

Engaging more consumers in clothing take-back schemes

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore opportunities that can engage more people to participate in the take-back scheme when their clothes have reached the end of life. The UK alone sends 350K tonnes of clothing to landfill annually. If these were taken-back and given a second-life, they could become an input resource that goes back to a circular manufacturing system. Thereby take-back schemes can close the material loop and make the industry more sustainable. However, the current clothing take-back scheme that one of the UK's largest retailers has been running since 2008 has collected only 1% of clothing (24 million garments to date) against an annual rate of 350 million items sold.

To increase the impact of the scheme, the case retailer undertook an academic research collaboration and examined various alternatives that would engage more participants such as enhancing rewarding systems and partnering with new entities. The deployed joint research activities include ideation, 24 focus group interviews, three multi-stakeholder workshops to an online customer survey with 137 participants. The mixed-method approach allowed the researchers to collect both qualitative and quantitative data.

The results of the research are threefold: first, it helped to clarify the most efficient and feasible customer relationship route for an expansion of the scheme. A joint partnership with a charity organisation and schools allows the retailer to build proactive customer touchpoints that are beyond receiving garments in in-store collection boxes. Second, it enabled the research team to explore potential value exchange opportunities between the company, customer and society. The

new joint programme provides an advantage of using the existing logistics system of the charity organisation, nation-wide collection platforms at schools, and educational opportunities about waste and environmental issues for the next generation of consumers. Third, it allowed the research team to understand the operational challenges of the scheme such as alternative collection schemes, potential customer appetite, and barriers and enabling factors. The findings form the basis of a pilot plan to test the new scheme at a local level, prior to an implementation at a regional scale. The research contributes both to academia and practice by providing an in-depth investigation into a real-world implementation of one of the most powerful circular economy solutions for fashion industry.

Keywords

Circular economy, business model innovation, clothes take-back scheme