

Will it Make it to the Rack? An Investigation of Perceived Retail Value in Second-hand Clothing

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Keywords: Second-hand clothing; perceived value; perceived quality; price; brand availability.

Introduction

In the past several decades, purchasing second-hand has become more widely adopted as a strategy for clothing acquisition, motivated by a desire for access to fashionable garments, an interest in vintage, a search for lower prices, quality garments, and concerns over sustainability (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007; Cassidy, 2012; Welters, 2008; Machado, 2019; Hur, 2020; Kim & Woo, 2022). As well, there has been a marked increase in research interested in the second-hand clothing economy since 2010, from a variety of disciplines (Turunen et al., 2018).

However, with mounting concerns over textile waste, attention is now turning to the quality and quantity of items in the second-hand economy, with reports of thrift shops becoming overrun with unsaleable merchandise (Brooks, 2019; Berry 2022). Concern is often focused on low quality *fast fashion* garments now circulating second-hand (Paz, 2022), with popular online second-hand platform *Vestiaire Collective* even banning fast fashion from its site (Edelson, 2022).

Current research focusing on consumers has addressed the drivers of second-hand clothing consumption (Hur, 2020), shopping practices in this space (Ayres, 2022), as well as disposal and life extension practices (Degenstein et al., 2020; McNeill et al., 2020). Elsewhere, several scholars have addressed the processes and labour that keep second-hand economies functioning, looking at the back-end operations of thrift stores and clothing recyclers (Hawley, 2006; Botticello, 2012; Larsen, 2022; Berry, 2022).

The present study aims to build on the latter stream of literature, interrogating the relationship between *perceived value* (Sihvonen & Turunen, 2016) and the treatment of garments in the second-hand economy. Instead of focusing on the donors and consumers of second-hand clothing, we focus on understanding the decisions that determine which garments make it to the retail floor, and which are simply sent to landfill. Ultimately, this study asks: how does *perceived value* affect sorting, selection, disposal and pricing decisions in second-hand clothing retail?

Methods

Contributing to a larger research project aiming to characterise and study the flow of second-hand clothing and textiles in Canada and New Zealand, this study analyses a data set of 19 semi-structured interviews with key thrift store personnel from both countries. The shops featured in the sample include both large, multinational organisations and small independent charities. This variation adds diversity to the sample, and helps to shed light on the operations of small second-hand businesses, which have received a lack of attention from researchers considering second-hand economies (Berry, 2022).

Thematic coding was used to make meaning from the data. First, an initial coding schema was developed based on collaborative research discussions about our initial impressions of trends present in the interview data. The initial, first-order concept phase of coding was broad, aiming to capture as many important features in the data as possible. As more transcripts were reviewed, the coding schema was revised to second-order concepts. Next, Sihvonen and Turunen's (2016) *six antecedents* of perceived

value were selected as a framework to guide a final stage of coding and strengthen the theoretical grounding of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These *six antecedents* were adopted as the main themes; however, additional themes outside of this framework were also created, combined, and refined during the process of re-coding, in order to explore the strengths and limitations of Sihvonen and Turunen's (2016) framework in explaining our data.

Results and Discussion

Thrift shops in this study were found to receive vastly different ratios of unsaleable/saleable donations, with reports ranging from most donations being in "fair to good condition," to as high as 80% of clothing received being unsaleable. Four of Sihvonen and Turunen's (2016) six antecedents of perceived value were shown to be highly applicable to the brick and mortar second hand clothing trade: perceived quality, design, price, and brand availability. Each antecedent, and its sub-categories, was shown to carry different weight depending on the garment and the individual undertaking the evaluation. For example, the relative concept of *condition* was shown to be highly subjective, with many informants referencing the personal perceptions or standards of individual sorters.

As has been shown in the literature, sorters can be thought of as engaging in individual negotiations with each garment, weighing its obvious detractors (e.g., stains, rips, holes, outdated style, poor quality etc.) against characteristics which may add value in the customer's eyes. For example, evidence of newness (e.g., original tags remaining), may mitigate the low desirability of a particular brand name, and fetch a higher price tag. Alternatively, low *brand availability* in a particular location (e.g., Target in New Zealand), makes an item more of a novelty, increasing its value. Furthermore, an attractive brand name was shown to compensate in some instances for the poor condition of an item. Informant comments reveal several reasons why this is the case, such as the initial price of the garment if it were bought new or the quality of the material. On the other hand, brand names that are not regarded well may inhibit sale, regardless of condition, problematizing the inevitable wave of fast fashion entering the second-hand marketplace.

Age was shown to be a highly subjective variable which could either increase (in the case of vintage) or decrease the desirability of the item. Items considered out of date, but that have not yet gained vintage status, were deemed especially challenging to sell by some, with one informant referring to these types of items as the "dead zone of style." Conversely, two of the six antecedents of perceived value were found to be less salient in our data: origin of a brand and authenticity. That said, the issue of the item's *previous owner* was revealed via a distaste for displaying items with the previous owner's name written inside, highlighting lingering hesitations around tangible evidence of shared consumption (e.g., Gregson, 2000).

Conclusions

This study reveals the second-hand clothing economy to be a highly contextual, variable space, impacted by the local environment and the personnel involved. In other words, there is no single deciding factor that guarantees an item will last in the second-hand marketplace; rather, an item needs to have some combination of value-adding factors to save it from the rubbish pile. The variability in approaches, quantity of donations, and quantity of waste complicates the established narrative of uncontrollable cascade of cheap merchandise pervading thrift stores, and suggests that there is value in adopting a more localised approach to addressing the undeniable problem of textile waste in second-hand.

Acknowledgments

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada for funding.

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