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Fashionable yet responsible? Attitudes and consumption patterns of female independent fashion consumers¹

Modne, lecz odpowiedzialne? Postawy i wzorce nabywania i korzystania z odzieży przez konsumentki mody niezależnej

Abstract

Despite the growing interest in independent fashion, significantly more studies focus on its producers than on consumers. Our paper aims to address this research gap by examining female independent fashion consumers who participate in an independent and slow fashion fair and compare their buying and post-purchase preferences and behaviours with those of the general population of Polish female fashion consumers. To this end, we conducted two parallel surveys: one during an independent fashion fair held in Krakow, and another on a representative sample of Polish fashion consumers. The primary focus of our analysis is to test the hypothesis about more sustainable and responsible consumption behaviours of independent fashion consumers, as derived from previous studies of this fashion segment. Our findings reveal that while independent fashion consumers do not significantly differ from other consumers in terms of general fashion behaviours (shopping frequency, second-hand purchases or clothing repairs), they more frequently engage in other fashion-related activities (such as sharing used clothing). They exhibit greater sustainability-related motivations during fashion consumption and generally demonstrate stronger awareness of environmental and ethical issues linked with the fashion industry.

Keywords

independent fashion, independent fashion consumers, sustainable fashion, ethical fashion, sustainable consumption

Streszczenie

Pomimo rosnącego zainteresowania modą niezależną więcej publikacji skupia się na jej producentach niż na odbiorcach ich oferty. Naszym celem jest wypełnienie tej luki badawczej przez porównanie preferencji nabywczych i zachowań pozakupowych konsumentek niezależnej mody biorących udział w targach mody niezależnej z ogółem konsumentek odzieży. W tym celu przeprowadzono dwa równoległe badania ankietowe: pierwsze podczas targów mody niezależnej w Krakowie, drugie na reprezentatywnej ogólnopolskiej próbie konsumentek. Najważniejszym elementem badania było przetestowanie hipotez na temat bardziej zrównoważonych i odpowiedzialnych zachowań konsumentek mody niezależnej, postawionych na podstawie wcześniejszych studiów tego segmentu rynku odzieżowego. Wyniki analiz pokazują, że o ile ta grupa konsumentek nie odróżnia się znacząco od ogółu nabywców płci żeńskiej pod względem takich zachowań konsumenckich jak częstość zakupów, zakupy odzieży używanej czy naprawianie ubrań, to częściej angażuje się w inne zachowania pozakupowe, takie jak dzielenie się ubraniami. Dodatkowo podczas konsumpcji mody konsumentki te częściej kierują się motywacjami typowymi dla nabywców mody zrównoważonej oraz charakteryzują się większą świadomością kwestii środowiskowych i etycznych dotyczących mody.

Słowa kluczowe

moda niezależna, konsumentki mody niezależnej, moda zrównoważona, moda etyczna, zrównoważona konsumpcja

JEL: L26, L67, M31

Introduction

Recent years brought about a growing number of studies focused on independent fashion (Leslie et al., 2014; Gurova & Morozova, 2016; Jung & Jin, 2016; Brydges & Hracs, 2019; Tuite, 2019; Tuite & Horton, 2019; Heim et al., 2021; McRobbie et al., 2023; Murzyn-Kupisz et al., 2023). However, while this part of the fashion market is usually studied from the perspective of designers and producers, the practices of its consumers, often considered the epitome of engaged participants in the fashion market, remain under-researched (Jung & Jin, 2016; Tuite, 2019). This is particularly true with respect to their supposed more sustainable consumption attitudes. Such assumptions require verification, in particular comparison with data on the general population and profiles of responsible consumers.

Our paper hence aims to address two issues: to shed light on the attitudes and consumption patterns of independent fashion consumers who participate in independent fashion fairs and to test whether their fashion-related choices are unique in comparison to the general population by setting them against the general backdrop of fashion consumption in Poland. Our intention is to broaden fashion studies, in particular independent fashion research, and sustainable consumption studies, and to extend the geographic scope of these studies to include a Central and Eastern European (CEE) perspective (Koszevska, 2013; Smalec & Mróz-Gorgoń, 2015; Jung & Jin, 2016; Paul & Bhukya, 2021).

Drawing on existing studies on independent fashion (e.g. Leslie et al., 2014; Gurova & Morozova, 2018; Tuite, 2019; Murzyn-Kupisz et al., 2023; Brydges et al., 2023) and responsible consumers (Bly et al., 2015; Koszevska, 2013; Koszevska, 2016) we posit that independent fashion fair visitors represent the responsible fashion consumption segment and differ significantly from the general population and the population of major Polish cities by displaying more sustainable sartorial preferences. We first conduct a review of existing studies on independent and slow fashion that constituted the basis for the detailed hypotheses put forth in the text. Next, we outline the design of two surveys conducted as a part of the study. The subsequent section presents, interprets and juxtaposes the findings from both of them. Finally, we discuss the specificities of independent fashion aficionados as sustainable and responsible consumers. We also suggest how these findings could be applied in practice by fashion designers and producers, as well as other stakeholders in the fashion industry.

Literature review

Sustainable fashion consumption

Sustainability of fashion is determined by both supply and demand side of the market, which makes it important to study attitudes, choices and behaviours of both fashion producers and consumers (Koszevska, 2013; Tuite, 2019). Sustainable fashion consumption comprises all environmentally friendly and ethically-driven behaviours linked with clothing acquisition, use, care and disposal (Lang et al., 2013; Laitala, 2014; Bly et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2016; Henninger et al., 2016; Lundblad & Davies, 2016).

The socio-demographic variables usually mentioned as important determinants of sustainable fashion consumption are gender and age (Žurga et al., 2015; Park et al., 2017). However, many analyses derive conclusions from data sourced from convenience samples (e.g., collected via social media – Włodarczyk & Górka, 2024). This may result in biased respondent groups (e.g. predominantly young women and students, as noted by Laitala (2014)). In addition, studies that did take other socio-demographic variables into account (e.g. professional status, educational attainment and place of residence – Žurga et al., 2015) produced inconclusive results. Further research is therefore advocated, taking into account more diverse consumer attitudes and attributes (Park et al., 2017) and specific aspects or stages of clothing consumption (e.g. purchase, maintenance, disposal).

The development of fast fashion and mass (over)consumption has in the recent decades become a significant problem not only of developed countries but also emerging and transition economies including the new consumer countries in CEE such as Poland (Koszevska, 2013). Consumers in particular geographic contexts or representing different segments of the fashion market may pay attention to different sustainable features and engage in different types of sustainable behaviours. For instance, Blazquez et al. (2020) posit that Spanish consumers are more prone to take into account ethical than environmental considerations. More sustainability-oriented consumers are prone to buy second-hand clothes or make use of other clothing sharing options (Blas Riesgo et al., 2022) though acceptance of second-hand purchases may vary between countries (Fashion Revolution, 2020). They are also both more fashion conscious and environmentally conscious than other consumers (Blas Riesgo et al., 2022). Koszevska (2013) distinguished three consumer groups in Poland

more open to sustainable consumption: fashionistas – interested in fashion, quality and value-for-money, producer country, material composition but not so much in ecolabels or social issues; slow fashionistas – not so much interested in fashion and trends but in brand prestige, longevity and quality of clothing; and fashion minimalists – infrequent buyers who prefer to buy fewer, better quality items, pay attention to country of origin and fabric composition, check for ecolabels and are concerned with the social dimension of clothing production.

The issue of consumer acceptance of ethical and green fashion is also important (Busalim et al., 2022). Various barriers to sustainable clothing consumption are identified including prices, accessibility, availability, social and cultural considerations (Bly et al., 2015; Žurga et al., 2015), trust and authenticity (Blas Riesgo et al., 2022), communication-based barriers such as lack of ambiguous, not-dependable or insufficient information (Koszewska, 2016). On the one hand, Lundblad & Davies (2016) notice that sustainable clothing needs to be aesthetically appealing. Due to symbolic and status-related meanings of clothing sustainable features alone are not sufficient to motivate most consumers to purchase garments. Other authors pointed to the importance of diversifying the sustainable fashion offer (Lang et al., 2013). Bly et al. (2015) on the other hand posited that in practice sustainable fashion offer tends to be more attractive in terms of style and quality than mainstream clothing.

Despite numerous studies on sustainable fashion consumers and the importance of sustainability features to garment consumers in general, most authors find further research lacuna. They stress that such research should target both the general population and the actual consumers of sustainable fashion. Most publications advocate further research in different geographic contexts, on more heterogeneous consumer groups and representative samples (Laitala, 2014; Bly et al., 2015; Blazquez et al., 2020) or longitudinal of surveys (Koszewska, 2013).

Independent fashion consumers as sustainable and responsible consumers?

Independent fashion designers and producers are recognized as stakeholders within the fashion world who distinguish themselves by seeking to maintain creative freedom, aesthetic and economic control over their work. They strive to offer original products on a small or limited scale, providing a more diverse and alternative choice to

mainstream brands (Leslie et al., 2014; Sempruch-Krzemińska et al., 2016; Tuite, 2019). Such designers and their brands are often target niche markets (customers interested in garments with specific functional, aesthetic and symbolic values) (Leslie et al., 2014). The association of independent designers and fashion brands with high quality and longevity of clothing, its timelessness and local production is in line with many of the main tenets of sustainable fashion (Gurova & Morozova, 2018; Murzyn-Kupisz, 2025).

However, there is still limited knowledge on whether independent fashion customers prioritise sustainable and ethical fashion compared to other consumers, as research to date has primarily focused on the supply side of the independent fashion segment (Jung & Jin, 2016; Tuite, 2019). It remains unclear in which areas these consumers are more willing to adopt responsible fashion behaviours. Hence, our aim is to examine the sustainable orientation of independent fashion consumers, their preferences and behaviours. We draw on earlier studies on independent fashion and sustainable fashion consumption and focus on four key areas of sustainable fashion preferences and practices. These are: acquisition behaviours, purchase preferences, attitudes towards ecological and ethical aspects of fashion production, and post-purchase behaviours. In addition, we explore the general sustainable everyday behaviours of independent fashion consumers.

Sustainable fashion consumption includes buying better quality garments, limiting quantity of clothing bought and kept in the wardrobe, slower wardrobe turnover, less frequent purchases, avoiding buying new and preference for second-hand garments (Bly et al., 2015; Kostadinova, 2016; Włodarczyk & Górka, 2024). Thus, based on existing studies, our first hypothesis (H1) posits that if independent fashion consumers indeed adopt a sustainable approach to fashion consumption, they should significantly differ from mainstream consumers. They are expected to shop less frequently and extend the usage of their garments. This implies a preference for certain types of clothing, disinclination to purchase mass-produced items and willingness to include sustainable, independently produced, second-hand, and made-to-measure clothing in their wardrobes. We also hypothesize that they stand out from the general population in terms of the places and forms of fashion consumption. Independent fashion consumers are expected to shop less frequently in shopping centres, supermarkets, hypermarkets, or bazaars, where mass-produced fast fashion predominates, and favour

traditional high street shops, second-hand and vintage stores, or fashion outlets.

In addition, features of clothing linked with sustainability taken into account while making purchase decisions may include textile composition (i.e. organic, recycled), garments' origins, quality, durability and flexibility of use, aesthetic appeal and compliance with fashion trends (Fletcher, 2014b; Žurga et al., 2015) or social and ethical issues (Blazquez et al., 2020). Selection factors and buying habits differentiate consumer behaviour, including ecological and social criteria (Koszewska, 2013). In this respect two main potential sustainable consumers profiles – eco-consumers and socially responsible consumers – may be distinguished (Koszewska, 2016). Accordingly, both concern for the environment and recognition of social issues may be important drivers of more responsible purchasing decisions (Blazquez et al., 2020).

Independent fashion producers emphasize sustainable features of their products that appeal to their customers, such as quality, durability, versatility, and timeless design in contrast to fast fashion (Murzyn-Kupisz et al., 2023). However, these features contribute to the generally higher prices of independent fashion compared to fast fashion. As a result, independent fashion is expected to primarily cater to the upper end of the fashion market and appeal to more sustainability-oriented consumers who seek good quality, unique, long-lasting clothing and accessories perceived as long-term investments, while actively rejecting the throwaway culture of fast fashion (Leslie et al., 2014; Jung & Jin, 2016; Sempruch-Krzemińska et al., 2016; Tuite, 2019). Hence, our second hypothesis (H2) suggests that independent fashion consumers place a high value on clothing features such as quality, originality, durability, and timeless design, putting less emphasis on prices and discounts. As these former traits are associated with more sustainable fashion consumption, this consumer segment should also stand out as displaying more responsible fashion consumption patterns in comparison to other consumer groups.

Furthermore, it is assumed that consumers within this segment of the fashion market value authenticity and originality of garments, derived from an appreciation for the talents, skills, and unique ideas of independent fashionpreneurs, and from the personalized shopping experiences, thanks to more direct, personal interactions with designers and producers (Leslie et al., 2015; Tuite, 2019; Murzyn-Kupisz & Miśkowiec, 2025). Closer relationships between independent fashion producers and consumers facilitate the development of deeper knowledge about consumed products. Independent designers' practices often seem to be

in line with the ideas of more eco-centric design and implementation of different elements of the design-for-sustainability strategies (Fletcher, 2014a). They are also willing to educate potential customers about sustainable options and choices (Clark, 2008; Leslie et al., 2014).

In addition, the products offered by independent fashionpreneurs often express local, regional, and national cultural identities. They are usually embedded in more localized spatial structures with shorter and more transparent supply chains (Brydges et al., 2023). It is thus believed that independent fashion disrupts hierarchical structures among designers, producers, distributors, and consumers. This stands in contrast to the more anonymous mass production and consumption associated with globalized and fast commodity chains (Leslie et al., 2014; Tuite, 2019). Consequently, independent fashion consumers are believed to exhibit a higher degree of local, regional, or national consumer ethnocentrism and be willing to pay more for sustainable and unique clothing (Leslie et al., 2014; Bakış & Kitapçı, 2023; Murzyn-Kupisz & Działek, 2023). We thus anticipate (H3) that consumers in this market niche are more informed and committed to sustainable fashion compared to the general population. This includes opting for eco-friendly fabrics, supporting safe working conditions and fair remunerations of fashion workers, expecting transparency from fashion companies, and favouring local production (Žurga et al., 2015; Włodarczyk & Górská, 2024).

Responsible maintenance and disposal of clothing are identified as key sustainable post-purchase behaviours (Bly et al., 2015). Reasons for discarding clothing extend beyond wear and tear to include items considered unfashionable, wardrobe boredom, and limited storage space. While many consumers report engaging in various forms of reuse rather than throwing away unwanted clothes, most disposal choices are driven by convenience (Laitala, 2014). For instance, a study on Slovenian fashion consumers revealed that the most frequent method of discarding old clothing was giving it to family members or friends, followed by donations to charities. Other moderately popular practices included reusing old clothes as cleaning rags or repairing them. Only a miniscule share of consumers put clothing directly in trash bins (Žurga et al., 2015). In North America, Lang, Armstrong & Brannon (2013) found that frequent clothing discarding was positively correlated with factors such as sensitivity to fashion trends, frequent shopping, higher incomes, quality consciousness, younger age, and being female. Conversely, price consciousness was negatively associated with the frequency of clothing disposal.

Studies on repairing and repurposing clothes in Western societies confirm that these practices remain relatively rare (Laitala et al., 2021; Zhang & Hale, 2022). Barriers to mending and upcycling include a lack of skills, time, and equipment; the poor quality of garments; the ease of engaging in alternative behaviours such as buying new clothing and discarding old items; the high prices of repair services; and negative perceptions of these practices. However, the rise of repair initiatives is gradually shifting attitudes, promoting this sustainable approach, and potentially extending the lifespan of clothing.

Therefore, we test the hypothesis (H4) that in comparison to the general population of fashion consumers independent fashion consumers are more likely to adopt pro-environmental post-purchase practices, such as repairing and remaking clothes themselves or using tailoring services, as well as engaging in more responsible clothing disposal.

Sustainable fashion consumer attitudes and behaviours, both at the purchase and post-purchase stages, are a part of a much broader domain of everyday sustainable consumer practices. These encompass various areas such as food, housing, mobility, leisure, energy use, water conservation, and waste management (OECD, 2002; Kostadinova, 2016). Growing populations, higher incomes, and demographic trends (e.g. an increase in the number of single-person households) are driving the development of unsustainable lifestyles (OECD, 2002). While sociodemographic variables are inconsistent in predicting sustainable consumer behaviours, the level of environmental consciousness has a significant influence on engagement in such practices. Furthermore, situational factors, such as the availability of ecological products or infrastructure for proper recycling, can either facilitate or hinder real-life behaviours, regardless of consumer preferences (Kostadinova, 2016).

Existing studies highlight that sustainable consumption is often closely connected with other environmentally friendly behaviours (Laurett et al., 2020). Thus, our final hypothesis (H5) tests whether independent fashion consumers are more likely than the general population to incorporate other sustainable and responsible consumption practices into their daily lives. This includes adherence to existing obligations and regulations related to sustainable consumption, such as making responsible choices driven by rising prices of products and utilities. It also pertains to environmentally friendly behaviours that are not regulated but are instead influenced by lifestyle choices and personal beliefs.

By addressing the five hypotheses (Table 1), we aim to fill the research gaps identified earlier,

particularly those related to limited studies on independent fashion consumers, with a focus on their sustainable preferences and behaviours. In addition, to provide a more nuanced view, we consider the attitudes and consumption patterns of independent fashion consumers across all stages of clothing consumption, from purchase through maintenance to disposal. We further contribute to the existing knowledge on the independent and sustainable fashion market by moving beyond studies based on convenience samples, basing our conclusions on data sourced from a representative sample of visitors to an independent fashion fair and comparing them with parallel information on a representative sample of the general population. Finally, we expand the scope of sustainable fashion research by studying customers from a large, post-socialist CEE country that has transitioned into an advanced emerging market responsible for a significant share of European fashion consumption (Oleksyn-Wajda, 2019).

Research design

Our research process consisted of two stages. First, we developed the content for two survey instruments, each containing identical questions on fashion consumption preferences and behaviours. Second, in June 2022, we conducted in parallel a CAPI survey among visitors at an independent and slow fashion fair and a CATI/CAWI survey on a representative sample of the general Polish population, stratified by gender, age, and municipality size. The first comprehensive study examining the Polish market for sustainable fashion (Koszevska, 2013) was a useful point of departure for designing our research tools.

The first survey was conducted during the 'Kiermasz' independent fashion and design fair held in Krakow, the second largest Polish city. This event, organized since 2014, is one of the most regularly and frequently held independent fashion fairs in Poland, with at least four editions a year (Hołuj & Murzyn-Kupisz, 2022). The organizers estimated that during two weekend days in total around 7,500 people attended the fair. Five professional interviewers conducted face-to-face surveys by interviewing every twentieth randomly selected visitor at the entrance to the building, completing 370 surveys in total (approximately 5% of the attendees). Since the majority of visitors to the fair were women (73.5%), and most of them declared an intention to purchase fashion during the fair (91.5%), we decided to focus our study on female fair visitors ($N = 272$), treating them as a proxy for independent fashion consumers.

Table 1. Summary of hypotheses proposed in this study

Consumption preferences and behaviours	Hypotheses	Operationalisation
Fashion purchasing behaviours	H1: Independent fashion consumers engage in sustainable fashion purchasing behaviours more frequently than the general population of fashion consumers	A greater share of independent fashion consumers indicate that they: purchase clothing less frequently; purchase mass-produced clothing less often, and buy second-hand clothing or clothing from small independent producers and brands more frequently; shop less often using channels or in locations associated with unsustainable fashion consumption, such as online platforms and shopping centres; exchange clothes in their wardrobe less frequently
General preferences when purchasing fashion	H2: Independent fashion consumers pay greater attention to sustainable features of clothing than the general population of fashion consumers	A greater share of independent fashion consumers indicate that they prioritise clothing features such as quality, originality, durability, and timeless design, placing less importance on lower prices and discounts, loyalty programmes, and the trendiness of clothing
Preferences for explicitly sustainable features when purchasing fashion	H3: Independent fashion consumers pay greater attention to clothing that is sustainably and ethically produced than the general population of fashion consumers	A greater share of independent fashion consumers indicate that they prioritise eco-friendly fabrics and materials, support safe and fair working conditions, expect more transparency from fashion companies, and favour domestic production and design
Sustainable post-purchase fashion behaviours	H4: Independent fashion consumers engage in sustainable post-purchase fashion practices more frequently than the general population of fashion consumers	A greater share of independent fashion consumers indicate that they use tailoring services and engage in responsible clothing disposal methods more often
General everyday sustainable practices	H5: Independent fashion consumers more frequently incorporate other sustainable and responsible consumption practices into their daily lives than the general population	A greater share of independent fashion consumers indicate that they more frequently engage in sustainable practices related to energy saving, limiting water use, waste recycling, sustainable nutrition, limiting food waste, sustainable mobility, and a preference for used items

Source: own study.

The results of the fashion fair survey were processed and compared with data obtained from the second survey of the adult Polish population. To ensure comparability between the surveys, since we focused on the responses of female independent fashion consumers, we decided to compare them with two subsets of female respondents from the representative sample of the Polish population ($N = 1067$): the responses of women ($N = 559$) and of women residing in cities with population over 200,000 ($N = 101$). The choice of a second comparison group was predicated on the fact that independent fashion consumption is to a large extent associated with metropolitan settings (Leslie et al., 2014).

To test the statistical significance of differences in proportions among the three compared consumer samples, we used the z -score test for independent proportions at a significance level of 0.05. While interpreting the survey results information obtained thanks to interviews with organisers of independent fashion fairs and fashionpreneurs conducted by the authors in 2020–2023 ($N = 40$) within a framework of a broader research project was also consulted (Murzyn-Kupisz, 2025). Namely, we have examined whether the survey data confirmed opinions of professionals involved in the design and retail of independent fashion with respect to the unique preferences and fashion consumption practices of their customers.

Findings

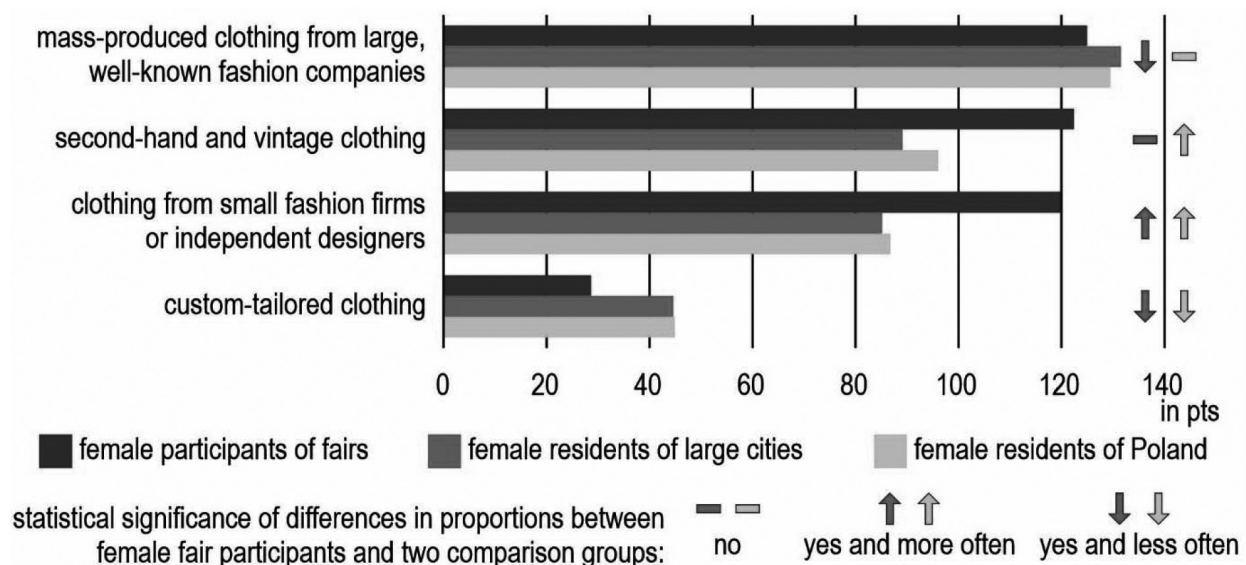
Fashion purchase patterns

The female independent fashion consumers visiting the fair statistically do not significantly differ in terms of the frequency of clothing purchases when compared to the residents of large cities and the entire country. Approximately two fifths of respondents in each surveyed group were frequent shoppers (making purchases once a month or more – findings consistent with those reported by Włodarczyk & Górka, 2024). A similar share comprised shoppers who made purchases less frequently, typically once every two or three months. Consumers who rarely engage in such purchases represented less than one fifth of the surveyed individuals in all categories. Similarly, when questioned about the contents of their wardrobe in terms of age of attire (its turnover), there were usually no statistically significant differences between the analysed consumer groups, with one significant exception. The share of consumers who exchange clothes in their wardrobe most frequently (i.e. declared that most of their attire is less than two years old) is significantly lower for independent fashion enthusiasts in comparison to the general population (one fifth versus one third).

Consumption patterns reflected in the types of purchased products, provide insights into the clothing choices of independent fashion consumers (Figure 1). They exhibit 'omnivorous' fashion consumption patterns, acquiring mass-market fast fashion, second-hand and vintage clothing, as well as garments from independent fashion designers and producers at similar frequencies. If compared to the general female population, there is however a statistically significant difference between it and fair consumers with respect to the frequency of purchases of both used clothing and independent fashion products. A more detailed analysis of responses reveals that independent fashion consumers often purchase used clothing (43%), followed by mass-produced clothing (34%), and small independent brands (29%). These proportions differ from the overall population of fashion consumers in Poland, who tend to prioritize mass-produced fast fashion clothing (36% buy it often), followed by used clothing (26%), while shopping for products offered by small, independent brands is least frequent (11%).

The independent fashion consumers distinguish themselves from other fashion consumers in terms of channels and places of clothing purchases (Figure 2). For understandable reasons, they significantly more often make purchases during fashion fairs or at similar fashion events (15%

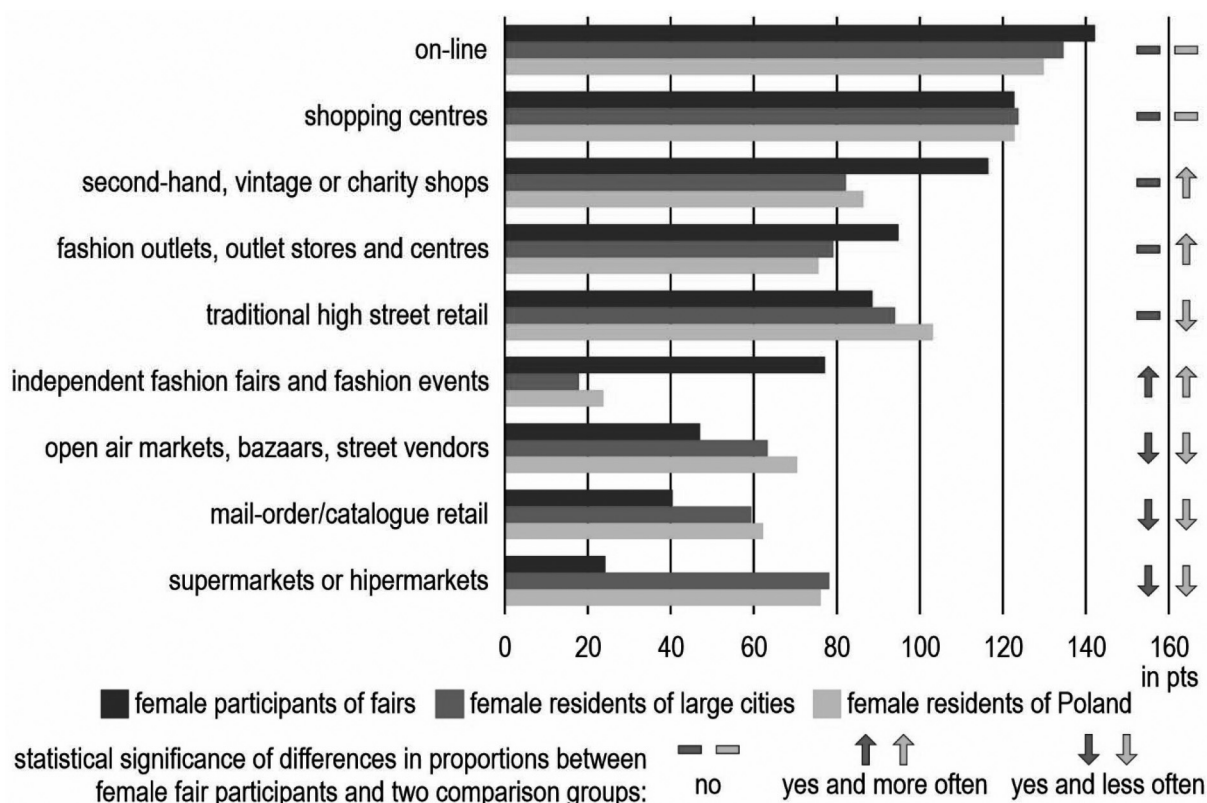
Figure 1. Frequency of purchases of specific types of clothing for different groups of Polish female fashion consumers



Note: the indicator was constructed by using answers to the question on the frequency of purchase: never = 0, sometimes = 1, often = 2 (max value 200); statistical significance of differences in proportions of answers 'often' and 'sometimes' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.

Source: own study.

Figure 2. Frequency of purchases using various types of retail places and channels for different groups of Polish female fashion consumers



Note: the indicator was constructed as follows: answer to the question on the use of a particular place or channel of fashion purchase: never = 0, sometimes = 1, often = 2 (max value 200); statistical significance of differences in proportions of answers 'often' and 'sometimes' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.

Source: own study.

often, 48% sometimes), increasingly popular in Polish cities (Hołuj & Murzyn-Kupisz, 2022) whereas for the overall groups of female consumers this is the least important place for fashion acquisition. The data provides evidence that among persons attending independent fashion fairs there is also a significant group for whom it is not a regular place for clothing shopping. It may also suggest that there is a group of independent fashion aficionados who use the opportunity to visit the fair to familiarize themselves with the offerings of designers and producers, potentially commissioning garments individually made for them (and paid for upon delivery at a later date), or to make purchases online after the event (so called SOPO).

Considering all places where independent fashion consumers make clothing purchases, although fashion fairs are an important location, these temporary spaces tend to serve as a supplement to other shopping places and channels. Fashion fair aficionados may appreciate them very much but still, probably due to greater

accessibility, they make more frequent purchases at permanent retail places such as second-hand and vintage stores or fashion outlets, which are another establishment type where unique or better-quality clothing is sought at bargain prices. The above-mentioned clothing acquisition channels are also used by independent fashion enthusiasts much more often than by other Polish consumers. However, all consumer groups do not significantly differ in terms of the frequency of using the two primary places and channels for contemporary clothing purchases in Poland, namely the Internet and shopping malls. Surprisingly, fashion consumers who frequent independent fashion fairs admit to relatively less frequent visits to traditional brick-and-mortar high street shops. The most significant difference between this consumer group and the two reference groups is their less frequent shopping for fashion in supermarkets and hypermarkets, at bazaars and open-air markets, as well as by using of mail-order catalogues. The first mentioned types of shopping spaces 'rejected' by independent

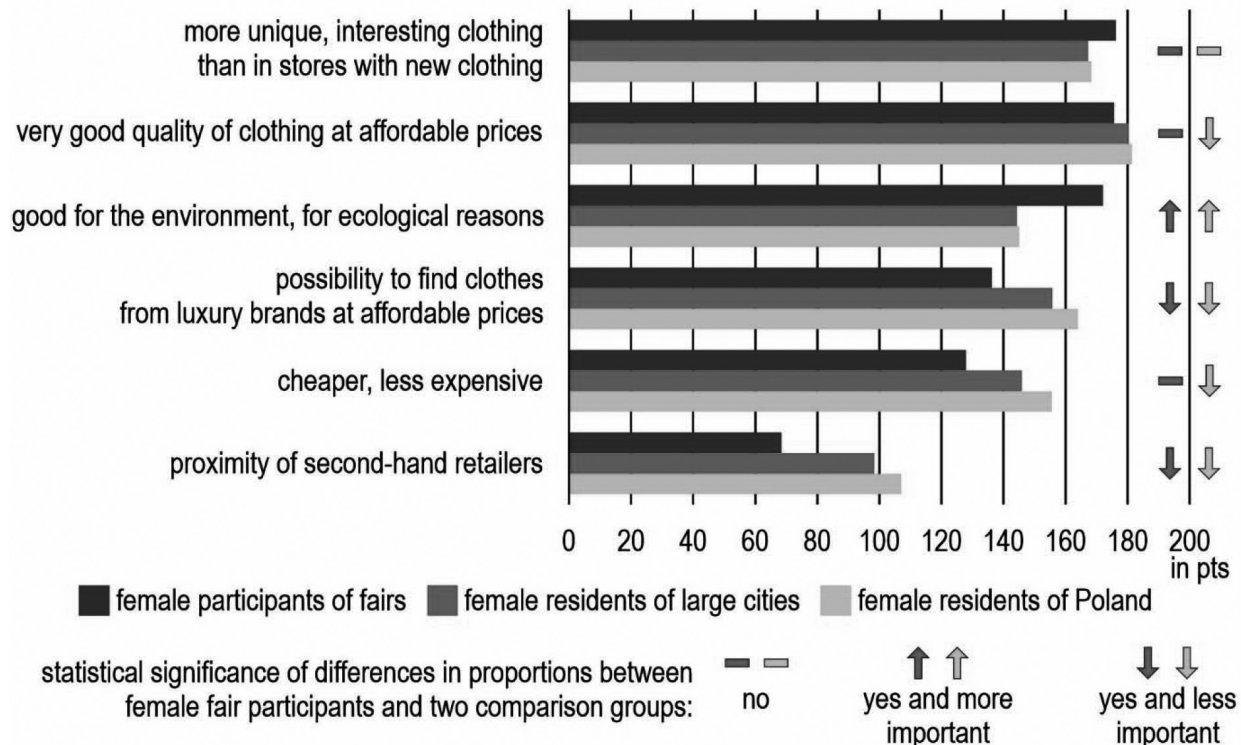
fashion consumers may be linked with their association with cheaper, low-quality products of less aesthetic appeal. In turn the last two space types may be seen as unfashionable, outdated and too traditional by the generally younger, better educated and wealthy independent fashion consumers' population.

These patterns of fashion consumption offer further insights into the shopping practices of independent fashion consumers. In their 'omnivorous' approach, they traverse similar avenues for acquiring clothing as the general population, such as online shopping, shopping centres or traditional high street retail. However, they frequently complement these practices with purchases made in unique settings offered by B2C fashion fairs, second-hand and vintage stores, and fashion outlets. These places often offer distinctive garment selections, better value for money and a specific atmosphere. We therefore posit that independent fashion consumers actively cultivate cultural distinction from other fashion consumers, even within their own generation. Supporting evidence for this is found in another question from

the fair survey, where over half (57%) of female visitors expressed a view that independent fashion is not a popular means of acquiring clothing among their friends and acquaintances.

The purchase of second-hand clothing is a sustainable behaviour that warrants greater attention. Despite independent fashion consumers visiting second-hand, vintage, or charity shops significantly more often, the frequency of actually buying used clothing is similar across the three compared groups of female consumers. Approximately two-thirds of consumers in each group purchased at least one piece of used clothing in the year preceding the study. What distinguishes independent fashion consumers significantly from other groups is one of their primary motivations to purchase used clothing – considering its positive impact on the environment, along with other motives related to uniqueness and good value-for-money (Figure 3). This consumer group is also less inclined to seek luxury brands in second-hand shops, and low prices of used clothing are less often a prime motive for its purchase.

Figure 3. Importance of particular reasons for purchasing second-hand clothing for Polish female fashion consumers who bought at least one piece of used clothing in the year prior to the survey



Note: the indicator was constructed as follows: not important = 0, moderately important = 1, very important = 2 (max value 200); statistical significance of differences in proportions of answers 'moderately important' and 'very important' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.

Source: own study.

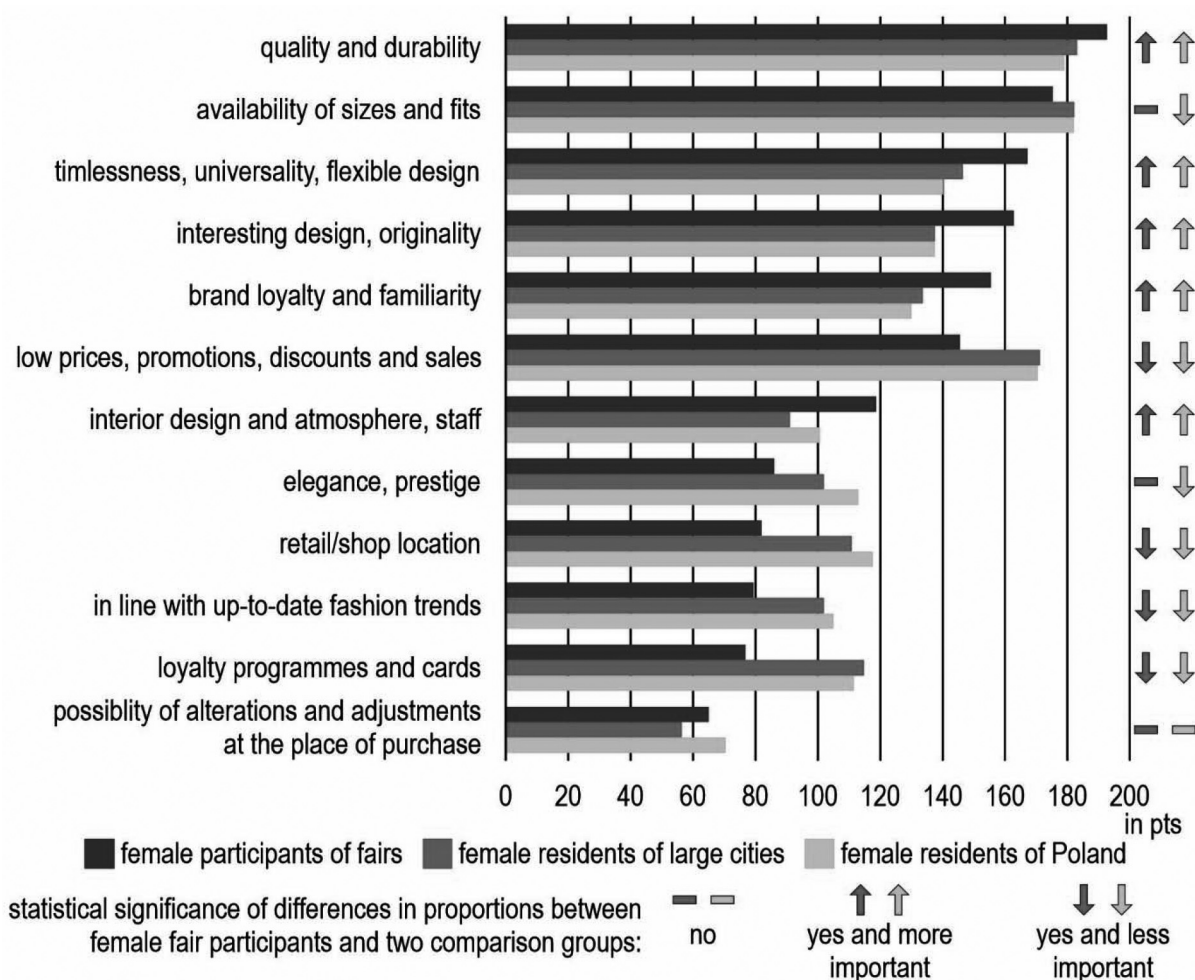
Preferences for specific features of clothing

Previous studies on independent fashion producers have suggested that consumers in this segment place a high value on features of garments such as quality, exclusivity, originality, and timeless design (Leslie et al., 2014; Sempruch-Krzemińska et al., 2016; Tuite, 2019), characteristics much in line with the idea of more responsible fashion consumption (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2011; Henninger et al., 2016). The preference for high quality aligns this group with the broader population of Polish consumers (Figure 4). However, this does not imply that all consumers can easily access and purchase high-quality garments, especially when combined with the expectation of low prices. In this regard, on the one hand, the price factor is a less significant

purchase consideration for independent fashion consumers than for other consumer groups. On the other hand, small, less known independent fashion designers and producers offer certain features appreciated by consumers (i.e. uniqueness, good design and quality) at lower prices than better known, larger (international) luxury brands.

When we consider features that are very important during fashion shopping, our findings provide statistically significant evidence of a distinct preference among independent fashion consumers for clothing with timeless and universal design, as well as unique and original styles, rather than emphasizing the elegance and prestige of a brand or following up-to-date fashion trends. Additionally, independent fashion consumers express higher level of brand loyalty,

Figure 4. Importance of various features in fashion shopping for different groups of Polish female fashion consumers



Note: the indicator was constructed as follows: not important = 0, moderately important = 1, very important = 2 (max value 200); statistical significance of differences in proportions of answer 'very important' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.

Source: own study.

extending beyond loyalty programs, an issue that has not been explored in previous studies. Moreover, in comparison to the general population, a much smaller share of consumers in this group (49.3%) see low prices and discounts as a very important factor when shopping (72.8%). Independent fashion consumers also attach significant importance to the interior design of stores and the creation of a unique shopping atmosphere, prioritizing these aspects over the convenience linked with store accessibility. This implies that, when shopping, they are willing to travel over longer distances to purchase clothing to which they are subsequently more emotionally attached, seeking places that offer an enhanced and positive overall shopping experience. In this sense shopping for independent fashion, including visiting independent fashion fairs, may be seen as an important aspect of the broader experience economy.

Preferences for sustainable and ethical fashion

It was expected that the features valued by consumers of independent fashion would align with their strong preferences for sustainable fashion. To test this assumption, we asked fair visitors whether they perceive the fair as a hub for sustainable clothing, with 86% of female visitors expressing agreement with such a statement. This was compared with features typically associated with independent fashion fairs, with 95% agreeing on the uniqueness and originality of products offered at them, 92% on the opportunity to personally meet fashionpreneurs, and 86% on the chance to enjoy spending quality leisure time at the fair.

We then analysed the features of sustainable fashion valued by independent fashion consumers visiting the fairs, comparing their preferences to those of other fashion consumers (Figure 5). On average, they attached more importance to most sustainability-oriented fashion features than the general public. The only shared preferences were for clothing made from natural fibres, avoiding the use of natural furs and leather, and seeking transparent information about production origins and methods. This made them similar to two fashion market segments distinguished in the earlier study of Koszewska (2013) namely fashionistas and ecologically and socially sensitive consumers.

In comparison to the general population of female consumers, independent fashion consumers were more likely to search for products made of ecological, organic, and vegan textiles. They particularly stood out in their preference for

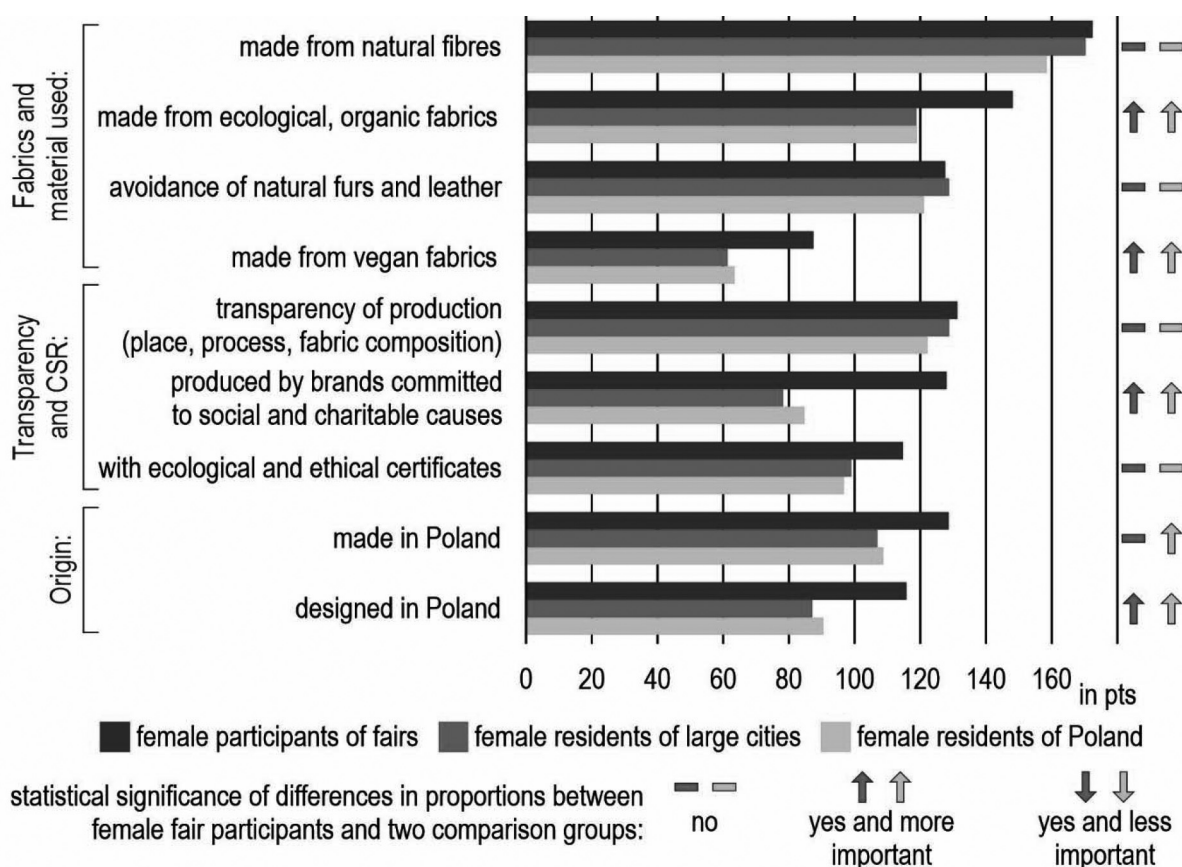
selecting brands engaged in social and charitable causes. This provides evidence to support the claim that independent fashion consumers are more involved in gaining deeper knowledge about the products they purchase (Clark, 2008; Leslie et al., 2014). Similarly, certificates confirming the ecological and ethical approach of fashion producers (Koszewska, 2013) are important for fair visitors; however, the difference to two comparison groups did not prove to be statistically significant.

Our surveys indicate that independent fashion aficionados feel much more informed about sustainable fashion than other consumers (Figure 6). This points to another important role of independent fashion fairs as places of education on and promotion of more sustainable approaches to fashion production and consumption. While many Poles perceive numerous barriers discouraging them from purchasing sustainable clothing, visitors to independent fashion fairs declare a relatively better understanding of this segment of fashion, a higher level of trust in its producers, and a stronger awareness of existing certifications. In addition, they largely disagree with the general perception that the selection of sustainable fashion is limited, that it represents a niche style, and that it is of lower quality. The only opinion shared with the rest of the consumers is the perception that the price of these products tends to be excessive.

The greater appreciation and understanding of sustainable fashion offer among independent fashion consumers is further supported by the information on their awareness regarding certain general pro-ecological and ethically responsible activities of the mainstream fashion sector in comparison to the general population despite the fact that they may be more focused on the offer of smaller fashion firms (Figure 7). They are slightly more aware of the introduction of eco-friendly packaging and fabrics, although they are comparatively less aware of the mainstream fashion sector's efforts to reduce the use of natural fur and the growing possibilities of repairing clothing brought to retail points.

Another aspect of fashion sustainability linked with independent fashion that we investigated is the preference for localized production, a factor purportedly valued by its consumers (Leslie et al., 2014; Tuite, 2019). Our findings supported the notion of a more ethnocentric attitude among independent fashion consumers, as they more frequently declared attaching significant importance to the fact that particular items of clothing were made and designed in Poland, compared to the general population of Polish female fashion consumers (Figure 5). This aligns with findings from another study of Polish consumers condu-

Figure 5. Importance of various clothing features linked with the concept of sustainable and ethical fashion for different groups of Polish female fashion consumers



Note: the indicator was constructed as follows: not important = 0, moderately important = 1, very important = 2 (max value is 200); statistical significance of differences in proportions of answers 'moderately important' and 'very important' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.

Source: own study.

cted via social media (Włodarczyk & Górska, 2024), in which 90% of respondents admitted that they do not take in to account whether clothing is manufactured in Poland or abroad.

The quest for locally and regionally produced fashion may be easier to satisfy during B2C fashion fairs. These events offer a unique opportunity for consumers to establish direct contact with designers and producers, inspect their clothing, and determine the origin of the products. Consumers obtain a symbolic 'certificate' from the producers they encounter, thereby reducing uncertainty about the products' quality and origin. This stands in contrast to the anonymous mass consumption entangled in global production chains.

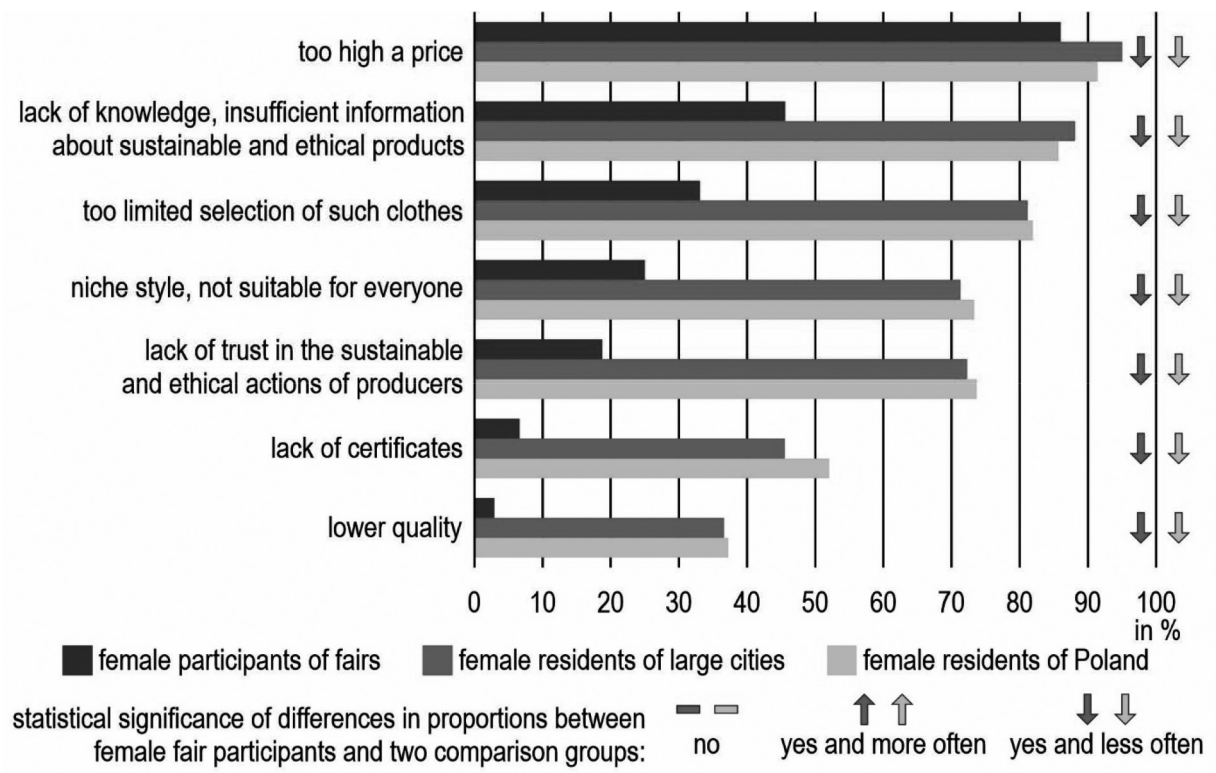
Responsible post-purchase behaviours

The independent fashion consumers do not differ from the general fashion consumer popu-

lation with respect to the frequency of using tailoring services. The patterns observed among Polish consumers in this regard are similar to those in Western societies (Zhang & Hale, 2022). Half of the respondents used tailoring services (with about 10% doing so more than once every six months and the remaining 40% less frequently). One fourth repaired and altered their clothing by themselves or with the help of family members. The remaining one fourth, however, did not engage in such repairs, neither independently nor by using the services of a tailor.

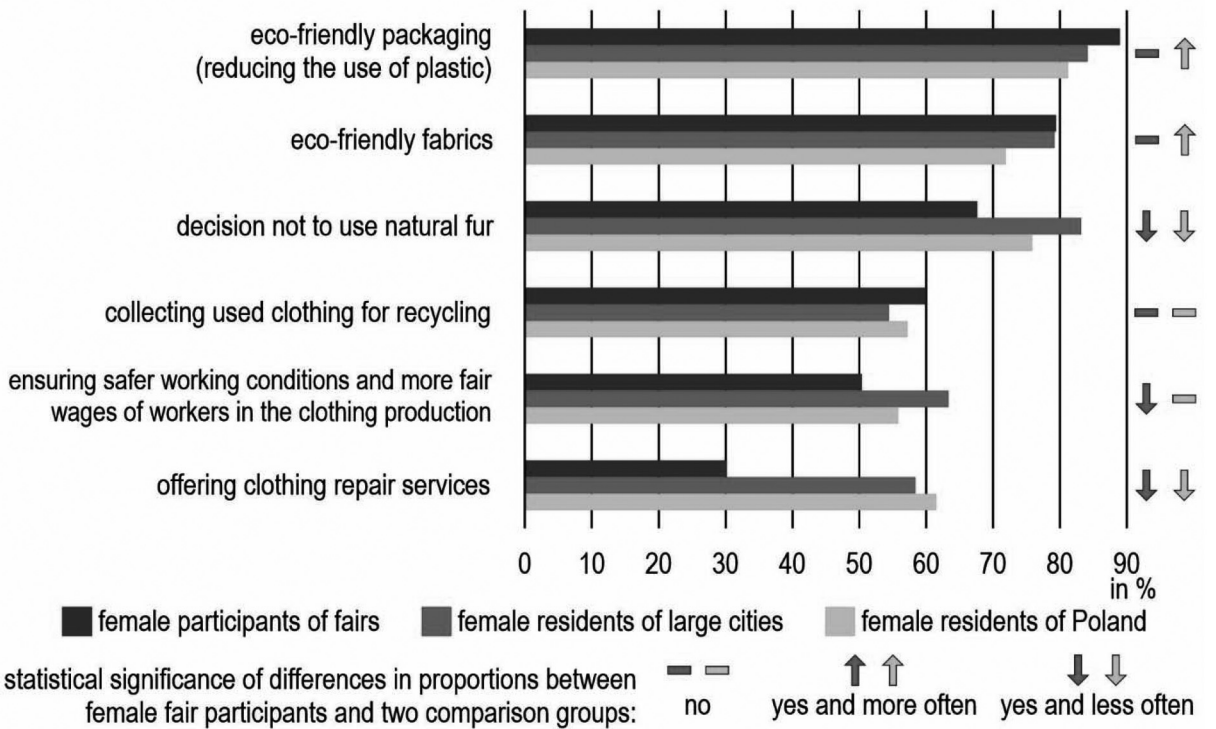
Their generally more environment-oriented approach is more evident in their attitude towards used clothing, as they are more likely to share used clothing rather than dispose of it – whether by giving it away to family, friends, or neighbours, or swapping (Figure 8). This makes them similar to more sustainability-oriented consumers identified in other studies (see Blas Riesgo et al., 2022). Although a similar share of all compared groups (90–92%) admits to giving away clothing for

Figure 6. Barriers discouraging Polish female consumers from buying sustainable and ethical fashion



Notes: statistical significance of differences in proportions of answer 'yes' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.
Source: own study.

Figure 7. Awareness of environmentally-friendly, ethical and fair trade-oriented activities undertaken by firms in the fashion sector



Notes: statistical significance of differences in proportions of answer 'yes' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.
Source: own study.

charitable causes, a much larger share of independent fashion enthusiasts declare doing it often. Clothing disposal does not only include throwing away or destroying garments but may also mean leaving them by the rubbish container with the hope that they may be of use to someone else. It appears that independent fashion aficionados prefer having more control over where the clothing they no longer need ends up. It is worth noting that discarding and destroying used clothing is generally a rare practice in Poland (and in other post-socialist countries), which could be a remnant of the economy of shortages and creative reuse during the communist times (Žurga et al., 2015; Brunclíková, 2017; Sulej, 2020). However, independent fashion consumers appear to be even more restrictive in this regard.

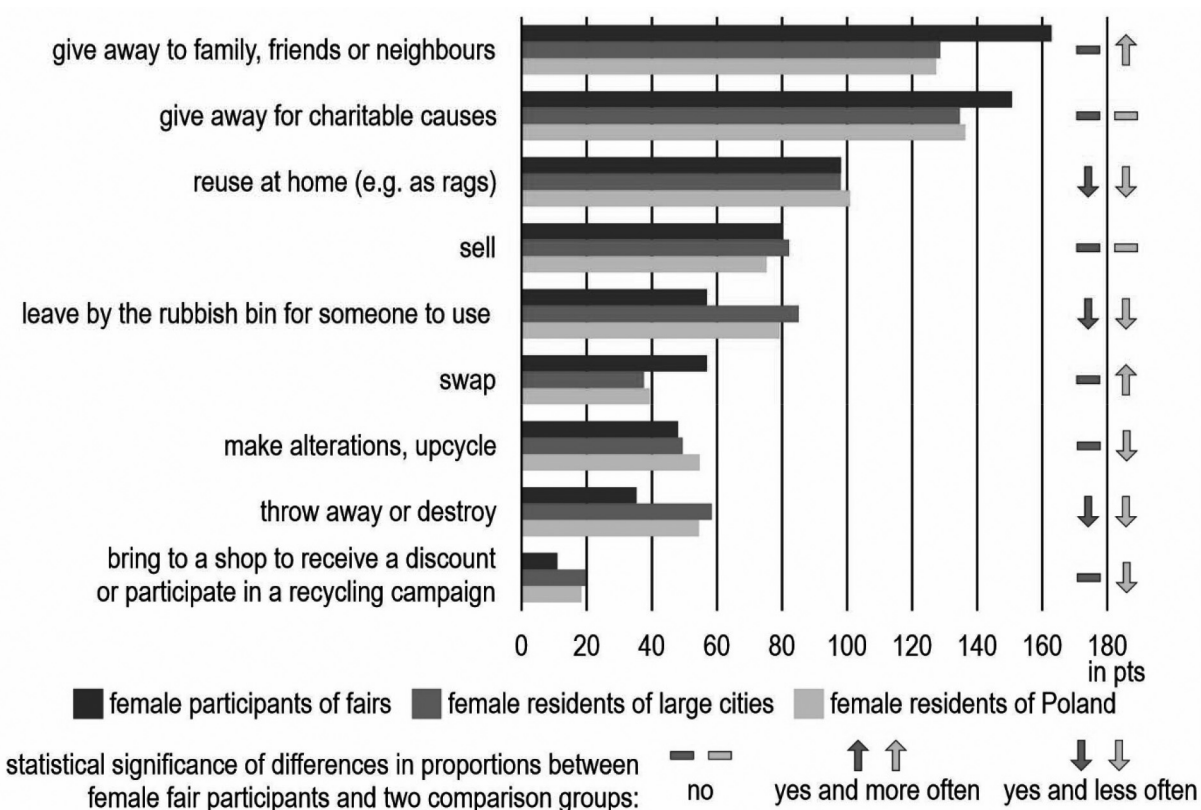
They share a similar frequency with the general population of fashion consumers in reusing clothing at home, either as rags or by making alterations, although the share of independent fashion consumers who are doing this is relatively smaller. Very rarely, and less often than other fashion consumers, they would bring used items to shops as part of fashion companies' efforts to

recycle them and reduce the negative effects (or at least negative image) of the throwaway culture of fast fashion. This aligns with their generally lower awareness of this kind of environmentally-friendly activities undertaken by mainstream fashion firms mentioned earlier.

General everyday sustainable practices

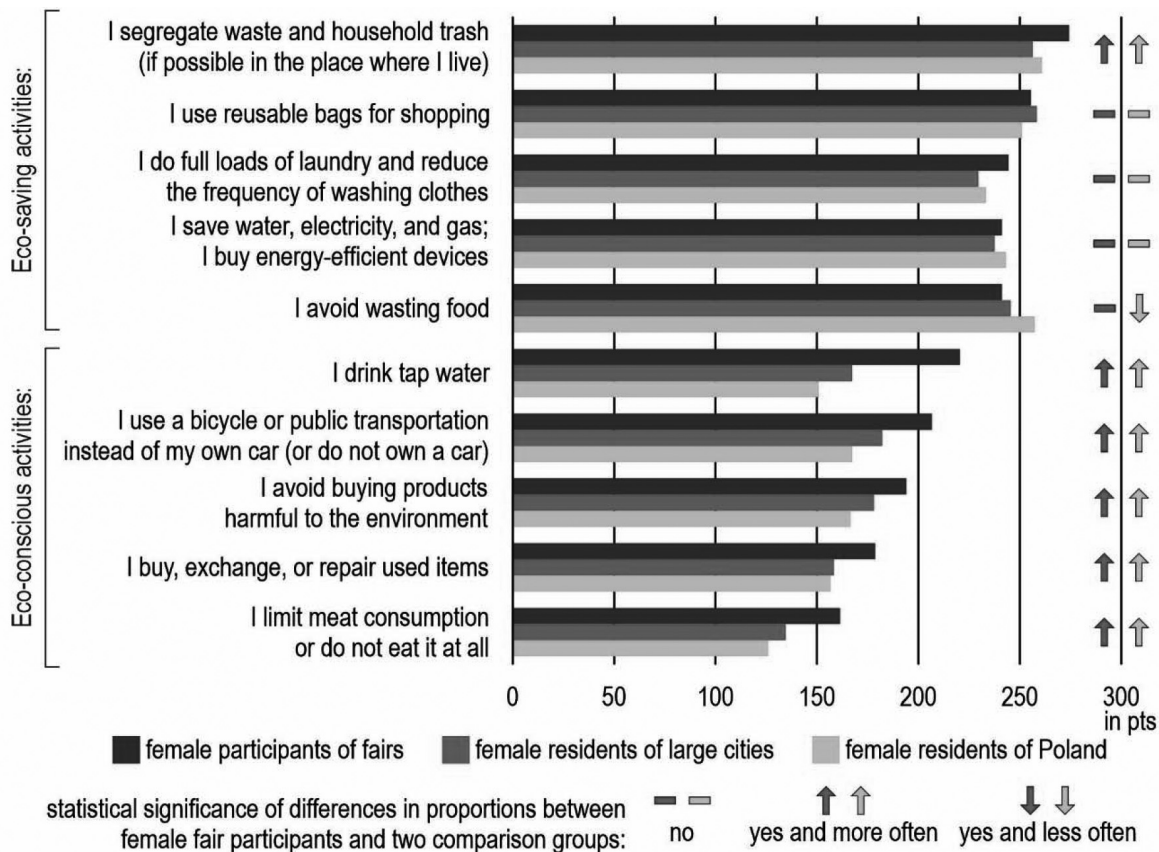
Finally, our interest centred on the extent to which the more frequent sustainable fashion choices made by independent fashion consumers align with their general environmentally friendly behaviour in everyday life (Figure 9). The study involved ten potential activities. The first five were related to legal requirements in Poland or associated with thrift (categorized as 'eco-saving' activities). The remaining five were inspired by personal choices and beliefs linked with ecological awareness and the perceived negative environmental impact of human activities on the planet in the context of climate change (termed by us as 'eco-conscious' activities). The findings confirm a more environmentally friendly approach of

Figure 8. Frequency of various approaches to used clothing practiced by Polish female fashion consumers



Note: the indicator was constructed as follows: never = 0, sometimes = 1, often = 2 (max value is 200); statistical significance of differences in proportions of answers 'often' and 'sometimes' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.

Source: own study.

Figure 9. Frequency of everyday environmentally friendly behaviours among different groups of Polish female fashion consumers

Note: the indicator was constructed as follows: never = 0, sometimes = 1, often = 2, always = 3 (max value is 300); statistical significance of differences in proportions of answers 'always' and 'often' according to z-score test at a significance level of 0.05 is shown.

Source: own study.

independent fashion consumers in terms of 'eco-conscious' behaviour in comparison to both female fashion consumers in Poland and female residents of large cities, with 'eco-saving' activities mostly at the same level. This eco-consciousness is particularly reflected by the higher share of fair participants who drink tap water (which is also related to the good quality of such water and its promotion in Krakow), use bicycles and public transport, avoid purchasing environmentally harmful products, engage in buying, exchanging, and repairing used items, and limit or abstain from meat consumption.

Discussion and conclusions

Our study offers a unique insight into consumption preferences and behaviours of visitors to independent fashion fairs who may be perceived as a proxy for independent fashion consumers and as a particular group among sustainable fashion

consumers (Bly et al., 2015). At the same time, referring to parallel data on a representative sample of the general Polish population, the research provided a unique opportunity to examine and compare diverse aspects of sustainable fashion consumption – ranging from preferences for certain features of clothing, places and reasons for its acquisition to usage and disposal of garments between independent fashion consumers and other consumer groups, following the comprehensive approach of earlier studies (Koszewska, 2013).

We expected that female independent fashion consumers would exhibit more sustainable fashion behaviours and significantly distinguish themselves from the general population and the population of large cities. In this respect, we obtained mixed results that reveal more nuanced differences in their consumption patterns. However, considering the whole spectrum of consumer choices linked with fashion consumption: purchase, use, reuse, and disposal of clothing,

we have identified instances where independent fashion consumers indeed engage in responsible consumer behaviours more often than the two comparison groups.

For instance, although independent fashion consumers did not significantly differ in terms of the frequency of shopping and wardrobe turnover, they were quite distinct from the general fashion consumer population in terms of the types of clothing purchased and the places and forms of fashion consumption (H1 partly supported). While independent fashion consumers do indeed purchase second-hand and vintage clothing (Blas Riesgo et al., 2022), as well as clothing from small fashion firms and independent producers more frequently, they do not significantly differ from the general population in terms of the frequency of buying mass-produced clothing from fast fashion companies. The 'omnivorous' (Johnston et al., 2019) nature of independent fashion consumers appears to be an understudied topic, deserving further in-depth quantitative and qualitative research on the volume of purchases for each type of clothing and how garments from these different sources are curated, worn and maintained.

Similarly, their use of retail channels and shopping locations associated with unsustainable fashion consumption, such as online platforms and shopping centres, does not differ notably from that of the general population. Surprisingly, independent fashion consumers are also relatively less likely to buy from traditional high street shops and, as expected, are more interested in second-hand, vintage, and outlet shops, as well as B2C fashion fairs. Simultaneously, they rarely purchase clothing from places such as bazaars, street vendors, supermarkets, and hypermarkets, where low prices often correlate with lower product quality. Avoidance of such places by independent fashion consumers may be linked not only with associating them with cheap products, but also predicated by their perceived low prestige and poor aesthetic appeal among the wealthier and better educated metropolitan elites who represent a segment of cosmopolitan consumers (Gil et al., 2024) striving for a cultural distinction (Johnston et al., 2019). This is further supported by the finding that their choices linked with acquiring second-hand clothing are more often driven by environmental considerations rather than a desire for luxury brands or low prices.

Moreover, our findings provide evidence that independent fashion consumers highly value specific features of clothing considered sustainable (Bly et al., 2015; Żurga et al., 2015; Lundblad & Davies, 2016), such as high quality, durability, interesting design, originality, timelessness, and universality, taking them into account while making garment purchases more often than the

general population. They prioritize these features over low prices or price deals, elegance, prestige, and staying up-to-date with trends (H2 fully supported). Adding two factors to the list of features valued by independent fashion consumers: their higher brand loyalty that goes beyond mainstream loyalty programs, and an emphasis on ambiance during shopping rather than mere accessibility of retail points, our findings broaden the understanding of their consumption behaviours. Independent fashion fairs offer an alternative to permanent, mainstream retail and seem to make sustainable fashion more accessible and appealing both as a consumer option and as a leisure experience (Lang et al., 2013; Lundblad & Davies, 2016).

Our comparison of different groups of female consumers largely supports the hypothesis that the more responsible fashion consumption behaviour of independent fashion consumers translates into their stronger preferences for sustainably and ethically produced fashion and their greater awareness and conscientiousness in practicing everyday environmentally friendly behaviours compared to the general population (Clark, 2008; Leslie et al., 2014; Blas Riesgo et al., 2022). Indeed, they value clothing made from ecological, organic, and vegan fabrics, produced by brands committed to social and charitable causes which control the design process (creation of aesthetic and symbolic value of clothes) and avoid offshoring manufacturing. However, they share similar views with the overall population of female consumers regarding sustainable features such as the use of natural fibres, avoidance of fur, transparency of production, and the presence of ecological and ethical certifications (H3 partly supported). At the same time, they perceive significantly less barriers discouraging from buying sustainable and ethical fashion than the general population, in particular in terms of trust and access to relevant information (see Blas Riesgo et al., 2022; Busalim et al., 2022). As such they can be considered an important group of forerunners of sustainable fashion consumption in the Polish context (Bly et al., 2015). Paradoxically, however, since they focus on the sustainable and more niche fashion offers, they may be less aware of certain environmentally-friendly and charitable activities undertaken by large firms in the fast fashion sector.

Our paper also contributes to a better understanding of clothing reuse among different consumer groups. The frequency of repairing garments does not significantly differ among independent fashion fair visitors and other female fashion consumer groups. However, they differ in terms of how they reuse items of clothing they no longer need. They more often share them with

family and friends, donate them for charitable causes, or swap them (H4 partly supported) (see Blas Riesgo et al., 2022). Simultaneously, they less frequently discard used clothing or leave it by rubbish bins. Paradoxically, they also less often choose to reuse them at home as rags or upcycle them by making alterations. The motivations behind these distinct consumer choices constitute another avenue for further in-depth studies.

Finally, we have identified significant differences between three groups of consumers in terms of their everyday sustainable behaviours and choices (H5 partly supported). In most cases, they do not differ in undertaking 'eco-saving' activities (behaviours which are obligatory or lead to saving money). However, independent fashion consumers engage significantly more often in 'eco-conscious' behaviours, which are voluntary and connected with higher ecological awareness. In that sense independent fashion consumers may be understood as forerunners of more complex and comprehensive sustainable behaviours.

Although our analyses were based on responses to identical questions posed to two distinct respondent groups, the fact that the answers were elicited in a different way is a certain limitation.

In addition, conclusions on attitudes and behaviours of independent fashion consumers to sustainable fashion were derived from a study of one specific independent fashion fair. None the less, in absence of earlier quantitative studies of this sort, and taking into account that representative samples of both fashion fair visitors and the general population of fashion consumers were used rather than a convenience sample, we believe that the study offers valuable insights into the specificity of independent fashion consumers. However, this exploratory study, quantitative in nature, could be complemented by further qualitative research on independent fashion consumers, their attitudes to sustainable fashion and sustainable fashion practices across different geographic contexts (Bly et al., 2015).

Apart from making an academic contribution, the findings may be of value to independent fashion designers and producers, in particular by providing them with a more nuanced picture of this fashion segment's consumer profiles. They could also be useful to non-governmental organisations and policy makers, indicating how to promote sustainable fashion effectively, especially to consumers from larger cities.

Notes/Przypisy

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Doktor habilitowany w dyscyplinie geografia społeczno-ekonomiczna i gospodarka przestrzenna, profesor w Instytucie Geografii i Gospodarki Przestrzennej Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Obecnie jego zainteresowania badawcze skupiają się na dynamice zjawisk artystycznych i kreatywnych w obszarach miejskich. Jest autorem lub współautorem ponad 70 publikacji naukowych, dotyczących m.in. działań artystycznych i kreatywnych w Krakowie i Katowicach, znaczenia instytucji kultury w budowaniu i wzmacnianiu kapitału społecznego, roli wsparcia społecznego w przygotowaniu i reagowaniu na klęski żywiołowe oraz zróżnicowania zasobów kapitału społecznego w Polsce.

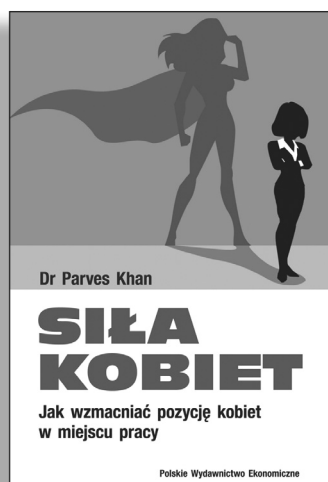
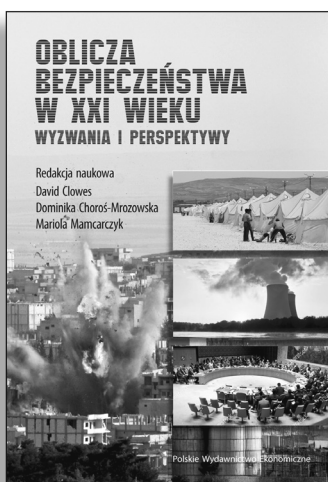
Dr hab. Monika Murzyn-Kupisz, prof. UJ

Profesor w Instytucie Geografii i Gospodarki Przestrzennej Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Jej wielodyscyplinarne zainteresowania naukowe koncentrują się wokół kwestii ochrony, interpretacji oraz współczesnego wykorzystania dziedzictwa kulturowego, a także roli sztuki, instytucji kultury, artystów i przemysłów kreatywnych, w tym sektora mody, w przekształcaniach współczesnych miast, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem obszaru Europy Środkowej. Jest autorem lub współautorem ponad 100 publikacji naukowych.

Mgr Magdalena Bajer

Doktorantka w Instytucie Geografii i Gospodarki Przestrzennej na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim. Obecnie jej zainteresowania badawcze skupiają się na regionie aglomeracji rybnickiej oraz funkcjonowaniu przestrzeni uczelnianych.

NOWOŚCI



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