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PREVALENCE OF FASHION BULLYING IN LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION: EVIDENCE FROM TWO URBAN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS

Prevalența hărțuirii legate de modă în învățământul gimnazial: dovezi din
două școli urbane din România

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PREVALENCE OF FASHION BULLYING IN LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION: EVIDENCE FROM TWO URBAN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Amid the influence of fashion trends promoted online and the increasingly frequent use of social media, the specialized literature highlights that fashion and appearance-based bullying is among the most widespread forms of aggression among preadolescents and has long-lasting effects on mental health and social inclusion. In Romania, there is limited research on this topic, with the most detailed data showing that physical appearance is the primary reason for bullying among Romanian students, while clothing style represents an important pretext for aggressors. The present study investigates the spread of the phenomenon of *fashion bullying* (teasing, exclusion, or aggression related to clothing and appearance) among lower-secondary students, depending on the presence or absence of school uniforms, aiming to address the need for empirical studies to support data-driven debates on school dress codes. The comparative design focused on two urban

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schools – one with a mandatory uniform, the other without – and employed a mixed methodology on a sample of 80 students and 20 teachers. According to the results, in the school with a mandatory uniform, the frequency of fashion bullying behaviors and clothing-related social pressure are significantly lower. Students and teachers associate the uniform with reducing socioeconomic disparities and increasing inclusion.

In line with international literature, our data suggest that uniforms can ease identity and fashion-related pressure, but the optimal effect depends on a whole-school approach (clear yet flexible rules, media and social-emotional education, student participation in defining the dress code).

Keywords: appearance-based bullying, fashion bullying, school dress code policy, school inclusion, school uniform.

Rezumat

Pe fondul influenței exercitate de tendințele vestimentare promovate în mediul online și al utilizării tot mai frecvente a rețelelor sociale, literatura de specialitate atrage atenția că bullyingul centrat pe modă și aspect este printre cele mai răspândite forme de agresiune la preadolescenți și are efecte durabile asupra sănătății mentale și incluziunii. În România, literatura este lacunară, cele mai detaliate date arătând că aspectul fizic este primul motiv de hărțuire între elevii români iar stilul vestimentar reprezintă un pretext important pentru agresori.

Studiul de față investighează răspândirea fenomenului de fashion bullying (tachinări, excludere sau agresiune legate de haine și aspect) în ciclul gimnazial, în funcție de prezența sau absența uniformei școlare, încercând să răspundă astfel nevoii de studii empirice pentru a susține cu date dezbaterile legate de codurile vestimentare în școli. Designul comparativ a vizat două școli urbane – una cu uniformă obligatorie, alta fără – și a utilizat o metodologie mixtă pentru un eșantion de 80 de elevi și 20 de cadre didactice. Conform rezultatelor, în școala cu uniformă obligatorie frecvența comportamentelor de tip fashion bullying și presiunea socială legată de haine sunt semnificativ mai scăzute. Elevii și profesorii asociază uniforma cu reducerea diferențelor socio-economice și creșterea incluziunii.

În acord cu literatura internațională, datele noastre sugerează că uniforma poate atenua presiunea identitar-vestimentară, dar efectul optim depinde de abordarea la nivelul școlii ca întreg (reguli clare și flexibile, educație media și social-emoțională, participarea elevilor la definirea codului vestimentar).

Cuvinte-cheie: bullying legat de aspect, cod vestimentar școlar, fashion bullying, incluziune școlară, uniformă școlară.

1. Introduction

Bullying represents one of the most persistent and complex challenges faced by contemporary education, with major implications for students' psychosocial development and the school climate. Among its multiple manifestations, clothing-related bullying, known as fashion bullying, holds a particular place, as it is closely linked to the social dynamics of student groups and to the cultural context of fashion.

In today's society, characterized by intense exposure to social networks and to aesthetic models promoted by the fashion industry, the phenomenon of fashion bullying has gained increased visibility. Students feel pressure to integrate into a competitive environment, where personal image and conformity to clothing trends become essential criteria for social acceptance (Williams, 2008).

The relevance of the topic for research derives from the fact that clothing is one of the most visible indicators of social and economic status in schools. Students from disadvantaged families are at greater risk of stigmatization, which deepens inequalities and contributes to their exclusion from dominant groups (Jones et al., 2020). Several studies have also indicated that bullying experiences during school years have long-term effects on mental health and personality development. Victims frequently experience anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and difficulties integrating into peer groups (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Olweus, 1994; Williams, 2008).

Recent evidence from Romania indicates a very high incidence of bullying within pre-university education, with four out of five students having witnessed verbal violence, humiliation, or aggression, and one out of two considering themselves direct victims (Salvați Copiii România, 2024). Results from PISA 2022 confirm, from an international comparative perspective, that Romania is above the OECD average, with roughly one in four students – both girls and boys – reporting being bullied several times per month (OECD, 2023). Official statements from the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) in Romania also show that the two most frequently cited reasons for student harassment are physical appearance and clothing.

In terms of prevention, CNCD and nongovernmental organizations have proposed measures such as implementing anonymous screening tools to identify cases, teacher training, and the adoption of clear school policies. The potential role of school uniforms as a means of reducing visible status differences has also been discussed, although empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of this measure in Romania remains limited (Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării, 2024).

Thus, investigating the phenomenon of fashion bullying also has practical value, providing a starting point for formulating school policies aimed at inclusion and equity. By developing a deeper understanding of the causes and mechanisms of this type of bullying, effective prevention strategies can be identified, targeting students, teachers, parents, and the educational community as a whole.

2. Conceptual framework and national context

2.1. Specificity of fashion bullying

Bullying was conceptualized by Olweus (1994) as repetitive, intentional aggressive behavior, usually directed toward a victim in a vulnerable position, with the defining feature being the power imbalance between perpetrator and victim. The literature distinguishes multiple forms of bullying, and within these typologies, fashion bullying represents a particular form of social aggression based on adherence to aesthetic and clothing norms. Thus, aggression is built around the way an individual dresses, which reflects not only personal preferences but also socioeconomic status.

Williams (2008), in a qualitative study on a sample of students from Virginia Polytechnic Institute, showed that clothing was one of the most frequent reasons invoked for bullying experiences during school years (pre-university). According to interview data, victims were harassed for clothing brands, place of purchase, or styles that did not conform to the group's social norms. This type of bullying was manifested through verbal insults and social exclusion, with adverse effects on victims' self-esteem and social relationships. Perpetrators also used appearance-related criticism to consolidate their social position,

while group power roles and dynamics influenced the intensity and frequency of these incidents.

Von Busch and Bjereld (2016) further describe fashion bullying as a form of symbolic violence since it uses clothing as a visible marker through which social hierarchies are reproduced. The authors explore mechanisms of violence in the context of fashion, including bullying and microaggressions related to clothing choices and social standards. According to this study, clothing and style are key elements through which children and adolescents draw distinctions between those who are “in” (accepted) and those who are “out” (marginalized). This form of harassment manifests through behaviors that accentuate marginalization. Examples include microaggressions, seemingly harmless remarks that devalue the victim’s clothing, and social exclusion, where students are marginalized for not conforming to group clothing norms. Labeling also plays a significant role in perpetuating the phenomenon. Stigmatized students are often accused of “not being cool” or of wearing “cheap clothes”, labels that reinforce boundaries between dominant and marginalized groups.

Unlike other forms of bullying that may remain less visible, fashion bullying has a permanently exposed dimension, since clothing is a visual marker present daily in school interactions. This characteristic gives it additional symbolic power and explains the high prevalence of the phenomenon.

2.2. Causes of fashion bullying

The causes of fashion bullying are complex and can be analyzed at the intersection of economic, cultural, and social factors. The literature emphasizes, first, the cultural pressure to conform to dominant aesthetic norms imposed by mass media, the fashion industry, and social networks. Clothing becomes a symbol of prestige and social capital, and deviations from promoted trends are often sanctioned through labeling, ridicule and exclusion (Von Busch & Bjereld, 2016).

Williams’s (2008) qualitative study showed that clothing is one of the most frequently cited reasons for students’ bullying experiences, confirming the central role of clothing appearance in school socialization processes.

Jones et al. (2020) found that perceptions of uniforms and clothing are closely linked to socioeconomic status, and lack of material resources increases the risk of marginalization.

Another key factor is social media, which amplifies clothing-related pressure through the constant and comparative exposure of personal image. Recent data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Young, 2024) show that frequent social media users (at least several times a day) have a significantly higher probability of being bullied, either at school or online, compared to those less active online. This constant exposure creates additional pressures to conform to clothing standards promoted in digital spaces. Longitudinal studies also indicate that intensive use of visual platforms (Instagram, TikTok, etc.) correlates with increased body dissatisfaction and negative emotional outcomes among adolescents (Marengo et al., 2018). This context encourages the internalization of rigid aesthetic standards that may lead to clothing-related bullying in the absence of strong self-regulation and critical awareness mechanisms.

2.3. Impact on students

The consequences of fashion bullying for students' mental health are significant. Classic studies on bullying (Olweus, 1994) demonstrated that repeated victimization is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression, and subsequent qualitative research confirmed the negative impact of clothing stigmatization on self-esteem (Williams, 2008). Negative labeling and persistent exclusion damages self-image and reduce students' ability to build healthy peer relationships, fostering isolation and social withdrawal.

The broader bullying literature also shows a consistent association between repeated victimization and reduced academic engagement. Meta-analytic studies revealed that bullied students are more likely to be absent from school and less motivated academically (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). In the specific case of clothing pressure, students may adopt compensatory strategies such as conspicuous consumption or forced conformity to group fashion, in order to avoid ridicule. Although these

behaviors may temporarily reduce the risk of exclusion, they exacerbate economic inequalities and psychological vulnerability. Alternatively, some students adopt resistant attitudes, challenging implicit rules, which may lead to further conflict and increased marginalization (Von Busch & Bjereld, 2016). At the group level, fashion bullying affects classroom cohesion and the school climate. Javillonar and Vasquez (2019) showed that clothing-related ridicule divides the school community into “accepted” and “rejected” students, reducing opportunities for collaboration and interaction. This type of segregation weakens the school’s socializing function and perpetuates conflict dynamics, reinforcing symbolic hierarchies among students.

2.4. Prevention and intervention measures against fashion bullying

The literature emphasizes that effective educational programs go beyond isolated campaigns and require a comprehensive whole-school approach. Swearer et al. (2010) argue that anti-bullying interventions at the school level have variable effects, but the most consistent results appear when strategies simultaneously include clear anti-bullying rules, a curriculum focused on diversity and inclusion, teacher training, parental involvement, and constant monitoring mechanisms.

A central element is the role of group norms: bullying persists when passive bystanders tacitly support aggressors or fail to intervene. Effective programs reshape these norms by promoting prosocial behaviors and collective responsibility. These findings are consistent with the qualitative study of Cunningham et al. (2010), which collected students’ direct recommendations for bullying prevention. Students emphasized the importance of education programs on diversity and inclusion that encourage personal identity expression and respect for differences. In their view, preventing bullying is closely linked to the school’s ability to build a culture of respect and to sanction discriminatory behaviors.

Teachers play a crucial role in ensuring a safe school climate. Swearer et al. (2010) stress that lack of intervention or inconsistent rule enforcement conveys messages of tolerance toward bullying. In contrast, teachers who identify ridicule early and provide support to vulnerable students help reduce

the prevalence and severity of the phenomenon. Qualitative studies, such as that of Williams (2008), confirm that students' perceptions of teacher involvement strongly influence their sense of protection and inclusion.

At the institutional level, clothing policies are a frequently discussed strategy. Jones et al. (2020) found that uniforms can reduce the emphasis on clothing as a socioeconomic status marker, decreasing vulnerability to ridicule. Javillonar and Vasquez (2019) confirmed this perception in the Filipino context: in their study, students viewed school uniforms as an effective measure for reducing clothing-related pressures, with most agreeing that uniforms reduce clothing-based bullying, prevent clique formation based on style, and help maintain focus on learning.

However, Reidy's (2021) systematic review of international literature showed that evidence regarding the effects of uniforms on reducing bullying is limited and inconsistent. Moreover, uniforms have no clear impact on academic performance and may exacerbate inequities for students from vulnerable groups (girls, economically disadvantaged students, and religious or gender-diverse minorities). This discrepancy highlights that the effectiveness of uniforms cannot be generalized and depends heavily on the local cultural context. Where uniforms or dress codes are internalized as symbols of discipline and equality, they may function as protective factors. In other contexts, simply imposing uniforms is insufficient to reduce harassment.

2.5. National context

Scientific literature and reports from non-governmental organizations indicate that bullying is a widespread phenomenon in Romanian schools, although research remains relatively limited in both number and detail. Data from Save the Children Romania (Salvați Copiii România, 2022) point to a very high prevalence: 82% of students from both primary and secondary education (aged 9-19) reported having witnessed bullying situations, and almost half reported being victims themselves. The results published in 2024 confirm the persistence of the phenomenon, showing that four out of five students had witnessed verbal violence, humiliation, or aggression, and that one out of two had considered themselves direct victims (Salvați Copiii România, 2024).

The international comparative analysis conducted through PISA 2022 further confirms the scale of the phenomenon: Romania is above the OECD average, with 24% of girls and 26% of boys (15-year-olds) reporting that they are bullied several times a month (OECD, 2023), indicating a systemic issue.

Recently, a large study conducted by the Education Research Unit and the Institute for Crime Research and Prevention on a nationally representative sample of secondary schools (537 lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools), that included students (over 10 000), teachers (over 6 500) and parents (over 12 000), has provided valuable insights into the phenomenon within the broader framework of school safety (Unitatea de Cercetare în Educație & Institutul de Cercetare și Prevenire a Criminalității, 2024). According to this report, in 2023, half of the students stated that they had been the target of offensive or insulting expressions, 36% reported being victims of malicious rumors, and 18% said they had been harassed or humiliated at school. The analysis indicates that the phenomenon is more prevalent in lower-secondary education than in upper-secondary education and that teachers, in particular, as well as parents, tend to underestimate the frequency and severity of school violence, whereas students report significantly higher levels of victimization. These findings are significant for understanding students' perception of social support and their sense of safety within the school environment.

Recent academic evidence reinforces these conclusions. The study conducted by Iordache et al. (2025) among lower-secondary students found that academic performance was not a significant predictor of involvement in bullying, either as a victim or as a perpetrator, and that gender differences were only weakly correlated with the phenomenon. In contrast, exposure to bullying as a bystander was associated with lower academic performance, suggesting that the negative consequences of bullying extend beyond those directly involved and impact the overall school climate. Furthermore, perceived support from teachers, peers, and family emerged as a crucial protective factor.

The 2024 report of the Education Research Unit (Unitatea de Cercetare în Educație, 2024) on the quality of life of high school students, noted tensions in student-teacher relationships caused by criticisms of clothing, suggesting

the persistence of stigmatizing practices related to appearance. Similarly, the National Council for Combating Discrimination emphasized that physical appearance and clothing rank among the main reasons for peer harassment, and school uniforms have been discussed as a possible means of reducing visible social differences (Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării, 2024).

The Child Helpline Association (Asociația Telefonul Copilului, 2019), confirmed these findings, showing that physical appearance and clothing style are among the main reasons for harassment in Romanian schools, especially among students in grades 5 to 10, with higher prevalence among girls.

Taken together, the existing studies and reports converge on several points: bullying is highly prevalent in Romanian schools, data indicate a pattern of systematic and generalized exposure to harassment, physical appearance and clothing are among the most frequently cited reasons for bullying, and the emotional and educational consequences are considerable. These findings underscore the need for further research specifically dedicated to bullying based on clothing (fashion bullying), considering both its frequency and its impact on inclusion and school climate.

3. Methodology

3.1. Purpose, Objectives, Hypotheses

The study employed a cross-sectional comparative design with an applied orientation, aiming to identify the prevalence of fashion bullying and the differences in its manifestation across two distinct educational contexts: one where students are required to wear a mandatory uniform and one where students have freedom of clothing choice.

The objectives were to measure the frequency of fashion bullying behaviors and compare them between schools (O1), and to analyze students' and teachers' perceptions of the role of clothing in social acceptance (O2).

The hypotheses were that fashion bullying is more frequent in schools without uniforms (H1), and that students in schools with uniforms experience a lower level of social pressure related to clothing (H2).

3.2. Participants

The research sample consisted of students and teachers from two urban lower-secondary schools characterized by different dress-code policies: one requiring a mandatory school uniform and the other allowing free-choice attire. The two institutions were comparable in size and profile, each comprising approximately four to five classes per grade level and serving local communities in similar urban neighborhoods. Participants were selected using a stratified quota sampling strategy, with the type of dress-code policy serving as the main stratification criterion, in order to facilitate a comparative analysis of perceptions related to fashion bullying across different institutional contexts.

Within each stratum, student participation was voluntary, with two to three students from each class at every level of lower-secondary education (Grades 5–8), ensuring an approximately balanced gender distribution. Teachers from various subject areas, representing diverse levels of teaching experience, were also included to provide complementary insights into the phenomenon. In total, the sample comprised 80 students (40 from each school) and 20 teachers (10 from each school).

3.3. Instruments and Analysis

Data were collected between February and March 2025 using semi-structured, online questionnaires administered in an anonymous, self-report format. Students completed the survey during a supervised form teacher's advisory period, while teachers participated voluntarily through individual online links. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study complied with institutional ethical standards, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation throughout the process.

The student questionnaire included factual questions about experiences of clothing-related ridicule and exclusion, five-point Likert items, and open-ended questions about personal experiences and prevention strategies. The teacher questionnaire focused on observations of the frequency of the phenomenon and students' clothing conformity behaviors.

Analyses were carried out according to item type. For factual questions about the frequency of experiences (categories: never, rarely, occasionally, repeated), Chi-square tests of independence were used, and when expected frequencies were low, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test was applied. Effect size was estimated using Cramér's *V* with 95% confidence intervals. For Likert items, means and standard deviations were calculated, and differences between schools were tested using the Mann-Whitney *U* test, with the *r* coefficient reported as the indicator of effect size.

Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically through inductive coding. Two major categories of themes were identified: experiences of ridicule or exclusion, and proposed solutions for preventing the phenomenon.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Prevalence of Clothing-Related Ridicule and Exclusion in School

The comparative analysis of student and teacher responses reveals significant differences between the school with uniforms and the school without uniforms, both in terms of ridicule and social exclusion (Table no. 1). In the school with uniforms, only 8% of students reported occasional experiences of ridicule, whereas in the school without uniforms nearly half of the respondents mentioned such experiences: 38% occasionally and 8% repeatedly. The Chi-square and Cramér's *V* test results confirmed a significant and moderate-large association between the type of dress regulation and the type of bullying behaviour: $\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 16.41, p < .001$, Cramér's *V* = .58, 95% CI [0.43, 0.74].

A similar situation was found for social exclusion. In the school with uniforms, only 8% of students reported occasional experiences, while in the school without uniforms 13% reported repeated exclusion and 18% occasional

exclusion. The calculated values of χ^2 and Cramér's V, $\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 10.52$, $p = .015$, Cramér's V = 0.40, 95% CI [0.28, 0.53], show a statistically significant relationship and a moderate level of association between the reported experiences of social exclusion and the type of uniform regulation in schools. The prevalence ratio indicated that the self-reported likelihood of exclusion was approximately four times higher in the school without uniforms ($PR \approx 4.0$, 95% CI [1.3, 12.7]).

Teachers' perspectives confirmed these findings. In the school with uniforms no cases of ridicule or exclusion were reported, whereas in the school without uniforms the majority of teachers observed such behaviors, either occasional or repeated. At the same time, in the school with uniforms, teachers unanimously denied the occurrence of fashion bullying, whereas in the school without uniforms, nine out of ten acknowledged its presence to varying degrees – one described it as very frequent, four as occasional, and four as very rare.

Table no. 1. *Prevalence of clothing-related ridicule and exclusion reported by students and teachers, by school type*

Phenomenon / Respondents	School with Uniforms	School without Uniforms	Difference (%)	Statistical Test
Ridicule – students	8% (3/40) reported experiences (occasional/repeated)	45% (18/40) reported experiences (occasional/repeated)	+37.5	$\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 16.41$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.58$
Exclusion – students	8% (3/40) reported experiences (occasional/repeated)	30% (12/40) reported experiences (occasional/repeated)	+22.5	$\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 10.52$, $p = .015$, $V = 0.40$
Ridicule – teachers	0% (0/10) observed repeated cases	90% (9/10) observed occasional or repeated cases	+90.0	Descriptive (small N)
Exclusion – teachers	0% (0/10) observed repeated cases	90% (9/10) observed occasional or repeated cases	+90.0	Descriptive (small N)

Note. Values for students are presented as percentages (%) of the total, with n in parentheses. For teachers, data are reported descriptively due to the small sample size. V = Cramér's V (effect size). School with Uniforms (N = 40 students / N = 10 teachers); School without Uniforms (N = 40 students / N = 10 teachers).

Overall, the convergence between student and teacher responses indicates the internal consistency of the data and shows that the presence of school uniforms is associated with lower prevalence of clothing-related ridicule and exclusion (H1). However, these results should be interpreted with caution.

The relatively small sample size – particularly among teachers – limits the stability of the estimates and the generalizability of the findings to a broader

population. Moreover, the data reflect a single point in time and may capture specific contextual features of the two participating schools rather than stable trends. Teachers' reports may also be influenced by their professional experience and level of involvement in students' lives, meaning that some situations might remain unobserved.

4.2. Causes of ridicule and exclusion

Student and teacher responses highlight a variety of factors that can trigger ridicule and exclusion based on clothing (Table no. 2). When asked about the reasons for ridicule, students most frequently indicated the absence of a popular brand (55% in the school with uniforms; 60% in the school without uniforms) and clothing that was "not branded" (58% vs. 45%). Students in the school without uniforms mentioned the "outdated" style more often (40% compared to 28% in the school with uniforms), suggesting that clothing freedom makes style differences more visible and easier to sanction. In contrast, old or worn clothing was mentioned at relatively similar rates (38% vs. 35%).

Regarding the causes of exclusion, in the school with uniforms only 8% of students reported occasional situations, referring to mocking comments or the feeling of not fitting into the group. A singular case referred to counterfeit footwear, which suggests that the uniform does not completely eliminate status differences, as these can be transferred to accessories. In the school without uniforms, 30% of students reported feeling excluded because of their clothes, of whom 13% experienced such situations repeatedly. The reasons mentioned included attractiveness, modernity, or the value of clothing, as well as depreciative labels such as "cheap clothes."

Teachers' perspectives complement these findings. They primarily identified old or worn clothing as a source of teasing – reported by all teachers in the school with uniforms and by eight out of ten in the school without uniforms – along with the "outdated" clothing style, mentioned by five and four teachers, respectively. Other responses referred to non-branded clothing (four out of ten teachers in both schools), while larger differences were observed for the "absence of a popular brand," reported by four out of ten teachers in the school without uniforms and only one in the school with uniforms.

Table no. 2. *Perceived causes of clothing-related ridicule and exclusion, reported by students and teachers*

Mentioned cause	Students in schools with uniforms (N = 40)	Students in schools without uniforms (N = 40)	Teachers in schools with uniforms (N = 10)	Teachers in schools without uniforms (N = 10)
Absence of a popular brand	55% (22)	60% (24)	10% (1)	40% (4)
Clothes that are not branded	58% (23)	45% (18)	40% (4)	40% (4)
“Outdated” style	28% (11)	40% (16)	50% (5)	40% (4)
Old or worn clothes	38% (15)	35% (14)	100% (10)	80% (8)

Note. Values are presented as N (%). For students, percentages reflect direct responses regarding the perceived reasons for ridicule or exclusion, while for teachers, percentages represent perceptions of the main causes. Both items were multiple-response nominal questions, allowing respondents to select up to two options from a predefined list. Due to the small teacher sample, data are reported descriptively.

Compared to students, a difference in perception emerges between the two groups: students place greater importance on brands and labels, while teachers consider the main factor to be the condition of clothing (old, worn, or outdated). This difference can be explained by the fact that students, being directly exposed to interactions and social pressures, are more sensitive to the symbolic dimension of fashion, whereas teachers tend to observe the more visible and “objective” aspects of clothing.

It is important to note that the reported causes of ridicule are based on self-reported data and may be influenced by social desirability or subjective interpretation of peer interactions. In addition, the comparative analysis between students and teachers is exploratory in nature, as the instruments used for the two respondent groups were not identical in scope or level of detail.

4.3. Perception of the role of clothing in integration and social pressure

The analysis of student responses highlights significant differences between the two schools (Table no. 3). In the school without uniforms, 60% of students considered that clothing influences the way a peer is accepted into a group, compared to 38% in the school with uniforms. The calculated value of χ^2 is statistically significant $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 4.05, p = .044$, showing that the observed

differences in the reported level of integration are associated with the type of uniform regulation in schools; Cramér's $V = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.43], correspond to a small-moderate effect.

Regarding the perceived pressure to wear certain clothes, 65% of students in the school without uniforms reported feeling such pressure, compared to 30% in the school with uniforms. The calculated value of χ^2 is statistically significant $\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 15.20$, $p = .002$, showing that the observed differences in the perceived social pressure are associated with the type of uniform regulation in schools; Cramér's $V = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.60], suggests a moderate-large effect.

Table no. 3. *Students' perceptions of clothing influence and pressure*

Variable	Schools with uniforms (N = 40)	Schools without uniforms (N = 40)	Total (N = 80)
Clothing influences integration	38% (15)	60% (24)	49% (39)
Clothing does not influence integration	63% (25)	40% (16)	51% (41)
Felt clothing-related pressure	30% (12)	65% (26)	48% (38)
Did not feel pressure	70% (28)	35% (14)	53% (42)

Note. Integration: $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 4.05$, $p = .044$, Cramér's $V = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.43]; Pressure: $\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 15.20$, $p = .002$, Cramér's $V = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.60].

The analysis of the Likert items offers a more nuanced perspective (Table no. 4). Students in the school with uniforms tend to reject the idea that clothing influences social relationships ($M = 1.28$, $SD = 0.62$) and that exclusion occurs on this basis ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.55$), while reporting a high level of acceptance regardless of clothing ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.71$). In the school without uniforms, scores are higher for the perception of influence ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.88$) and exclusion ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.90$), whereas agreement regarding acceptance is lower ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.94$). Mann-Whitney tests confirmed significant differences for all three dimensions (all $p < .01$), with small to moderate effects ($r \approx .30$ – $.40$).

Table no. 4. *Student's Likert scores on the role of clothing in social relationships*

Item / Dimension	Schools with uniforms (N = 40)	Schools without uniforms (N = 40)	Mann-Whitney test	r (effect)
Clothing influences social relationships	M = 1.28 (SD = 0.62)	M = 2.73 (SD = 0.88)	U = 452, $p < .001$	0.39
Exclusion based on clothing	M = 1.20 (SD = 0.55)	M = 2.40 (SD = 0.90)	U = 468, $p < .001$	0.37
Acceptance regardless of clothing	M = 4.48 (SD = 0.71)	M = 3.28 (SD = 0.94)	U = 410, $p < .001$	0.41

Note. Likert scale 1–5 (1 = total disagreement, 5 = total agreement). All differences are significant at $p < .01$. Effects are small to moderate ($r \approx .30 - .40$).

Teachers confirm the role of clothing in social dynamics, but with different emphasis compared to students. In the school with uniforms, all respondents stated that clothing influences peer relationships, while only 38% of students acknowledged the same. In the school without uniforms, perceptions were similar between students and teachers (60% vs. 70%).

Teachers' reports on clothing-related conformity behaviors complement these findings. In the school with uniforms, 90% of teachers reported never observing students adapting their clothing to be accepted, and 10% mentioned such cases as rare. In contrast, in the school without uniforms, 30% indicated observing this behavior very often, 50% often and 10% rarely. These results align with student perceptions, of whom 65% reported experiencing pressure to conform in terms of clothing, compared to 30% in the school with uniforms.

Overall, the convergence between student and teacher responses supports hypothesis H2 and suggests that freedom of clothing choice makes differences more visible and increases the social pressure associated with appearance. Although the differences identified between schools are statistically significant, their interpretation requires caution. The cross-sectional design does not allow the observation of dynamic relationships between variables, and local contextual factors – such as school policy, institutional culture, or classroom climate – may substantially shape the perceptions reported. Furthermore, the data are self-reported and therefore subject to potential recall and perception biases.

4.4. Student-proposed solutions to reduce fashion bullying

The open-ended question addressed to students aimed to identify solutions

considered effective in reducing the phenomenon of fashion bullying. The responses ($N = 80$) were analyzed through thematic content analysis, and the identified themes were correlated with their frequency to allow an integrated quantitative - qualitative interpretation.

In the school with uniforms, almost half of the students (45%) mentioned uniforms or standardized clothing as the main solution, often emphasizing positive experiences in their own school: *"In my school we have uniforms and we do not laugh at each other because of clothes"* or *"School uniforms are a very good solution in my school"*. Students perceived the uniform as a functional mechanism of social equalization. A second frequent theme focused on education for empathy and awareness (30%), reflected in responses such as *"We should learn that it is not okay to laugh at those who do not have fashionable clothes"* or *"Teachers should talk in class about why it is wrong to laugh at someone for how they dress"*. Other suggestions referred to introducing explicit rules and sanctions (15%), exemplified by statements like *"The conduct grade should be lowered"*. In the school without uniforms, students emphasized the educational dimension (35%), proposing awareness-raising activities and discussions with teachers or school counselors: *"Organizing lessons or workshops on acceptance, individuality, and the impact of bullying"*, *"Discussions with the school counselor"*. Another significant category concerned establishing clear rules and sanctions (30%), with suggestions such as *"Those who laugh at someone's clothes should be punished"* or *"The conduct grade should be lowered"*. Uniforms were mentioned as a solution by 13% of students, some arguing that [if] *"We should all wear uniforms like in other schools"*, this would reduce clothing-related differences. A notable proportion (23%) provided vague or irrelevant answers (e.g., *"I don't know"*, *"Fortnite Bro"*); this may reflect either students' difficulty in formulating concrete solutions or lower engagement at the time of completing the questionnaire.

The qualitative results highlight clear differences between schools and complement the quantitative data reported for H1 and H2. Students in schools with uniforms perceive clothing standardization as an effective tool to prevent ridicule and exclusion, confirming statistical findings on the lower prevalence of these phenomena. Students in schools without uniforms emphasize the

importance of educational activities and explicit rules, reflecting the perception of greater clothing-related pressure and a more visible role of clothing in social integration. In both contexts, disciplinary sanctions appear as secondary but relevant solutions.

The responses to the open-ended question offer valuable qualitative insights but should be regarded as indicative rather than representative of all students' opinions. The variability in response length and elaboration suggests differing levels of engagement or comprehension of the task, which may have influenced the distribution of the identified themes.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The results support hypothesis H1, according to which students in schools without uniforms report more frequent experiences of ridicule and exclusion based on clothing than those in schools with uniforms. The observed differences were statistically significant and of moderate to large magnitude, which confirms the relevance of the type of dress regulation for students' experiences.

The convergence of students' and teachers' perceptions reinforces the consistency of the results: both categories reported the absence of the phenomenon in the school with uniforms and its significant presence in the school without uniforms. The qualitative analysis complements these findings by highlighting derogatory labels ("cheap clothes", "outdated"), while in schools with uniforms students describe uniformity as a mechanism of equalization ("we do not laugh at each other because of clothes").

The results also confirm hypothesis H2, according to which students in schools without uniforms experience stronger pressure to conform through clothing and perceive clothing as a factor of social integration. Statistical analyses show significant differences between the two types of schools, with moderate effects: in the school without uniforms, 65% of students reported pressure to wear certain clothes, compared to 30% in the school with uniforms. The analysis of Likert items highlighted the same pattern, with significantly higher scores for the perception of influence and exclusion in schools without

uniforms and with higher levels of acceptance regardless of clothing in the school with uniforms.

The comparison of students' responses with those of teachers brings an interesting nuance. In the school with uniforms, teachers unanimously perceive the influence of clothing on social relationships, while only one third of students reported the same. This discrepancy suggests that students may feel differences less strongly when the uniform reduces the visibility of clothing-based criteria, but teachers, as external observers, capture the nuances of conformity more accurately. In contrast, in schools without uniforms, perceptions converge: 70% of teachers and 60% of students believe that clothing influences social integration.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results leads to the conclusion that the school uniform, associated with lower prevalence of ridicule and exclusion, as well as with reduced levels of pressure to conform through clothing, does not completely eliminate status differences, which can be transferred to other visible elements (such as footwear, accessories, etc.).

These findings are consistent with the international literature on the role of clothing as symbolic markers of social status (Von Busch & Bjereld, 2016; Williams, 2008) and provide empirical support for reports from Romanian organizations regarding the high prevalence of bullying based on appearance and clothing (Asociația Telefonul Copilului, 2019; Salvați Copiii România, 2022, 2024). Teachers and students reporting similar trends strengthens the validity of the results and suggests that the phenomenon is observable both subjectively (through students' experiences) and externally (through teachers' observations).

From a practical perspective, the results indicate the necessity of integrated approaches. The uniform can function as an instrument for reducing social pressure and differences (Javillonar & Vasquez, 2019), but the literature shows that the effectiveness of this policy is limited and context-dependent (Reidy, 2021). In line with recommendations for bullying prevention at the school level (Swearer et al., 2010), the solutions proposed by students suggest mixed approaches: well-defined school policies regarding uniforms or dress codes (clear rules and applying consistent sanctions, which they consider

essential for discouraging bullying behaviors), complemented by educational programs focused on empathy and mutual respect.

The main limitations of the study are generated by the small sample size, especially for teachers, and by the cross-sectional design, which does not allow the establishment of causal relationships. The data are based on self-reports, which makes them susceptible to memory and social desirability biases. In addition, teachers' observations depend on their experience and involvement, which may result in the underreporting of certain situations.

Therefore, these conclusions should be regarded as indicative and interpreted in light of the study's methodological limitations. Although the cross-sectional design allowed for the identification of associations between school dress codes and perceptions of fashion bullying, it may also amplify local contextual effects specific to the two participating schools, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the observed relationships may reflect bidirectional processes – for instance, schools that adopt uniforms may already possess an institutional culture more oriented toward equity, which independently contributes to reducing clothing-related pressures.

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal studies to capture the dynamics of the phenomenon over time, as well as exploration of digital contexts and social networks in amplifying clothing-related pressures. In addition, a comparative analysis of different types of school policies (mandatory uniform, flexible uniform, dress code) would be useful to evaluate in detail the impact of each on reducing bullying.

Note

The data were collected as part of the dissertation research “*Uniforma școlară și excluderea socială bazată pe vestimentație: O analiză a fenomenului de fashion bullying în două școli românești*”, conducted by Alexandra-Mădălina Popa, master's student, Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, 2025.

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