

What impacts consumers to value secondhand apparel? A consumer theory study background

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*Keywords:* Secondhand fashion, Commodity theory, Extended-self theory, Need for uniqueness

Background: Secondhand consumption has had its ups and downs throughout the history. Although secondhand products are gaining popularity, still some consumers refuse to shop these products mostly because of the embarrassment to use products that used to be associated with poverty (Ferraro et al., 2016). Online shopping is a way to avoid the embarrassment because no one observes the consumers while shopping online, as a result secondhand online market is growing even faster than retailers (Martinko, 2019). Secondhand products are considered to be fashionable, fun, unique, nostalgic, affordable, and environment-friendly (Bae & Yan, 2018; Fernando et al., 2018; Padmavathy et al., 2019). The online shopping and beforementioned product aspects encourage consumers to shop secondhand online. Most previous studies focused on the economic and functional values of secondhand products. The symbolic values of such products have not been studied much. The symbolic value of a product depends on the identity of its owner. Used apparels are specific in this regard because their ownerships transfers between different individuals. It is not clear how the changes in ownership can impact the symbolic value of a product. To close this gap, the current study aims to develop a framework to examine the consumers' identity and self-concept related characteristics' impact on symbolic value. By checking the online secondhand stores, we can realize that the products sold on online secondhand stores are usually one of a kind, sold in one size, and sometimes discontinued; therefore, these products are considered to be unique.

Theories & Conceptual Framework: In order to develop the conceptual framework, perceived uniqueness, perceived contamination, and their impact on secondhand products' symbolic value are adopted. The independent variables are explained through perceived value, commodity theory, and extended-self theory. In order to precisely examine the beforementioned variables' effect, consumer's need for uniqueness and the level that the consumer perceives a belonging as an extension of self is included in the model to see whether this characteristic moderate the relationships. Perceived value of a product can be defined from different perspectives namely social, emotional, quality, and price (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). In the retail context symbolic value is the meaning associated with the consumption and is attached to user's self. A product has symbolic value when it conveys positive consumption meaning in addition to its functions and attaches a significant value to the consumer's self (Rintamäki et al., 2007). Commodity theory describes the impact of scarcity on human psychology and states that the scarcity of any product influences its value, in a way that the more unavailable a product is the more valuable it would be (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). People appreciate the scarcity because it gives them the pleasure of being distinct from other people. The good feelings of distinctiveness encourage people to seek for ways of being unique and obtaining unique products help them express their

identity as a unique person (Lynn, 1991). The extended-self theory originates from the human and object relationship. An individual's possessions are representatives of self and are considered to be an extension of one's personality. Some products such as clothes are closest to the body and are considered as the second skin, so they are considered as a powerful identity representative and extended self (Belk, 1988; Solomon, 1986).

Literature Review & Hypotheses: The perceived uniqueness of a product is defined as the consumer's evaluation of the extent to which a product is considered different from other products in the category (Tian et al., 2001). According to the commodity theory, such uniqueness makes the product valuable for the consumer. Consumers perceive secondhand clothes unique due to the authentic and vintage attributes of some of the products in secondhand markets (Jenß, 2004). Searching for unique products online and finding it is joyful for consumers (Yan et al., 2015). *H1: Perceived uniqueness of secondhand apparels on the online store positively predicts the products' perceived symbolic value.* The need for uniqueness theory extends the commodity theory and emphasizes that people aspire to be different from others at a moderate level and being similar to others makes them disappointed (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Since objects represent an individual's self, an object represents the degree of the individual's need to be unique. People with a higher level of need for uniqueness value the unique products more than people with a lower level of need for uniqueness (Lynn & Harris, 1997). Consumers with a higher need for uniqueness assume the used apparel products as a tool to represent their unique identity and distinguish themselves from other consumers (Roux & Guiot, 2008). These consumers value secondhand products because of the positive impact on their unique identity. *H2. Consumer's need for uniqueness moderates the relationship between the perceived uniqueness and perceived symbolic value. The relationship under the low level of need for uniqueness is weaker, compared to the relationship under the high level of need for uniqueness.* On the other hand, in addition to the positive effect of perceived uniqueness, perceived contamination of secondhand products has negative impact on the symbolic value. Most research on used clothes discusses the negative effect of contamination from the hygienic standpoint (Yan et al., 2015). The contamination in this study is the symbolic contamination which is explained by the theory of consumer contamination. The theory discusses how the proximity between an object and an individual results in disgust and negative evaluation of the product. The disgust is higher when the product is touched by more people or for a high period of time (Argo et al., 2006). In a qualitative study, Roux (2006) resulted that consumers believe the previous owner's identity extends to the cloth, the transferred identity contaminates the cloth, and most of the consumers do not consider such morally contaminated products valuable enough. *H3. Perceived contamination negatively impacts the secondhand product's perceived symbolic value.* Not all consumers have the same concerns about the contamination. Consumers who have greater perceptions that a cloth is an extension of self believe that used cloth is more contaminated because it is a part of the previous owner (Roux, 2006). They assign more negative value to the products contaminated by the prior owner. So, the level of self-reported extended-self as a personality aspect will moderate the relationship between perceived contamination and the secondhand product value. *H4. Self-reported level of extended-self moderates the negative*

*relationship between perceived contamination and perceived symbolic value. The negative relationship under the low level of extended-self is weaker, compared to the relationship under the high level of extended-self.*

**Discussion:** From the theoretical perspective, the study adds new knowledge to secondhand consumption literature by scrutinizing the consumer self-concept and the associated value. The study provides a basis to understand how consumers assign meaning and value to secondhand apparel. The study contributes to commodity and extended-self theories by precisely analyzing the consumer behavior from these theories point of view. Online secondhand retailers provide a platform for consumers to sell and buy used clothes from all over the country or even all over the world. The product value leads businesses to segment and target consumers more efficiently. This helps the brands to recognize the changes in the market and improve their marketing strategies (Rintamäki et al., 2007). The results of the study provide retailers with exclusive and detailed information about consumers and their perception of used apparel.

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