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Consumers' interest in using clothing repair services in Finland

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Abstract: Sustainable consumption practices, including garment repair, are vital in transition to a circular economy. Engaging in garment repair through professional repair services is, however, not as widely adopted practice as one might hope. This paper focuses on clothing repairs in the Finnish context, aiming to understand how consumers perceive the use of clothing repair services and what might be the reasons for not using these services. An online survey was conducted in 2021 to address this topic as part of a collaboration between the FINIX research project and the Finnish retail and service network S Group. Based on 1,903 survey responses, consumers generally express interest in the sustainable aspects of clothing and recognize themselves playing an important role in extending garment lifetimes. The use of clothing repair services remains yet relatively moderate among Finnish consumers. Many are competent in repairing garments themselves and do not require professional help. Price and availability are other critical factors that discourage consumers from using such services. Establishing a viable repair business may be challenging, given the price levels consumers are willing to pay for garment repairs.

Introduction

The textile and fashion sector is strongly aiming to transition towards a circular economy. The European Commission's vision of sustainable and circular textiles has led towards a policy work where several new regulations are under construction, and which will increasingly push the industry to implement more sustainable practices in doing fashion business (European Commission, n.d.).

Consumers play also an important role in this transition from a linear to a circular production and consumption model. Instead of constantly purchasing new fashion items and using them for a very short time, it is important to take care of the existing garments, to use them actively and to repair them when needed.

The importance of extending the use time of clothing is a recognized goal in the sustainable consumption research (e.g. Niinimäki et al., 2020). Citizen engagement in clothing repair practices and interest in using clothing repair services are increasingly studied (e.g. Qwilt 2014, Cerulli-Harms et al., 2018; Laitala & Klepp, 2018; Durrani, 2019; Jain, 2021; Laitala et al., 2021; Potdar, McNeill & McQueen, 2023). Earlier research shows that older generations seem more likely to engage in paid clothing repair services than younger ones (e.g. McQueen, et al., 2023), and men more likely than women (McQueen et al., 2022; Potdar et al., 2023, ibid.). Motivations behind garment repairs also seem to be linked to emotional connection to a garment, high price and/or good quality (e.g. Laitala et al., 2021; Jain, 2023). Especially quality conscious consumers seem more likely to use professional repair service, if they do not consider the cost of repair to be too high (Jain, 2023). Repair services for expensive garments or alterations done for special events can provide good value for money (Maguire & Fahy, 2022) but this can also be the case when garments require more challenging repairs (McQueen et al., 2023).

By contrast, low-priced and low-quality garments are not perceived to be worth repairing (e.g. Laitala et al., 2021; McQueen et al., 2023). The lack of access to repair services (ibid.) and the effort that is required to arrange the repair (Cerulli-Harms et al., 2018) can also be reasons for not getting clothes repaired. In some countries, many consumers are also competent in repairing clothes themselves, which implies less need for repair services. Private clothing repairs, for example in Norway, are at least three times more common than using professional repair service (Laitala et al., 2021). However, the most referred barrier for using clothing repair services seems to be the price, which is often compared to the price of a new garment.

The price issue is also visible in the Finnish context (Berninger et al., 2024). Repairing garments and using services for making, fashioning and repairing clothes were common practices in Finnish households until the 1960's and 70's (Frisk, 2023). With the rise of ready-made clothes, the price of clothing related services increased compared to purchasing a new item, and the use of repair and modification services started to decline (Frisk, 2023). Today, another challenge for Finnish clothing repair businesses is that garments are not designed to be repaired (Berninger et al., 2024).

The aim of this paper is to delve deeper into the Finnish context of clothing repairs and provide a better understanding of how consumers view the use of clothing repair services today. The specific research questions are the following:

- How common is the use of clothing repair services?
- How much are consumers willing to pay for clothing repairs?
- What prevents consumers from using clothing repair services?

Currently, the Finnish repair sector is small, consisting mostly of micro-enterprises, in which repair services are mainly used for shoes, leather products, bicycles and mobile phones – self-repair being more common in the context of clothing (Berninger et al., 2024). Despite the above it is important to study consumers' readiness to use garment repair services since the new textile regulations of the European Union push companies to consider garment repairability as part of their business.

Methods
This research was conducted in collaboration with the FINIX research project and S Group. The FINIX project focuses on transition towards sustainable textile system through several themes such as new materials, digital solutions and circular economy management (FINIX, n.d.). S Group is a large customer-owned Finnish retail and service network, which consists of department stores, various specialty stores and hospitality services (e.g. hotels and restaurants) (S Group, n.d.). S Group also has a major role in the Finnish fashion business; even 37% of Finnish consumers are estimated to purchase garments from S Group's biggest supermarket chain 'Prisma' (Finnish Commerce Federation, 2024).

The data collection of this study was carried out through an online survey between April 8–15, 2021. The target group of the survey consisted of adult co-op members of S Group. An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent to 35 000 individuals, who also received one reminder email during the survey period.

The survey questions broadly addressed aspects related to sustainability of clothing, consumers' interest in different kinds of clothing services and use practices. On this basis, we were able to the get an idea of the respondents' general attitudes towards sustainable consumption. The deeper analysis, however, focused on the data that links specifically to clothing repairs; respondents' interest in clothing repair (services); readiness to pay for such services; and barriers to using them. The cross-analysis was applied to find out possible differences in responses in terms of respondents' age, gender or region. Content analysis was applied to identify the most significant reasons for not using clothing repair services.

Findings
A total of 1,903 adult S Group co-op members from various age groups and regions of Finland participated in the survey (Figure 1). Of the respondents, 39% were men, 61% women, and the majority 45 years old or older (71%). 26% lived in the capital region where population density is higher than in other parts of Finland.

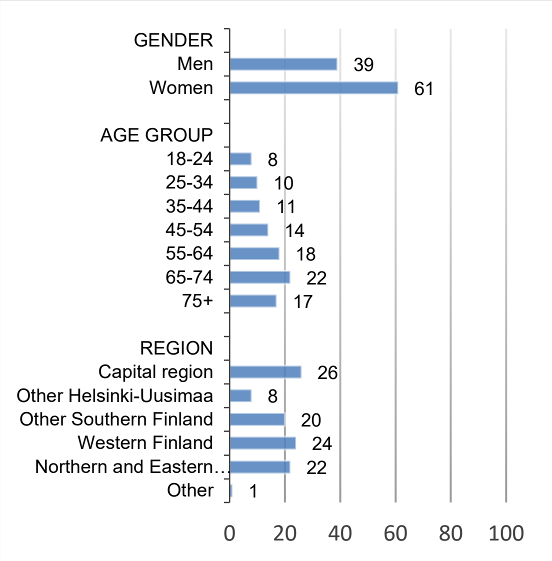

Figure 1. Number of survey respondents by gender, age group and region (% of respondents, N=1903).

General attitudes towards sustainable consumption

70% of the survey respondents show interest in the environmental impact of clothing. 74% think that information about environmental aspects should be more easily available, and more than half of respondents (58%) would like to receive information about the human rights issues of clothing production.

Regarding clothing reuse, the data indicates that many respondents engage in different reuse activities *at least sometimes*: 89% of the respondents donate and 54% sell their own old clothes; and 66% buy second-hand clothes. Correspondingly, 9% of the respondents never donate their clothes; 45% never sell their old clothes; 33% never buy second-hand clothes.

Considering clothing quality and the use phase more generally, most respondents (90%) think they would be willing to pay more for a good quality product if they could trust its quality. A high number of respondents also see that the best way to extend the garment lifetime is to use it carefully (94%) and to maintain it properly (91%). 83% express interest in extending the lifespan of clothing through their own actions, for example by repairing or otherwise taking good care of their garments. This indicates that respondents are quite confident that they themselves are the best actors to extend the use time of their garments.

Current use of clothing repair services

28% of the respondents do use clothing repair services. The number of users by gender, age group and region are illustrated in Figure 2. Among male respondents, 30% reported using services, while for women, the figure was 26%. Those aged 45-54 seem to use clothing repair services the most (35%). Contrarily, the youngest age group reported using repair services the least (16%).

Here it is important to note that the highest total earnings in Finland are among those aged 45–49, whereas the youngest age group has lower income levels compared to other age groups (Statistics Finland, 2022). This can partly explain why older age groups use repair services more. The use of repair services seems to be almost equally popular in all regions (26-32%), except for the other Helsinki-Uusimaa (17%).

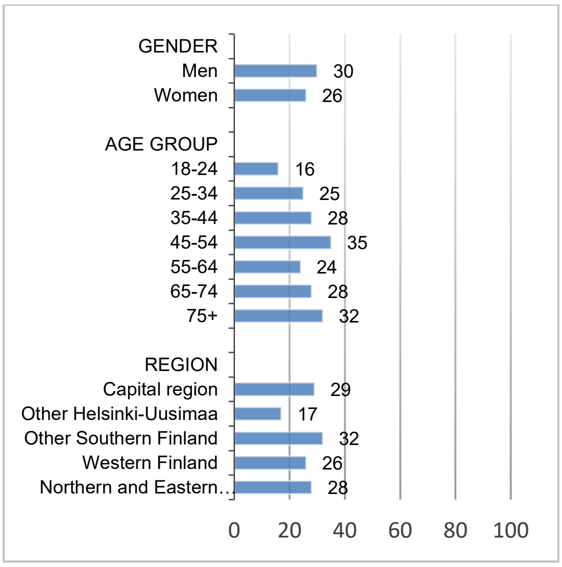

Figure 2. Number of respondents already using clothing repair service(s) by gender, age group and region (% of respondents, N=1903).

Interest to use clothing repair services

Generally, 56% of respondents are *somewhat* (35%) or *very* (21%) interested in using clothing repair services, whereas 23% of respondents are *not very* or *not at all* interested. Regarding gender, age group or region, there were no significant differences in the responses.

When asked if one was interested specifically *in extending the lifespan of a garment by using paid services*, approximately half expressed their interest (51%). The responses were fairly similar among men and women and in different regions. Those under 24 and between 65-74 were slightly less interested in this particular practice than other age groups, even if still showing moderate interest.

Regarding the relation between repair services and the resale value of clothing, only 26% of respondents are *somewhat (*19%) or very (7%) interested in repair service *if it can increase the resale value of the clothing.* This is quite interesting because the second-hand fashion has become a trendy business in many countries. While 54% of the survey respondents sell their old garments, they apparently have not thought that using repair services might even increase the resale value of their garments and thus make the potential resale activity more profitable for them. The younger age groups (18-44) showed slightly more interest here than older age groups (45+), and women slightly more than men.

Pricing of specific repairs

The purchase price of the clothes has a clear impact on how much respondents are willing to pay for repairs. This was investigated in the survey through *two exemplary products*, which typically might be quite difficult for an average consumer to repair by themselves:

- a winter coat with a broken zipper
- a pair of ripped jeans/trousers

Figure 3 illustrates the amount respondents are most likely to spend on their next winter coat purchase. Figure 4 shows how much the respondents would be willing to pay to repair the winter coat in the price category they chose, if the zipper was to break after some time, but the coat was otherwise in good condition. 75% of the respondents reported they could pay 10-30 euros for repairing a broken zipper of a winter coat, but 8% of the respondents would not pay anything for such a repair.

From the data, it was also possible to observe that the younger age groups (18-34) would more likely purchase a winter coat with under 100 euros than older age groups. In contrast, a coat over 300 euros would most likely be bought by someone over 75. Older age groups and those living in the capital region if Finland seem more willing to buy more expensive winter coats and pay higher repair prices.

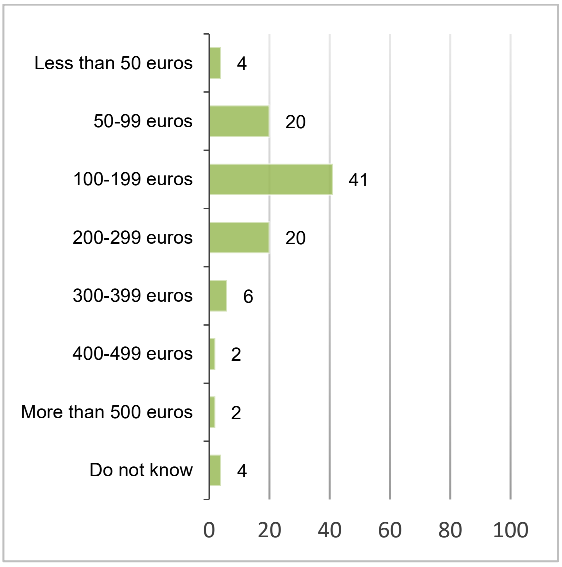

Figure 3. Respondents' estimates of the price category of their next winter coat purchase (% of respondents, N=1903).

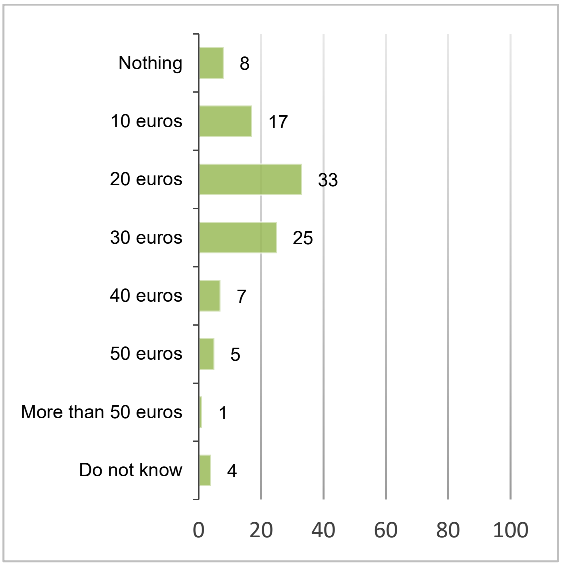

Figure 4. Acceptable repair price for a broken zipper of a winter coat (% of respondents, N=1903).

Figure 5 illustrates the amount respondents are most likely to pay for their next jeans/trousers. Figure 6 shows what could be an acceptable repair price for a pair of ripped jeans/trousers if it was otherwise in good condition. 53% would be ready to spend 10-20 euros on repairing such a product, whereas 25% would not pay anything.

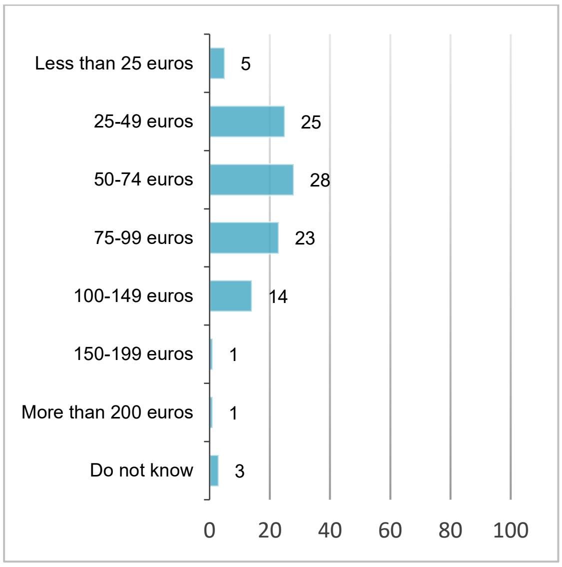

Figure 5. Respondents' estimates of the price category of their next jeans/trousers (% of respondents, N=1903).

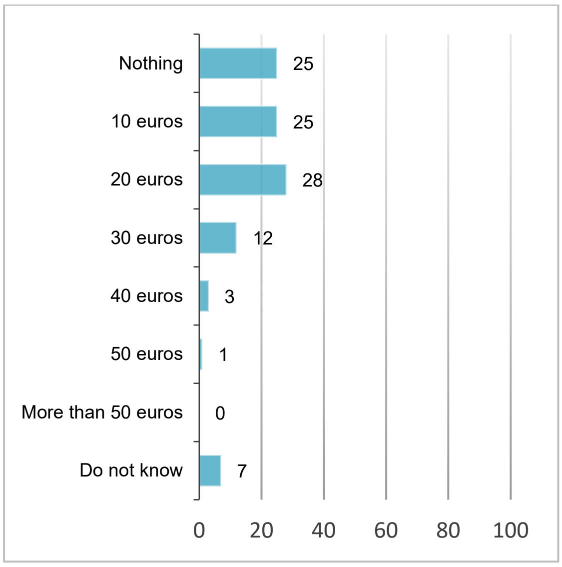

Figure 6. Acceptable repair price for ripped jeans/trousers (% of respondents, N=1903).

Generally, the cheaper the product, the less the respondents are willing to pay for repair services in euros. This applied to both exemplary products. However, the acceptable repair price of more expensive products, in relation to the original purchase price, seems to be percentage-wise lower than for cheaper products.

Reasons for not using clothing repair services

A significant number of respondents (23%) reported not being particularly interested in extending the lifespan of their clothing through repair service. The question of what currently prevents consumers from using clothing repair services was approached through an open-ended question, which got 1645 answers (86% of all survey respondents). The main reasons for not using clothing repair services are illustrated in Table 1. It shows how many respondents mentioned the specific reason. The percentage indicates the proportion of those who answered this open-ended question.

Across all age groups the main reason was that consumers have the skills to repair clothes themselves or they have "someone close" who can. 83% of respondents who reported having repair skills were women. Regarding age, repair skills seemed to be equally common in both younger and older age groups. For men, "someone close" is often the spouse, whereas for women, a mother, a close relative or a friend is usually the one repairing for them. The response "I could probably repair the garment myself" also shows confidence in a respondent who apparently is not an active "repairer", but still believes in their own abilities to repair.

Price was the second biggest reason for not using clothing repair services. Responses not only mentioned "high price" but also expressed concerns that such services are not profitable for consumers compared to "just buying a new garment". Price seemed to be a critical factor equally for men and women, but more for younger than older age groups.

Availability and accessibility were further factors for not using clothing repair services and almost equally significant in all regions. From the data, it was also possible to observe that 67% of all survey respondents are positive about clothing repair (plus alteration and rental) services being in shopping centers; 61% consider markets suitable locations; and 30% think such services could operate via online and postal service. Shopping centers and supermarkets got most support from those of 35-44. The youngest age groups (18-44) were more favorable towards the online option than older age groups.

Moreover, many stated they do not simply need repair services because they already buy long-lasting garments or that the items are often too damaged to be repaired at the end of their life. These types of responses were more typical of men than women.

Reasons	Examples
Repair skills 36 %, N=584	I'll repair it myself or take it to a friend to repair it. I fix what I can myself. I could have the zipper replaced by a professional, but there hasn't been a need for that.
Price 11 %, N=176	Too expensive I don't see it profitable to repair worn and cheap clothes. You can get clothes relatively cheaply. Repairs might cost more.
Availability and accessibility 9 %, N=148	The service offering is quite limited. There are no repair services nearby.
No need for repair service 8 %, N=135	I use them so that there is nothing left to be repaired. My clothes usually last a very long time and when they fall apart, I buy new ones. My clothes don't wear out much with use.
Lack of information 7 %, N=120	It is not advertised. I don't know where to take broken garments. I don't know where they are or what they cost or if they are easy to use.
Required efforts 2,5 %, N=41	It's complicated. Laziness to go and take the garment to the repair service separately. The hassle of waiting and picking up the repaired garment.

Table 1. Reasons for not using clothing repair services (% of respondents, n=1645).

Many also lack information about the existence of clothing repair services and how they operate. Surprisingly few mentioned that repair services require effort, although one might assume that this would be a reason for significantly more respondents. Other reasons for not using repair services were also mentioned, but they were marginal in this data (e.g. preference to buy new; lack of interest; lack of time; appearance of the repaired garment).

Discussion and conclusions

Finnish consumers are nowadays continuously informed about the unsustainability of the clothing industry through various media and encouraged to consider their clothing consumption more carefully. However, the use of clothing repair services in Finland seems still quite modest based on this research. Active engagement in self-repair practices might be a significant reason since it has been recognized that many Finnish consumers are capable to repair garments themselves, they are willing to learn these skills and garment repair workshops are very popular (e.g. Niinimäki et al., 2021). This might reduce interest in professional garment repair services and thereby hinder Finnish companies from developing such services even if the new EU regulations put pressure on them.

This research also supports what is already known regarding motivations for, and barriers to, using clothing repair services (e.g. Laitala et al. 2021; McQueen et al., 2023). Some consumers feel that repair services are too expensive, and cheap clothes are not worth repairing. In addition, finding repair services might require too much effort. Especially in Finland distances can be quite long to locations offering physical repair services. Therefore, it would make sense to place such services in locations where consumers visit regularly (supermarkets or shopping centers). Online services, which connect consumers to service providers (e.g. Vuota, n.d.) are also important and might encourage especially younger consumers and those living in rural areas to find professional repair help.

Surprisingly, there were no concerns among respondents about the repair results (e.g. aesthetics of repair, how the garment will look after repair, nor functional aspects of a repaired garment). This might show consumers' acceptance of wearing repaired garments, which previous research has identified being an issue (e.g. Qwilt, 2014). Alternatively, this may indicate trust in clothing repair services.

The unique feature of this research is the Finnish context of clothing repairs. Moreover, the paper sheds light to how much Finnish consumers might be willing to spend on clothing repair services. This is crucial information when aiming to create viable repair business in Finland (or other similar markets) and thinking about the pricing of specific repairs. A business model, in which costs of garment repair services are already included totally or partly in the retail prices of garments, would be worth to address in the future research.

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