were okay?

Participant 5: [00:24:20] Colors were okay. Yeah. I never had too much of an issue, but yeah, definitely the fabric and the quality, because I guess on the fast-fashion websites, you know, the clothes are cheap, but some of the quality just was really bad.

Rachel: [00:24:37] Okay. And is there any company that you would never consider buying from, like purchasing and from again? Or that you never actually purchased anything and you would never consider?

Participant 5: [00:24:52] Yes. Nasty gal.

Rachel: [00:24:54] Any particular reason why?

Participant 5: [00:24:57] The sizing? Yeah, I bought like so much from them one time and every single item I actually had to return because the sizing was so bad.

Rachel: [00:25:11] And any other company or just that specific experience?

Participant 5: [00:25:15] Yeah, just that. That's the only one I'd actually never shopped from again. Or BooHoo.

Rachel: [00:25:29] BooHoo? That you wouldn't buy?

Participant 5: [00:25:32] No. I find the quality of the clothes not very good.

Rachel: [00:25:39] And have you ever bought any items from like charity shops, like online, those kinds of online charity shops?

Participant 5: [00:25:49] No. I had gone in store to charity shops, but I've actually never shopped online.

Rachel: [00:25:56] Never shopped online. You never had this experience?

Participant 5: [00:25:59] No.

Rachel: [00:26:01] And during the pandemic, would you buy more from local shops or internationally? And when I say local shops, not necessarily the shop around the corner. But I mean like about shops that actually have stores in Ireland.

Participant 5: [00:26:26] So, oh, yeah, that's a good question. I don't know if there is many, Irish brands. Pennies, I guess, but I don't think.

Rachel: [00:26:37] Like pennies is one, but I, I don't think they were online.

Participant 5: [00:26:43] Oh, no. I'm trying to think now.

Rachel: [00:26:46] Well, what were the shops that you bought more clothes?

Participant 5: [00:26:53] So I think a lot of UK based, well, like Pretty Little Thing, Motel Rocks, ASOS, but I think ASOS is German.

Rachel: [00:27:06] Okay. I think they're mostly digital, only online.

Participant 5: [00:27:12] Oh, you mean? Sorry. Yeah. You mean actual shop.

Rachel: [00:27:17] No, it doesn't need to be, because this is actually interesting because your preferences are more for shops that are digital not necessarily they have physical stores.

Participant 5: [00:27:32] Yeah.

Rachel: [00:27:33] Okay. And do you think that anything will change for you after the pandemic is over? Because now, for example, we still have to wear the face mask and there's still a limited number of people in stores. And a lot of things are still being impacted because of COVID. But think of a world where we don't have to wear masks anymore. And we can gather like loads of people together and you can go out with loads of friends and you can go into the shops, with your groups again. Do you think that anything is going to change for you in regards to online shopping or shopping for clothes after the pandemic is completely over and things are back to normal, even like a new normal?

Participant 5: [00:28:30] I think, yeah, I think I will definitely be shopping in-store more when we don't have to wear masks and everything. Because I find that really difficult. It's like you just get so disorientated, but, um, yeah, I think I will definitely be going shopping with friends and in-store, but I also think I am now more inclined to do online shopping because of COVID than I would have been if COVID didn't happen.

Rachel: [00:29:05] So, yeah, I think from what you said for you, you just became more open to online shopping. Because you had to experience this. You had to experience online shopping because you had no other option.

Participant 5: [00:29:22] Yeah.

Rachel: [00:29:23] Then you kind of go use to the way things are and how you were doing things.

Participant 5: [00:29:31] Yeah

Rachel: [00:29:31] Okay. I think this is pretty much everything I had to ask you. I'm going to stop recording now.