

Generation Z and Secondhand Clothing in Sri Lanka: Exploring Sustainable Behaviors and Circular Economy Potential

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Abstract: *The environmental consequences of fast fashion have intensified global concern regarding unsustainable consumption patterns in the apparel industry. Secondhand clothing (SHC) has emerged as a practical and scalable response aligned with circular economy principles, yet its adoption remains culturally and contextually uneven. This study investigates the perceptions, motivations, and behavioral patterns of Generation Z consumers in Sri Lanka toward SHC, while evaluating its potential to contribute to sustainable consumption and waste reduction. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative data from a structured survey (n=150) conducted across all 25 districts of Sri Lanka with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews (n=25), analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis respectively, within a Theory of Planned Behavior framework. Findings reveal that although Generation Z demonstrates moderate awareness of sustainability issues, their understanding of SHC as an environmentally responsible practice remains limited, with economic considerations, particularly affordability and cost savings, emerging as the dominant drivers of adoption. Conversely, hygiene concerns, entrenched social stigma, and limited market transparency act as critical barriers, producing a pronounced attitude-behavior gap. Despite these constraints, a growing openness toward SHC is evident, particularly if social perceptions shift and accessibility improves. The study concludes that targeted awareness strategies, market development, and cultural normalization are essential to position SHC as a mainstream sustainable consumption practice in Sri Lanka.*

Keywords: Generation Z; Secondhand clothing; Sustainable consumption; Circular economy; Consumer behavior

1. Introduction

The global fashion industry has experienced rapid expansion over the past two decades, largely driven by the proliferation of fast fashion. While this model has increased affordability and accessibility, it has simultaneously contributed to severe environmental consequences, including excessive textile waste, resource depletion, and greenhouse gas emissions (UNEP, 2023). The urgency of addressing these issues has led to increased scholarly and policy attention toward sustainable consumption alternatives.

Secondhand clothing (SHC) has emerged as a viable and increasingly popular solution within the framework of the circular economy. By extending the lifecycle of garments and reducing the demand for new production, SHC contributes to waste minimization and resource efficiency. Globally, younger consumers, particularly Generation Z, are often perceived as key drivers of sustainable consumption due to their digital connectivity, exposure to global sustainability discourses, and heightened social awareness.

However, the adoption of SHC is not uniform across contexts. In Sri Lanka, secondhand clothing has traditionally been associated with poverty and charitable use rather than sustainability. Such cultural perceptions, combined with limited awareness and infrastructural constraints, have restricted its mainstream acceptance. At the same time, recent economic pressures and the gradual emergence of thrift markets suggest a shifting consumption landscape.

This study seeks to examine Generation Z's perceptions and behaviors toward SHC in Sri Lanka and to evaluate its potential as a mechanism for promoting sustainable consumption and advancing circular economy practices. By

integrating empirical findings with established theoretical frameworks, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainable fashion adoption in a developing country context.

2. Literature Review

Fast Fashion and Environmental Implications: The fast fashion model is characterized by rapid production cycles, low-cost manufacturing, and high consumption turnover. While economically advantageous, this model has been widely criticized for its environmental impact, including significant contributions to global carbon emissions and textile waste (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Secondhand Clothing and the Circular Economy: The circular economy framework promotes sustainable resource use through reuse, recycling, and lifecycle extension (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). SHC directly supports these principles by reducing waste generation and minimizing reliance on virgin materials (Armstrong and Park, 2020). As such, it represents a critical component of sustainable fashion systems.

Motivational Drivers of SHC Consumption: Existing literature identifies economic, environmental, and hedonic motivations as key drivers of SHC consumption. Affordability remains particularly significant in developing economies, while environmental concerns are more prominent in developed contexts (Roux and Guiot, 2008; Guiot and Roux, 2010; Herjanto et al., 2024).

Barriers to Adoption: Despite its benefits, SHC adoption is hindered by multiple barriers, including hygiene concerns,

Volume 15 Issue 8, August 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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perceived social stigma, limited trust, and lack of accessibility (Guiot and Roux, 2010; Sajjad et al., 2021). These barriers are often amplified in societies where secondhand consumption is culturally stigmatized.

Generation Z and the Attitude-Behavior Gap: Generation Z is widely recognized for its environmental awareness; however, a persistent gap exists between pro-environmental attitudes and actual consumption behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). Factors such as social influence, materialism, and financial constraints often mediate this relationship.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and consumer behavior theory. TPB posits that behavior is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Within this study, attitudes correspond to perceptions of SHC as sustainable and economically beneficial; subjective norms capture the social and cultural influences, including stigma, that shape SHC-related decisions; and perceived behavioral control reflects that determine whether intention translates into actual purchase behavior. Consumer behavior theory complements TPB by emphasizing the role of economic, psychological, and social determinants in shaping purchasing decisions. Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for analyzing SHC adoption among Generation Z in Sri Lanka.

3. Materials and Methods

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was adopted to capture both the breadth and depth of consumer behavior. This approach enables triangulation of findings and enhances the validity of the results.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 150 Generation Z respondents across all 25 districts of Sri Lanka. The survey captured demographic characteristics, purchasing behavior, awareness levels, and attitudes toward SHC. Qualitative data were obtained through 25 semi-structured interviews, allowing for deeper exploration of perceptions, motivations, and cultural influences.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify key trends and relationships. Qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and insights.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly maintained, including informed consent, participant anonymity, and confidentiality of responses.

4. Results

Consumer Profile and Purchasing Patterns

The sample was predominantly female (66%), with the majority aged between 20 and 25 years, reflecting strong engagement of young adults in fashion-related behaviors. Clothing purchasing behavior indicated moderate frequency, with 34% purchasing garments approximately every three months and 65% spending less than LKR 5,000, suggesting a cost conscious consumer segment. Table 1 summarizes the key quantitative indicators from the survey.

Table 1: Summary of Key Survey Indicators

Indicator	Finding
Sample composition	150 survey respondents (25 districts); 25 semi-structured interviews
Gender	66% female
Age	Majority aged 20–25 years
Monthly clothing spends	65% spent under LKR 5,000
Purchase frequency	34% purchase clothing approximately every three months
Awareness of fast fashion's environmental impact	50% unaware
Leading motivation: cost savings	33% of respondents
Leading motivation: affordability	31% of respondents
Leading barrier: hygiene concerns	43% of respondents
Preferred purchase channel: physical retail only	57% of respondents
Preferred purchase channel: retail and online combined	31% of respondents

Awareness and Perception of SHC

Awareness of SHC as a sustainable practice was limited; many participants associated it with financial necessity or charitable use rather than sustainability. Approximately 50% of respondents were unaware of the environmental impacts of fast fashion, indicating a significant knowledge gap that directly influences consumer perceptions and limits the adoption of SHC as a sustainable alternative.

Motivations for Adoption

Economic considerations emerged as the primary drivers of SHC adoption. Cost savings (33%) and affordability (31%) were identified as the leading motivators, followed by practicality for casual wear. These findings reinforce the importance of financial factors in shaping consumption behavior in developing economies.

Barriers to Adoption

Hygiene concerns were identified as the most significant barrier, reported by 43% of respondents, followed by social stigma, limited trust, and lack of awareness of SHC retailers. Many participants expressed reluctance to openly engage with SHC due to fear of negative social judgment, underscoring the influence of cultural norms and peer perceptions.

Market Preferences and Accessibility

A clear preference for physical retail stores was observed, with 57% of respondents favoring in-store purchases, primarily due to the ability to inspect product quality and cleanliness, while 31% preferred a combination of retail and

online platforms. Limited awareness of reliable SHC platforms further constrains adoption, particularly in online contexts.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that Generation Z in Sri Lanka demonstrates cautious yet emerging interest in secondhand clothing, largely influenced by economic considerations. Affordability and cost savings are the primary motivators, reflecting the financial constraints faced by young consumers in developing economies (Roux and Guiot, 2008; Herjanto et al., 2024). However, while economic incentives encourage initial adoption, they are insufficient to drive sustained behavior change, particularly when confronted with psychological and cultural barriers.

Hygiene concerns and social stigma emerged as critical impediments. Many respondents expressed reluctance to openly engage with SHC due to negative societal perceptions, emphasizing the influence of subjective norms on behavior, consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Cultural perceptions linking SHC with poverty hinder its normalization as a sustainable fashion practice, mirroring findings from similar contexts in other developing countries (Sajjad et al., 2021; Guiot and Roux, 2010).

The preference for physical retail stores highlights the importance of perceived behavioral control, as consumers seek assurance regarding product quality and cleanliness. Limited awareness of trustworthy SHC platforms constrains the adoption of online channels, reinforcing accessibility as a key factor. These findings align with previous studies that highlight the interplay of economic, psychological, and social factors in shaping Generation Z's purchasing decisions (Herjanto et al., 2024; Mazanec and Harantová, 2024).

Despite moderate environmental awareness, a significant attitude-behavior gap persists. While Generation Z recognizes the potential benefits of SHC, this does not consistently translate into actual purchasing behavior, reflecting a disconnect between pro-environmental attitudes and actions (Carrington et al., 2010). Consequently, the potential of SHC to contribute to a circular economy remains underutilized in Sri Lanka.

To enhance adoption, targeted interventions are necessary. Awareness campaigns emphasizing the environmental and economic benefits of SHC, the normalization of secondhand fashion through social media and influencer marketing, and improved accessibility and trust in SHC platforms can collectively bridge the gap between attitude and behavior. By addressing both cultural and structural barriers, SHC can become a viable mechanism for sustainable consumption and a circular fashion economy in Sri Lanka.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that Generation Z in Sri Lanka exhibits a cautious but emerging interest in SHC, with economic factors, primarily affordability and cost savings, serving as the main drivers of adoption. Despite moderate awareness of sustainability issues, cultural stigma, hygiene concerns, and

limited understanding of SHC's environmental benefits continue to constrain widespread engagement. A significant attitude-behavior gap persists; wherein environmental consciousness does not consistently translate into sustainable purchasing behavior.

Nevertheless, SHC holds substantial potential to support sustainable fashion practices and advance the circular economy in Sri Lanka. By extending garment lifecycles, reducing textile waste, and promoting resource-efficient consumption, SHC can play a pivotal role in mitigating the environmental impact of fast fashion. The findings suggest that targeted interventions addressing awareness, social norms, and market accessibility are essential to unlock this potential and facilitate broader adoption among young consumers.

7. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, reliance on self-reported surveys and interview data may introduce social desirability and recall bias. Second, the use of purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the findings to all Generation Z consumers in Sri Lanka. Third, the study did not explore longitudinal behavioral patterns, which could provide deeper insights into the evolution of SHC adoption over time. Future research could address these limitations by employing larger, randomized samples, integrating longitudinal designs, and using mixed behavioral measures.

8. Recommendations

- 1) Awareness campaigns: Implement educational initiatives highlighting the environmental and economic benefits of SHC, targeting schools, universities, and social media channels.
- 2) Normalization of SHC: Leverage influencers, social media campaigns, and community events to reduce social stigma and promote secondhand fashion as a trendy and responsible choice.
- 3) Market development: Expand both physical and online SHC platforms, ensuring transparency, quality assurance, and accessibility to build consumer trust.
- 4) Policy support: Encourage governmental and institutional policies that incentivize circular economy practices, such as tax benefits for thrift stores, regulations for textile recycling, and sustainability certifications.
- 5) Consumer engagement: Introduce gamified or interactive platforms that engage Generation Z consumers in sustainable fashion practices, such as virtual thrift marketplaces or clothing swap programs.

By implementing these measures, stakeholders, including policymakers, retailers, and educational institutions, can facilitate greater adoption of SHC, reduce textile waste, and strengthen the role of Generation Z in advancing sustainable fashion and circular economy practices in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the 150 survey respondents and 25 interview participants across Sri Lanka's

25 districts who generously contributed their time and perspectives to this study.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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