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Research Article

Second Hand Clothing: A Circular Economy Strategy for Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract: The fashion industry has seen a growing trend of secondhand clothing and resale market where pre-owned clothing is bought and sold via various channels such as community swaps, online marketplaces like ThredUp, Depop, and Poshmark, thrift stores, and consignment businesses. The second-hand market and the expanding sustainable fashion practice are reactions to the fast fashion system. Fast fashion's rising appeal has led to unsustainable consequences, including overproduction and overconsumption. Thus, the best ways to promote sustainability in fashion are through cooperative consumption and prolonging the life of garments. A circular economy must be established, which entails producing long-lasting, recyclable, and reusable products. Thereby leading to the growth of secondhand garments. Previous researches have established the motivational factors for the adoption of Second-hand clothing. This research aims to establish the non-adoption factors for second-hand clothing and also establish the contribution of second-hand clothing in developing the circular economy.

Keywords: Second-hand clothing, sustainability, circular economy, fast fashion

INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry has seen a growing trend of secondhand clothing and resale market where pre-owned clothing is bought and sold via various channels such as community swaps, online marketplaces like ThredUp, Depop, and Poshmark, thrift stores, and consignment businesses. The global Secondhand Apparel Market size was valued at USD 91.12 billion in 2022 (Kings Research, 2024). The secondhand clothing market is a more sustainable approach to fashion as it prolongs the lifespan of clothing, eliminates textile waste, and lowers demand for new clothing (Huang, 2022). Sustainability in fashion is an umbrella term for clothes that are created and consumed in a way that can be, quite literally, sustained, while protecting both the environment and those producing garments (Vogue France, 2022). This growing practice of sustainable fashion and the resale market is in response to the system of fast fashion (Kapoor, Khare, 2019). Fashion serves as a canvas for self-expression, a medium through which individuals convey their unique identities to the world (Lopez, Ouattara, 2021). As no two people are alike, the demand for diversity and variety in the fashion industry has increased. This need for constant innovation and more choices laid the groundwork for the emergence of fast fashion. Fast fashion refers to “an inexpensive substitute of latest luxury fashion clothing trends, which change at a rapid rate, with today’s newest styles quickly turning into yesterday’s” (Joy et al, 2012). Hence, it is characterized by rapid production, low cost, and continuous introduction of new trends.

The growing popularity of fast fashion has resulted in unsustainable effects like overproduction and overconsumption (Kapoor, Khare, 2019). In addition to the environmental impact, fast fashion tends to exploit their labour force as well. Excess merchandise from overproduction frequently goes unsold, which companies dispose off either by giving discounts or burning them, which is a highly wasteful activity. 100 billion items of clothing are produced each year, and 92 million tons end up in landfills (Earth.org, 2023). In this process, massive amounts of natural resources go to waste, along with causing large volumes of pollution. The emissions from textile manufacturing alone are projected to skyrocket by 60% by 2030 (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018). The fast-fashion market promotes current trends, creating a consumer culture that encourages individuals to purchase new clothing regularly. As a result, more clothes than are necessary are bought by individuals. Additionally, the lifespan of these items is short. The number of times a garment is worn has declined by around 36% in 15 years (Earth.org, 2023). These practices are not sustainable in nature. According to previous research, collaborative consumption and extending the life of clothing are the best approaches to sustainability in fashion (Kapoor, Khare, 2019). There is a need to transition to a circular economy which involves the creation of items that are made to last, to be reused and recycled (Liu, Bernardoni, Wang, 2023, Patwa, Seetharaman, 2019). Thereby leading to the growth of secondhand garments. Estimates shows that instead of a new one, if every individual goes for adoption of a second-hand clothing, it would lower CO2 emissions by more than 2 billion pounds, equal to taking 76 million cars off the road for a day and

save some 23 billion gallons of water and 4 billion kilowatt-hours of energy (ThredUp, 2023).

The SHC industry, despite its evident advantages as a win-win solution for manufacturers, consumers, and the planet, has surprisingly failed to experience the significant growth it deserves. Looking specifically in case of India, the secondhand clothing markets exist in an informal and unofficial way in the form of hand-me-downs (Shah, Gajjar, 2021). Additionally, the counterfeit market in India accounts for 25–30% of all goods sold, with apparel being the top category (FICCI Report, 2022). This translates to a staggering Rs 1.5 lakh crore ($20 billion) annually, as per Confederation of Indian Industry estimates, hence, the niche local fashion culture in India already provides latest items of clothing at exceptionally low prices, which raises a reasonable and fair question of why Indians would prefer secondhand clothes over new ones at approximately the same price. Even though secondhand clothing is affordable, sustainable, generates employment opportunities and can even provide epistemic benefits such as uniqueness of items (Liu, Bernardoni, Wang, 2023) it still fails to attract Indian consumers. This can be traced to cultural differences and several psychological and social factors affecting their buying behavior (Sihvonen, Turunen, 2016; Koay, Cheah, Lom, 2022; Orangi, Wambugu, Maina, 2023). Moreover, the lack of awareness about the industry and its benefits and the insufficiency of an official accessibility market, as most of it is online and unauthorized, is also a factor for the same (Grundberg, Nassab, 2022).

Multiple research studies have pinpointed the motivations behind purchasing secondhand clothing (SHC). Jägel et al. (2012) argue that five dominant consumer motivations drive ethical clothing consumption—environmental, altruistic, and ethical concerns, well-being, economic value, and personal image. Building on them, we aim to shed light on the factors leading to the non-adoption of SHC influencing experienced and inexperienced SHC shoppers, particularly in the Indian market. This study helps to understand the contributions of SHC in the development of a more sustainable economy

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have looked into consumer habits and models for sustainable apparel use. Use-oriented product-service systems (PSSs), such as apparel consulting, rental, and swapping services, were studied by Armstrong et al. (2015). In a similar vein, Bly et al. (2015) found contextual and consumer motivational elements that affect the purchasing of sustainable fashion. Novelty, inventiveness, and aesthetics were shown to be the most important components for sustainable fashion consumption, despite the fact that many other aspects were also engaged in the adoption of sustainable behaviors. Environmental, altruistic, and ethical concerns, well-being, economic value, and personal image are the five main consumer motivations that drive the purchase of ethical clothes, according to Jägel et al. (2012).

Nonetheless, this study attempts to identify the key elements that prevent the adoption of used apparel. Numerous obstacles that have discouraged customers from adopting second-hand apparel have been identified by earlier studies.

Social Embarrassment

Social embarrassment plays an important role in the non-adoption of second-hand clothing. Sihvonen and Turunen (2016) and Kapoor and Khare (2019) both pointed out that people are discouraged from purchasing second-hand clothing due to worries about how others will perceive them. According to them, wearing second-hand clothing is interpreted as a sign of lower economic standing. Customers are hesitant to adopt sustainable practices, in general, due to the social stigma attached to it. Orangi et al. (2023) adds that the social stigma is higher in cultures that associate their social image with their purchasing power, therefore making them unwilling to adopt second-hand clothing.

Hygiene

Hygiene is a crucial factor influencing the adoption of second-hand clothing. Many buyers are concerned about the perceived cleanliness of the pre-used clothing and its owner, which forms a major obstacle in the buying process (Koay et al., 2022). Since clothing comes in direct contact with the users' body, consumers are more concerned about second-hand clothing in comparison to other previously owned items. Orangi et al. (2023) adds that if companies selling second-hand clothing prioritize and implement strict cleaning and other hygiene procedures, they could win customers' trust. According to Bollick and Bragagnolo (2019), there are already several second-hand clothing sellers who have made hygiene a pivotal part of their marketing, resulting in wider acceptance.

Non-Sustainable Behavior

Non-sustainable behavior in the fashion industry has two variables- fast fashion and consumerism. These variables put convenience before environmental impact. Kapoor and Khare (2019) say that since consumers often buy new clothing without thinking of its environmental impact, overproduction and overconsumption have prevailed in the clothing industry, making the sustainability attribute very difficult to achieve. Patwa and Seetharaman (2019) add that unsustainable practices are fueled by consumer ignorance and disregard for the environmental implications of fast fashion. They have further added how a circular economy would encourage people to reuse and cut down on waste.

Attitude of User

Attitude is another important factor affecting the adoption of second-hand clothing. According to Koay et al. (2022), people who are concerned about the environment and have high subconscious drives will adopt second-hand clothing. Orangi et al. (2023) said that if second-hand clothing aligns with an individual's personal standards and social image, they will adopt it. Whereas according to Kapoor and Khare (2019), consumers' attitudes are highly influenced by second-hand clothing's perceived quality and ease of access.

Availability of SHC

The availability of second-hand clothing plays a crucial role in its adoption. Sihvonen and Turunen (2016) say that the ease of availability both in physical stores and online platforms will promote second-hand clothing and reduce the social stigma around them. Machado et al. (2019) say that the rise of online platforms for selling second-hand clothing has introduced them to a larger number of people, especially the younger generations. Orangi et al. (2023) also claim that easily accessible second-hand clothes will attract more customers, steering them away from fast fashion and encouraging sustainable and environmentally friendly options.

Price of SHC

Price is described as a motivator for the adoption of second-hand clothing. Affordability attracts a wide range of customers. Kapoor and Khare (2019) claim that the affordability factor of second-hand clothing attracts people with limited buying power and resources. Koay et al. (2022) say that since second-hand clothes are more affordable than new clothes, the former are more accessible even though they may be perceived as low quality due to price-quality inference. Khare and Rakesh (2010) say that second-hand clothes could be more preferable during economic downturns, when people prioritize saving money more.

Product Risks

According to Koay et al. (2022), quality, durability, and hygiene are the major factors that influence consumer buying decisions. Customers avoid buying second-hand clothing due to perceived risks like bad quality, hidden defects, and non-sanitary conditions. Khare and Rakesh (2010) say that second-hand clothing companies ought to build trust with customers by minimizing these risks in order to sell their products. Bollick and Bragagnolo (2019) say that there are already many successful second-hand clothing companies that have garnered customers' trust by ensuring good quality assurance and inspection.

Brand

The brand of second-hand clothing greatly influences an individual's purchase decision as it is a teller of the apparel's quality. Kapoor and Khare (2022) claim that second-hand clothing from a good, well-reputed brand, especially luxury brands, have lower social stigma around them than others. Machado et al. (2019) say that second-hand clothes from luxury brands will eliminate the risk of social unacceptance and draw in the status-conscious customers. This will increase the appeal of second-hand clothes.

FASHION INDUSTRY AND ITS EFFECT ON THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

The circular economy is an economic model that aims to minimize waste and maximize resource utilization by emphasizing on keeping resources in use for as long as possible, extracting maximum value from them while in use, and then recovering and regenerating products and materials at the end of their service life. Key principles include designing for longevity and reusability, resource efficiency and regeneration, and creating closed-loop systems where materials are continuously cycled back into the economy. The fast fashion industry, however, works on the traditional linear model of take-make-dispose with rapid and continuous production, consumption, and disposal.

The main reason is the rise of fast fashion, which emphasizes low cost and trend-driven clothes, leading to short lifespans of garments. Hence, clothes are often made with low-quality material that is not designed to be durable, encouraging the consumers to frequently replace clothes. Thus, contributing to a higher volume of textile waste and causing overproduction. According to Earth.org, around 85% of fast fashion products end up in landfills annually due to the industry's tendency toward overproduction and shorter lifespans. The industry uses a complex blend of materials, making them difficult to recycle, ending up in a landfill where they can take centuries to decompose. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates that over 100 billion garments are produced annually, with a significant portion ending up in landfills or incineration (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2023).

Cradle-to-cradle approach

Life Cycle Assessments measure the environmental impact of textiles across all life stages of a garment, from raw material production through to processing, manufacture, distribution, use, recycling, and ultimately disposal. Every stage in the fast fashion production system leads to unsustainability. According to UNCTAD, this industry uses enough water to cater to the needs of 5 million people annually. More than 60% of clothes are made from polyester, which is made from fossil fuels and produces about 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. Additionally, according to IUCN, these synthetic fibers are responsible for 35% of all microplastics found in the water. These problems originate right from the manufacturing process itself. According to UNECE, fast fashion production has doubled since 2000, with 85% of it ending up in landfills. According to McKinsey & Co., an average garment is worn only seven to ten times before being discarded. Less than 1% of these discarded clothes are recycled, indicating that the secondhand clothing market is underutilized (Ellen MacArthur Foundation).

Despite the fashion industry working on overproduction and consumption, only 13% of the total input of materials is recycled in some way after wearing the garments. Thus, it is necessary for the fashion industry to adopt a cradle-to-cradle approach. Under this concept, everything is transformed and reused after a product 'death'. The main aim of this philosophy is to ensure industries aren't just sustainable but also regenerative. This will help in reducing the carbon footprint and thereby help in creating a circular economy.

The fashion industry's Ecological Footprint is also significant and ranks among the highest of any consumer sector. The Ecological Footprint is a measurement tool that evaluates the human demand on Earth's ecosystems. It quantifies the amount of biologically productive land and water area required to produce the resources a population

consumes and to absorb the waste it generates. Essentially, it measures how much of the Earth's resources are used to support a particular lifestyle or consumption pattern.

According to the World Bank Report, the fashion and textile industry is responsible for 20% of global wastewater and 10% of global carbon emissions, which is higher than that released by the shipping and aviation industry. The industry significantly increases its ecological footprint primarily through extensive resource consumption and depletion, mainly of land through cultivation, leading to deforestation, soil erosion, and water scarcity. Further, the use of pesticides, fertilizers, and dyes in textile production pollutes land and water and harms biodiversity. This industry also contributes to high textile waste and carbon emissions, mainly due to intensive manufacturing and supply chain emissions.

Moreover, the fashion industry is one of the major sectors that conflicts with blue economy principles due to its significant impact on marine environments and water resources. The blue economy is a concept given by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2014) which emphasizes the sustainable development of marine and coastal ecosystems. It promotes growth by safeguarding the health of the oceans and subsequently, its resources.

Firstly, the production of textiles, particularly of synthetic fibers, releases microplastics, which, as reported by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2017, make up approximately 35% of all microplastics in the ocean that originate from washing of synthetic clothes. A study by the University of California, Santa Barbara, found that a single wash of a polyester fleece jacket can release up to 250,000 microplastic fibers (Browne et al., 2011). These tiny plastic particles harm marine life by being ingested, causing physical injury and disrupting their feeding and reproductive processes (Beaumont et al., 2019).

Secondly, the textile industry is a major water polluter as the production is a water-intensive process. In fact, approximately 20% of all global water pollution is a result of textile dying alone, which is often overlooked. If this free reign continues, it can lead to high water scarcity as high water consumption of textile production can strain water resources in regions where scarcity is already a concern. Further, it can have an impact on human health due to an increase in waterborne diseases, chemical exposure due to textile wastewater leading to skin diseases, and food safety concerns in the consumption of seafood.

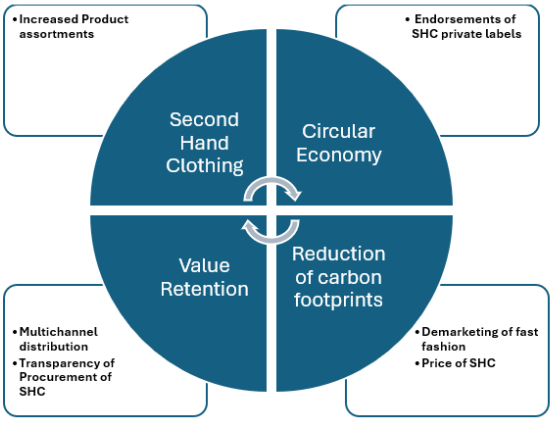
Therefore, the problem does not just lie with excessive production but also the complex and opaque nature of the global fashion supply chain, which makes it difficult to track materials and monitor the effects on the environment throughout its lifecycle. Thus, promoting SHC consumption would contribute to the development of a circular economy since it would lengthen the cycle of consumption of similar goods, thereby reducing the production and, conversely, leading to a hazardous impact on the economy. Although consumers are drawn to quick fashion, raising SHC demand can meet their expanding wants without endangering a sustainable human society.

SHC and its contribution to the circular economy

The second-hand clothing market, including thrifting and reselling, has emerged as a sustainable alternative to fast fashion, with significant implications for environmental conservation and business innovation. Secondhand Clothing (SHC) can help eliminate the issue of pollution and other environmental damage caused by fast fashion. For example, producing one cotton T-shirt requires approximately 2700 litres of water, which is enough for a person to drink for almost 3 years. SHC will reduce this usage and thus conserve resources and combat pollution. Additionally, secondhand clothing extends a garment's life by an average of 2.2 years, as reported by WRAP Research. By buying SHC, users can prolong the life span of clothing and prevent it from ending up in a landfill. A study by the European Environment Agency (2022) found that extending the lifespan of clothing by nine months could reduce its carbon, water, and waste footprint by 20–30%. In addition, adopting SHC will increase the production cycle of new clothes since the demand for them will start declining, further reducing carbon emissions. Research by Fashion Revolution (2023) states that doubling the lifespan of a garment, even just from 30 to 60 uses, can reduce its greenhouse gas emissions footprint by nearly half.

Furthermore, SHC provides consumers with access to low-cost, good-quality items. According to a report by WRAP UK (2023), purchasing pre-owned clothing saves consumers an average of 60% compared to new retail prices. On top of that, thrifting helps in preserving culture and heritage by keeping traditional textiles, patterns, and vintage garments in circulation, which are not produced by mainstream fast fashion anymore.

SHC has several benefits; ranging from sustainability by promoting a circular economy, saving resources like water, reducing the carbon footprint, to value retention, cultural preservation, and consumer savings, and can certainly be profitable. A study by McKinsey & Company (2023) found that businesses incorporating second-hand clothing into their models experience an average 20% increase in customer retention due to sustainable engagement. Businesses can integrate SHC in their operations by introducing buy-back programs, reselling, and rental platforms. Brands like H&M and Levi’s have successfully adopted these strategies, proving sustainability doesn’t have to be uneconomical. Buying SHC encourages a more ecological and conscientious approach to fashion while simultaneously lowering wasteful consumption and pollution, leading the industry towards a more sustainable and profitable future.



CONCLUSION

Thus, promoting the use of used apparel by comprehending the dynamics of non-adoption can help create a more sustainable world. Therefore, marketers in the second-hand clothes sector should concentrate on influencing consumers' attitudes toward sustainable consumption. SHC marketers should create a plan to explain the sustainable behavior of adopting SHC in a world where consumer tastes and preferences are changing quickly.

Conscious consumers' attitudes and beliefs will be influenced by this. The shift in SHC adoption can be altered by expanding product offerings, enticing reputable companies to start donating used clothing, promoting SHC private labels by well-known celebrities, explaining the sterilization procedure used for SHC, implementing multichannel distribution, and setting competitive prices for SHC. Spreading the word about SHC adoption will encourage consumers to consider it on a regular basis.

Demand for SHC will rise as a result of the fast fashion industry's demarketing. SHC is urgently needed, given the influence the fashion industry has on the economy's sustainability. Unsustainable conduct has far-reaching effects that are negatively impacting customers' lives on a daily basis without their knowledge. The globe will be able to lower its carbon footprint and create a model for a circular economy thanks to marketers' efforts to implement strategies that will result in the adoption of SHC.

This study makes recommendations for the actions that marketers should take to affect SHC usage. The researchers found that a variety of factors influence the adoption of SHC; as a result, marketers should incorporate these elements into their marketing approach. The marketing mix should incorporate strategies for repurposing the product in addition to the four Ps. The model above explains the factors that can be adopted by marketers, which can lead to the adoption of SHC. The SHC industry will enable the creation of a circular economy, thereby reducing carbon footprints and contributing to the retention of value of the various products.

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