

Exploring the Trend: Motives behind Online Second-Hand Fashion Consumption

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Abstract

This paper examines the motives behind online second-hand consumption and gets to the bottom of the recent second-hand trend. Using a qualitative research approach based on in-depth interviews, four overarching categories are identified into which the consumption motives can be classified: Individualism, saving expenses, sustainability and solidarity. While individualism and saving expenses were most frequently mentioned in the interviews, sustainability and solidarity motives are rather secondary for online second-hand consumption. In addition to the four above-mentioned, a further category was identified that specifically highlights arguments in favor of purchasing second-hand fashion online: Convenience. Consumers aim for the same shopping experience online that they are used to from stationary thrift shops. However, not only is this feeling transported into the digital world, but the value proposition is extended through search functions and learning algorithms. This makes clear how technology is influencing purchasing behavior and thus shaping a new consumer culture. Due to the power of second-hand fashion to represent one's own individuality and thus stand out from the crowd, it becomes visible that when buying online second-hand fashion, elements of conspicuous consumption also play a role.

Keywords: Online Second-Hand Fashion; Consumption Motives; Consumer Culture; Conspicuous Consumption

1. Introduction

"We pay more or less for the clothes depending on each brand's marketing spin, but the workers are paid a pittance and treated like dirt" (The Guardian, 2020).

The booming fashion industry with its structures, production conditions and global waste of resources is increasingly questioned critically. In this context, the so-called fast fashion industry is particularly pilloried, as these very structures become visible in their full perversion. In recent years, more and more people in the western world experienced a paradigm shift that sees second-hand fashion as an alternative to the vicious circle of producing, buying and throwing away in the fashion industry. In response to this, the market volume of second-hand clothing has heavily increased in recent years and exponential growth is still forecasted (Statista, 2022). In addition to stationary second-hand stores, the internet plays a particularly important role here. More and more big players in the fashion industry enter the second-hand business trying to secure their market position there. But what actually drives the buyers of second-hand fashion? While previous studies tended to examine second-hand purchases in stationary stores (Ferraro et al., 2016; Laitala & Klepp, 2018; Zaman et al., 2019), this paper focuses on online retail.

What are the motives behind online second-hand fashion consumption? And do these motives include elements of conspicuous consumption? Is the second-hand trend perhaps even creating a new consumer culture? These are the questions that this paper explores. After a short explanation of the theoretical background and the history of second-hand fashion, the qualitative research design of the study is presented. The identified motives are then explained and grouped before the following chapter summarizes these findings into an overall picture and provides an outlook for the future. Finally, the limitations of the research are pointed out and theoretical and practical implications are derived.

2. Theoretical Background

Second-hand consumption is the purchase of goods that were previously owned by others (Weinstein, 2014). The image of second-hand consumption has evolved over the last centuries: in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, second-hand consumption emerged and expanded, although it declined in the following century because of its stigmatization as “being worn-out, soiled, and malodorous.” (Zaman et al., 2019, p. 2)

Recently the perception of second-hand clothing has been de-stigmatized and gained renewed popularity since the early 2000s and the social stigmata have faded, so that second-hand consumption became an economic power of global scope which is not negligible (Ferraro et al., 2016).

The reasons for this shift are versatile: Not only is there a rising consumer interest in sustainability, but also more critical questioning in regard to structural exploitation of countries of the global south (Zaman et al., 2019). Otherwise, price sensitivity accounts for a decisive reason to buy clothing second-hand, although second-hand consumption was proscribed when primarily people with low budgets were purchasing used apparel (Ferraro et al., 2016). Another well-discussed reason for the emergence of second-hand fashion is the current era of social media and the self-portrayal that comes with it. The need for originality objects the fast fashion narrative, where most stores present disposable pieces and uniqueness is hardly attainable (Ferraro et al., 2016). “Something that started as a necessity of acquiring quality clothing by the poor has transformed into ‘smart’ shopping [...]” (Xu et al., 2014, p. 671) What started as a coping mechanism for less fortunate people became a trend that all economic classes revert to, especially regarding the commercialization of second-hand apparel and the spillover of second-hand supply to online platforms (Ferraro et al., 2016; Zaman et al., 2019).

As this paper aims to contribute by qualitatively capturing the motives behind the purchase of online second-hand apparel, the main consumer group needs to be further analyzed and evaluated.

Cova and Cova (2001) describe that postmodern societies are characterized by high levels of individualism and even-handedly by a desire to re-establish in communities. This paradox of modernity, which states that individuals of modernity seek to differentiate themselves in order to stand out and show off their uniqueness, while equally wanting to be part of a social group that they feel a sense of belonging to, points out what the essence of consumer culture nowadays consists of (Weinstein, 2014). Cova and Cova (2001) accordingly concluded that consumption is a strategy to find like-minded people and to then connect with them, by which they indicate that the linking element of consumption is more important than the consumption itself. The superstructure behind online second-hand shopping expresses the connecting elements which refer to the motives and reasons for people to purchase already used apparel on-line. The word tribe is used to cover a social group, in which the members are emotionally invested in the passion that links every member to the group. Shared values, rituals and signs, that need to be filled with meaning, intensify the bond within the tribe (Cova & Cova, 2001). A ritual could be, for instance, the quest for unique pieces or pieces from which the consumer knows that these would show their belonging to another social milieu. Tribes consist of people of different ages, gender and income. The one linking element is the shared passion, because individuals in that tribe no longer are only consumers but proponents and advocates (Cova & Cova, 2001).

Due to the possibility that second-hand shopping reached the middle of society, the establishment of a new consumer culture is likely. If the online equivalent has already reached the majority of society remains to be seen. But the linking elements, namely the motives and values for stationary and online second-hand shopping might be similar. Also, in terms of conspicuous consumption online second-hand shopping can be a way to signal others that individuals who purchase used goods instead of newly produced goods i.e. value ecological and ethical standards and criticize the standard quo of the fashion industry and visually set themselves apart from others in that way (Goulding et al., 2008; Weinstein, 2014).

3. Methodology

In order to conscientiously examine the motives behind online second-hand consumption, in-depth one-on-one interviews were used to collect the qualitative data from the study participants. The generation of the questionnaire was built in that way, that one could interchange the different thematic sections. This was of importance in order to disturb the flow of speech as little as possible, so that attitudes, motives, values and behaviors in regards to online second-hand consumption were as unbiased as possible. With the aid of the laddering technique, the interviewers then tried to uncover deeper values, attitudes and motives of the interviewee by pointedly asking, so that means-end-chaining could be revealed.

In reference to the literature, four deductive overarching categories were used that include the motives of stationary second-hand consumption. First, economic reasons were chosen as a category. Second-hand apparel is much cheaper than apparel that one would buy in stores, therefore the category is called "saving expenses". Second, ecological concerns about the fast fashion industry with respect to climate change were integrated, so that the category was defined as "sustainability". Third, ethical and moral concerns about the exploitation of inhabitants of countries of the global south were mentioned as the category "solidarity". And finally, "individualism" as a last deductive category in the era of social media and self- depiction was named and integrated in the process of survey creation. However, the study focuses on the motives that lie behind online second-hand shopping. Therefore, the formation of inductive categories was taken into consideration after the interviews.

The interviews were held with eight participants, all in the lower income range, equally distributed in gender. The participants were chosen out of a circle of friends and acquaintances from 24 to 28. Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes. After the interviews were held, the analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken. The overarching categories were divided into subcategories that line out the single motives of online secondhand consumption. The last step of the evaluation contained a frequency analysis that put all superior categories into perspective. The frequency analysis creates an overview and a ranking list of the subcategories, which are the searched motives in this study.

4. Results

Besides the superior categories set up deductively, another one was inductively discovered through the interviews. The motives behind these categories were then examined more precisely. The results indicate that the motives behind online second-hand consumption coincide with huge parts of the motives of stationary second-hand consumption. Notwithstanding significant differences become apparent, which need to be taken into account. Collectively the overarching categories of the analysis are the following: Individualism, saving expenses, sustainability, convenience and solidarity. Within the conducted frequency analysis, it was possible to put the categories in consideration to each other and create a frequency ranking (see table 1). With 39.34%, individualism was the most frequently named category, followed by saving expenses (20.87%), sustainability (19.42%), convenience (16.55%) and solidarity (12.23%). The motives behind these categories will now be elucidated more detailed.

Figure 1. Frequency Analysis

Overarching Categories	N	Percentage	Subcategories = motives	N	Percentage
Individualism	43	39.34%	Express one's own identity	18	41.86%
			Differentiation through unique clothing	14	32.56%
			Willingness to follow trends and social change	11	25.58%
Saving expenses	29	20.87%	Following fashion trends on a budget	8	27.58%
			Bargain hunting	11	37.93%
			Small available budget for clothing	10	34.48%
Sustainability	27	19.42%	Circular use of resources	8	29.63%
			Sustainable consumption orientation	19	70.30%
Convenience	23	16.55%	The aim for facilitated access	9	39.14%
			Benefit from search and filter functions	11	47.80%
			Inspiration through personalized suggestions	3	13.05%
Solidarity	17	12.23%	Calm one's own conscience	6	35.29%
			Make your own contribution	6	35.29%
			Desire for greater social justice	5	29.41%

Within the category of individualism three different motives can be identified: the aim to “express one's own identity” (41.68%), “differentiation through unique clothing” (32.56%) and the “willingness to follow trends and social change” (25.58%).

The motivation to express one's own identity emphasizes the importance of second-hand clothing to symbolize the idea of one's own identity and personality as well as the expression norms and values followed. Furthermore, this can be affirmed by statements like: “[...] zum Ausdrücken von dem, was ich sein möchte und wie ich gesehen werden möchte.” More specific, second-hand consumption serves as a tool to express one's own reflection and understanding of fashion, which also includes searching for specific brands and styles.

Differentiation through unique clothing describes the possibility to outwardly set oneself apart from others and to extensively “hunt” unique pieces of clothes. This motivation can be emphasized by assertions like: “[...] das fand ich ganz schlimm, wenn jemand das gleiche Teil anhatte wie ich [...] Vintage Sachen die gibt es halt meistens nicht nochmal doppelt, [...] genau das Teil, das hat halt niemand anderes.” Here the desire to differentiate oneself from the mainstream by finding limited, rare clothing becomes obvious, as well as the urge to show the possession of unique clothes.

The willingness to follow trends and social change shows the aim to comply with social norms, trends and changes through second-hand consumption, which also goes along with the wish of adaption. Through statements like “[...] dass in meinem näheren Umfeld, das schon fast anerkannter ist, also viele Menschen Second-Hand kaufen [...] und es deswegen eben schon zu meinem Lebensstil gehört [...]” the influence of interpersonal and social relations is noticeable, as well as the social change regarding second-hand consumption in general. Many respondents described online second-hand shopping as an upcoming lifestyle trend: “[...] Pullover, die unsere Eltern damals weggeschmissen haben in den 80ern, (sind) jetzt [...] auf einmal zu einem hippen Lifestyle geworden.”

Saving expenses can be split into three different motives: “bargain hunting” (37.93%), “use of a small available budget for clothing” (34.48%) and “following fashion trends on a budget” (27.58%).

Bargain hunting represents finding high quality clothes from popular brands for comparatively low prices, mentioned as follows: “damit habe ich ein richtig gutes Schnäppchen gemacht. Von Hugo Boss ist der, hat nur 7€ gekostet.” Further, especially the sense of achievement within the searching process seems to be a crucial motivation “[...] dieser Nervenkitzel, wenn ich zum Beispiel ein bestimmtes Teil suche [...]. Das dann wirklich auch zu finden in meiner Größe ist immer so ein geiles Erfolgserlebnis.” The pleasure to search and find clothes with a good price-performance ratio therefore seems to be incredibly motivating.

The use of a small available budget expresses to aim to act economically in the course of possibilities. In statements like “[...] dass ich als Studentin auch an einen gewissen Preis irgendwie

gebunden bin.“ the dependence on a specific budget for clothing becomes apparent. This can be caused by unintentional factors or the wish to actively save money: “[...] weil es günstiger ist, als es neu zu kaufen und ich dadurch aktiv spare [...]].”

Moreover, the motive to follow fashion trends on a budget expresses the fashion consciousness of the consumers by simultaneously focusing on the price of a single product. This becomes clear in statements like: “[...] ein Fashion Victim bleiben, weil man auch viele Sachen dann für einen geringeren Preis kauft.“ Here the need to be “up-to-date” in terms of fashion trends but not spending too much money on clothing shows up.

Sustainability can be split into two different motives: “following a sustainable consumption orientation” (70.30%) and the “circular use of resources” (29.63%).

The motivation to follow a sustainable consumption orientation becomes visible in the idealistic conviction to counteract climate change and follow a sustainable lifestyle.

Statements like “aus idealistischen Gründen, Konsum anders denken zu wollen” confirm the intrinsic motivation to implement one's lifestyle also into the consumption of clothing. Also, the external social influence seems to play a crucial role: “[...] aufgrund der Debatte, die eben über die Welt geführt wird, was Klima angeht, was die Gestaltung des Lebensstils angeht, mit dem man der Entwicklung am besten entgegenwirken könnte, das hat mich am meisten beeinflusst.“ Following the social change towards a more attentive way of treating the environment and adapting the own actions seems to be a crucial motivation to buy second-hand clothing. The aim for a circular use of resources describes the desire to follow an approach of a long-lasting resource use. More specific, the waste of clothing and in particular the resources spent for these is considered as pointless: “ich fände es total schade, die Kleidung wegzuschmeißen, weil es eine Verschwendung der Rohstoffe wäre.“ Therefore, buying second-hand helps with the optimal use of given resources. This motivation can be affirmed by statements like “[...] das Kleidungsstück wird noch länger getragen. Kleidungsstücke wieder- und weiterzuverwenden, bis diese nicht mehr funktionieren.“

Convenience as an additional category can be split into three different motives: “benefit from search and filter functions” (47.80%), “the aim for facilitated access” (39.14%) and “Inspiration through personalized suggestions” (13.05%).

A huge motivation for online second-hand consumption are the benefits of search and filter functions as the shopping experience becomes more convenient and adjusts to the “normal” online shopping experience: “wenn ich jetzt wirklich eine grüne Jacke suche [...] das dann auch finden kann und dass ich eben eine extrem riesige Auswahl habe.“ The interviewees indicated the advantage to more easily search for particular pieces or brands, compared to stationary second-hand shopping.

The aim for facilitated access is reflected in the strive for fast and easy access to a huge selection of clothing in a spatial and timely manner. This motivation can be seen in statements like: “[...] also eine Art von Zugänglichkeit. Auch weil viele Personen ja gar nicht in Städten wohnen.“ The wish to have a convenient second-hand shopping experience at home becomes visible in this motivation as well.

The inspiration through personalized suggestions is reflected in statements like: “Die Vorschläge im News Feed werden ja auch immer besser und manchmal wird man dadurch halt echt auf coole Teile oder Styles aufmerksam.“ Personalization through smart algorithms shapes the online second-hand shopping experience and slowly adjusts to stationary second-hand shopping and thus serves as a source of inspiration which further facilitates the searching process.

Solidarity, as the least frequently mentioned category, can be divided into three different motives: “Calm one's own conscience” (35.29%), “Make your own contribution” (35.29%) and “Desire for greater social justice” (29.41%).

To calm one's own conscience goes along with the wish to adapt the own behavior to social and personal norms and values. Through statements like “der Konsum ist für mich ein bisschen akzeptabler, als wenn ich das jetzt bei H&M neu gekauft habe” one's own knowledge and concomitantly the bad conscience about unsoldierly conditions is calmed by self-perceived small contributions towards more social justice. “Ich achte halt sehr darauf, dass ich halt nicht diese Billig-Marken kaufe, gerade so die ganz die extreme Fast-Fashion [...].“ For example, this is reflected by the avoidance of particular fast fashion chains.

The motive to make your own contributions in terms of the consciousness about bad working conditions, low wages and even child labor in the fast fashion industry causes a change in the consumption behavior. “[...] denen ist es einfach nicht bewusst, dass man durch sein Kauf- verhalten maßgeblich an Kinderarbeit oder so beteiligt ist und dem auch entgegenwirken kann.” This aim reflects the choice to not to support the prevailing conditions. “[...] auch ein bisschen „Solidaritätsgedanken“ auslöst. Dass man wirklich etwas bewirken kann [...] ich tue etwas gegen Kinderarbeit, ich tue etwas gegen Ausbeutung [...]].”

The third motive represents the individual motivation that more attention is paid to the precarious circumstances in the production process. The wish for a change in consumption behavior is reflected here. Thus, the desire for more attention towards social justice and exploitation through the fashion industry becomes visible, such that more people buy second- hand to avoid over and mass production.

Within the analysis five different overarching categories with several motives for online second-hand consumption were identified. Nevertheless, the choice to buy second-hand clothing online depends on an interaction of individual motives and not just on one primary motive.

Thus, the individual purchasing decision seems to be a subjective interaction of many of the above-mentioned motives, each weighted differently.

5. Discussion

The previous chapter shows that arguments for buying online second-hand fashion traced back to price sensitivity and the desire for individualism were mentioned particularly frequently. Especially the possibility to buy trendy and fashionable clothes at low prices, which often do not show that they are used, is a frequently mentioned reason why second- hand fashion is a real alternative to buying cheap clothes new. Also, in terms of individualism, second-hand fashion is very suitable for i.e. differentiating from the masses through a focus on unique second-hand clothing.

Contrary to that, there is less evidence for solidarity and sustainability motives. Even though sustainability is strongly related to second-hand fashion, it becomes clear that the respondents tend to view this category as secondary and rather subordinate. As an example, consider the following statement suggesting the ranking of the categories: *“An Second-Hand-Kleidung finde ich vor allem cool, dass die Kleidungsstücke etwas eigener sind als der Mainstream und man vor allem ‘nen stabilen Preis hat. Und irgendwie ist es dann ja auch nachhaltiger.”*

The convenience category points out the differences between online and offline purchases of second-hand fashion, since personalized filter, search functions and easy access to the offers are very important here. Especially large platforms such as Vinted or Zalando can stand out with high usability through mobile applications and personalized news feeds. In this context, complex algorithms present an individual compilation of suggestions to the user and thus also serve as a source of inspiration for new styles and trends. This clearly shows how much influence technology has on people's consumption behavior.

This category also addresses another frequently mentioned factor: purchasing barriers in online second-hand shops. Uncertainty about the exact fit and true condition as well as lack of trust in (private) sellers on certain platforms are the most common reasons why second-hand fashion is bought in stationary stores and not online. In particular, the uncertainty about product characteristics, is counteracted by many providers through a standardized evaluation procedure and professional and uniform product images. This increases accessibility and convenience, which has a positive effect on the buying experience.

As always with purchases on the Internet, there is the possibility of falling for a scam. Especially platforms that aim for direct communication between buyers and private sellers are affected by this problem. This was also reported by respondents: *“Ich habe [...] eine Tasche von Michael Kors [...] gefunden, die war zu einem Spitzenpreis zu haben. Und da habe ich dann direkt 50€ überwiesen [...], dann war sie halt auf einmal weg und der Nutzer gelöscht.”*

This paper clearly shows that second-hand fashion in the online sector is a way of expressing a lifestyle and belonging to a certain social milieu. In this context, the purchase of second-hand fashion is often guided by motives of conspicuous consumption. Especially through sharing new fashion items and styles on social media, the feeling that the consumption of second-hand fashion triggers the individual becomes a shared social experience (Goulding et al., 2009). Therefore, individual satisfaction is transferred to others and creates new incentives for consumption. Crucial to the way in which social media drives this process is the type of network. Contrary to private networks, such as WhatsApp or Snapchat groups, public and professional networks such as Instagram or TikTok, present second-hand fashion consumption usually in a more extreme and exuberant way. Here, the target group is larger, which is why in the flood of information of the news feeds of these platforms, usually only the most extreme and exaggerated posts receive attention (Kozinets et al., 2017). Especially in the case of TikTok, this was confirmed within the interviews. *“Ganz besonders doll ist das auf TikTok, wo ich ja viel unterwegs bin. Da gibt's viele Leute, die leben dieses Ding richtig. Das ist nochmal ein ganz anderes Ausmaß. [...] Das ist echt krass.”*

This shows that the motive of individualism is exacerbated in such networks and the people involved become more and more extreme in order to serve this role.

The second-hand trend of recent years is not only creating new target groups in social media, but is also being taken up by more companies expanding their businesses into the second-hand sector. This includes big players like H&M, AboutYou and Zalando. The marketing strategies usually focus on sustainability by suggesting that buying products from these brands is eco-friendly. While these companies, as driving forces in the fast fashion industry, seem to be concerned with ecological and social sustainability, this development is viewed ambiguously by many consumers. There is often the accusation that sustainability, which is associated with second-hand fashion, is exploited to generate new sales and thus the young generation's awareness is commercialized. This also became clear in the interviews: *“Früher hast du bei Mädchenflohmarkt von anderen Mädels in deinem Alter gebrauchte Jacken gekauft und heute springen die großen Ketten auf diesen Zug auf und scheffeln da richtig Kohle mit diesem Nachhaltigkeitsding.”* The accusation here is that big fast fashion players like Zalando or H&M use the recent second-hand boom to greenwash their corporate image and exploit and monetize the ideals of younger generations.

Closely connected to this is the question of whether second-hand fashion can be seen as a kind of indulgence trade. On the one hand, this happens on an individual level, so that people soothe their conscience by buying some second-hand clothes and thus justify their otherwise less sustainable consumer behavior. Here, a double standard of buying second-hand fashion on the one hand and fast fashion products on the other hand plays a major role. But the phenomenon can also be observed on corporate level. As described above, many fast fashion companies try to shape their corporate identity with small adjustments to their business models, such as a second-hand sub-brand that serves the sustainability image. These are clear indications of corporate greenwashing, for which online second-hand fashion is then used as a door opener (Schmuck et al., 2018; Banerjee et al., 1995).

Finally, this paper raises the question of whether the recent online second-hand boom expresses a new consumer culture. Regarding the technical component, i.e. the online platforms on which most of the consumption takes place, it becomes apparent that large technology corporations like Meta or Alphabet are significantly influencing people's desire to consume. Therefore, a new type of consumption behavior is emerging, resulting in a new form described as techno-capitalism. This new type of consumption also has an impact on the society and its culture and should be considered in the future (Kozinets et al., 2017).

6. Implications and Limitations

Basing on the results, there are several implications. The biggest learning managers can draw from this paper are the different consumption motives as starting points for future strategies. In particular, the strong focus on individualism that drives online second-hand fashion consumptions and subsequent exchanges on social media offer many starting points for future marketing

campaigns. But also purchasing barriers identified in the survey offer information to optimize the existing business model and to better adapt it to the needs of the target group. The influence of the second-hand boom on an emerging consumer culture is also an important characteristic, since companies will be faced with the challenge of integrating changing buying patterns of consumers into their corporate strategy in the future.

This paper also provides some starting points for future research. For example, the connection between the recent second-hand boom and the emergence of a new consumer culture should be further investigated. Therefore, for example, it would be suitable to work out and categorize the differences between the consumption motives for second-hand fashion in the online and offline sector more deeply. Another aspect is investigating the strength of individual consumption motives and the differentiation of the respective subcategories.

The research design of this paper has some limitations and offers potential for improvement in future research. Firstly, the sample size of eight can be seen as too small and for the successful validation of the identified motives the survey should be extended to a larger sample size. In addition, the results are characterized by a certain selection bias, which can be located in the homogeneous sample coming from known socio-topes. In this context, it should also be mentioned that most of the respondents came from the personal environment of the interviewers. This leads to problems regarding implementation and evaluation objectivity. In general, this study offers a first impression of the consumption motives of online second-hand fashion, but the results must be further validated and therefore no generalization is possible.

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