

## The Consumption Economy – Finding Value in Our Clothing

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**Keywords:** Consumption Practices; Values; Ethical Beliefs; Second-hand Market; Consumers.

**Abstract:** The fashion industry is one of the largest global polluters, with its linear ‘take-make-dispose’ supply chain model driving unsustainable consumption patterns. With over 100 billion garments produced annually, the industry contributes significantly through over-production and consumption in the multi-billion dollar industry. **Overarching Question:** This study investigates consumer consumption practices to understand the true ethical beliefs and values of individuals in relation to fashion purchasing, use, and disposal. Consumption practices are rarely explored by understanding consumer deeper thoughts and perceptions in second-hand retail, despite garments having an average lifespan of 3.3 years, many clothing items are unused, with 26% of garments in the UK remaining unworn (SCAP, 2021). **Sub Question:** The effects of the high and low value of clothing in the second-hand economy need to be investigated with the collection of empirical data of consumption practices. Predominantly unseen activity in Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) transactions remains underexplored, executed through digital and online selling platforms. **Sub Questions:** This study examines consumer’s ethical belief systems that influence second-hand purchasing behaviour. Exploring participants’ motivations when engaging in second-hand markets in physical and online spaces, it highlights the complexities of consumer belief systems that shape their purchasing behaviour. The findings emphasise the importance of values and beliefs playing an integral role in the second-hand market landscape—challenging traditional consumption models and shedding light on potential avenues for innovation in a circular fashion future.

### Introduction

The fashion industry significantly impacts the environment, ranking as the sixth-largest polluting sector globally (EEA, 2023). With over 100 billion garments produced annually (Chan, 2024), it relies on a linear “take-make-dispose” supply chain model (Ellen MacAurthur Foundation, 2023). This approach drives the relentless production of clothing, saturating markets with used products. The industry’s rapid production cycles, fuelled by seasonal trends, result in the frequent obsolescence of garments, contributing to unsustainable consumption patterns (Niinimäki, 2015).

Previous studies by Niinimäki (2015) highlight how consumer values and beliefs influence their purchasing behaviour, demonstrating that garment design should be approached through a value-creation system. Adegeest (2016) states that clothing durability has declined dramatically over the past century, alongside this, research indicates that a significant portion of wardrobes remains unused; for example, 26% of clothing owned by UK consumers,

which is estimated to be 31 items per person, is left unworn (Palmer, 2022). These unused garments often sit unworn for years during their “use phase” (Klepp et al., 2020). When no longer, consumers typically donate, pass on, or resell their clothing (Gregson et al., 2007). This aids the circulation of garments to be sold in second-hand systems, which indicates many new routes that lead to the demise of low-priced items scoured across digital platforms and in the charity retail sector.

### The Consumption Economy Contextual Review

Previous research into consumer behaviour has predominantly examined ethical decision-making and purchasing practices within first-hand markets (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Belk et al., 2005; Hur, 2020; Vladimirova et al., 2023). Consumer purchasing behaviours in second-hand spaces have been debated by key authors, for instance, Gregson and Crewe (2003), were able to approach their research

through an anthropological lens. In contrast to this, Horne and Maddrell (2002) often focus on societal, and economic impact across the value chain. However, consumer purchasing behaviour in this paper aims to explore consumption practices within the second-hand market, specifically analysing consumers' ethical beliefs and values when reselling from a Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) perspective. While consumer purchasing behaviours provide insight into broader consumption patterns, the dynamics of C2C transactions in this emerging market remain largely unexplored in academic research.

The study of values and ethics is vital to understanding sustainable fashion consumption, as they incorporate a wider discussion to see the problems surrounding fast fashion in a more holistic setting, and can help gain traction with a wider audience (Niinimäki, 2015). In contrast, when clothing is made in a localised economy this can increase value and bring awareness to traditional production (Fletcher, 2010). In these efforts, practitioners are encouraged to create value around their textile craft, which excludes mass-manufactured multiples. Furthermore, designers, traditionally focused on product aesthetics, are increasingly being encouraged to consider sustainability from the outset by collaborating with key stakeholders to develop products and services that support circular economies (Liedtke et al., 2013).

While the second-hand economy has grown due to increased accessibility via technology, it remains under-researched in certain areas, such as C2C transactions, which often go undetected. Barriers to second-hand clothing (SHC) consumption, including concerns over cleanliness, accessibility, and social perceptions, remain significant (Hur, 2020). However, online platforms have made second-hand purchasing increasingly common, suggesting that consumer behaviour is influenced more by convenience than by concerns about transparency (Hur, 2020; Vladimirova et al., 2023). This paper will investigate the dynamics of second-hand consumption, by understanding consumers' values and ethical beliefs, by uncovering purchasing behaviour, by engaging with them, particularly in online and physical contexts. Consumers' value systems are connected to beliefs of bad and good, right and wrong, and

this gives consumers a sense of direction, followed by a series of behaviours (Paehike, 2000). The knowledge gaps this paper will identify how consumer values and beliefs play an integral role in second-hand purchasing. By identifying the overarching research question and the sub-questions the literature reveals that consumption practices influence how products and services are marketed and consumed, ethically or otherwise (Armstrong et al., 2015). Consumption practices play a key role and European apparel consumption is the fourth-largest contributor to climate change and greenhouse gas emissions (EEA, 2023). Encouraging consumers to have alternative consumption patterns by reassessing their current systems and sustainable behaviours

## Methodology

The study sought to understand consumer beliefs and values, investigating the cognitive processes behind their decision-making and identifying the key drivers that motivate them to buy second-hand items. An indicative qualitative methodological framework was developed to address three critical research questions:

**Overarching Research Question:** How do consumer values and beliefs play an integral role in second-hand purchasing?

### Sub Questions

- What are the effects of high and low-value of clothing in the second-hand economy?
- How do consumer belief systems interact with second-hand spaces to elicit high consumption?

This study is a qualitative research approach which explores participants' core belief systems, motivations, and actions with second-hand markets. A sample strategy is used to recruit participants who are actively engaged in second-hand clothing consumption, to ensure diverse perspectives from both physical charity shops and digital online platforms. This study draws upon a comparative analysis of consumer principles which instigate purchasing motivations through these key retail personas.

**Sample Strategy:** The participants in this study were chosen on their engagement with second-hand purchasing, recruitment-facilitated activity in online second-hand platforms, consistent engagement with second-hand clothing social media groups, and regular attendance to purchase in charity retail shops. A sample size of 10 Generation Z consumers was selected as study participants, due to 41% of this demographic being most likely to impulse buy on second-hand digital platforms, in comparison to 34% of millennials and 32% of Generation X (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). The primary data would use semi-structured interviews to serve as the collection method, enabling participants to articulate their ethical considerations and purchasing motivations. This set of interviews analysed how individual consumption behaviours contribute to the broader second-hand supply chain.

**Interview Process:** the interviews were designed to explore perspectives on second-hand consumption, focusing on their purchasing behaviour in a digitalised second-hand market space. The charity retail integrates business-to-consumer (B2C) transactions, and this instigates consumers to act akin to trading action as their values in second-hand markets are aligned with their ethical beliefs. Specific questions probed the cognitive processes behind their choices, which reflected their beliefs and values. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how sustainability, personal values, and economic factors influence their decisions to buy pre-owned items.

The semi-structured format allows for in-depth discussion to be drawn upon but allows flexibility to explore emerging themes that appear in interviews with the participants. In the final step, participants were able to identify the product life cycle of garments they owned. This step aimed to identify potential correlations between their expressed beliefs and values and the ways they treated and managed their clothing. By integrating these layers of inquiry, the study sought to uncover how consumer values and behaviours align with the broader goals of sustainability and extended garment lifespans in the second-hand markets. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and were transcribed for analysis. A thematic approach was used to highlight recurring patterns and key insights, allowing for

a structured examination of consumer values, behaviour and ethical beliefs. This process enabled a rigorous interpretation of data, which could draw upon some key findings to exemplify key themes in second-hand consumption.

## Discussions and Findings

The study was investigated through semi-structured interviews, to explore participants' ethical behaviours and understand whether their beliefs influenced their practices within second-hand markets. By identifying consumers' ethical beliefs, valuable insights were gained into the principles that guide their purchasing decisions. This research holds importance for stakeholders, academics, and industry professionals, as it sheds light on aspects of second-hand clothing consumption and consumer motives and this type of purchasing behaviour.

The interview data revealed that participants do not rely on a single source for clothing purchases, instead employing a range of methods such as online shopping, retail, auctions, and second-hand markets. The discussion provided evidence of consumers' altruistic behaviours, with their purchasing choices reflecting personal values and lifestyle preferences. Furthermore, it indicates that a primary factor influencing consumer purchasing behaviour is the desire to align purchases with individual beliefs, with various consumption methods aligning closely with their lifestyle choices.

When comparing values between the first- and second-hand economy, one participant stated "when a brand is more sustainable, I am more likely to purchase it first-hand because they are doing good rather than bad, so the brand's ethics have contributed to correct ways to buy directly from that brand". This finding indicates how consumers are to negotiate a common misconception with only purchasing first-hand and reflects an ongoing philosophical debate on their ethical choices when it comes to purchasing first-hand and second-hand retail. This key finding also challenges the assertion by Geiger and Keller (2018) that altruism is the main driver of sustainable fashion consumption. This group of participants were chosen because they were active shoppers in second-hand clothing markets. In contrast to this,

Casais and Faria (2022) highlighted that social values and economic factors shape the gap between consumer intentions and actions. Additionally, when considering the second-hand market in the context of the charity retail sector, it was noted that: "buying second-hand is a great option, there are lots of charity shops in my hometown, and it is easier on the conscience". This brings attention to how the economic status of an area can determine the high consumption of low-quality clothing. For instance, many small towns within the U.K. are seeing more charity retail shops opening in low-income districts across the UK high streets. Additionally, Generation Z, often constrained by lower incomes, struggles to afford sustainable fashion brands, a challenge noted by Rex (2020). Therefore, the younger generation is motivated to pursue second-hand consumption as a way of being sustainable.

The investigation was able to demonstrate how the social media platform Depop creates a sense of community with similar values and beliefs by mirroring platforms like Instagram by integrating social elements and purchasing behaviour. This has contributed to the rise of 'Depop Girlies' – a term which describes influencers within Generation Z who engage in reselling second-hand clothing at a significant markup (Harting, 2022). The finding highlights, how capitalising on second-hand fashion is curated through consumers being able to create value on certain products, as their role as a seller for capital gain, whilst other items with low-value qualities to the product remain within the charity retail sector, which is fed into their waste management system.

There are now many ways for clothing to ebb and flow through second-hand retail markets, and Generation Z is increasingly aware of garment resale value for financial gain. In this study, participants reflected on the best ways to discard garments, and this plays a significant role in their purchasing behaviour as one of the participants was able to reflect, "When thinking about how to get rid of this item, I will probably sell it on Depop. Nevertheless, it will be given to charity if it is too damaged." This garment removal behaviour distinguishes how the reselling phase and the disposal phase are closely tied to one another in C2C (consumer-to-consumer) second-hand markets. Value creation at this stage is determined by the seller and highlights how economic and societal

trends can shift the value of products and this is pursued in a realm of sustainable purchasing through second-hand markets.

An interesting observation came from Participant 5, who referred to items in a charity shop as 'new', highlighting the varied interpretations of what new means in the context of second-hand purchasing. This is mirrored in debates within literature, where value is considered a multi-layered concept, with many meanings which are specific to the context. Mostly, value is known for being defined as socially recognised importance: the weight that society gives to an object or an issue (Hirscher et al., 2018). Value in second-hand commodities is widely debatable and is perceived by a host of actors, stakeholders, donors, customers and beneficiaries, each operating through different regimes of values (Elsden et al., 2019). This study affirms how key concepts of the definition are widely debated, therefore defining the low and high value of textile creates a more accurate approach which this study goes on to explore.

## Conclusions

To conclude the study, the investigation was able to explore the behaviour of consumer consumption practices in second-hand clothing markets to understand consumers' true ethical beliefs and values when purchasing, use and disposal. Values can be determined by first identifying on a scale the low and high value of items, and this plays a multifaceted role when it comes to depicting certain belief systems in second-hand purchasing. Firstly, the value of garments is demonstrated through consumers' garments, for instance, time can determine if certain items of clothing will gain value while others may lose value.

When items are to retain high-value, textiles can retain different types of value after a length of time, for example, because of how it has been designed and constructed, kept for sentimental reasons, or archived as artefacts, mended or embellished. High value is created through all these characteristics by creating an element of care and appreciation. This also demonstrated how ethical beliefs are to be consistent in high-valued items and how a strong sense of second-hand ownership can be passed on to the next buyer of this item. On the other hand, when items show low value, they usually encompass signs and characteristics of



garments which can be found in low-cost fashion markets. This has overseen a change in buying and wearing habits, as similar patterns in the data highlighted the shift and cognitive bias for garments that had been designed on a low-value creation system, and mimicked agile supply chain systems of a trajectory of planned obsolescence predicted market. This has been described as clothing usually purchased in multiples and discarded quickly in the post-consumer phase as it is perceived to be of little value (Fletcher, 2010). Discouraging consumers from retaining value in clothing has the consequence of a detachment from their clothing, it is only beneficiary for the garment's very short life before it is disposed of and replaced with another item that will share the same lifespan as its predecessor.

When clothing enters second-hand realms the charity retail sector here in the U.K. experiences high amounts of low and high-valued items, it is implicit that the direction the garment may travel in the supply chain is dependent on its previous life span. Passing clothing onto charity is a form of doing something good for the individual and the thought process is the feeling the garment is being sent in the right direction to live its second life where it can be worn once again. The findings in this study were able to identify how their purchasing behaviour indicates how active second-hand shoppers explored their value propositions in second-hand purchasing behaviour in this ongoing study.

As explained by Elsdén et al., (2019) some things are said to be 'priceless' and cannot be reduced to an abstract, exchangeable or single value, whereas the consumer's beliefs and values are embedded and entwined in a complex series of behaviours. The participants in this study were conflicted with the fashion companies' sustainability morals and their belief systems on their knowledge surrounding second-hand purchasing. When defining value and beliefs in consumers craftsmanship of a garment plays an important role, as there is a personal relationship with the garment, and this is lost when consumers do not understand the craftsmanship that has gone into making a garment.

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