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As Good as New: Exploring the Drivers and Barriers of Second-Hand Clothing Consumption

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Abstract

Globally, most of the clothing of textile clothing ends up in landfill or is incinerated. The environmental impacts of the textile industry are driving the need to consider alternative models which would reduce textile waste and increase textile reuse. The selling and consumption of second-hand clothing is one such solution. The Baltic2Hand project aims to promote re-use of textiles and decrease textile waste by developing circular business models and services for consumers in the central Baltic region. Therefore, the identification of drivers and barriers which impact consumer perceptions of second-hand clothing is vital. By reviewing relevant literature this article identifies enablers and barriers which impact upon second-hand textiles being perceived "As Good as New." The extent to which second-hand clothing retailers can influence upon these drivers and obstacles is also discussed. Within this article, lack of convenient shopping experience and perceptions of lower hygiene are identified as some of main barriers. Considerations for presenting and guarantying the freshness of second-hand clothing, and logically arranging and categorising second-hand clothing in both brick and mortar and online platforms, are recognized as possible solutions.

Keywords: second-hand clothing, consumer motivations, consumer deterrent's, second-hand textile consumption, textile waste, textile re-use, sustainable textile solutions

As Good as New: Exploring the Drivers and Barriers of Second-Hand Clothing Consumption

The consumption of second-hand clothing within high-income societies is highly influenced by a range of social and physical aspects. Today, fast-fashion business models dominate the textile industry, accelerating ever-greater volumes of textile waste (Hur 2020) and it has been estimated that the fashion industry accounts for over 10% of global carbon emissions (European parliament 2020). Currently, 80 billion pieces of new clothes are sold to customers globally (Tabishat 2022) and most used clothes (87%) either end up in landfills or are incinerated (European parliament 2020). Increasing the use of second-hand clothing within the textile industry is an important component of transitioning towards a more sustainable and circular economy.

The Baltic Second-Hand project, co-funded by the European Union Interreg Central Baltic Programme, tackles this mass issue of textile waste. The project engages organizations and consumers through a service design process, to map, design, test, and pilot circular business models to both increase the re-use of textiles and reduce textile waste altogether. A vital part of this process also includes actively increasing consumer engagement and overall acceptance of second-hand textiles and circular models. This article contributes towards this objective by identifying enablers and barriers which impact on the ability for consumers to perceive second-hand items as being “As Good as New.”

By reviewing and reflecting upon relevant literature, and looking at both theoretical and empirical sources, this article discusses the symbolic importance of clothing and identifies some of the common social and physical aspects which can both drive and deter the consumption of second-hand clothing. We explore these aspects and discuss the way they impact the different perceptions of second-hand clothing and new clothing textiles. We conclude this article by providing some practical considerations and suggesting topics for further research.

THE SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF CLOTHING

Within each society, there are unique symbols, values and norms embedded within clothing textiles (Piacentini and Mailer 2004). Clothing textiles are not merely a basic need but are also utilized as powerful tools for self-expression (Silva, Santos, Duarte and Vlacic 2021) and non-verbal communication in social contexts. Arguably, the consumption of clothing textiles is thus a unique and personal experience. It can be used for a range of reasons including deriving thoughts, assumptions, and judgements out of each other, constructing individual identities, and providing a sense of security, belonging and confidence (Piacentini and Mailer 2004). Clothing textiles can therefore also be understood as materials which allow individuals to control the way they are perceived both by themselves and others. Consequently, the embedded symbols, values and norms may greatly impact upon the type of clothes we choose to wear and purchase.

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS: ECONOMIC STATUS

The consumption of second-hand clothing carries different meanings in different societies. In some communities, higher prices and brands symbolize better clothing quality and durability.

Conversely, second-hand clothes have been associated with economic poverty, where economic necessity drives their purchase as opposed to want (Williams 2002). These symbols of poverty are also reflected in the presumptions some consumers hold of second-hand clothing as being dirty and disgusting (Sandes and Leandro 2016), with many consumers expressing concern over their hygienic condition (Laitala and Klepp 2018 cited in Silva et al. 2021, 722).

Economic impoverishment is negatively interpreted within many high-income societies, it is understandable why many consumers describe the phenomenon of purchasing second-hand clothes as 'something you maybe did but never would admit to (Bowser et al. 2015 cited in Lo, Tsarenko and Tojib 2019, 287).' Thus, the social pressure of not appearing impoverished, and being economically capable of purchasing new clothes, may drive consumers to not even consider purchasing second-hand clothing as a viable option. Not wanting to be identified or perceived as poor, deters consumers away from consuming second-hand clothing, or at least hiding it if they do.

Further still, high-income societies have arguably created a range of social norms which dictate the appropriateness of different clothing garments for different social occasions. Second-hand items are often offered at a lower price in comparison to brand 'new' clothing. Due to their previous life, second-hand items are often considered to be flawed which consequently determines their lower transaction value (Sihvonen and Turunen, 2016). However, this assumption of used items having a lower value due to being flawed, may mean that consumers deem it inappropriate to wear such items for certain occasions.

Clothes which do not conform to certain visual standards or are not deemed presentable, are likely to be negatively received by others. Wearing second-hand items may also provoke feelings of anxiety in many individuals as they fear the way they will be perceived by others (Silva et al. 2021). At events or situations which often require certain professional or formal attire to be worn, for example work meetings, wedding ceremonies, job interviews etc. many consumers may not consider it appropriate or acceptable to wear second-hand clothing which is seen to be flawed. Whilst this may not actually be the case, the mere pressure of social norms and standards may drive the purchasing behavior of many who wish to simply conform and not be regarded as disrespectful or inappropriate.

On the other hand, second-hand clothing may also be perceived as a form of frugal and reasonable consumption. The instability of the global economy in recent decades has created new social norms and expectations, which are altering the way second-hand clothing is perceived. The precarious and unstable economic environment has come to convey the consumption of affordable and durable clothing as a form of economic sensibility (Kasriel-Alexander 2015, cited in Lo et al. 2019, 288). The smart shopper, who can make their money go further, has become a desirable identity and skill to possess (Lo et al. 2019). The consumption of second-hand clothing is therefore becoming associated as an act which many consumers do out of a desire to be economically smart.

The trend of wanting to be economically sensible makes second-hand clothing popular with those who aim to make sensible shopping decisions. Lower prices do not always equate to lower quality, especially with durable clothing items, meaning they serve their function and purpose well even if purchased second-hand. Furthermore, the ability to find and purchase good quality clothing cheaper may provide some consumers with a feeling of pride and accomplishment. These consumers may be more inclined to advertise where their clothes have been purchased, and not feel shame over what others may think.

In addition, as awareness over the environmental impact of the textile industry and excessive consumption is increasing, purchasing second-hand textiles has become to be viewed as a more ecological choice. For those consumers who wish to shop ecologically, second-hand clothing provides them with the opportunity to do so whilst also awarding them with higher moral status, which is becoming increasingly admirable within societies. Further still, for those who have excessive consumption habits, second-hand clothing consumption provides a viable alternative, where despite not drastically reducing their consumption rate, they are able to diminish their feelings of guilt and accountability.

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND EXPRESSION

High-income societies have become increasingly material orientated (Joung 2013), where individuals 'use products and brands as materials with which to cultivate and preserve their identities (Piacentini and Mailer 2004, 251).' Clothing textiles are used to represent the different identities and groups with which consumers identify with and/or belong to. Identities can be complexly associated with aspects such as age, gender, profession, hobbies, politics, or music, but clothing textiles are predominantly used to depict and express these outwardly. However, as individual identities continuously fluctuate, the clothing textiles with which they are expressed are also subject to constant contestation and change.

The current fast-fashion textile industry caters for the ability of individuals to continuously alter the way they dress (Cao, Chang, Kallal, Manalo, McCord, Shaw and Starner 2014) through short life cycles and extensive ranges of choice. However, it is difficult to determine whether the need to excessively construct new identities has created the demand for a fast-fashion model textile industry, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the act of self-expression is central across modern societies and is seen as a human right by many, creating a barrier for alternative industry models to be implemented.

Further still, attempts to ignite mindset shifts where consumers begin to favor quality over quantity need to be prioritized (Vehmas, Raudaskoski, Heikkilä, Harlin and Mensonen 2018). Transitioning towards a textile industry which functions in accordance with slow fashion and where personal style over ever-changing fashion is promoted. The second-hand clothing market should seek opportunities to promote and support slow fashion by catering to the style orientated consumer, as opposed to attempting to compete with fast-fashion retailers. The fashion orientation trait within consumers is characterized as a desire and need to be led by fashion trends, and therefore strongly related to materialism (Silva et al. 2021). Alternatively, the style orientation is led by a person's long-term identity (Gupta, Gwozdz and Gentry 2019). Consumers who possess this trait have more stable clothing choices which do not fluctuate in accordance with fashion trends.

Stable identities may create the conditions needed to establish a slower-paced fashion industry, one which is more suited to the second-hand clothing market. The second-hand clothing market is not able to compete with fast-fashion models and offer excessive choice in style or sizes, and therefore needs to differentiate itself from this market. There needs to be a shift in social culture, enhancing stability over endless possibility, yet second-hand clothing does provide the ability for individuals to test unique identities. For those who do not wish to conform to current fashion trends, second-hand clothing allows these consumers to obtain unique clothing unlike anyone else's. Second-hand clothing provides different avenues for identity construction practices and can support the consumption needs of consumers who have more fixed identities.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS: OPTIMIZING THE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

Acceptance towards second-hand clothing is believed to increase through positive purchasing experiences of second-hand clothing (Connell 2011). This suggests that two primary goals should be prioritized in the pursuit of popularizing the purchase of second-hand clothing. First, consumers need to be enticed to try second-hand clothing for the first time, either by un-doing the physical and imaginary barriers which have prevented it thus far or providing incentives to do so. Thereafter, the first shopping experience needs to be as positively received as possible, increasing the likelihood of return consumers. For those who are new to second-hand clothing, trying to mimic certain standards and practices which are used in the shopping of 'new' clothing could be effective.

Whilst sustainability remains important for many consumers, they also favor comfort, ease and cheap prices when purchasing clothing textiles (Joergens 2006). In consideration to second-hand, many consumers take delight in the search for hidden "treasures" (Lo et al. 2019, 289). These consumers may in fact be attracted to more traditional second-hand clothing stores, where a wide variety of items are uncategorized, thus providing them the experience of treasure hunting. However, second-hand shopping should cater for a range of different consumer needs and therefore needs to consider the preferences of those who prefer to shop more traditionally. In a study conducted by Xu and Chen (2017, cited in Silva et al. 2021, 721), the authors concluded that consumers prefer to shop at second-hand clothing apparel where aspects such as comfort, convenience and aesthetics are taken into consideration.

To enhance the practical experience of shopping for second-hand clothing, second-hand clothing stores should make active efforts to minimize common physical proximities, by for example arranging clothes according to size, color, style, brand, or season just to name a few. At brick-and-mortar stores, an adequate number of changing rooms should be made available for consumers to try on clothing before transaction, return policies could potentially be tested, and the hygienic condition in which the clothing is purchased should be guaranteed. Creating more pleasant consumer friendly experiences also requires brick-and-mortar second-hand stores to have an adequate number of staff available and create simple systems, such as returning clothes which have been tried on by consumers but not bought, back to their original places. Much inspiration may be drawn from seeing how traditional clothing stores operate and to trying to reflect this wherever possible.

Tam (2014, cited in Lo et al. 2019, 288), proposes that online digital platforms eliminate potential unpleasant aspects such as the smell and having to search through many different items usually associated with second-hand clothing stores. However, to boost the use of digital solutions for second-hand fashion, second-hand retailers should pay attention to the online shopping experience of consumers. Aspects such as accessible categorization, simulating in-person shopping experience, brand authentication, condition certification and personalized algorithms for product recommendations (Charnley Knecht, Muenkel, Pletosu, Rickard, Sambonet, Schneider and Zhang 2022), may all enhance consumer experience. The emergence of new technologies such as innovative taxonomy software using AI photographic analysis (ibid), may also help to provide new avenues through which the consumer experience of second-hand shopping can be optimized.

However, the inability to physically examine the textile quality of secondhand products in virtual points of sale, reduces the perceived safety of the purchase (Sihvonen and Turunen 2016). Whilst this issue is also relevant for the online purchase of 'new' clothing textiles, second-hand clothing is perceived as being less reliable since it has been used and is assumed not to be flawless. For those consumers, who continue to be deterred by not being able to phy-

sically see or feel second-hand clothing, brick-and-mortar stores may be more promising. However, aspects such as an unpleasant sense of smell can impact upon the perception of second-hand clothing being 'dirty' or 'unhygienic' and physical stores must try to undermine such perceptions as best they can. For example, a study conducted by Groot, Walther and Holland (2022), shows that the sales of second-hand clothing can be boosted through the smell of fresh laundry. In addition, good ventilation and efforts made to ensure that all second-hand clothing has been through a power wash wherever possible, all contribute towards this aim.

CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

The changing social, economic and ecological reality of modern societies is altering the way second-hand clothes are being perceived and to what extent they can make a viable clothing option for the bulk of consumers. The above discussed how psychological barriers such as associating second-hand clothing with being flawed, dirty or socially undesirable continues to deter potential consumers from choosing second-hand clothing as do physical barriers such as chaotic arrangements and inability to find suitable sizes easily.

Those organizations selling second-hand clothes should consider how to increase the perceived value of second-hand clothing through a series of actions which ensure that the clothes are presentable, smell fresh and hygiene standards are guaranteed. In addition, the logistics of selling second-hand clothing needs to be carefully thought out and in perspective of the main targeted consumer segments. Whilst the convenience of online platforms may entice certain consumers, the safety and security of purchasing online needs to be developed, by providing clear pictures, videos, material information and even easy return policies. In contrast, second-hand brick-and-mortar stores face different issues, where the arrangement, presentation, categorization and comfort and service of consumers should be prioritized.

The above provides potential solutions which may aid in both encouraging consumers to purchase second-hand clothing for the first time and supporting their transition to becoming regular second-hand clothing shoppers. If barriers which prevent consumers from trying second-hand clothing for the first time can be reduced, and the positive experience of consuming second-hand clothes guaranteed, consumers will be more inclined to buy second-hand clothing in the future. This helps build alternative shopping habits and simultaneously continues to break down the inferior associations of second-hand clothing in comparison to new textiles.

Nevertheless, transforming consumption habits and creating a textile industry in which the second-hand clothing industry can thrive, 'depends on a joint effort between companies and governments (Silva et al. 2021, 718).' A long-term strategy from the government which both supports and drives organizations towards the second-hand market, whilst simultaneously placing consumer incentives and legislation, thus also driving demand towards the second-hand market is needed. However, smaller changes pave the way for greater transitions in the future and therefore organizations should attempt to support this process by considering the aspects discussed above. Understanding how we can work towards creating the social and economic conditions, norms, and desires to support second-hand clothing and slow fashion is essential. We expect that the Baltic Second-Hand project can shade light also to this question.

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