

Re-sell-Rewear: Exploring consumer engagement and involvement with redistribution fashion-markets and collaborative-consumption

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Abstract

Background scientific research: The aim of this research is to explore consumer engagement and involvement with the circular fashion economy as means to address the unsustainability of the fashion industry, which currently contributes more to climate change than the aviation industry (United Nations, 2020). Although some fashion retailers engage with aspects of sustainability, mainly the focus is to increase sales; yet the excavation of scarce resources, production and consumption inevitably lead to garment disposal, often to landfill. Most UK fashion retailers encourage consumers to donate unwanted garments to charity, often with the reward of a voucher for more consumption (Ritch, 2020). There are, however, two implications of this: responsibility for sustainability transfers to consumers rather than addressing sustainability within design, resource selection or production. Moreover, the rise in clothing donated for reuse supersedes the size of the resale market; therefore, it is often sold onto developing countries where it displaces local markets. Recently the volume of donated garments to be exported to developing countries has been illuminated by Brexit border delays (Partington, 2021). Westernised businesses mine developing countries for natural resources, utilise cheap labour for production and return unwanted consumer waste (landfill and donated garments), compromising the environment and displacing local markets. With the ever-decreasing price of fast-fashion, some online fashion retailers were selling garments for under a (UK) pound

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during the pandemic lockdown in the UK (Blackall, 2020). Low pricing encourages more frequent consumption, and ultimately disposal, exacerbating the impact on the environment. This, we would argue, has reduced consumer thresholds for how much they are willing to pay for fashion (Ritch and Brownlie, 2016). However, the global Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in suspending economic activities in many countries, including restrictions on retailing, had a couple of consequences: firstly, there were reduced social interactions that required the consumption of new fashion, which may impact on normalised consumer behaviours; secondly, there were positive environmental manifestations due to reduced industrialisation, such as the return of sea and wildlife to the canals in Venice (Brunton, 2020) and nature was more appreciated as a form of entertainment; thirdly, the pandemic has provided consumers with an opportunity to reflect on what they actually need in life, as well as the world we live in (Brydges et al., 2021). Consumers may now reward companies that treat their environment with respect (McKinsey & Company, 2021) Despite the global pandemic, the threat of climate change continues - yet the suspension of commerce and social norms may have a longer impact on consumer behaviours, providing alternative leisure activities from traditional shopping which may include alternative consumption practices. This research seeks to explore if more consumers are engaging with alternative consumption modules due to concern for the negative impact the fashion industry has for sustainability.

Research issue to be addressed: To address those issues, developed countries should assume responsibility for 'closing the loop' of consumption and disposal by extending the lifecycle of garments and textiles (Colucci and Vecchi, 2021). The sharing economy offers such opportunities and is captured within collaborative consumption and redistribution markets (Ritch, 2019; Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2015; Heinrich, 2013). Collaborative consumption expands the use of commodities to a wide range of consumers, through loaning and renting, as captured within a library system (Harper, 2018; Martin, Upman, & Budd, 2015). Often operating as social innovation enterprises, such as books, toys, and tools, more recently private enterprises have capitalised on this trend, with car sharing initiatives and garment renting, such as the Lena library in Amsterdam. Redistribution markets offer an opportunity for consumers to sell unwanted fashion garments and accessories, as well as make purchases (Albinsson & Perera, 2012; Luchs et al., 2011). Advances within redistribution markets are digitally led, through mobile applications, such as Depop, Vinted and eBay as circular consumer-to-consumer models, as opposed to being driven by the fashion industry (Ritch, 2019). Whilst online redistribution activities are growing in popularity, this is insignificant when compared to annual fashion sales. Currently, only one fashion retailer (Cos, part of the H&M group) provides consumers the ability to resell unwanted clothing through their website. Yet, garment resale opportunities are gaining in prominence. For example, London department store Selfridges opened a permanent 'pre-loved' department in 2019 (Marriott, 2019), and multi-national retailers Ikea, John Lewis and Asda are also engaging with the

resale market (BBC News, 2021; Butler, 2021). These examples illustrate the missed opportunity for retailers to invest in closing the loop for fashion sustainability to address the volume of clothing sold and disposed of.

Little is known of how consumers engage with the fashion circular economy and what would encourage higher involvement and engagement. Yet, arguably consumers, especially generation-Z, are more aware of fashion sustainability (Amed et al., 2019; Frances and Hoefel, 2018). These are also cohorts who increasingly use mobile applications for socialising, news and accessing information and consumption (Levin, 2020). Further, life after the Coronavirus pandemic may focus more acutely on sustainability, where digital technology may enable consumers to prioritise circular fashion markets with easier consumption and reselling routes. Moreover, whilst influencers drive fast-fashion consumption, will a similar approach shift accepted social norms to embrace the circular economy?

To better understand the potential of the circular economy, an exploratory inductive interpretative approach was deemed appropriate to understand consumer perspectives and reflections of their experience over the last year. Therefore, dyadic interviews targeting specific consumer generational profiles (3 pairs of Generation-X, 3 pairs of Generation-Y and 3 pairs of Generation-Z) were carried out in Scotland. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions on gatherings, the interviews were carried out on Microsoft Teams. In total, 24 participants contributed to the data collected which enabled a rich insight based on assumptions from the fashion and sustainable consumption literature. The three examples of alternative economic model's were presented to the groups to stimulate discussion and perceptions, as well as how this would align with their current behaviours and expectations of fashion retailers. The analysis of these first qualitative results will be presented at the conference. The findings will offer insight for new innovative fashion business models and marketing management.

Keywords: fashion; sustainability; circular; redistribution markets; collaborative consumption

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