

## CONSUMERS' CLOTHING DISPOSAL BEHAVIOUR: WHERE DO WE STAND?

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of current knowledge on consumers' clothing disposal behaviour. This article is based on a literature review on consumers' clothing disposal behaviour, with a review process that resulted of a list of 50 papers. Articles not directly linked with the subject or available for download were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 30 articles. This research presents a holistic and comprehensive view of literature related to consumers' clothing disposal behaviour, and highlights the main gaps within the topic with some suggestions on how to deepen the knowledge on the topic.

**Key Words:** Sustainability, Clothing disposal behaviour, Consumer behaviour, Fashion disposal.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The world is facing an unsettling discussion on environmental problems that are taking its toll on inducing a change in Earth's climate [1,2]. Shifts in both environmental and social aspects have led to many negative outcomes such as global warming, deterioration of ecosystems and biodiversity, social issues, which also resulted in changes in production and consumption behaviours that are no longer sustainable [3-5]. In order to fight the negative influences of unsustainable consumption, academics are now paying more attention to consumer behaviour and, consequently, socially responsible consumption, namely on how people use and dispose products in a way that it diminishes negative effects on both society and the environment [3,6,7]. Unfortunately, the focus of many researchers has been mainly on the consumer behaviour acquisition practices regarding sustainable products, and less attention has been given to the disposal phase [8-10]. However, consumer behaviour concerning disposal of clothes and textiles has major implications regarding environmental concerns [8,11,12]. This is due to the rise of production and consumption of textile and clothes that have recorded fast growing patterns, having a significant influence on the environment [12,13]. Therefore, this article aims at contributing to the development of clothing disposable behaviour research by reviewing the existing literature.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

The review was conducted in a way that all relevant literature considered clothing disposal behavior. Databases such as Scopus and Web of Science were used by typing the search term "cloth\* dispos\* behavior\*" in titles, keywords and abstract [14]. The subject area was filtered for studies in business, management, economics. No restriction was considered on a time period in order to get the longitudinal representation of all articles. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were considered for the analysis, and to broaden the number of articles available in online databases, the search criteria was enlarged to environmental sciences, as it was perceived it may include more valuable information [15]. The review process resulted in

a list of 50 papers. After excluding articles that were not directly linked with the subject or available for download, resulted a final sample of n=30 articles.

### 3. CLOTHING DISPOSAL BEHAVIOUR

The rise of clothing and textile production and consumption has caused significant environmental impacts. Due to the speed of the current clothing consumption new concepts such as fast fashion, emerged. This fast-paced fashion is defined as cheap fashion that is not durable and is rapidly disposed by consumers [8].

The fashion industry is evolving with emerging retailers offering new collections every few weeks at competitive prices, thus profiting from customers' impulsive purchases [16]. When analyzing the sustainable consumption of clothing, there are several stages that need to be taken into consideration, besides the purchase. The post-purchase stage is extremely important and involves different components, such as use, care, and disposal. For the purpose of this review, disposal behaviour refers to the act of getting rid of something, i.e. the end of life stage of the clothing with the present owner, regardless of whether the clothing is discarded as waste or delivered to recycling or reuse [12].

Clothing and textile products can become obsolete and no longer in use mainly because of physical features of the product such as functionality or quality, and because of psychological and social aspects such as new fashion trends, individual lifestyles, desires and similar [12].

Consumers are presented with three options when discarding a product: keep it (saving it or using it in another ways), dispose it temporarily (lending or renting) and dispose it permanently (discard it, give it to someone else, donate it to charity or friends/family, sell it, trade it or abandon it) [17].

The existing studies on disposal behaviour can be organized around four major areas:

i) reasons for clothing disposal; ii) disposal methods, iii) motivations for selecting specific disposal methods; and iv) demographics influences [12].

*i) Reasons for clothing disposal:* The literature suggests that the reasons for clothing disposal may fall into three categories: hedonic, utilitarian, and fashion sensitivity [12].

- Hedonic reasons relate to feeling good about helping [12]. Studies show positive associations related to clothing disposal and recycling, and feeling good in helping other people and the environment [18].
- Utilitarian reasons are related with quality-related issues, which have been identified as the most important factors for clothing disposal, followed by suitability, such as changing body size, weight, and shape [12]. Moreover, previous research shows that consumers tend to dispose their clothes when cleaning the excess of clothing and also because of the lack of storage space, leading to the permanent disposition of textiles [19].
- Fashion Sensitivity reasons relate to consumers in which aesthetic value in fashion objects appears to be intrinsic in their lifestyles. A higher sensitivity is translated in the need to keep up the current fashions, thus creating the need to buy more [12].

*ii) Disposal methods:* When disposing clothing, consumers have different methods for their unwanted fashion [12]. Previous studies [12,20] show that donating and giving the clothes to family/friends appear as the most frequent methods for clothing disposal. However, if the user feels that the clothes are not suited to be worn by others, either due to stains, tears or other damages, they throw it away and do not consider fixing them. Results from another study suggested that, even though consumers do not see any use in a piece of clothing, they may repurpose them and use the textiles for other uses other than wearing, like cleaning rags [12].

A study conducted in U.S. with female adult consumers (+18 years), showed that the most common method of disposal was donating to charity and to secondhand stores, followed by throwing away, giving to family/friends, selling, and repurposing into rags, or into other items [20]. It is also important to highlight that some consumers' characteristics and/or conditions may influence the selection of a specific clothing disposal method. For example, fashion-oriented consumers and non-fashion-oriented consumers manage their clothing disposal differently [12]. Although both consumer types generally donate their clothes to already known organizations, fashion consumers are more prone to reselling, exchanging and using the take-back method (disposing in specific recycling bins provided by the store where the clothes were bought). This is because they are more aware of the textile value and they try to preserve it by disposing it in one of these aforementioned ways [21].

*iii) Motivations for selecting specific disposal methods:* Consumers may have different motivations to select specific methods of clothing disposal. Three types of attributes can motivate consumers to choose a specific clothing disposal method: (i) product attributes, which relates to the physical condition of the item, (e.g. stains, torn, worn-out, inappropriate size); (ii) individual attributes that relates to the user's psychological characteristics (e.g. change in style, how often the clothes are worn, financial needs, desire to buy a new outfit, personal beliefs and habits about clothing disposal); and (iii) situational attributes corresponding to external *stimuli* in disposing clothes (e.g. actions from charity organizations, help in cases of natural disasters, encouragement of family or friends, access to thrift stores and charities) [18].

Regarding disposal motivated by product attributes, studies show that disposal was especially linked to certain types of clothing, such as socks and underwear [22,23]. In addition, it was found that the main reason for disposal is when clothes are too small or too big [24].

Motivations regarding the individual attributes included not liking their clothes, clothes going out of style and lack of interest. Also, selling clothes is very often related to financial motives in addition to not wanting to waste usable products [25].

Previous research has also been focused on investigating situational attributes that motivate specific disposal methods, such as recycling. Overall, studies suggest that convenience may be a decisive factor when deciding to recycle or not, which relates to the availability of collection systems and stations/bins or other infrastructures [11,19,26]. Still on the situation attributes, a study showed that consumers choose to donate to charity because it felt more convenient to them [24].

*iv) Demographics:* Different segments of consumers tend to have specific disposal reasons and/or select specific disposal methods. To date, the majority of studies have attempted to investigate, mainly through surveys, the relationship between demographic characteristics of consumers and their disposal behaviours. When analyzing samples, generally they are usually divided by gender, age and income [12,27].

- *Gender:* Gender distribution in the topic of disposal behaviour is very uneven, with female respondents representing the majority, or even the entire samples [12]. For example, in a study aimed to investigate the antecedents to clothing disposal methods in two countries, had a sample 100% composed of female participants [8]. Another study intended to analyze the relationship between socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and reasons for disposal using trash, charity, and (nonprofit) secondhand stores as clothing disposal methods [27]. It was found that females expressed a more positive association than males on environmental awareness and recycling habits regarding apparel disposal. The gender differences are more

prominent due to the split of responsibilities within the household, rather than the gender itself, as shown in a study that concluded that females influence disposal by assisting males [27].

- *Age*: Age plays an important role regarding the disposal of clothes [12]. When analyzing the disposal habits of clothing, most clothing disposal studies have focused its efforts on younger consumers [8,12,21,28,29]. Moreover, that there is a lack of recycling awareness and interest among high fashion sensitivity consumers. Some of them dispose of their clothes by exchanging them with other people [24]. Additionally, in a study it was reported that young consumers' habit of clothing disposal usually includes donating, reselling and exchanging, which is in turn influenced by clothes' fashion and trend, physical state and socially responsibility [18]. Another study, consumers with ages between 18 and 30 years, showed that the main disposal method is giving to family and friends. As for older consumers, the main disposal method is to give clothes for charities [30],
- *Income*: This factor plays an important role on the disposal method, as households with lower income opted to give to family and friends, using it as rags and repurpose it [20]. The lower-middle income households donated more to secondhand stores and the middle income showed the highest percentage for trash disposal. Finally, the highest income households showed to be the group that donates the most and also opts for selling to stores [20].

#### 4. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study attempted to contribute to the scant literature on consumers' clothing disposal behaviours. Overall, it is showed that consumers' reasons to dispose of clothing may fall into three categories: hedonic, utilitarian and fashion sensitivity. When disposing of clothes, consumers have different disposal methods: keep it, dispose it temporarily and dispose it permanently. Studies suggest that donating and giving clothes to family/friends seems to be the most frequent disposal method. Also, majority of studies have attempted to investigate the relationship between certain demographic characteristics of consumers and their disposal behaviours, through surveys. Therefore, there is still a lack of qualitative studies, and a deeper analysis on other demographic characteristics such as education and proximity to recycling bins/facilities.

Samples should not be focus only on females nor younger consumers, and include males and more wide-range age participants, thus allowing the results to be generalizable for complete populations regarding the disposal behaviour.

Also, from the literature, there is a clear lack in understanding the clothing disposal behaviour, specially, all the different motivations behind that behaviour. Academics should focus on understanding the disposal behaviour by conducting more experimental studies, such as wardrobe audits, focus groups, in-depth interviews, in order to grasp in-depth the 'drivers' that lead to disposal. Possible outcomes in producing a more in-depth knowledge on the topic of disposal, could result in synergies with practitioners, by assisting the development of marketing strategies, including the development of social marketing campaigns to foment behaviour change and guidelines to help practitioners increase the public's environmental and social awareness. It is an emergent topic that needs more attention from researchers, due to its potential to produce real changes in the world.

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