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Slow Fashion in Southeastern Europe: Developing and Sustaining Handmade Brands

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Abstract

Slow fashion in contrast to fast fashion is a rising 'trend' in the fashion industry with a focus on sustainability. The present study looks into the motivation of Southeastern European designers who produce slow fashion items and the challenges they face, along with the opportunities for growth. Interviews have been conducted among 13 participants giving an overview of their business in the market where fast fashion dominates. Results indicate that businesses are mostly started out of love for creating unique fashion and being it was a hobby long before they made it a business and the opportunities for such businesses lie in the recognition of the uniqueness and closer relationship between the customers and the businesses.

keywords: Slow fashion, Handmade brands, Sustainability, fashion industry

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Slow fashion

Global fashion industry is estimated to have a value of 1.7 trillion dollars in the year 2022 (Ariela, 2023). The market is led by fast fashion which means people buy a lot of mass-produced clothing that have a short lifespan (“slow fashion, a sustainable”, n.d.). High consumerism has had an impact on production which led to environmental issues. That is why the term 'slow fashion' was put into more focus at the beginning of the 21st century to the point when Kate Fletcher, a design activist and author, first coined that term. She describes it as fashion based not on time, but rather quality. The 'slow fashion' movement has taken its cues from the already existing 'slow food' movement which has also been supporting the small, local suppliers and seasonality of supplies (Kahn, 2009). Slow fashion is not named that way to refer to time, but rather to attentive behavior of the producers who are mindful of their stakeholders' needs ('stakeholders' referring to buyers, retailers, designers and consumers of products) and the impact that producing these fashion items has on people who work, their consumers, and overall the entire ecosystems (Pookulanga and Shepard, 2013 as stated in Fletcher, 2008).

An average American is said to buy one new piece of clothing every fifth day which would mean approximately 73 pieces of clothing per year (Marquis, 2021). Even though people often do not wear their clothes out before buying new one, they tend to throw away the clothes they do not wish to wear anymore, perfectly preserved. Most of the clothes that people buy are thrown away before they need to be. The biggest reason for the high fashion waste is overconsumption where people buy more than they need which is the result of the growing fast-fashion trend. Approximately 5.8 million tons of clothes, shoes and other fashion items are discarded in the European Union only (Pons and Furness, 2023). It means 11 kg per person is thrown away.

Fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries and it has a major impact on the cleanliness of water by the chemicals and plastic microfibers that are disposed (Marquis, 2021). To be sure that an item is sustainable there is an OEKO TEX 100 certificate. It means that no harmful substances have been used in the material of the item and in the process of making it.

Over the past decade, companies have realized that sustainability and ethical conduct have begun to matter in, and it is because affordable and trend-sensitive fashions, while typically highly profitable, also raise ethical issues (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013). Workers of the big corporations that mass produce clothing items are seriously underpaid. Slow fashion producers focus on the 'zero waste' concept and Ethical Fashion which is associated with animal and human rights (Aishwariya, 2019). The term 'ethical fashion' is connected to analyzing work conditions, employee wages, if child labor is present, and if animal testing is being done in the process.

Many people express their interest in sustainability but continue seeking out fast inexpensive clothing items (Pookulanga and Shepard, 2013, as stated in Johansson, 2010). By 2030, the European Union plans for all the clothing sold in the bloc to have a great longevity and consist of materials that would be recyclable. A big factor behind the European Union's decision to reverse the massive production and consumption of clothing was Inditex's massive output of garments (Pons and Furness, 2023). It is not just using the traditional, classic approaches to creation, or literally slowing the pace of the production process; it is a way of incorporating sustainability, social responsibility, transparency, and other concepts to maintain profitability while improving the business practices (Pookulangara and Shepard, 2013). Slow fashion products have a longer lifespan than fast fashion products, they are sustainable and made to last for a longer period of time. Even though many studies have examined various aspects of sustainable and eco fashion, none of them have studied the concept 'slow fashion'.

Current value of the sustainable fashion industry alone is approximately 6.5 billion dollars, and it is growing by 8.3% annually, but is estimated to grow at an even larger pace of 9.7% a year (Ruiz, 2023). By this pace it should be worth approximately 15 billion dollars by the year 2030.

Slow vs fast fashion

Fast fashion consists of fashion items that are mass produced by a machine while being cheap quality for a low price and often end up thrown away very soon (Srauturier, 2023). It is the second most polluting industry in the world after the oil industry and it is no wonder that many people are turning to alternatives. It takes 2000 gallons of water for just one pair of jeans and each year, there is 2.1 billion tonnes of carbon emission which is 4% of total (Ruiz, 2023). In addition to this, for one cotton t-shirt, 2700 liters of water is used which would level to an average of 2.5 years of a person's drinking needs ("Slow fashion vs," 2022). Opposed to fast fashion, slow fashion includes fashion items that are handmade, very time consuming, dependent on the talent of artists, have a lot better quality and are highly priced. Contrasting to mass production, sustainable fashion is concerned with use of fibers from organic, recycled, repurposed or upcycled materials. Textile industry for mass production is the third highest user of water and land, and fifth highest user of primary raw materials and greenhouse gas emissions ("Questions and answers", 2022). Materials are treated with less chemicals, artificial dyes, less energy use and less resources, lower waste and minimal impact on the environment (Ruiz, 2023).

Sustainable fashion might include organic or recycled materials and biodegradable packaging, reduced carbon emission in the process of production and fairly paid workers (Ruiz, 2023). H&M is a popular fast fashion brand which has implemented some sustainable

measures, but still they dispose of approximately 12 tonnes of their products each year. They burn them to prevent their warehouses from loading with last year's items (Hendriksz, 2021).

Some of the main differences between fast and slow fashion are the scope of the industry in which fast fashion counts a turnover over \$1.44 trillion annually, while slow fashion are small business firms (Aishwariya, 2019).

Materials used in the fast fashion industry are mostly petroleum based and very toxic, while in slow fashion they are locally sourced, biodegradable, organic and natural, and sometimes even recycled. Manufacturing of fast fashion products causes large environmental issues while in slow fashion there are more traditional and ethical methods of production. Fast fashion is known to have new mass-produced collections every 2 weeks, while in slow fashion production it takes a lot more time to create 'limited collection' pieces. In the fast fashion industry, the labor includes factory workers who are underpaid and overused, while in the slow fashion industry the workers are mostly from the nearby areas and they are paid according to the amount of work they do and they are not forced to work uncontrollably. Slow fashion, compared to fast fashion, is ethically made goods where no living creature is being used, and there are no immoral doings (Aishwariya, 2019).

The motto of the slow fashion is 'Live with nature, not against it'. Some of the fast fashion brands known worldwide are H&M, Primark, Topshop, Zara, Bershka etc. Some of the slow fashion brands are Amour Vert, Eileen Fisher, Re/done (Aishwariya, 2019).

Sustainability in the fashion industry

Sustainability is the focus of slow fashion. There are many questions regarding sustainability in the fashion industry such as profitability, effect on the stakeholders, competitive advantage. As an answer to these questions, authors of 'Sustainable fashion index

model and its implication' research paper have used American Customer Satisfaction Index (ASCI) as a base of their study. ASCI helps measure retail and supply chains, how they perform based on the evaluations of the customers. It created the opportunity to test if personal judgements influence how sustainable behavior is evaluated. Some of the influence factors are how the sustainable quality is perceived and valued. The study shows that many people are more likely to buy products that have been labeled as sustainable and have been made of high-quality materials (Wang et al., 2019).

'Ethically made goods' demand that they are made in ways that make no harm to the workers or the environment (Assoune, 2021). Studies have indicated that many people would pay more to buy "green" items and "sweat-free" goods (Pookulangara et al., 2011, as stated in Kahn, 2009). While everyone talks about sustainability on a positive note, Kenneth P. Pucker (2022) is not that ambitious about it. As he stated in the article on 'Harvard Business Review', "The sad truth however is that all this experimentation and supposed "innovation" in the fashion industry over the past 25 years have failed to lessen its planetary impact" (Pucker, 2022).

As any other project, sustainability needs effort and some steps in the process. To focus more on the process of how sustainable, slow fashion items are made, there are three steps. First step of the process of slow fashion is the designing of the products and it should be done concerning sustainability and ecological factors. Source of materials should be raw natural materials. The second step is making sure that the labor is quality, treated fairly and the work conditions are good, and wages are fair. Sustainability is not some trend, but it is based on the concerns of ethics and environment. Procedures of the production are transparent, and people know that the actual person made the items and how they are treated. In short, three steps of the "Slow fashion" process are design, production, and consumption. Design is influenced by sustainable suppliers and ecological and ethical way of working. Production needs to be quality

and handmade, while consumption means sustainable investment and longevity of products (Aishwariya, 2019). Motivation to buy sustainably made products comes from the consumer's feeling of self-worth that enhances their self-image. They feel their values are enhanced (Legere and Kang, 2020).

Benefits of slow fashion

Slow fashion products are made with emphasis on skills of the craftsmen who give their soul into the products they make. Every collection has a limited number of products that are going to be sold completely, or at least close to 100%. Even though the products are more costly, they last longer than the mass-produced items which justifies the higher price of the clothes in the long-term period. The materials used for the slow fashion products are taken from nature and handmade while the quality is checked at every step of the process (Aishwariya, 2019).

The nature of the materials used in the slow fashion industry help reduce the environmental impact that the production of synthetic fibers creates (Legere and Kang, 2020).

“Self-transformation is the expectation that a purchase will bring a certain degree of positive image, confidence, and status”(Legere and Kang, 2020, as stated in Richins and chaplin, 2015).

It has been reported that 46% of the fast fashion retailers have had lower sales since 2020. 73% of Millennials have stated that they are willing to pay more money for the products from sustainable brands (Ruiz, 2023).

Challenges to slow fashion

Even though the slow fashion industry is on the rise, they often face many challenges. One of those challenges is the cost of the raw materials because they use the non-renewable natural materials which are not always available to produce as the synthetic fibers (OCS Team, 2022). When there is a scarcity of a certain type of the material, it cannot be replaced by

Commented [JB1]: If you are going to use a direct quote here - introduce an additional sentence that connects this with the above sentence - how is self-transformation connected to that?

something similar because it will end up completely different and it cannot be produced artificially. Some of the most common materials that most people know of are cotton, wool, silk, viscose, leather and cashmere for which the cost has gone way up in recent years and is rapidly growing still. Lack in raw materials results in slowing the entire production cycle which affects the supply chain (How to Face, n.d.). Another challenge are the environmental issues such as water consumption, usage of chemicals in coloring and production, and waste management. While they are better for the environment, sustainable methods of producing the fashion products, such as using natural colorings and reducing the usage of water, increase the costs of production (Sankar, 2023).

People who work for a slow fashion brand need proper skills for the job and the will to do it, while the employer needs to consider the fact that they need to be paid fairly along with having the business being profitable. Small businesses have higher transportation costs unlike big corporations (Fashinza, 2021). The last, and for many, the biggest issue is that many customers find small brands too expensive which demotivates them from buying from such brands or buying more than one item. Many consumers are not aware how negative the effects of fast fashion are on the environment and how it influences the global environmental issues that are faced every day (Sankar, 2023).

Method

The present study investigates the challenges and opportunities in developing and sustaining 'handmade' fashion brands. The participants have been given ten questions about the advantages and disadvantages of their businesses on the market. Target participants for the present study were found on social media, on the internet and in their physical stores. Interview questions have been modeled from existing research made by Taylor Brydges, Mariangela Lavanga and Lucia von Gunten for the 'University of Chicago press' (2014). The results are based on the answers of 13 participants of which nine are from Croatia, two are from Serbia

and one from Montenegro. Out of these 13 participants who sell fashion accessories and clothing, three of them sell only clothing items, five of them sell accessories and five of them sell both clothing items and accessories. The interviews were sent out via email, Instagram account or given in person depending on the targeted participant's preferred communication platform. Ten participants decided to answer the questions in time of their own convenience and returned answers via email, two participants answered the questions over the phone call and one participant answered the questions in person. Approximate time of the interviews was fifteen to twenty minutes for all the questions to be answered. The interview was strictly confidential, meaning their identities are not to be included in the research.

This method of collecting data was appropriate for this type of research because it required individual answers and other methods would not serve the purpose to cover all the questions that needed to be covered. The questions were made to cover most of the aspects of their business such as the motivation and struggles while starting the business and while running an already established business, advantages, and disadvantages of that type of the business, advantages and disadvantages of sales and marketing, and their goals for future and word of advice for anyone who plans to start such a business.

Interview questions were the following:

1. What motivated you to start such a business?
2. What do you believe to be your comparative advantage in relation to other businesses such as big global corporations and other local businesses?
 - 2.1. What do you believe to be the most attractive detail of your business to the customers?
3. What do you believe to be the disadvantages of a small fashion brand in relation to other businesses such as big global corporations and other local businesses?

- 3.1. In your opinion, what would be the reason a customer decides not to buy your products, but rather competition's?
4. Which selling platform/s do you use to sell your products? Why do you choose those platforms? (physical store, website, social network etc.)
 5. Which marketing strategies do you use to reach your customers? Why do you choose those strategies? (Online ads, TV ads, social media influencers etc.)
 6. What would you say are the disadvantages of such an approach to sales and marketing?
 7. What were the biggest challenges in starting such a business?
 8. What would be the biggest challenges you faced while running your established small business in the region (legal inquiries, supply, customers, and such)?
 9. What goals did you set for your business in the future?
 10. What would you advise people who plan to start such a business?

Results

Motivation

Study begins by exploring the entrepreneur's motivation to start a 'slow fashion' business in the market where 'fast fashion' dominates. Most of the participants had multiple reasons, but the most common reason that eight participants (61.54%) mentioned was 'turning hobby into business'. It has the biggest score in motivations for starting a handmade business. In the words of one of the participants that supports others' opinions was 'I will do what I love, and this cannot fail'. Connected to this, another participant mentioned 'There was not any particular motivation besides the love I have towards that business' and it is the reason why, even though small business is not as profitable as large corporations, they do not quit. Two participants mentioned that they started their business after bad experiences in their previous jobs where they were not satisfied and the hobby that they had turned out to be the best kind of business for them. They agree that this job fulfills them because they always loved creative work.

Second most mentioned reason that six participants (46.15%) mentioned was 'family motivated' as one of the primary reasons for starting their business. Three participants had their mother as the one starting the business and slowly embedding the idea in their own minds which turned out to be their hobby as well. One participant pointed out how her mother's hobby is theirs as well and it motivated her to create an online store where potential customers would be able to find the products they like and appreciate. Another participant shared the experience of working and observing mother as she developed her handmade brand which was a part of their life the entire childhood and eventually she decided to take over the brand after the mother's retirement. One of the most recognized handmade brands in the Southeastern region had a little bit of a different story. Wife and husband noticed the need for quality fashion that would be made in a more sustainable way, yet more affordable than

luxury brands. Using their own words 'Goal was to offer people a possibility to afford quality and modern pieces that would make them feel confident and refined'. They are now, after over three decades, a brand that is recognizable not only within the region, but globally. They are a perfect example of a successful 'slow fashion' brand and a motivation to similar brands to pursue higher goals, it just takes more time and effort.

Moving on to six participants (46.15%) mentioning 'Unique products' as one of their primary reasons to start the business which was mostly combined with the fact that this was their hobby that they turned into a business. Based on the participants' results, each item they make is unique even if they make more items of the same model. Uniqueness perfectly represents every handmade business. What is different from the 'fast fashion' items and the 'slow fashion' items is the ability to adjust and personalize each and every product to the wishes and measures of the customers. 'I want to offer something modern and unique, here locally' is one of the comments of the participant from this research and the handmade goods are 'Favorites among fashionistas' as another participant mentioned about their unique handmade products. The results of this research proved that the handmade businesses rely on having unique products and their motivation is far from profitability, rather their values, creativity and love for the job they are doing motivates them to keep on doing that job and strive for perfection according to their own values and beliefs.

Moving on to the last two motivations to starting such business that were mentioned in lower numbers of participants. 'Love for a place/motive' was mentioned by three participants (23.08%) which was a result of the participants' love for a specific place where one participant grew up in a region where the handmade goods are a part of the tradition and for others, maritime motives that are connected to the Mediterranean style of living and the love towards the sea, fishing, boats and ropes.

The least mentioned motivation for starting a handmade business is having an 'entrepreneurial mind' according to two participants (15.38%). They mentioned it was an inner motivation and they knew that one day they would open some kind of their own business.

Advantage in comparison to other fashion brands

After analyzing the results of the participants' interview answers, the answer that was mentioned the most was 'Uniqueness' which 11 participants (84,61%) mentioned as one of their biggest advantages and motivations for customers to buy from them. Based on the answer of one of the participants, there are not many brands who crochet, which is one of the ways to create handmade fashion items and it contributes to having more unique products. Every handmade fashion item requires hours of producing it and may take up to a couple of weeks to perfect them because those brands have 'thread, needles and hardworking hands' and 'each and every one of them is completely unique'. A participant mentioned having a possibility to satisfy some extra requirements such as adjusting the color and material, and the size and cut of the clothing items they make. Orders can take a lot of time if they are personalized so the customers get the 'most accurate image of the desired product'. Every brand has their own 'recognizable design'. Based on the experience of one of the participants, it may happen that the product arrives differently than imagined if the customer does not see it physically before ordering which they return it and it gets replaced or retouched to respect the customer's money spent on their little brand. Just the fact that the customers are aware that they are wearing something authentic and different from the mass produced items is what makes it special. One participant mentioned the uniqueness of the materials they conceive and design is their competitive advantage to all other similar brands. Having to personally arrange the model, design, size, length and everything else with the client makes a big difference. One small brand mentioned the advantage of being small is being able to dedicate

time to each product individually and personalize them which creates bigger value to the customer. As mentioned before, making products by the customers needs and desires makes a big difference and 'unique jewelry, made by customer's preferences, and made in front of the customer' is what keeps those customers coming back and even if there is price obstacle 'there are gems that are more expensive, and if a customer wants a cheaper option they can choose imitations of gems that cost less'. Uniqueness of the products is connected closely with the adaptability to the customer's preferences and gives more value to the products and ultimately, to the brand itself. In the words of one of the participating brand from this study 'Our target customers care about their looks and how they feel wearing our products, people who value the quality and authenticity'.

Second most mentioned advantage is the 'direct contract with clients' that seven participants (53.85%) believe is important for a small brand because it gives a dose of warmth and friendliness which enhances the relationship between the client and the brand. They can hear the thoughts of the customers, their needs and preferences and adjust their products accordingly. Due to direct and friendly communication with the customers, they become returning customers because the satisfaction goes both ways. The goal of communicating frequently is to be able to perfect the product and create satisfied customers according to one participant's experience and opinion. Another participant stated a fact that they believe to be a reason why customers might prefer their product instead of a product from a 'fast fashion' brand. They mentioned that compared to large corporations their advantage is being close to customers. While corporations gain their data about the customers needs and wants through various researches and statistics, their small brand gets it first hand, directly from their customers, and thanks to that close approach they are able to satisfy some extra requirements of customers. This comment explains perfectly how direct communication and approach to customers in today's time, when service and experience mean a lot, can

come as a big advantage to the 'slow fashion' brands who lean more towards the values rather than pure profit. Each customer is approached in a flexible and individualized way and the products reflect their needs and values. Fair amount of time is spent communicating with each customer to create a product that is at least very close to what the customer had in mind which requires patience from both the customers and the seller.

'Good quality and longevity' of the products were mentioned by six participants (46.15%) as one of the biggest advantages to such a business. It is a very important part of any kind of brand because it reflects the overall reputation of the brand and the small handmade businesses are less likely to succeed if they do not offer high quality products that last longer than the 'fast fashion' products that are known to last a short period of time which is reflected on the price as well. A comment that one of the brand participants received from their customer was 'My mother bought a bag from you 20 years ago and now I use it' which is what all these brands strive for. These things matter to many of the customers because in comparison to this the 'fast fashion' items have become less quality and more quantity and they cannot fit the needs of all the customers. The biggest reason why one of the participant's customers return is 'Guaranteed quality, timeless design and a high level of customer care'. As they speak from experience it shows that these reasons matter a lot and brands need to understand that in order to positively impact their reputation and success of the business. As quality and design matter to the customers it also matters to the brands. According to one of the participants 'We only use Turkish cotton that is known for its perfect quality, for our one-colored designs'. Another participant mentioned that most of their feedback is about satisfaction with the quality and workmanship. It shows how the customers care a lot about the 'little things' that some brands do not pay attention to. 'Quality has been the highest priority since the foundation of the brand and there, we do not make compromises' is an unwritten policy of one of the participants that clearly stated how they use only the top-

quality materials and will not have any excuse to lower that quality. Their quality and design level to famous high-end brands, and the products are more available. These kinds of brands know their values and because of that, people recognize them and their number of customers who care about quality and long-lasting products rise.

‘Ethically made’ expression means that the workers who create the products are not being used, underpaid, or abused in any way and that is one of the traits of the ‘slow fashion’ brands. Lacking employees was mentioned by five participants (38.46%), meaning they do everything themselves or have just a few employees. The participants who mentioned that they have no employees also pointed out that they are the ones who deal with every aspect of their business such as creating the products, perfecting them, checking them, creating their logos, the name of the brand, promoting and selling the products to shipping the products.

‘Materials and sustainability’ have been proven to be some of the biggest advantages by four participants (30.77%). It is closely connected to the quality and longevity of the products, but four participants highlighted it. It is no wonder that it is an advantage since that is the essence of the ‘slow fashion’ brands. Even the ‘fast fashion’ brands have started implementing some sustainable collections which proves how much it matters to the customers. A participant stated that ‘every product is completely handmade, and 100% cotton and pleasant’ and they pointed out that sustainability is the essential reason why their customers buy from them and their brand is based on it. Another participant pointed out that they design and create the prints on their materials, but have it done in another company that deals with prints on the textile while using high quality textile.

Having a ‘story behind brand’ is the love that the participants put into their production. Based on four participants (30.77%) it is a nice detail that goes to their advantage compared to large corporations. It can make the customers feel connected to the brand and what it represents. ‘Every brand has its story, that way we try to connect our products to our

hometown' is what this small brand is trying to represent with their products. They want to make products that would connect the customers with their hometown. Another participant mentioned that drawing the prints they use on their textile have always been drawn to tell a unique story, their story. They wanted to express something that only they could tell.

Disadvantages in comparison to other fashion brands

While there are many advantages about the small 'slow fashion' brands, there are many challenges and disadvantages to their type of brand as well. 'Preferences and taste' are the highest ranked disadvantage and a reason why a customer decides not to buy from a brand mentioned by seven participants (53.85%) from the study. Some prefer buying from the known brands which are usually 'fast fashion' brands or compared to the similar 'slow fashion' brands, some prefer different styles of the fashion items. It takes time to develop relationships with customers and embed some emotions in them towards the brand. That is why many reach towards the safety of the known brands. Many people prefer buying from a known brand because they know what quality they are getting for the money they give. Compared to businesses who work for over ten years, small businesses haven't created the 'habit' of customers to buy from their brand. Most of the similar handmade brands work under similar conditions and depending on the model of products they offer and how they succeed in selling them is one of the reasons why people turn to a brand. 'Some just prefer competition's product' is one participant's reason for why they believe customers would not buy from them. Safety of the known brands connects to the preferences of the customers while the models of the clothing items or accessories reflects the taste of the customers. As one participant brand which makes and sells clothing items mentioned 'We believe the reason would be the inappropriate dress/product model for a certain occasion' is proven to be a significant reason to why customers reach for different brands. On the other hand, some

customers prefer 'buying something branded, that every second or third girl has because it is modern'.

'Higher prices' is one of the main reasons, sharing the first place, why customers decide not to buy from a brand, and it is one of the biggest disadvantages based on seven participants (53.85%) of this study. Even though many claim to prefer buying more sustainable fashion, prices often demotivate them from buying the handmade brands and they turn to mass produced fashion instead. Two participants stated two opposite comments. While one participant mentioned lack of pricing competition, other participants stated that even though their prices are higher, they do not wish to compete with large brands in that aspect since they create new campaigns two to three times a week. In this region, in most cases prices demotivate customers from buying not only from the brands that are participating, but also similar local brands. A participant stated that 'some people will buy a product from a similar brand that offers products made with less effort and details just because of the lower price' and it is a struggle between the small brands on the same market. Customers often lean towards cheaper and less interesting versions of some fashion products because they prefer buying more things for the same money. Participants agree that having a slow production of the handmade items and putting more effort reflects on the price of the product. In the words of a participant 'mass produced items are cheaper which is impossible in our case due to the duration of production, energy and effort in creating the product'. Since the 'slow fashion' movement is all about real people creating products in a sustainable way while fairly treated, it is understandable that the products made that way should cost more and be valued more than the machine-made, mass-produced products.

'Lower exposure' of the brand is one of the issues that the small handmade brands face due to the popularity of the 'fast fashion' brands. It is one of the biggest disadvantages of

the small brands based on six participants (46.15%) of this study. In today's time when the choice of marketing strategies is big, it is still challenging to find the right way to expose the brand to a bigger audience and gain customers. Most of the participants are still small and growing gradually which automatically means they have less opportunities to expose their brands to bigger markets and gain more customers. They often have a smaller budget for marketing and promotion and less possibilities to stand out which 'leads to lower visibility on the market and lower number of customers that are familiar with the brand'. Participants have agreed that the lower exposure is mostly influenced by the lower budget for the promotion and being a smaller, still rising brand. More participants agreed that 'in comparison to large global companies, they are less recognizable on the wider, worldwide market' and it would take much more time for them to grow.

It is known that the handmade businesses tend to have time consuming operations in every aspect of business and so 'time management' was mentioned as one of the major challenges of such business by 5 participants (38.46%) of this study. Time management is crucial for any business and so it is for the handmade businesses where the production requires even more time and ultimately reflects on the pricing of the products and finding the employees for the job. Many handmade, small brands rely on one or two people to do everything from supply to shipping the products. They are unable to produce as many products as the larger corporations. A participant shared their tasks as a small brand 'besides the production, all the other aspects of the business are done by me, like: supply of materials, marketing, advertisement, taking photos of the products, running social media, receiving orders and interacting with customers, packing the products and printing the bills' and that is why the small businesses like these cannot compete with the larger corporations. Another participant stated how competing with these large corporations that create new campaigns every two to three days is never going to be their goal because the customers who are

impatient and do not appreciate handmade products cannot be their clients. Creating a quality product of a unique design can last a long period of time and 'waiting lists are often long and the delivery period can be extended to up to two to three weeks'. Customers very much appreciate communication and that is why quick and efficient communication is important. Some small brands are at the customers' disposal at all times and tend to adjust the clothing items to their measures instead of creating fixed sizes as the mass-produced fashion does. Customers appreciate it a lot because it also proves that they put an effort into making their products even though it takes more time to adjust the products which results in lower production. For the smaller brands, more time and effort are needed in growing the business which is an obstacle for those brands that wish to grow to the level of the large brands.

'Higher expenses' have been mentioned multiple times during the study, but only four participants (30.77%) pointed it out as a disadvantage for their business. Smaller brands need to have higher prices due to higher expenses they have in comparison to larger companies. Customers often do not understand the reason behind the large prices and refuse to buy handmade products. Multiple participants argued that they have higher expenses for sales and marketing, as well as the materials they use and the availability of materials in different periods of time. Due to lower budgets for marketing and promotion, small handmade brands have less opportunity to be seen on the market unlike the larger corporations who have significantly larger budgets for marketing and promotion of the brands and each new campaign. Multiple participants have agreed that having a lower budget for promoting their brand is a big obstacle for a small brand like them. Finding a supplier of quality materials with a consistent offer is very difficult for the brands who do not buy in large bulks and very often. When their supplier runs out of a certain material they use, they need to find a substitute supplier which, on this small market, is quite challenging and time consuming. To

maintain the quality of the products, businesses need to use the same quality of the materials every time.

Advantages of preferred selling platforms

Preferred selling platform for nine participants (69,23%) of this study is social media, specifically Instagram and Facebook. Instagram is used by all 9 participants, while Facebook was mentioned in a combination for six participants (46.15%). Social media, especially Instagram has become the most popular platform due to large opportunities for business accounts and cheaper options for promotion, so it is no wonder that it reached the first place in this study. Small handmade brands often believe that having an Instagram business account is a good way to start the business before expanding it on a more serious level. Since more participants mentioned their business being their hobby at the beginning, some mentioned posting their products on their social media accounts was a way of presenting their hobby which developed into a business. Social media accounts are presented as an advantage when it comes to communication with the customers because it simplifies customers' understanding of the information about some products and they can easily, with assistance, create an order. The study has come to results that explain how the 'customers feel like the approach to designer/owner of the brand is a lot better due to the ability to get more accurate answers from them' and it is proven to be the simplest and most accessible platform for the customers as well as the brands. Communicating via social media accounts saves time for the producers, especially if one person does everything by themselves because they find it more challenging when they need to follow different places where they might get an order and keep track of everything as the larger corporations can due to having different employees to every part of the selling process. While social media accounts are more convenient, they also give an opportunity for the businesses to post photos and videos of their products and 'easier

way to post products, describe them, add filters and such' which could enhance the positive feedback on the product. Since Instagram offers paid promotions, it is 'an ideal platform to connect with the target audience' since it is also very popular among younger generations who follow such content and they can present their products in the best light. While some participants mention various reasons why they believe that social media is a perfect selling platform for them, one participant mentioned a reason that it is 'just rational at the moment'.

Second most used selling platform for the small handmade brands is 'physical stores' that is proven to be the most convenient to five participants (38.46%) of this study. It is a traditional way to sell products and some still prefer going to a store to try, see and feel the products. In this modern time where everything is easily accessible via the internet, physical stores are still very important, especially for a more luxurious assortment. Participants who offer both online and physical selling platforms mentioned how they invest in both options because of accessibility of the online selling platforms (online store and social media) and convenience of the physical stores such as being able to touch the fabric and try the products. Some participants agree that it is the best way to present a product and they prefer direct contact with the customers. For small brands who target local customers it is best to have a store or a showroom for the customers to try on the products and decide based on the fit.

'Online stores' or webshops are very popular in today's time and so the four participants (30.77%) agree to be an important selling platform for their business and some of the participants who sell their products on the social media agree on the importance of the online stores and hope to have them in the future. Consumers' habits change fast, people live fast lives and expect to complete a purchase in the same way. As mentioned by the participant who uses social media 'we first started with social media, and as the business grew we made a web shop' because it allows people without social media to see and buy the

products and for those who wish to 'click and buy' meaning, quick purchase with no direct contact with the brand. Thanks to online shops, people from all around the world can find and order the products, depending on the shipping options by each individual brand. Based on the participants who plan to open an online store they still see themselves 'as beginners who haven't been recognized by enough customers to open a web shop, but we hope to do it soon' and they are challenged by the process and expenses of it. They see it as an online platform that is quicker and more accessible to customers.

Final selling platform mentioned in this study is 'retail stores' such as souvenir shops are one of the methods of two participants (15.38%) of this study. These brands are both selling on social media and due to being a small brand, they do not have their own physical store, but rather they sell their products in souvenir shops. They believe it is more convenient for them as a small brand because they are not well recognized by themselves, and this increases their sales.

All the selling platforms mentioned are proven to be productive, depending on the targeted customers and convenience for the brands who use them.

Marketing strategies and their advantages

Most common marketing strategy based on nine participants (69.23%) of this study is 'social media' marketing. Since most of the participants use social media to sell their products, it is no wonder they use it for marketing as well. Unpaid version of social media marketing is when the brands post photographs and videos of their products with the description of the products they posted. Decorating their social media, business account in a unique image that represents their brand is a way of marketing and so a participant mentioned how they "always try to make my page as colorful and diverse as possible so that anyone could find some small detail that fits their taste" and even just making someone feel positive

after having a glimpse of their page is enough for them. Some participants agree that social media is crucial in today's time because it is like 'you do not exist' without them. "Even with a good recommendation potential customers will first check what you do on social media which many eventually use to contact you" is one of the comments of a participant that uses social media as their primary marketing strategy. Fitting customers' preferences is important in marketing for it to be effective and so our participants mentioned spending a lot of time creating content that has a potential of being interesting to the clients such as presenting new collections, colors, discounts and actions. While effort is the most important in promoting the brand on social media, some brands who wish to reach larger audience also invest a lot of money in creating campaigns and content for the social media, while also using the option to promote their content on social media to a targeted audience apart from the ones already aware of the brand. Social media offers many more options, especially cheaper options for small brands in the rise which is a good marketing option to gradually develop the brand and move on to different platforms.

Second most used marketing strategy for the handmade brands that 5 participants (38.46%) find very effective is connected to social media marketing and it is 'collaborations and giveaways with influencers' which has proven to be an effective way of collecting more audience in a short period of time. Based on an opinion of a brand that is not yet, but planning to collaborate with influencers, they believe that it might be a great way of increasing visibility of their brand and attract new potential customers, and expand their audience and achieve better sales results. "Influencer marketing today is the strongest marketing, whether we admit it to ourselves or not" is the opinion of a participant who has experience in collaborating with influencers on social media. Influencer marketing is collaboration usually to mutual satisfaction of both the brand and influencers. Process how influencer marketing goes is that they post content where they show their products and

describe it or offer discounts or create a giveaway of certain products. Similar thing goes with collaboration with other companies where they create a giveaway of their products while presenting them at the same time. Showing appreciation to the influencers after collaborations creates loyal collaborators and creates a positive image of the brand. No matter how many collaborations a brand has, their effort to create a good relationship with their collaborators is perceived in more effort that they put into presenting their products on social media.

The oldest and still very important indirect marketing is the 'word of mouth' which four participants (30.77%) mentioned they rely on. It is the only marketing that no brand can influence since it is the experience and opinions of the customers that affect that. That is why brands focus on the relationships with customers and small details that are not directly connected to the products such as "investing in packaging, "Thank you" cards and many other invisible expenses ", but give the customers a sense of appreciation .

'Fashion shows' are common for the more developed brands, but one participant brand has mentioned it as one of the marketing strategies. It presents the products on the living models in motion which is a great way to attract potential customers.

This study has proven how social media has the biggest impact on the customers since many young people have social media accounts and are most likely to buy products based on the images and videos that are easily accessible to them which does not exclude other ways of marketing. Word of mouth is directly connected to the customer experience and satisfaction which are influenced by the products and that is the indirect marketing that will always be present and that many brands rely on.

Disadvantages of Marketing strategies

While some brands believe that their marketing strategies do not have any disadvantages, others disagree. There are Three main disadvantages mentioned by the participants.

Disadvantages related to 'social media' marketing have been proven by seven participants (53.85%) to influence their business negatively. Many brands who use social media marketing for their brands, such as Instagram stress the issue of the algorithm that changes often and difficulty of finding the suiting marketing strategy for their brand. Some participants find it difficult to keep being consistent with posting the content on their social media account, while some "still haven't decided which hashtag to use in the posts which contributes to potential customers seeing the products on social media". It requires a lot of time to study not only what content to post, but what to write, at what time and other details of each post of their products they make. Without using the option for paid promotion on social media, a participant mentioned "small reach" of customers to the content posted which connects to another comment of "high competition in the form of other similar brands reaching for the same audience" who might use other, more efficient methods to reach customers on social media. As mentioned previously, many people use social media, mostly younger generations, but those who do not use social media do not have access to their products presented there. Another problem of brands who only focus on selling and marketing their brand on social media is not having a physical space for customers to try the products, touch them and see what is offered.

As mentioned before, creating content is time consuming which four participants (30.77%) believe to be the disadvantage to their engagement in every aspect of the business which includes marketing. The biggest challenge to participants with time management issues is that they do everything by themselves instead of having someone in charge of

marketing alone. A participant mentioned how organizing delivery, sales and marketing alone is 'time-consuming and stressful' for one person. A lot of time is required to prepare the content and all the details for the marketing of each product. Time management is important in any business and any aspect of the business, so it is the marketing of the small businesses where mostly one or two persons do all the work.

The final challenge to the marketing that participants use are the financial challenges which were mentioned as the biggest challenge for marketing for three participants (23.08%) of this study. Every business needs a lot of investment, as in production, so does in promotion which requires more money. A participant agrees how 'profit is definitely lower without marketing' and having to advertise and promote costs a lot because it is a part of sales in a way because it affects the reach of customers. When it comes to physical stores without any additional selling platforms, it is more difficult to reach customers which results in lower popularity, therefore lower profit.

Based on the brand who use different marketing strategies on more platforms, they mentioned not having any disadvantages due to using marketing strategies personalized for their business and using different platforms to gain more audience.

Startup challenges

Every business startup has some challenges to it, so it is no wonder that this study has collected various challenges from legal aspects of the business to the marketing. This category does not have percentages due to individual reasons of participants' challenges while starting the business. Each of the challenges have been mentioned by only one or two participants directly. While starting something new, there are questions presented in the entrepreneur's mind and in this study some of the questions have been mentioned such as whether the business will be profitable and if people are going to like the offer. Participants

wondered if their business would be successful and the final stage of questioning themselves has led to 'Finally deciding to actually do it' and leaving the more secure job they had, if they were employed somewhere already.

After making the decision, some participants have had difficulty regarding legal inquiries. Since most of them deal with legal inquiries by themselves along with all the other aspects of business, it is no wonder it presents them a challenge especially if they do not have any previous knowledge in starting a business and if they have difficulty in reaching the required institutions needed in the process. Moving on from legal inquiries, creating a financial plan presents a great challenge for startups without previous knowledge in planning their finances. A participant mentioned creating an organized plan was a key to overcoming the challenges such as legal inquiries and financial plans. Creating networks and contacts can be challenging as well while starting a business. Finding a good supplier, arranging the supply of materials and reaching to multiple suppliers to find the best suiting options for a lower cost is more difficult for a small brand startup due to smaller orders that cost more in smaller batches and finding a supplier that would be consistent in delivering the materials of the same quality. If the supplier is from a different country it delivers another challenge where 'Everything is much more challenging from mutual understanding, liquidity negotiation that is necessary for such cooperation'. As much as the external relationships need to be established, so do the internal relationships with the employees. Coming to the marketing of the brand, it is very challenging in the starting process of the brand establishment since it is done from the scratch. Patience is important in the entire startup process and 'every beginning is difficult, but you need to have specific goals' and wait for the right moment. As mentioned, many deal with all the aspects of the startup process, but one thing is important to understand and that is 'if you don't do it, nobody will do it for you and so the work will wait for you tomorrow and day after tomorrow until you do it'.

Challenges of the already established the business

Challenges that influence the already established handmade brands in this region are divided in three different categories for the purpose of this study. Just to mention, all the categories have some way of influencing each other.

The greatest challenge for already established handmade brands participating in this study is the 'material and production' challenge mentioned by eight participants (61.54%). There are different issues regarding materials and the production, starting with the supply of materials which is 'quite small, especially on this market and for a smaller brand'. It happens that the supplier does not have the required material so 'you try to order from one and it does not suit us, then the others until you find the material you need' and it takes time to find the fitting supplier and be consistent in supplying the needed materials. It is also connected to the habits of the customers that differ from one market to another and so does the offer like materials, amount of it, designs and such. It is a big challenge to find the textile made of required materials because 'they became very expensive or there is no color that sells the best'. Lately, the escalation of the prices have been hard on the producers because the materials have gone up in prices and automatically 'we raise prices of the products which is always difficult to do and I feel like I need to explain it every time' according to a participant who struggles with raising prices. Handmade products are known for higher prices than the mass produced fashion which is a great challenge when the prices of the materials rise because the products that many people find expensive rise even more in prices. Even though supply of the material is challenging, so is the production of the handmade fashion products. According to a participant struggling with production, the main reason for their country's fashion industry state is production which is 'not lacking talent, wish or customers'.

‘Customer gain and marketing’ is the second category of the current challenges of the participant brands which have been an influence on five participants (38.46%) directly. A participant pointed out how in their country ‘people do not appreciate handmade products compared to mass produced ones that use industrial processes’ and that there needs to be more effort in educating customers about the value of the handmade production and benefits that the products of the small brands offer. Having lesser customers and lower visibility on the market is also connected to being a small brand which is one of the reasons why some participants of this study want to grow more. Channels and methods of advertisement of the products are also influenced by legal inquiries that often change and create difficulties for the brands to advertise themselves how they wish and automatically might influence customer reach. Some participants have challenges in visibility of their brand and finding customers that would like products they offer.

Moving on to the legal inquiries that have been the biggest challenge for many brands in their beginnings. After establishing the brand, four participants (30.77%) mentioned that the legal aspects of business still present a challenge to them in several different ways. Knowing and understanding legal inquiries can be stressful especially because law regulations change and it presents an issue for the businesses to make changes in time. Participants agreed that their business needs to ‘adjust to changes and follow the legal aspects of the business all the time’, but however challenging it is, it is easier than in the startup process. Doing all administration on time is important for the businesses not to face penalties, but it consumes a lot of time from those in charge of it who are, in most cases, the same people who deal with supply, production, sales and marketing at the same time. Administration and bookkeeping are ‘often demotivating and create too much unnecessary paperwork’ and time they spend on that is ‘the time needed for design and production’ of the brands’ products. When it comes to businesses who work in different markets, knowing the

legal inquiries can be ‘quite a challenge and a big bite considering differences in availability of information, precision of the legal framework and language barrier’. There is a need for adaptation in legal inquiries as much as supply, export, hiring and such.

After these three categories of challenges for the business at this moment, one last challenge mentioned by one participant is hiring employees. It is not simple to find enough people who know how to create the handmade products, especially ‘making the swimsuit in the client’s measures’. It often happens that the people who knew how to create handmade fashion items, forget how to do it over time. It is something that is a challenge to a small brand that wishes to grow.

Goals for the future

In the study, participants have been asked what their goals for the future of their brand look like and they provided their own hopes and goals. Starting with creating new collections and increasing production that seven participants (46.15%) mentioned to be their primary goal for the future. Based on the results of several participants, creating a new collection and opening new stores is one of their goals that are in the process while in long term goals, one mentioned they plan to ‘become globally recognized’. Another participant mentioned slow growth which would come along with satisfaction of the customers. Increasing production and gaining visibility on the market ‘should be followed by the financial segment’. Even though satisfaction of the customers is important, equally important is the profit according to a participant of the study. Smaller brands with no employees besides the founders have a difficulty of growing outside of their country due to lower production which is one of the long term goals mentioned. One participant mentioned planning to have a ‘larger range of products’ which will be oriented towards not only fashion, but other use which is now only a motive in the fashion products of the brand. Constantly learning and improving the ways of

producing the fashion items is a goal which would lead to 'more diversified and richer collections' in the future.

Moving on to the goals of growing the business and increasing visibility on the market which five participants (38.46%) mentioned to be their primary goal for the business. Growing slowly without stopping eventually leads to higher success which is one brand's goal. Their definition of success is to 'become a leading brand in the country' in the type of jewelry they make with personalized motives. Development of the brand goes along with achieving better visibility on the market and for a small brand. Collaborations could assist the process of growing and that is why one participant mentioned they plan on having 'collaborations with influencers to attract new customers', and improve their marketing strategy and increase involvement on social media. Social media is proven to be a great tool to increase visibility among potential customers interested in such products. This study proves that small brands care about being noticed on the market, not only within the country, but also neighborhood countries as well, some even globally. It is important to grow or maintain business success, but an important aspect of business is being recognized by quality and uniqueness which needs to be maintained along with keeping up with trends. For some, growing does not mean losing quality by rising quantity, but 'considering the delicate way of production, we will have to become an exclusive brand' which would automatically target slightly different clientele.

Advice from brands

Participants have been asked to offer some advice for those who want to start such a business based on their experience. They encourage anyone who wants to start their own small handmade brand to gain courage and go for it. They cannot lose anything if they try, but might gain much more than they hoped for. It takes discipline, effort and clear vision and

goal to start something and pursue it. People surrounding them should be encouraging and they should start surrounding themselves with people who know more than them because that is how they can learn. Investment is very important, not just financial, but invested time and effort into production, networking and marketing brings many opportunities over time. They should not give up and be persistent in what they do. In everything they do, they need to 'be yourself' because 'there is nothing nicer than arriving at work to yourself and having yourself, everything else will come'.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to raise awareness of the slow fashion concept by collecting data from the owners and those in charge of external communication of handmade businesses in Southeastern Europe. More closely, the study was focused on handmade brands from Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro that have provided examples from real life situations to create a more generalized picture of how handmade brands develop and maintain their business. Furthermore, the study is made to create a bigger understanding of challenges that these kinds of businesses often encounter during the brand establishment and how the challenges change after the brand has developed more. Results of this study are in accordance with Pookulangara and Shepard (2013) who came to the conclusion that companies have come to realize that sustainability and ethicality have begun to matter in the fashion industry. This study has proven that aside from customers, businesses are turning towards sustainability and focus more on the materials they use and the processes of production. From the time when the businesses focused on the guest satisfaction and profit only, now they put more focus on the employee satisfaction and fairness regarding their rights. Even though many customers turn towards more sustainable products and brands, this study has come to another conclusion in accordance with Johansson (2010) where there are still as many

customers who, out of habit, price or safety prefer the mass-produced fashion instead of handmade products after claiming the desire to turn more sustainable. Based on the responses, the study has come to a conclusion that starting a handmade business has a lot to do with creating handmade products out of hobby before developing the business. 61.54% have proved to be one of the primary motivations to starting their brand. Comparing advantages and disadvantages of handmade brands, study has come to realize that the brand owners believe their advantages are far greater than disadvantages which are presented more as challenges rather than disadvantages by the brands. Sankar's (2023) theory of higher prices and production of materials leading to higher prices of the production has been proven in this study by the experience of brands participating in this study to have higher expenses of more quality materials they use and fair treatment of the workers involved in the production leads to higher expenses of the production of the fashion items. That leads to higher prices of their products on the market. Modern time requires modern ways of promoting and selling the products which is why the majority of the brands from the study have mentioned social media being the primary platform for sales and marketing.

Finally, the theory that the handmade brands can succeed in the Southeastern region has been proven to be achievable regardless of the challenges presented to smaller brands. All handmade brands participating in this study have slightly different circumstances that influence their business, but the main goals of these brands are similar and ambitious. They focus on improving production and visibility while maintaining the quality of their products which is the true vision of a slow fashion concept. Limitations to this study were the number of participants due to low number of such businesses in the region and the time limit for the businesses who were willing to participate. In the future research more interviews should be conducted to a higher number of participants from other countries in the region, as well as

more participants within the countries to create more accurate picture of the slow fashion businesses in the Southeastern Europe.

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