

Exploration of Second-Hand Apparel Acquisition Behaviors and Barriers

By

Kim Y. Hiller Connell

Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS

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Post-consumer textile waste, including garments discarded by the original owner, is an environmental issue. In 2006, 11.8 million tons of textiles entered the United States municipal solid waste stream, with only 1.81 million tons being recovered for recycling, a recovery rate of 15.3% (Environmental Protection Agency, 2007); and on a yearly basis, Americans throw away approximately 68 pounds of apparel and textile products per person (Council for Textile Recycling, 2003).

Although American consumers (primarily through charity and donation programs) do prevent approximately 1.25 million tons of textile products from entering the municipal waste stream on an annual basis, a large portion of discarded clothing becomes solid waste (Council for Textile Recycling, 2003). Furthermore, it is estimated that only 40% of all donated apparel is actually sold as clothing to American consumers (Riggle, 1992). Although some of the unsold products are recycled through the textile recycling industry, many second-hand clothing stores lack the economic and personnel resources or infrastructure to recycle their unsold apparel. In these cases, businesses have little alternative but to send superfluous products to landfills (Steinbring & Rucker, 2003).

Previous research has suggested a number of possibilities for reducing post-consumer textile waste, including increased development of community collection and recycling programs for apparel and textile products (Domina & Koch, 2001; Hawley, 2000) and increasing the sales of post-consumer textile waste being sold through second-hand markets by increasing the number of consumers acquiring apparel through this avenue (Rucker et al., 1995; Steinbring & Rucker, 2003).

Very little research on increasing sales of second-hand apparel and textiles products exists, and all of the studies that have examined it focused on better understanding consumers who are already acquiring second-hand apparel. For example, in their study of garage sale patrons, O'Reilly, Rucker, Hughes, Gorang, and Hand (1984) determined that willingness to buy second-hand clothing was related to the physical closeness of the clothing to the body and that the closer the garment is to the body (such as sleepwear, underwear, and footwear), the less willing consumers are to purchase the garment. O'Reilly et al. also learned that consumer acceptance of these types of garments increases the more an individual is experienced with second-hand apparel acquisition. In another study, Steinbring and Rucker (2003), interviewed thrift shop customers; and the most common barriers these individuals saw to acquiring second-hand apparel were garment cleanliness, missing size information, limited size ranges, poor store organization, and the lack of fashionable garments.

Despite the positive contributions of the above studies, there remains very little understanding of how to increase the number of new consumers acquiring apparel through second-hand sources. Subsequently there is a need for research that focuses on consumers who do not currently acquire a substantial portion of their apparel through second-hand sources and the barriers facing these individuals. This is the knowledge gap this exploratory study begins to fill.

The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers to acquiring apparel through second-hand sources so as to design strategies to foster greater acquisition of second-hand apparel. Based on these objectives, the study's research questions are: (1) To what degree are consumers acquiring apparel from second-hand sources? and (2) What are the perceived barriers to acquiring apparel from second-hand sources?

Data collection for this study occurred through six focus groups conducted with a convenience sample of male and female college students enrolled in apparel design and apparel marketing majors at a four-year, Midwestern university. Each group lasted for approximately one hour and focused on the participants' experiences with second-hand apparel acquisition and their perceptions of the obstacles to acquiring second-hand apparel. The focus groups ranged in size from 5-8 students, with a total of 44 students participating. Among the 44 participants, nine (20.5%) never had and 35 (79.5%) had acquired clothing through second-hand sources. However, just nine out of the 35 participants having had acquired second-hand apparel did so on a regular basis. The rest of the participants stated that they only infrequently (1-2 times per year) utilized second-hand sources for clothing.

Findings of this study suggest that attitudinal barriers serve as obstacles to acquiring second-hand apparel. For example, many of the participants felt it was unpleasant and unhygienic to wear clothes having belonged to someone else and that it was "weird" or "creepy." Some of the participants also spoke of how they believed second-hand clothing was primarily for lower-income people and not intended for people of higher socio-economic levels. Also hindering the participants' acquisition of second-hand apparel was other people's attitudes. A couple of the participants said family members' negative attitudes about second-hand apparel discouraged them. Additionally, participants also felt that because many of their friends were judgmental of second-hand clothing they were reluctant to acquire it on a regular basis. The participants also perceived contextual barriers to second-hand apparel consumption. The contextual barrier most commonly discussed was the environment of second-hand stores, with the participants asserting that they are often unorganized, crowded, and poorly lit. The participants also perceived many second-hand stores as being dirty, smelly, and lacking attention to visual merchandising and store layout. Secondly, the participants also spoke of the actual second-hand clothes as being a contextual barrier. More specifically, the participants stated they were often reluctant to buy second-hand clothes because the clothes were old, in poor condition, and not consistently available in their size. The participants also believed that the majority of second-hand clothes were not very fashionable or trendy and not reflective of their personal style. The third contextual barrier to second-hand apparel consumption discussed by the participants was price. According to the participants, the price of second-hand clothes at some consignment stores is very similar to new clothes at discount stores. Therefore, the participants preferred to buy new clothes since they are not saving any substantial money by shopping second-hand. The final contextual barrier facing the participants in acquiring apparel through second-hand stores was location. Many of the participants did not have second-hand clothing stores in close proximity to their homes and, as a result, found it more convenient to purchase apparel through closer mainstream stores. The results from this study have important implications in terms of increasing consumer patronage of second-hand clothing stores. The barriers uncovered in this study indicate a need to improve the atmosphere of second-hand clothing stores by paying closer attention to product merchandising and store layout, cleanliness, and organization. Not only would this make it less frustrating for consumers to shop in second-hand stores, but improving the environment of second-hand stores would also potentially change consumer attitudes about second-hand clothes—making them a more attractive clothing alternative. Findings from this study also suggest a need to educate consumers about the eco-conscious nature of second-hand clothing consumption. If consumers were more aware of the environmental benefits of second-hand clothes, they might be more willing to accept the limited economic benefits and perceived inconvenience.



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