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Exploring UK Consumers Attitudes Towards Fashion Rental

Karina McGowan, Eileen Conlan, Danielle Moran

The authors are currently involved in a multi-stakeholder knowledge transfer partnership (KTP). The KTP scheme is a flagship open innovation program from Innovate UK helping businesses to innovate and grow (Innovate UK, 2022). The KTP is focused on the acceleration and adoption of circular business models in the fashion industry including rental, resale and repair. It involves 3 academics from a UK university, the UK's largest 3rd party logistics provider for fashion rental and resale, and a KTP associate.

In 2020, Mukendi and Henninger explored the 'spectrum' of fashion rental. Their qualitative study began to uncover consumer perspectives on fashion rental. Their findings indicated that considerations around fashion rental tend to be more utilitarian with functional benefits motivating consumers to adopt. This research built on the work of authors such as Armstrong et al (2016) who suggested that early benefits of initiatives like fashion rental included the ability to reduce excess consumption, becoming more knowledgeable about personal style and fit, and enhancing creativity with items already owned. Brydges et al (2020) in line with Arrigo (2021) considered fashion rental from the perspective of the 'platform economy' providing a business model analysis with regards to the consequences of the pandemic and the challenges faced by these platforms at that time. In recent times, however, fashion rental platforms have reported strong growth as lockdown restrictions eased (Chen, 2021). When lockdowns diminished consumer interest in occasion wear, rental platforms began exploiting different revenue streams (Dirvanauskas, 2021) namely white-label subscription services whereby they began offering the use of their technology to the wider fashion market ensuring that brands and retailers without their own rental infrastructure could offer it as an option (Dirvanauskas, 2021). This provided new ways for consumers to access rental and increased the rental offering available to the UK market – moving beyond what was primarily occasion wear.

The KTP case organisation, established in 1997, initially specialised in the rental of highland wear in Scotland. The project has focused on developing new marketing strategies as they have strategically repositioned themselves and entered the UK fashion rental and resale markets. Today, they manage the entire reverse logistics process enabling their partners to enter the circular economy. To support the business in the acquisition of new B2B partners interested in offering subscription-based rental, the project has been underpinned by ongoing consumer research regarding attitudes towards fashion rental.

Data collection has focused on issues including current consumer behaviours in fashion, awareness of and experiences with fashion rental, future intentions to rent, perceived value of fashion rental, awareness of environmental impact, drivers and barriers to adoption, associations, and preferences between one-off and subscription rentals. This has allowed for consideration with regards to the optimal model and has enabled consumer profiling with regards to the market potential of particular consumer segments. Data collection at present has been quantitative in nature but is currently being extended into focus groups. Findings could be discussed within the workshop.

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