CURRENT CUSTOMER SERVICE IMPROVEMENT SOLUTIONS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY IN LITHUANIA: THE CASE OF ZARA

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Abstract
The development and digitalization of retail trade have resulted in increased competition and the erasure of geographical boundaries. The COVID-19 pandemic has further changed customer behavior, giving rise to new competitors, particularly from the Asian market. These new fashion brands not only offer attractive prices and acceptable quality, but also constantly update their collections in online shops, offer various promotions, discounts, and excellent customer service, which pique buyers' interest and encourage them to try their clothes. The objective of this paper is to analyze modern customer service solutions in the fashion industry in Lithuania with the aim of enhancing customer satisfaction in Zara stores. To assess the situation in Zara stores in Lithuania, a quantitative research method utilizing a questionnaire was employed to gather data from 109 respondents. The analysis and discussion of the survey data from Zara store customers revealed the main customer service issues, including moderate satisfaction with the product range and quality, low satisfaction with Zara's" pricing strategies, loyalty programs, and online store. While respondents expressed satisfaction with the physical store environment, they were dissatisfied with the lack of rest-waiting areas in shopping halls. There is a high demand for modern customer service solutions in both digital and physical environments.

Key words: *modern customer service solutions, customer satisfaction improvement, fashion industry, Zara.*

JEL Classification: *F23, L21, M16, M21*

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has led to the gradual emergence of a global consumer market with characteristics different from those of 20 or 30 years ago. The development of shopping networks and the digitalization of retail have led to an intensification of competition and the blurring of geographical boundaries (Dolzhenko, 2021). Changes in shopper behavior during the COIVD-19 pandemic and the digitalization of retail have led to the entry of new competitors in the EU and Lithuanian fashion market. Asian fashion manufacturers have significantly strengthened their position, with brands such as 'Urban Revivo', 'Ochirly', 'JNBY', 'Ellasay', 'Sprandi', etc. making targeted inroads in the EU market. These brands compete not only on the basis of attractive prices and acceptable quality, but also on the basis of constantly renewed collections, various promotions and discounts that attract the interest of customers and encourage them to try on their clothes in both digital and physical environments. Changing consumer attitudes towards the purchase of clothing and footwear are undermining the competitiveness of international fashion industry leaders such as the American 'Nike' and 'Gap', the Spanish 'Inditex', the Japanese 'Fast Retailing', among others. The competitiveness of these multinationals is based on a sophisticated system of sales channels, consisting of direct and indirect sales through their own specialized stores and the physical stores of intermediaries and partners. However, as young and middle-aged people increasingly shop online and value sustainable fashion, this competitive advantage in the fashion industry is diminishing. The ongoing changes in the international fashion industry have led to the bankruptcy of a number of large retailers, especially in the US and the UK, including firms such as True Religion Apparel, J. Crew, Centric Brands, Neiman Marcus, Aldo and others (Dolzhenko, 2021).

Customer service is of paramount importance in the fashion industry, as evidenced by studies by Madanchian, Ariken and Taherdoost (2022), Kumar (2017), Tien, Anh, and Vu (2021), Bird (2021) and others. Kumar (2017) points out that quality customer service is a viable and affordable solution to increase customer satisfaction and create added value. According to Tien, Anh, Vu (2021), improving customer service is no longer a business choice, it is an indispensable part in a competitive business environment. The researchers note that

improving customer service gives a company a long-term competitive advantage, which is very important in the fashion industry. Jung (2017) points out that, in a highly competitive environment, customer service is a direct determinant of a company's operational success, as it allows it to form long-term relationships with profitable customers, to foster their loyalty and to better meet their needs. The researcher points out that it is appropriate for companies to develop and improve their individual customer service strategy. Vineela (2019), Shukla, Vyas and Pandya (2018) point out that in-store customer service can be improved through various visual merchandising solutions. Hirna, Darmogray (2021) analyzed the applicability of partnership marketing in improving customer service. Shumsky (2021) studied the evolution of the fashion industry and found that its future lies in digitization and virtual customer service. Special apps that allow virtual fitting, personal styling using the collections of clothes and accessories on sale are solutions that can improve customer service and help them to shop. Bird (2021) analyzed the use of robots to improve customer service and optimize service costs. The use of robots in customer service could increase the 24/7 availability of various services, respond faster to customer email enquiries, and provide some basic information and assistance. Customer service is also an issue for the multinational company Zara, which faces increasing competition in Europe and the US in 2022-2023.

Research problem How to improve customer service at Zara, a company in the fashion industry, in a highly competitive environment?

The aim of the study: to analyze modern customer service solutions in the fashion industry in Lithuania in order to improve customer satisfaction in Zara stores.

Research methodology. Quantitative research - questionnaire survey. In order to analyze customer satisfaction with the service in Zara stores, it was decided to use a structured questionnaire survey method. The choice of this method is based on the need to collect detailed data on how customers evaluate the various elements of service in Zara stores.

Study results. The analysis of customer service shows that Zara provides a wide range of clothes and fast delivery of the latest collections to stores, but that there is not always a wide range of sizes in physical stores. The customers surveyed are not very satisfied with Zara's pricing, discounts and sales. The survey found that shoppers are satisfied with the organization of service in Zara's physical stores, the performance of the staff, the customer orientation and the provision of the necessary assistance. Respondents are not satisfied with Zara's loyalty programs and the discounts offered to loyal customers. The respondents rated the elements of the physical environment as good.

Respondents are not very satisfied with the customer service in the Zara online shop. In order to improve customer service in Zara's online shop it is important to improve navigation, product presentation, fast delivery, and to create more shopping value through discounts and loyalty incentive programs. More than half of the respondents rate the shopping experience in Zara stores as positive, while a quarter rate it as unsatisfactory. The results of the service satisfaction and shopping experience evaluation support the need for improving customer service in Zara's physical and online stores.

Originality/value of the research. This study sheds light on modern customer service solutions in the fashion industry and identifies the customer service solutions affecting customer satisfaction in Zara stores and provides suggestions for improvement.

II.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of customer service as a business development concept was formed in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s, when competition began to grow rapidly and distribution channels covering large geographical areas began to be developed. The early concept of customer service was associated with the sale of a product or the provision of a service. Eventually, customer service came to be seen as a process of active communication with the consumer, opinion- forming and counselling (Peppers, Rogers, 2016). Today, customer service does not end with the sale, but often continues after the sale (after-sales and post-warranty service, disposal of used products, etc.). The modern concept of customer service is based on the view that customers' needs may vary from one situation to another, but that there are five basic common requirements that are important for all customers (Harris, 2013):

• Matching the product or service to the customer's needs;
• Acceptable price;
• Satisfactory quality;
• Smooth purchasing process;
• Customer orientation of the retailer.

Batra (2017) points out that the goal of customer service is to create a positive (memorable) shopping experience for the customer. This experience has a significant impact on customer satisfaction and encourages

the customer to re-initiate the purchase process.

The importance of customer service in the fashion industry. When analyzing the importance of customer service in the fashion industry, it is appropriate to define the concept of the term and the main trends of its development. Shumsky (2021) points out that today fashion is one of the phenomena of consumer culture. Heuer, Becker-Leifhold (2018) point out that the fashion industry is one of the cultural forms that develops its own communication technologies, supply and distribution chains, and mechanisms for the realization of social needs. Analyzing the fashion industry in a management context should focus on fast fashion. Fast fashion is cheap fashionable clothing created by taking ideas from the catwalk or by copying the clothing styles of celebrities. Fast fashion ensures that unique high fashion creations are accessible to the mass consumer (Heuer, Becker-Leifhold, 2018).

When analyzing customer service in the fashion industry, there are two main categories (Shumsky, 2021):
- traditional trade. These are various physical shops for clothing, footwear and accessories, where the customer can physically inspect the products in the range, try them on, and assess their compatibility with other existing clothing and accessories;
- e-commerce. The most popular form of modern commerce is e-commerce. Other forms of modern commerce include social networking, sales through opinion leaders, etc.

Between 2020 and 2022, the fast fashion industry was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed consumer shopping habits and led to the rise of e-shopping for clothing. As a result, today, fashion industry players are increasingly adopting online shopping platforms to increase revenues in the fast-growing e-commerce segment. All this increases competition in the fashion industry and changes consumer behavior. Customers shopping in physical and online stores have different requirements to be taken into account by the seller.

In the fashion industry, the factors determining the quality of customer service fall into two main categories: objective and subjective factors. According to Šalkauskienė (2018), the following objective factors are important in the physical environment of the fashion industry: exterior design; interior aesthetics; speed of service; window decoration; safety and eco-friendliness of service; service staff; communication; customer orientation; sanitation of the premises; musical accompaniment; assortment; availability; and attention to regular customers. Subjective factors: sincere attention and concern for the customer's well-being; pleasant shop environment; rest areas.

Pentina, Amialchuk, Taylor (2011) found that the virtual environment, functionality, and ease of navigation of an e-shop are very important in the fashion industry. These elements form the basis of service in the virtual environment. However, in the highly competitive fashion industry this is not enough. A positive customer experience is shaped by a wide range of products, unique offers, visual presentation of garments, reasonable and secure payment, fast delivery, reliability and integrity of the seller (see Figure 1).
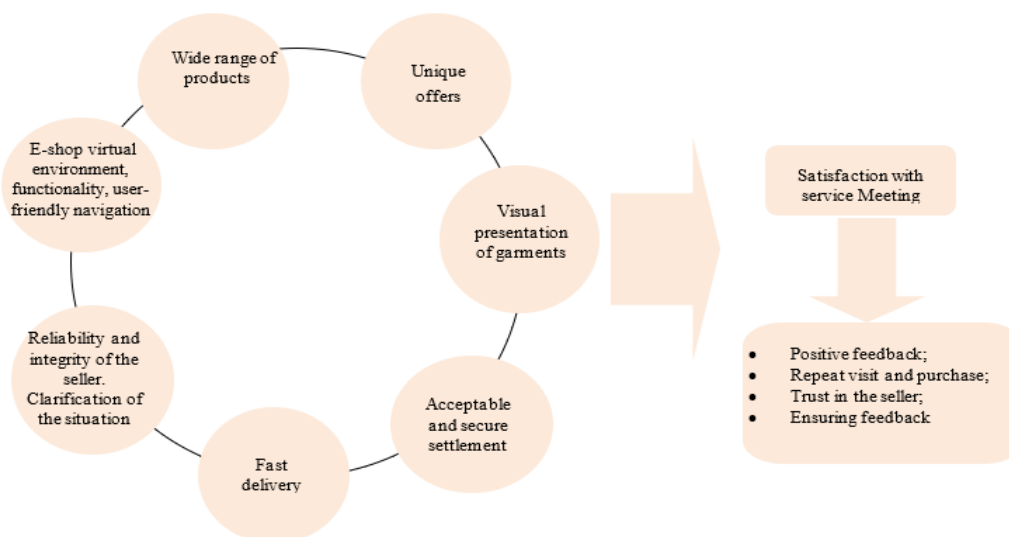

Figure 1 – Customer service model in fashion e-commerce
Source: compiled by the authors' based on Pentina, Amialchuk, Taylor (2021, p.748)

Solutions to improve customer service in the fashion industry. In the fashion industry, innovation brings innovation not only to the production process but also to customer service. Customer service innovations in the

fashion industry include virtual stores, physical stores and sustainable fashion solutions. Virtual technologies help businesses to promote new collections, assist shopping and adapt to customer needs. Merchandising helps customers to find the products they want on the shelves and to get different outfit ideas. And the growing public awareness of environmental pollution issues and the need to address them more proactively is driving the fashion industry to find solutions to reduce environmental pollution through customer service and involvement in the circular economy

Virtual Customer Service. Innovation in the fashion world is not just about design. To attract new customers, to offer them radically new ideas, clothing and accessory designs, the fashion industry needs to innovate in business, to improve customer service and the buying experience (Makarenko, 2019). According to Ricci (2022), Shumsky (2021), one of the most promising technologies for customer service is Virtual Reality (VR). Ricci (2022) points out that virtual reality is a promising technology to create a satisfying customer experience that mirrors the experience in physical stores and to enrich the online customer experience by bringing it closer to shopping in physical stores.

Virtual reality catalogues in physical stores allow shoppers to shape their own style in a virtual environment. Virtual reality catalogues in physical stores allow the shopper to try on different garments and combinations of garments without being measured and to choose the ones that fit best (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Virtual reality catalogue in a physical store
Source: compiled by the authors from Kivisense (2022)

Similar technology can be integrated in the customer's phone. A virtual reality catalogue on the customer's phone gives them the opportunity to get to know the store's assortment and innovations better, and to use them to create their own unique personal style. Customers can try on the clothes they like in-store or order online (see Figure 3).
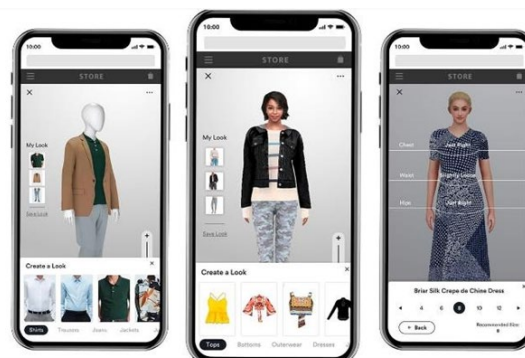

Figure 3 – Virtual reality catalogue on the customer's phone
Source: compiled by the authors from Kivisense (2022)

Kohl's innovative solution Kohl's Virtual Closet has proven its worth in strengthening customer relations. This solution was developed in collaboration between Kohl's and Snapchat (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Kohl's virtual wardrobe
Source: Kohl (2020)

Kohl's augmented reality virtual wardrobe, which allows consumers to select their favorite items from a curated Kohl's product range. Kohl's Virtual Closet showcases the best spring styles, sports and leisure products. Using virtual reality technology, Kohl's has deepened relationships with Generation Z customers and improved sales performance (Kohl's, 2020).

Virtual reality technologies are particularly important for improving customer service, as they allow online stores to create an immersive shopping experience close to the physical shopping experience (Wu, 2019). Virtual reality technologies allow products to be configured in 360° and users are shown the configured product through immersive 3D visualization (Ricci, 2022). This allows the user to better understand the features of the configured garment, which may be difficult to perceive through a flat 2D image displayed on a traditional monitor. Virtual Try-On (VTO) applications for clothing and accessories are considered to be very promising for improving customer service in e-commerce (see Figure 5).
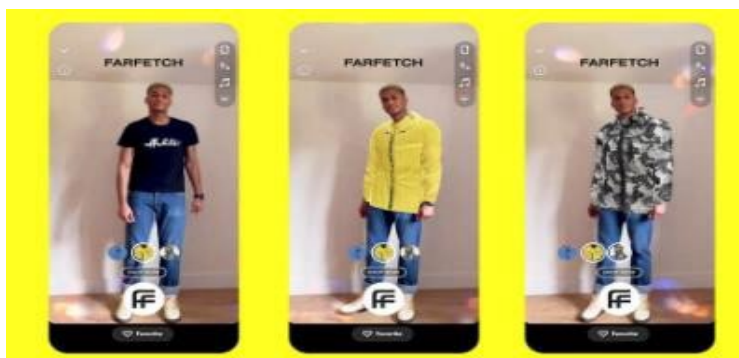

Figure 5 – Virtual Try-On on a smartphone
Source: London (2021)

Shumsky (2021) points out that virtual reality allows the fashion industry to create unique experiences for consumers. Thanks to virtual reality technologies, the customer can have the opportunity to be present at the most famous haute couture events and to watch the shows in the front row. They can also visit any store in the world without leaving their home. This experience is unique and creates a new relationship between the retailer (brand) and the consumer. The application of virtual reality technologies in the fashion industry began in 2016 when Intel, in collaboration with IMG and selected designers, conducted live virtual reality filming at New York Fashion Week using Voke VR. The use of Voke VR technology enabled everyone to participate in real time in the New York Fashion Week events with a front row view. Virtual reality technology creates a sense of space, sound, and experience of the emotions at the event that 2D technology cannot.

Physical merchandising. The term merchandising was coined in the 20th century, when competition for customers and the increasing choice of similar products made it important to influence potential customers directly on the sales floor by attracting their attention, creating a need to buy and encouraging instant shopping (Kumar, 2022). Merchandising is defined as the marketing activities carried out at the retail point of sale (Vineela 2019). Merchandising consists of the following activities (Figure 6).
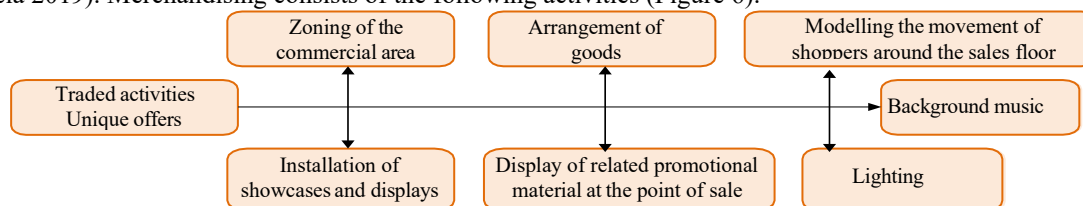

Figure 6 – Traded activities
Source: compiled by the authors based on Vineela (2019)

Merchandising is widely used in the fashion industry to improve customer service and create a positive shopping experience. Kumar (2022) points out that merchandising solutions create a microclimate in a clothing store that encourages the shopper to relax, forget about the day's worries, browse the store's assortment, choose the clothes they like, and get new ideas for updating their wardrobes (Belli, 2020). Well-organized decisions influence shopper behavior, increase engagement and interest, contribute to demand creation and encourage unplanned purchases based on feelings and emotions. Murtazalieva (2012), Kumar (2022) identifies the following key functions of the marketplace:

• Arranges the layout of goods on the sales floor in such a way as to slow down and lengthen the shopper's path of travel;

- It optimizes the search for products and at the same time encourages the customer to look for other products that he or she did not plan to buy;
- Draws shoppers' attention to certain seasonal products;
- Shapes the need to buy clothes, accessories and outfits;
- Demonstrates the possibilities of combining, accessorizing and using different types of clothing;
- Creates a positive, relaxing atmosphere for the shopper;
- Reveals the distinctive characteristics of goods.

The traded functions are directly linked to the main objective of increasing sales (Kong, 2018). In order to implement the key elements of merchandising in the fashion industry, it is necessary to realize complex solutions related to store design, space planning, space zoning and lighting.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research method - quantitative research, questionnaire survey. The choice of this method is based on the need to collect detailed data on how shoppers perceive various modern service elements in Zara stores. Zara stores were chosen because the Zara brand is one of the most popular brands in the world, which is both well-known and liked by both women and men. Therefore, a quantitative research approach using a questionnaire survey enables a large amount of data to be collected and processed to provide information on the respondents' attitudes, preferences and behavior.

Research instrument: the questionnaire for the study is based on the elements that form the overall consumer satisfaction with the service as identified by, Batra (2017), Peppers, Rogers (2016), Montague, (2016), Šalkauskienė (2018). These elements are: relevance of the product or service to the customer's needs; acceptable price and quality; communication; smooth purchase process; physical and virtual environment; and the seller's orientation towards the customer. The questionnaire is structured around 4 groups of questions: 1. To assess the shopping habits of fast fashion consumers; 2. To determine how the respondents perceive the modern customer service elements in the physical Zara stores; 3. To determine how respondents perceive the customer service elements in the electronic Zara clothing store; 4. To assess the need for service improvements in the physical and electronic Zara clothing stores. Based on these groups of questions, a questionnaire of 18 questions was developed, including 4 demographic questions.

Sample and sampling methods: the survey was carried out in one of the Vilnius Zara stores. The average number of customers per day is 112, which is about 3360 per month. These shoppers form the general population of the survey. The methodology of Panioto (2008) was used to calculate the survey sample and, therefore, with a margin of error of 9,4 % (which is possible in market research), the survey sample was calculated at 109 respondents.

Study process: the study was carried out between 6 and 10 April 2023. The survey used an electronic survey form posted on a dedicated website Apklausa.lt. The link to this questionnaire was shared with the customers of the Zara store.

Research ethics. The study was conducted anonymously and voluntarily. Respondents were informed about the purpose and nature of the study and their rights to participate. The data was collected from the respondents on a confidential basis, ensuring that it would not be disclosed to third parties. Prior to the start of the survey, respondents were warned about the anonymity of the survey, that individual information would not be disclosed and would only be used for the purposes of the survey.

The limitations of the study relate to the weak motivation of buyers to participate in the study. There was a strong lack of trust among older buyers. This made the data collection process more difficult. Also, the survey was only carried out in one Zara store due to the limitation of permissions to carry out surveys in other stores. Therefore, in the future, surveys could be carried out throughout Lithuania to extend the study.

Further research: in order to analyze the problem in more detail, it would be relevant to carry out similar studies in other fast fashion chains and compare the data obtained.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics: 109 Zara shoppers were interviewed during the study. The most active respondents were women (84.4%), who are more interested in shopping than men (15.6%). The majority of respondents were young, aged 20-30 (48.6%) and middle-aged (24.4%). These data suggest that the target customers of Zara stores are young and middle-aged people who pay attention to fashionable clothing. This is also reflected in the age and income of the respondents.

The analysis of the behavior of Zara shoppers is carried out in order to determine the shoppers' attitudes

towards fashion, their shopping behavior, to assess which criteria are most important to them when shopping in Zara stores (Figure 7).
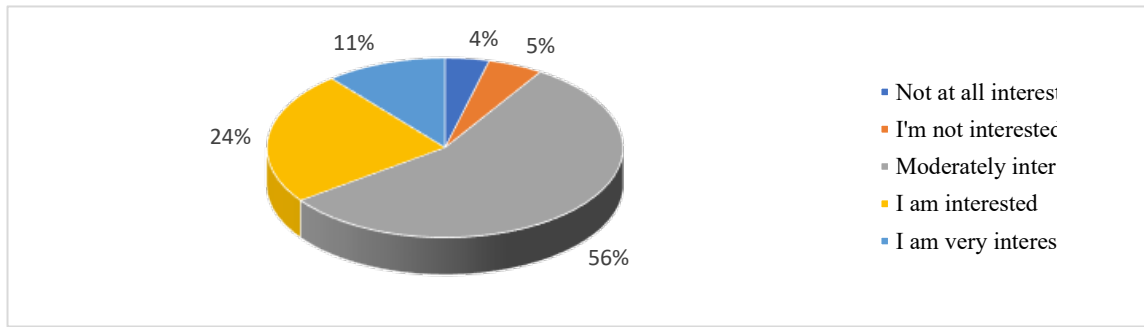

Figure 7 – Respondents' assessment of their interest in fashion, per cent

Many of the shoppers surveyed are interested in fashion. 11% are actively interested in fashion, 24% are interested and 56% are moderately interested. The statistics suggest that many respondents consider it important to be stylishly and beautifully dressed and to be in line with the current season's fashion trends. Many respondents update their wardrobe quite frequently. 64.2% of respondents update their wardrobe irregularly, when they see clothes, they like. This means that they make buying decisions based on emotions. 23.9% of respondents plan their clothing purchases rationally. This means that good service, a positive shopping experience, and various marketing tools can encourage unplanned purchases. Supermarkets are the main place to buy clothes. 56% of respondents buy their clothes in supermarkets. This shopping trend is in line with the behavior of the majority of Lithuanian shoppers. The presence of shopping centers in the country's major cities shapes the behavior of shoppers, many of whom make their larger purchases there because of the abundance of physical stores where they can browse and try on the clothes they like.

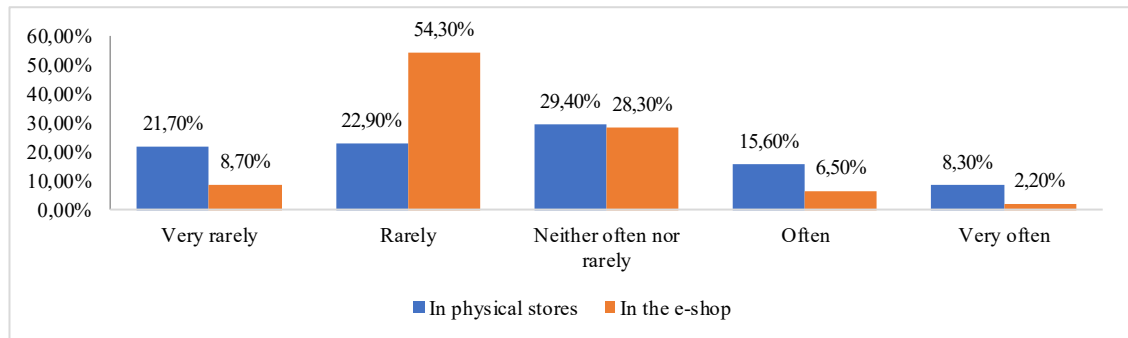The survey assessed how often respondents shop at Zara clothing stores (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 – Frequency of shopping in Zara stores, per cent

Respondents shop at Zara physical stores in a variety of ways, with 8.3% shopping very often, 15.6% often, and 29.4% when the need arises. 44.6% of respondents rarely or very rarely. Respondents are significantly less likely to shop at Zara. 63% of respondents shop there rarely or very rarely. Only 2.2% of respondents shop very often at Zara.

There are several main drivers for shopping at Zara. For respondents (see Figure 9), the most important factor when shopping in Zara physical stores is the assortment (48.6%), followed by quality (22.9%) and price (12.8%).
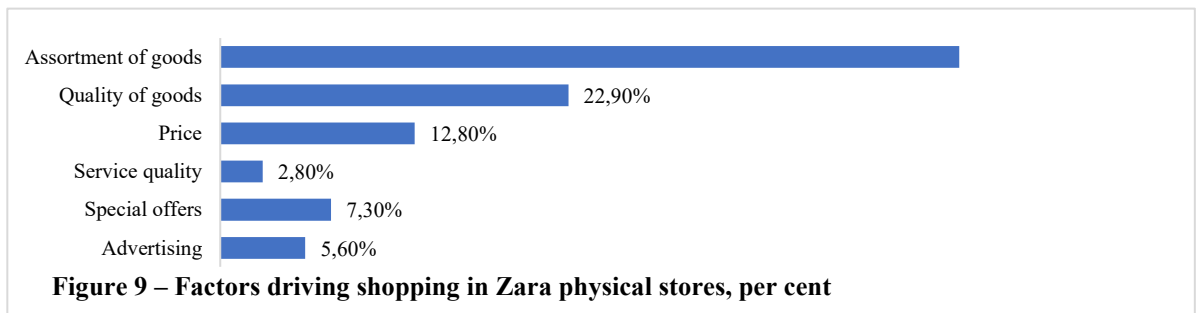

Figure 9 – Factors driving shopping in Zara physical stores, per cent

For respondents (see Figure 10), the most important factor when shopping at Zara e-shops is the assortment (43.2%), followed by prices and promotions (26.5%) and fast delivery (18.7%). The success of a Zara online shop depends to a large extent on the products it offers. The brand is known for its fashionable and high-quality clothing, which appeals to many consumers. Price is also an important factor for consumers. Zara is renowned for offering quality clothing at affordable prices. In addition, there are frequent sales and promotions which attract many consumers. To improve their service, Zara online stores offer fast delivery to many countries, as well as the possibility of collecting goods directly from the store.

**Figure 10 – Factors driving shopping in Zara e-shops, per cent**
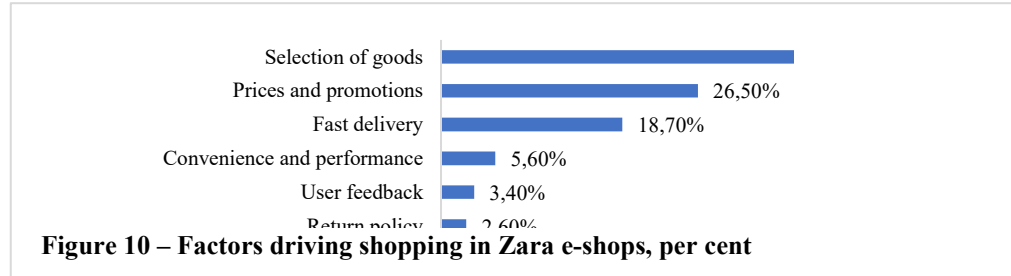
The analysis of Zara's shopper behavior shows that many shoppers are interested in fashion, and that they update their wardrobe quite often and make buying decisions based on emotions. They usually buy clothes in supermarkets. Shopping in physical Zara stores varies, with many respondents shopping infrequently, and in e-shops rarely.

Zara customer service study: in the fast fashion industry, customer service is closely linked to product range and quality, and these elements were therefore assessed in the study (see Figure 11).

Figure 11 – Evaluation of the range and quality of goods in Zara stores (average of responses)
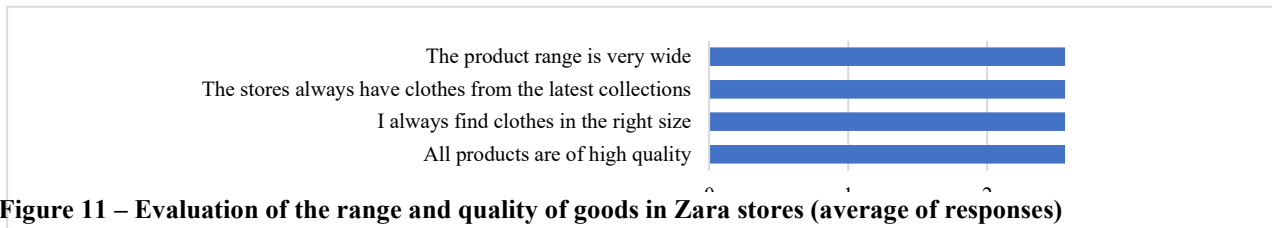
As can be seen in Figure 11, respondents are satisfied with the range of goods (3.39) and always find the latest clothing collections in the shops (3.57). This is due to the 'just in time' strategy of Zara, which is based on the rapid production and delivery of the latest clothing collections to the stores. This strategy allows the delivery of new collections to be organized within 15 to 20 days, whereas other brands take up to 2 months. Thanks to this strategy, Zara provides customers with a quick access to the latest collections. However, the availability and quality of clothes in the right sizes does not always meet respondents' expectations (3.04), and not all items are of good quality (2.95).

The pricing elements of Zara were assessed in another question. The average scores are above 3.5, indicating that respondents find the prices of Zara products moderately acceptable. According to the respondents, Zara sometimes provides goods at reasonable prices and organizes discounts and sales. However, respondents rate the organization of customer service in Zara stores highly (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 – Evaluation of service organization in Zara stores (average of responses)
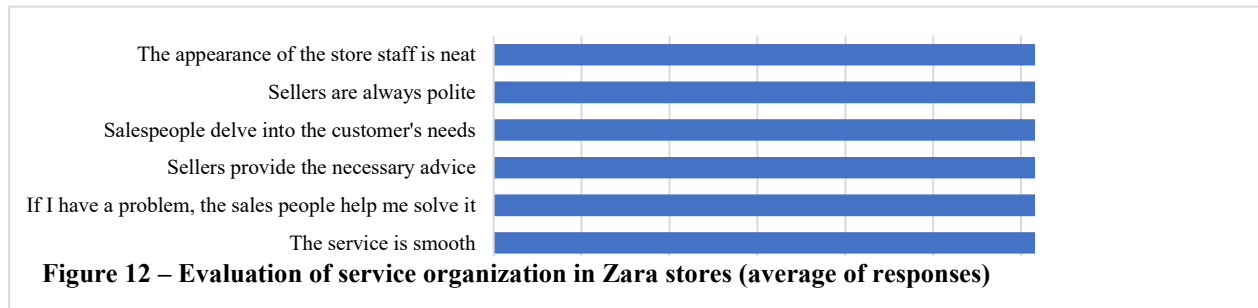
Respondents praise the appearance of the store's staff (4.2), the behavior of the sales staff, their willingness to help the customer and provide the necessary advice (3.8). The surveyed shoppers perceived the service in the physical stores of Zara as smooth (mean score 3.7). However, respondents are not very satisfied with Zara's attitude towards loyal customers (3.3), and the customer's needs. Customers feel that Zara's loyalty programs are not as useful as those of other retailers (3.07) and that discounts and special offers are not offered to loyal customers as frequently as they would like (2.84).

The environment and the merchandising in the physical Zara stores are rated as good by respondents, as is the work of sales staff (see Figure 13).
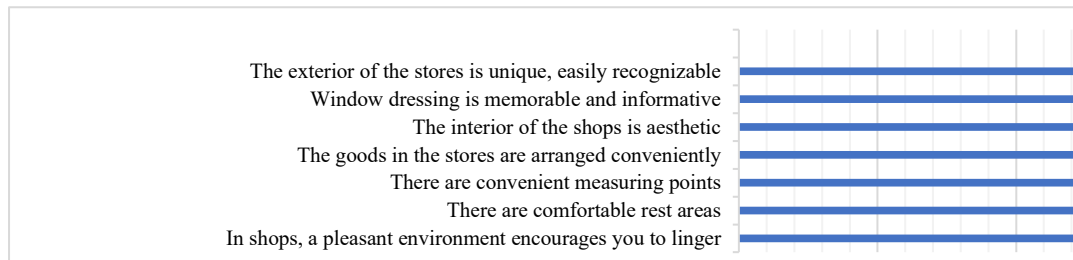

Figure 13 – Evaluation of the environment and merchandising in the physical Zara stores (average of responses)

As shown in the figure below, respondents rated the elements of the physical environment fairly well. Customers are satisfied with the exterior design, the aesthetics of the interior of the stores, the merchandising solutions, the measuring points, the decoration of the shop windows. The exception is one element where respondents are not satisfied with the rest and waiting areas (2.73). This practice has been successfully applied in some H&M stores in the USA, Canada and other countries to encourage shoppers to linger longer in the store and to allow them to put their shopping bags away. Alcido (2017), in his research on in-store solutions and their impact on shopper behavior, also highlights the benefits of rest areas in improving the shopping experience of shoppers.

As part of the research, a separate set of questions was designed to analyze customer service in the Zara online store. As statistics show that online sales will increase significantly between 2020 and 2023, Zara, like other fast fashion players, is actively developing its online shop. However, when asked how often they shop at Zara, 42.2% of respondents indicated that they do not shop at all, while 17.4% shop only sometimes. These statistics suggest that respondents are not satisfied with the service at Zara (see Figure 14).
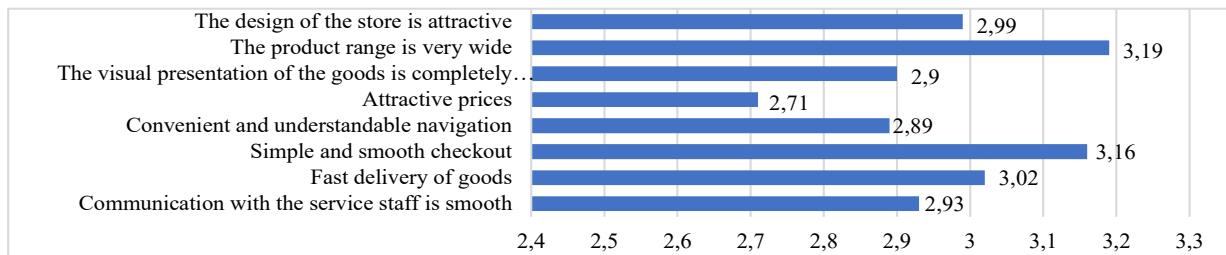

Figure 14 – Service evaluation in the Zara online store (average of responses)

The results of the study suggest that many of the customer service elements in the Zara online store are rated as satisfactory. In contrast, price attractiveness is rated below satisfactory (2.71). The comparison of Zara with "About You", one of the fastest growing online clothing stores in the EU, shows significant differences in customer service (Sederskyte, 2021). "About You" has a very clear and customer-friendly navigation system and offers a wide range of products at different prices. Regular discounts and promotions are organized. Special discounts and discount codes are offered to loyal customers for shopping. Fast and free delivery and returns. All these conditions are not sufficiently ensured in the Zara online shop. In order to improve the customer experience in the Zara online shop, it would be important to improve the navigation and product presentation systems and to focus more on sales promotion.

V. CONCLUSION

Customer service is the process by which a seller seeks to create a pleasant shopping experience for the customer and to meet their needs in relation to the purchase, price, communication, delivery and post-purchase consumption of a product or service. Fast fashion is cheap fashionable clothing that is created by taking ideas from the catwalk or by copying the clothing styles of celebrities. Strong competition in the fashion industry creates strong competition. Improving customer service enables fashion industry players to differentiate themselves, enhance positive customer shopping experiences, build long-term relationships and increase competitiveness. In the fashion industry, customer service quality is understood as the conformity of service to set or expected standards.

The analysis of theoretical solutions for improving customer service in the fashion industry identifies virtual reality technology solutions that enable the fashion industry to create new consumption experiences for customers and to form close relationships with them. Virtual reality catalogues in physical stores allow shoppers to shape their own style by avoiding the need to try on many garments in a virtual environment. Kohl's virtual wardrobe enables virtual

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