

Motivations for and against second-hand clothing acquisition

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Abstract

One of the possibilities consumers have for more sustainable clothing acquisition is to select pre-owned products. This article explores consumers' motivations for clothing reuse: why they choose or do not choose to acquire second-hand clothing. First, a taxonomy of motivation categories based on previous studies is presented. This demonstrates that similar properties can be used as arguments both for and against acquisition of second-hand clothing. An analysis of a representative sample of Norwegian consumers shows that both environmental and economic reasons are important for those who take part in informal clothing circulation. Uniqueness and style are more important for those who buy second-hand clothing. Those who do not take part in any of the forms of acquisition of used clothing, use vague and open justifications, as well as contextual aspects; hygiene, health and intimacy. Previous studies have mostly been based on how clothing is reused as part of a market exchange, and therefore the motives have been embedded with a rational choice understanding of consumption. Studies of the private exchange of clothing should also address additional reasons such as routinized practices and established rituals, family ties, feelings, friendship and love. The article concludes with an invitation for further research to explore several possible motivations that are more relevant for private circulation of clothes.

Keywords Reuse; Second-hand clothing; Motivations; Informal exchange;

Introduction

The amount of clothing that people own is growing in Norway (Klepp and Laitala, 2015), as well as in many other rich countries (Fletcher, 2008, Laitala et al., 2017). The large amount contributes to consumers having more clothing than they have time to wear, and therefore

many of these clothes are seldom used, if not completely unused (Laitala and Klepp, 2013). At the same time, the interest and research around recycling and reuse has escalated (Laitala, 2014, Schmidt et al., 2016, Watson et al., 2017, Östlund et al., 2017). So far, the focus has been on the commercial and ideological solutions within a market-based economy (Fisher et al., 2011, Laitala et al., 2012, Morley et al., 2009, Palm et al., 2014). We want to expand the discussion by looking at the whole breadth of the various forms of sharing that exist. Used goods can be acquired through various channels. Our previous research has shown that the amount of clothing acquired through non-monetary private exchange exceeds the amount acquired through market exchange in Norway (Laitala and Klepp, 2017). With private exchange we mean activities where pre-owned clothing gets a new owner without exchange of money, for example through handing down items to friends, family, or other acquaintances, swapping parties, inheriting, gifting, giving away things online and through social media channels, and so on (Clarke, 2000, Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2016). An example of this is given in Figure 1, where the same jacket has been used by four young men within the same family. The jacket has not been exchanged for money since it was bought new in the United States in the 1940s. When referring to market exchange, we mean activities where second-hand clothing is exchanged for money for example in second-hand and vintage stores, used markets, charity thrift-stores, flea markets, online, or in backyard and garage sales.

In this article, we will limit our discussion to the motivation. Why do people choose to acquire second-hand clothing? And what contributes to why others don't? In this context, 'motivation' means the justifications that consumers give when asked about their reasons for behaving in a specific way. Based on previous literature, we will present an overview of possible motivations for and against acquiring second-hand clothing in the Western countries. This is followed by a discussion of what we know about the different types of motivation based on our knowledge of clothing consumption in Norway. We will also discuss whether there are differences between motivations when we compare second-hand clothes received from friends and family with the clothes that are acquired in a market.



Fig. 1 Olve who is wearing the woollen pea jacket, used it during his high school years. The jacket fits best on a young, slim body, and he has now grown out of it. He knew that it was bought by his grand-grand uncle while he was in the United States in the 1930s-40s, and that it was later used by his grandfather during 1960s-70s and his uncle during 1980s. Olve liked to use the jacket because it was old and at the same time good-looking and practical. (Photo: Hilde Bjørhovde, 2012)

Motivation in previous research

Historically, clothes had a high economic value, and the reuse of clothing was common practice (Ulväng, 2012). In today's Western economies, clothing prices have decreased (Cambridge Econometrics, 2015), and now clothing constitutes only between two and five percentage of household expenditure (European Environment Agency, 2014, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Therefore, motivations for acquiring and using second-hand clothing are likely to be based on a larger variety of reasons than earlier, when economy played the most important role.

A prevalent view of consumers' motives for acquiring second-hand clothing has been that they either have economic or hedonic agency-oriented reasons for their clothing choice (Williams and Windebank, 2005). Consumers that are experts on thrift shopping and acquire second-hand products mainly for economic reasons, have often below-average income (Christiansen and Snepenger, 2005), and therefore using the economic argument has a more relevant basis. Economic reasons appear as a more important motivation in studies that concentrate on the general population compared to studies concentrating on vintage or retro consumers. However, recently it has been shown that economic and hedonic agency-oriented reasons often co-exist, although the degree varies within different populations (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005, Gregson and Crewe, 2003, Williams and Windebank, 2005).

Various hedonic motives have been identified in previous studies, including the goal of being unique and original, having a specific style, as well as the shopping experience of treasure hunting for quality clothing at bargain prices (Cassidy and Bennett, 2012, Charbonneau, 2008, DeLong et al., 2005, Ekström et al., 2012, Henriksson and Kechalanlo, 2010). Retro clothing was used to construct individual identity different from the mainstream, but also to show how one belongs to a group of like-minded people (Jenss, 2005).

In addition, many studies point out that consumers buy second-hand clothing to reflect their personal values. These include ethical and environmental aspects, recycling, avoiding mainstream fashion and expression of anti-consumption attitudes (Brace-Govan and Binay, 2010, Roux and Korchia, 2006). These types of justification for obtaining used clothing can be seen as a form of political consumption, which is defined by Micheletti (2003, p. 2) as:

“action by people who make choices of producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practises. Their choices are based on attitudes and values regarding issue of justice, fairness, or non-economic issues that concern personal or family wellbeing, or political assessment of favourable and unfavourable business and government practice.”

Several studies have also pointed out barriers that consumers experience with regards to acquiring second-hand clothing. These include:

- Dirtiness and feeling that it is unhygienic, unpleasant or contagious to wear something that belonged to someone else (e.g. Goffman, 1971, Gregson and Crewe, 2003, Nemeroff and Rozin, 1994).
- Inconvenience of shopping, including lack of stores nearby, poor store organization and layout, dirt and bad odours, poor lighting conditions as well as a feeling of crowdedness (e.g. Fisher et al., 2008, Henriksson and Kechalanlo, 2010, Stephens, 1985).
- Poor availability of clothing, unappealing selection, old, outdated, poor condition, does not last as long, bad odours, limited size ranges, missing size information, not reflective of own personal style, and price similar to new clothing in discount stores (e.g. Gracey and Moon, 2012, Hiller Connell, 2010, Steinbring and Rucker, 2003).
- Stigma or embarrassing to shop at second-hand stores or to wear second-hand clothing, believe it is meant for a lower socio-economic range, and fear of other people’s negative attitudes (family or friends) (e.g. Ekström et al., 2012, Hiller Connell, 2009).

Xu et al. (2014) have looked into perceived values and concerns for purchasing second-hand clothing and compared these among Chinese and American young consumers. Based on existing literature, they used Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) theory of reasoned action and categorized them into the following groups: economic, hedonic treasure hunting, uniqueness, environmental, concerns wearing used products, and subjective norms. These categories are a good starting point, and we have broadened their approach to apply a wider range of motivations.

Baxter et al. (2017) have looked into the interactions that occur when products or services circulate between users (not limited to clothing). They discuss a concept of “contamination”, an altered meaning of how the product is perceived after being contaminated either by the user, another user, the object itself, or some other object. This contaminant can be characterized as real or imagined, and perceived as either positive or negative. Real contaminants include objective, measurable factors such as the odour left in clothing or visible signs of wear. Imagined contaminants occur through mental associations or beliefs, such as added value of things touched by celebrities. Baxter et al. argue that eliminating negative perceptions and interactions with used objects are central to realizing extended product life, and that countering imagined contaminants with logic, is especially difficult.

The studies use different motivation categories. Interestingly, many of these arguments are not exclusive and can be used for or against acquiring second hand clothing. One example is economy. It is possible to argue that second-hand clothing is cheap, but also the opposite that it is not profitable to buy it due to the availability of cheap new clothes. In the next section, we present a taxonomy of motivations where the arguments for and against are included.

Taxonomy for legitimisation

This taxonomy results from the studies previously mentioned, but includes a wider variety of reasons than any of the individual studies has pointed out. We recognised potential additional motivations when we considered the potential negative or positive associations related to each category. Some of the categories are mainly valid for formal markets, such as the shopping experience, while other contextual aspects such as participating at swapping events usually are part of private networks. Most categories apply to both sectors, such as economic and environmental reasons. Figure 2 gives a taxonomy of categories that are used for legitimisation of second-hand clothing acquisition behaviour. The categories give examples of perceived benefits in the arrows pointing right, as well as perceived barriers on the left side.



Fig. 2 Taxonomy for legitimisation of second-hand clothing acquisition behaviour

The taxonomy shows that the same, or at least similar properties, can be used as arguments both for and against acquisition. It also shows that many different arguments are raised which belong to different forms of rational thinking systems. Political consumerism can be seen as especially important in categories related to the environment, ethics and non-wastefulness, but also within the social aspects and reputation when these values are made visible through clothing. The traditional idea of the rational and self-interested economic man (Persky, 1995) is connected to economic reasons and quality, as acquiring pre-owned clothing might provide clothing at minimum cost. However, this motivation may even be closer to Miller's idea of thrift-driven consumption, where the consumers' motivation is based on the moral economy of the home. The aim is to take care of the family with a moral obligation to manage the household's resources with care and not to waste (Miller, 1998). This is a lot less egoistic view than the idea of the economic man. Further, the motivational categories that are not related to the economic capital, such as uniqueness and style as well as fashion and trendiness, can be seen as manifestations of achieved cultural capital, while social aspects and reputation are more related to the collection of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

The overview is mainly built on motivation as it is discussed in studies of reuse of clothing within the pecuniary markets. There are less studies concentrating on the private exchange of clothing and we do not know of any studies that concentrate on the motivations within this sphere. In the following, we will discuss the degree to which these motivations can be relevant also within the private and informal reuse spheres.

Motivation for private circulation

For a number of categories, it probably does not matter if the second-hand clothes are bought or received through private networks. This applies to matters that relate to a garments' style and quality such as uniqueness, fashion and trends, or how they are perceived, such as social aspect and reputation, environmental aspects, or preference. However, the categories hygiene and health, as well as intimacy and transfer of personality, can be thought of differently depending on whether the previous owner is known or not. Belk shows how sharing can be understood differently the closer the family relation is (Belk, 2010). The expression "extended self" is used about this phenomenon (Belk, 1988). Because family is held to be the most immediate layer of extended self after the individual, most sharing occurs within the family. A typical example is mother and child who can share almost anything without it being

considered unhygienic or inappropriate (Belk, 2010). In relation to others' clothes, it is possible that more than the risk of infection remains in clothes. This aspect, the person's "presence" or "imagined contaminant" (Baxter et al., 2017) can be experienced as strong and can make it either easier or more difficult to wear other people's clothing, such as clothing inherited from a deceased family member (Nemeroff and Rozin, 1994).

Economic motivations are likely to be more valid for private reuse because they are outside the pecuniary market. We have researched the importance of economic arguments related to the reuse of clothing in Norway (Laitala and Klepp, 2014). The results showed that only 11% of those who received pre-owned clothes themselves said that this had great economic importance, 57% said little relevance, and 32% said it had no economic impact. However, this was more important for the families who received children's clothing and sports equipment. As many as 36% of those with children who received goods, said this was important for the family economy, 53% said it had a slight effect, and only 9% said it had no importance (N = 527). This result was further supported, as we found a relationship between low personal income and the importance of receiving children's clothing. Children outgrow clothing within a season or two, and therefore need to replace clothing and equipment more often than adults.

Shopping experience and contextual aspects are of course different for the private and the market-based networks. Even the starting-point is different, as within private exchange, the initiative is often taken by a person who wants to give away some selected clothing items, while the customer wishing to acquire second-hand clothing in the market is actively seeking such items. Gift economy does not involve money, but reciprocity is still expected (Mauss, 1970). However, we don't know how this relates to used clothing. It is possible that reciprocity is by virtue of facilitating the giver's bad conscience of getting rid of usable clothing. Another possible reciprocity-benefit, are the reinforced ties between the individuals who exchange clothing, adults and children.

The different motivations that we have discussed here have been studied within a market context and they are as mentioned earlier also inspired by "the rational choice paradigm". However, there are other theories about consumption that may be relevant, also in the understanding of reuse outside the market. One way to understand consumption, is that it is ruled by habits and routines. Once something is established, you continue to do this without contemplating why you do what you do, which is the starting point for social practice theories

(e.g. Reckwitz, 2002). As an example, environmental arguments were important when the waste recycling scheme was established, but people continued to use it as a habit (Thøgersen, 1994). When it comes to used clothing, it is thus possible that the habits and routines are more important for private than for market-based solutions. Therefore, this could be a reason why this has not been included in the studies we have seen. It is likely that private reuse is a well-established and is sustained more out of habit than any specific motivations. This is especially likely for the circulation of children's clothing, where it is common to collect the clothes that the child has outgrown and give them to the next user.

Another possibility is to look for motivations within moral economies, a sharing and gift economy. "Sharing is likely to involve caring and love" (Belk, 2010, p. 720) and both sharing and gift-giving bind the giver and recipient (Belk, 2010, p. 718). He refers here to Durkheim (1964) who argues that the desire for intimacy with others is the most important determinant of human behaviour. Sharing creates and strengthens ties between people. If we take this seriously, we should look for justifications for reuse as a way to strengthen social relations, such as the feeling of love and togetherness between family and friends, or the joy of using or seeing babies and children reuse clothing with good memories from cousins, siblings or your own clothing from your childhood. The used goods take part in mediating human relationships (Marzella, 2015). An exploratory survey of private reuse could reveal how these activities are legitimized through rational justifications such as environmental and economic motivations, routinization acts, or out of love and interpersonal ties.

Method

Quantitative information of Norwegian consumers' experiences and motivations concerning clothing reuse was collected through an internet survey. In order to get a representative sample of the Norwegian population, a target sample of 1000 respondents is set. TNS Gallup uses a pre-recruited random sample of 50 0000 people over 15 years who are willing to participate in surveys. The sample is pre-stratified by age, sex, and education level (TNS Gallup, 2012). In total, 1019 respondents answered the survey.

The final sample is weighted by TNS Gallup corresponding to the distribution of the population. The total weighting is based on a demographic weight (region, gender and age),

which is adjusted for education according to population distribution. The final sample is constituted of 51% men and 49% women, out of which 11% are 18-24 years old, 27% are 25-39 years, 38% are 40-59 years, and the remaining 23% are above 60 years old. The received data was analysed with SPSS software (IBM, USA). The results are mainly given as descriptive statistics.

Comparison between motivations in formal and informal exchange

We have conducted a survey that included many of the motivation categories, especially related to studying the formal markets. Unfortunately, the responding categories did not cover the breadth of all possible motivations, especially relevant for private exchange. In this survey the respondents who had bought or received used clothing could select up to three reasons for acquiring second-hand clothing from a list of options. The distribution of answers is given in Table 1.

Table 1 Consumers' legitimisation for acquisition of pre-owned clothing within formal markets, informal networks and a combination of both sources

	Market exchange – Respondents who only bought (N=98)	Informal exchange - Respondents who only received (N=231)	Combination - Respondents who bought and received (N=75)
Not wasting useable garments	31 %	71 %	49 %
For economic reasons	30 %	23 %	49 %
For environmental reasons	29 %	22 %	44 %
Get them for free	10 %	43 %	38 %
It fits my style	12 %	14 %	21 %
To have something that not everybody else has	16 %	4 %	22 %
To get brand clothes cheaper	17 %	4 %	5 %
There is a larger selection in used than in new clothing stores	9 %	0 %	4 %
Other	10 %	4 %	8 %
Don't know	8 %	2 %	1 %

The answers are not that easy to interpret. Not wasting is much larger within informal exchange, while environmental sustainability is slightly smaller. In the same way, “to get them for free” is more important, while economic reasons are less important. Immediately one might think that these factors were connected. An important interpretation of the table is thus that the motivation for participation in these two forms of exchange means different things for those taking part in the one, the other, or both forms.

Should we interpret these differences further, the table shows that the moral reason, i.e., the discomfort of throwing away usable clothing, is more important than economic reasons and reasons that have to do with style and variety. Comparisons between different age groups and men and women show that the uniqueness of second-hand clothing was a significantly more important reason for female respondents than for male respondents, but there were no significant differences between the genders in the distribution between the other reasons. Non-wastefulness was more important for respondents above the age of 40 than for younger respondents. Uniqueness and getting clothes for free were most important for the 18-24 age-group. There are also likely to be structural differences, because access to used clothing through private exchange is dependent on family ties and the circle of acquaintances.

Barriers

Respondents who had neither received nor bought used clothing during the past two years could also give up to three reasons for not doing so. These reasons are listed in Table 2.

Table2: Barriers for acquiring second-hand clothing (N=605)

	Total	Gender		Age group			
		Women	Men	18-24	25-39	40-59	60+
Prefer new clothing	59 %	58 %	59 %	63 %	59 %	61 %	54 %
Dislike using others' old things	26 %	28 %	24 %	50 %	23 %	22 %	25 %
No second-hand store nearby	20 %	19 %	20 %	13 %	16 %	23 %	19 %
Too much work	13 %	10 %	15 %	17 %	20 %	13 %	7 %
Clothes feel dirty	13 %	16 %	10 %	35 %	17 %	9 %	9 %

Can't find clothes I like	11 %	15 %	8 %	12 %	12 %	9 %	12 %
Better selection in regular stores	10 %	11 %	9 %	15 %	9 %	9 %	11 %
Don't like the smell	9 %	11 %	7 %	15 %	12 %	8 %	5 %
Can't find my size	6 %	8 %	4 %	4 %	7 %	4 %	8 %
No flea-markets nearby	4 %	4 %	4 %	2 %	4 %	3 %	8 %
Too expensive	3 %	4 %	2 %	0 %	7 %	2 %	1 %
Can't find fashionable clothing	3 %	4 %	2 %	4 %	6 %	1 %	2 %
Other	4 %	3 %	5 %	4 %	4 %	4 %	7 %
Don't know	6 %	3 %	8 %	6 %	4 %	8 %	5 %

Men were more likely to prefer new clothing, while women stated several different reasons for their preferences. Almost twice as many women as men said they could not find their size or clothing they liked, or that they thought used clothing felt dirty or smelled. In most cases there were no significant differences between the age-groups, but the respondents under the age of 24 were most likely to say that they did not like to use other peoples' old clothing, or that the clothing felt dirty or smelled. Focus on cleanliness and odours has increased, and especially body odours are considered appalling (Klepp et al., 2016, Shove, 2003). It is possible that this increased focus can be seen in the answers from the young generation.

It seems that the reason for choosing new clothing instead of second-hand is related to certain qualities of new clothing that they appreciate as well as to some properties of used clothing that they do not like. In addition, availability of the clothing is an important aspect for many. The prices seemed to play a minor role.

In response to written comments about the acquisition of clothing, the most often given reason (2%) for not acquiring used clothing was that they already had enough clothing and did not need to acquire, or did not buy clothing, anyway. Some respondents also commented that they had not acquired any used clothing during the past two years, but had done it before.

Opposing motivations

Results presented at previous section are grouped according to the taxonomy that we prepared and presented at the beginning of the article. Figure 3 gives the grouped reasons that consumers gave for buying, receiving or avoiding second-hand clothing. The motivations for or against second-hand clothing consumption were quite similar to the reasons given in previous studies. However, in this study more information was obtained about the differences between consumer groups, in addition to the clothing exchange that occurs in informal networks. Many of the consumers seem to be executing political consumerism as well as economic rational behaviour. These motivations seem to be especially important for the consumers who are actively engaged in informal exchange. Achieving higher cultural or social capital seemed to be more important for customers who were active in the use of formal markets.

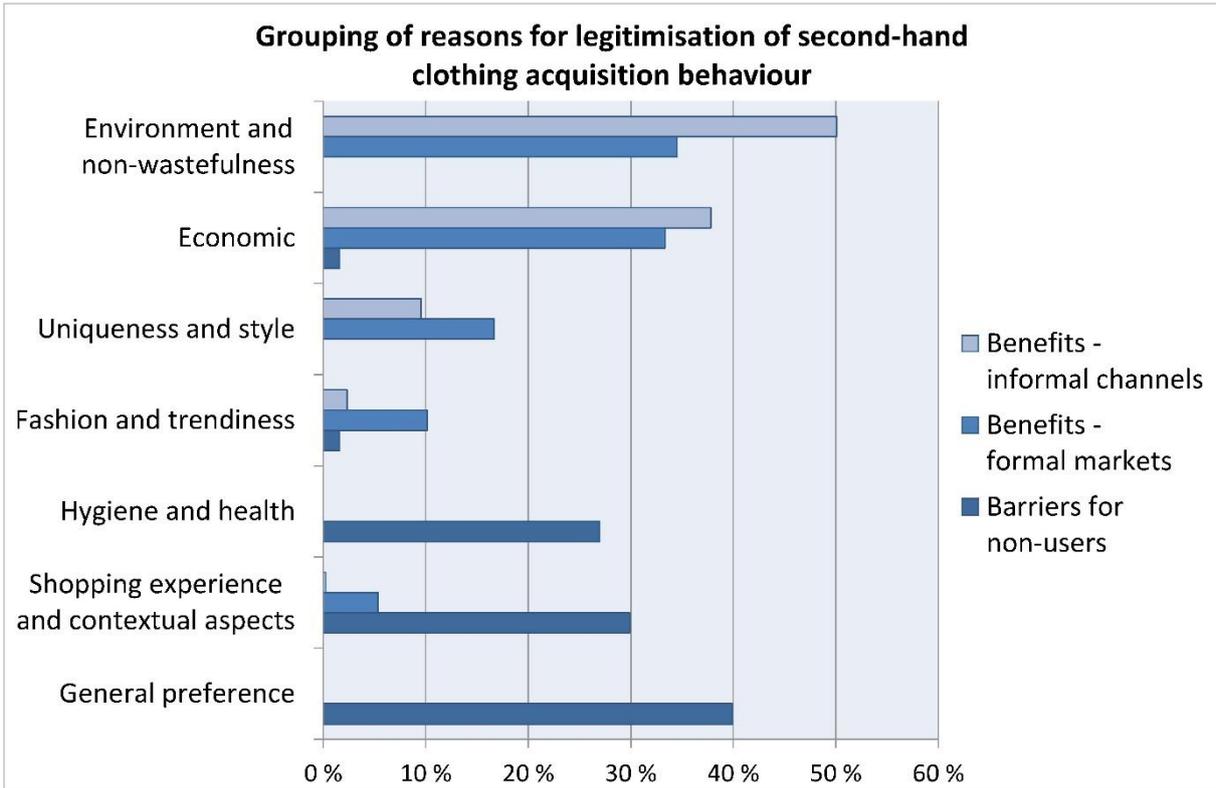


Fig. 3 Benefits and barriers consumers associated with the acquisition of second-hand clothing grouped according to the taxonomy (respondents who used both formal and informal channels are left out of the figure).

The most frequently cited reason for using second-hand clothing was not wasting usable garments. Even though this approach has obvious environmental benefits, these consumers

may be connecting this more to morality, thriftiness and rational consumer behaviour than to environmental benefits.

The second most common reasons for using second-hand clothing were economic, either that the respondents got clothing for free from family or friends, or that the purchasing price was low. Some were also motivated by the possibility of getting brand clothing cheaper. However, economic reasons were also cited as barriers, since the price of new clothing is low (Cambridge Econometrics, 2015). In addition, prices in some vintage shops may not be perceived as low.

Much of the research literature on the use of second-hand clothing emphasizes aspects related to the cultural capital such as uniqueness, style and vintage fashion as reasons for consumers to use second-hand clothing (Brace-Govan and Binay, 2010, Cassidy and Bennett, 2012, DeLong et al., 2005, Jenss, 2005). This may relate to the focus that previous studies have had on consumers who purchase vintage or retro clothing.

Conclusion

Comparison of motivations between those who don't acquire second hand clothing and those who do either within or outside the pecuniary markets showed large variations in the ways they justify their behaviour. Both environment and economic reasons are important for those who take part in informal clothing circulation. Uniqueness and style are more important for those who buy second-hand clothing. Those who do not take part in any of the forms of acquiring used clothing use vague and open justifications, as well as contextual aspects, hygiene, health and intimacy. The imaginary contaminants are likely to differ between the goods acquired through private exchange and pecuniary markets, but there is a lack of knowledge about these motivations. We believe that the differences between groups would have been even larger if we knew more about the motivations for participating in informal clothing exchange, as well as those who do not acquire any second-hand clothing. This study has presented a taxonomy that can be used in future studies related to the motivations.

There is a lot we do not know about the motivation to partake in the reuse of clothing. The studies that have been conducted have been based on reuse of clothing as a commodity exchange and the motives are sought within a rational choice understanding of consumption.

Studies of private exchange of clothing should also address other reasons, such as routinized practices and established rituals, family ties, feelings, friendship and love.

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