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I do it (also) for me: a qualitative study on the identity aspects underlying consumption on second-hand fashion apps

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Abstract

The topic of sustainable consumption assumes a central importance in the fashion sector, since it is one of the industries that has the most negative impact on the environment. Considering the latest buying trends, this study aims to investigate in depth which identity aspects play a significant role in motivating the purchase of second-hand fashion products on apps. We conducted an exploratory investigation aimed at identifying the main identity aspects underlying this specific type of purchase. In-depth interviews were conducted, and the data were analyzed from an identity-based motivation perspective. Findings showed that there is a link between sustainable consumption and identity, as both personal and social aspects linked to identity motivate consumers to purchase sustainably. In other words, they can be driven not only by social motives (collective action, pro-environmental engagement, altruism, and sharing) but also by personal ones (self-expression, utilitarianism, hedonism, and personal beliefs). Limitations, insights for further research, and managerial implications are also discussed in the paper.

Keywords

Sustainable consumption, identity, identity-based motivation theory, fashion industry, second-hand apps.

Introduction and Objectives

Recently, sustainability has become an emerging megatrend in all sectors due to the increasing number of environmental issues, making the need for a more sustainable life inevitable (Ianole et al., 2020; Lubin & Esty, 2010). Achieving environmental sustainability is today a crucial issue for all types of companies. In particular, there are sectors in which this need is even more urgent: the fashion industry falls into this category, since it is one of the industries that has the most negative impact on the environment globally (Pal & Gander, 2018; Vehmas et al., 2018).

The apparel sector has been confronted with several sustainability challenges (e.g., usage of raw materials, natural and synthetic fibres, excess consumption of water and energy, products of chemicals, harmful by-products, employment of child labour, etc) and today's consumers are more aware of such sustainability challenges, resulting into increasingly changing habits and lifestyle in terms of fashion consumption (Badani et al., 2005; Sengupta & Sengupta, 2021).

Consumers and companies are gradually moving towards circular fashion consumption practices, which encompass activities such as gifting, lending, sharing, swapping, renting, leasing, and second-hand use (Camacho-Otero et al., 2019). This document will particularly take into account the purchase of second-hand fashion. Second-hand products – and more specifically, used fashion products – are reused items with the consumers as both buyers and sellers (Machado et al., 2019). In fact, consumers are increasingly aware of their behavior and are starting to pay attention to how to dispose of their used clothing and to reduce fashion consumption. As a result, the second-hand clothing industry has increased in recent years (Gopalakrishnan & Matthews, 2018; Xu et al., 2014). One of the ways to dispose of used clothing is by selling through internet platforms (Albinsson and Perera, 2009; Xu et al., 2014), such as online apps or dedicated websites.

Scholars have investigated consumer's motivations in second-hand fashion shopping (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2016; Guiot and Roux, 2010; Xu et al., 2014), but the drivers behind the purchase of second-hand clothing through online platforms have not been studied so far. Besides, the motivations for second-hand shopping are constantly changing, especially in the last few years: while in the past second-hand clothing was mainly purchased to save money, nowadays the drivers include ethical concerns and

moral values as well as self-expression needs (Herjanto et al., 2019). Sustainable consumption behaviors appear to be heavily affected by the individual's identity construction process (Herjanto et al., 2019). For this reason, relationships between identity and sustainable behaviors have received significant scholarly attention. For example, Shaw and Shiu (2002) demonstrate the usefulness of the self-identity concept (how we see ourselves) as a predictor of intentions to behave sustainably. Studies have furthermore found relationships between social identity and sustainable behaviors (Bartels and Onwezen, 2014; Prati et al., 2017). From this perspective, it could be interesting to investigate which identity aspects are involved in the motivations for buying second-hand fashion on online apps and what role they play.

Research Question

Considering the aforementioned premises, the aim of this study is to investigate in depth which identity aspects play a significant role in motivating the purchase of second-hand fashion products on apps.

Conceptual Framework

When it comes to fashion consumption, existing literature shows how it is intrinsically linked to the concept of self and social identity (e.g.: McNeill & Venter, 2019). Fashion items allow consumers to develop, express and confirm their identity socially (Belk, 1988). Different studies showed how consumers make use of their consumption choices in order to construct and express their own identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) as well as perceive the identity of others (Dittmar, 1992). Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) argue that consumers take advantage of the consumption of products for their identity project. Fashion, in particular, is frequently used as a means of self-expression. Niinimäki (2010) argues that clothing is close to our inner self and values, which therefore can be expressed or hidden through clothing. Clothing can be used for several identity-related purposes: to cohere to the environment (Simmel, 1957); to distinguish oneself from others (McNeill & Venter, 2019), to answer a need for uniqueness (Lang & Armstrong, 2018), and to enable participation in social groups (Niinimäki, 2010).

In the context of sustainable fashion, such as second-hand clothing, Niinimäki (2010) claims that there is no exception. Even better, the construction of an identity is mentioned as one of the deeper reasons for consumers purchasing sustainable clothing (McNeill & Venter, 2019; Niinimäki, 2010). This study will explore the identity aspects related to the purchase of second-hand clothing on apps. To do this, the identity-based motivation theory (IMB theory) perspective will be used (Oyserman, 2009). According to this theory, the way people think about themselves ('as individuals' or 'as group members') influences their personal goals and strategies to reach them (Oyserman, 2013). IBM theory defines identities as personal or social (Oyserman, 2009). Personal identity refers to the way people think about themselves as individuals, their own traits, characteristics, values and goals (Oyserman et al., 2009). In contrast, social identity refers to how people think about themselves as a part of a group, its shared traits, characteristics, values and goals through connections as group members or social relationships (Oyserman et al., 2009).

As stated by this theoretical model, the motivational pull leads to identity-congruent action. Therefore, starting from the assumption that sustainable consumption choices are guided by motivation, and that it is consistent with identity assumptions, this study wants to investigate what are the identity aspects that come into play in the specific context of second-hand shopping on online apps. In fact, to date, there are studies in the literature that investigate identity effects on generic sustainable consumption (e.g.: Perera, 2014; Pinto et al., 2014), but only few studies have focused on collaborative fashion consumption (e.g.: McNeill & Venter, 2019). However, none of them focus on the specific context of buying second-hand fashion products on online apps, through the lens of the dual nature of identity (personal vs. social) highlighted by the IBM theory.

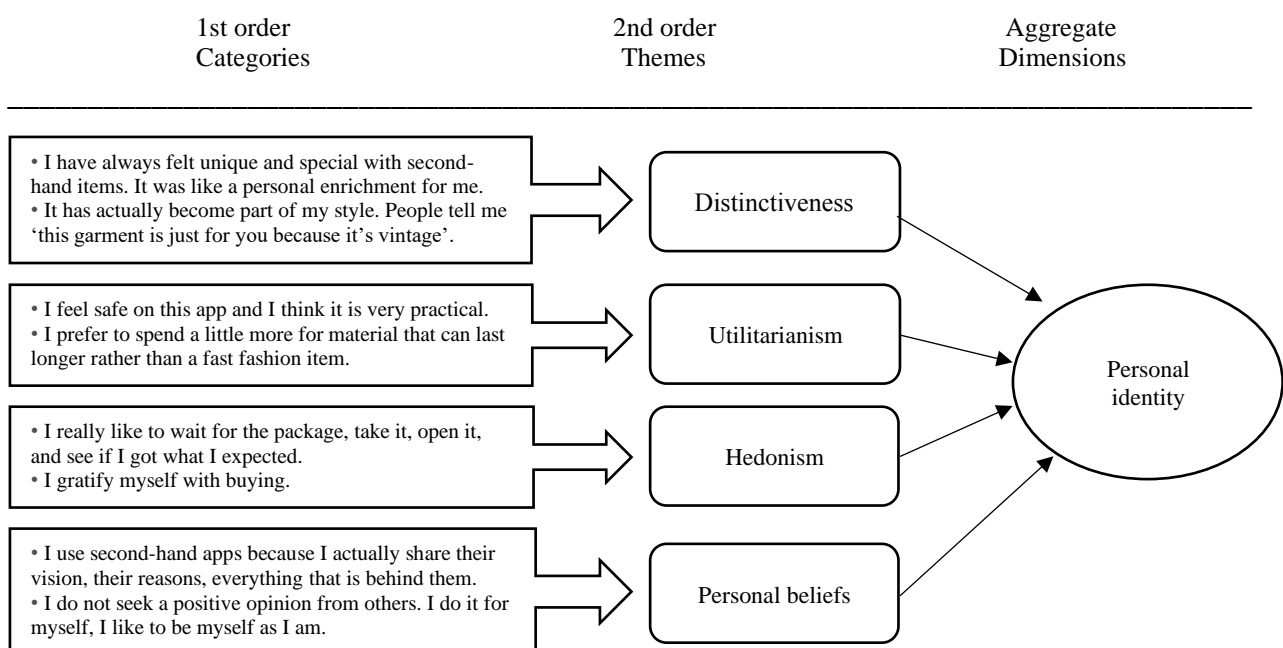
The goal of this study is to fill this gap by conducting an exploratory investigation aimed at identifying the main identity dimensions underlying this type of purchase. We have chosen the purchase of second-hand fashion on online apps as the specific context of this study because the latest buying trends and the urgent need for circularity in this industry (Styvén & Mariani, 2020) prove this to be the ideal setting for the analysis.

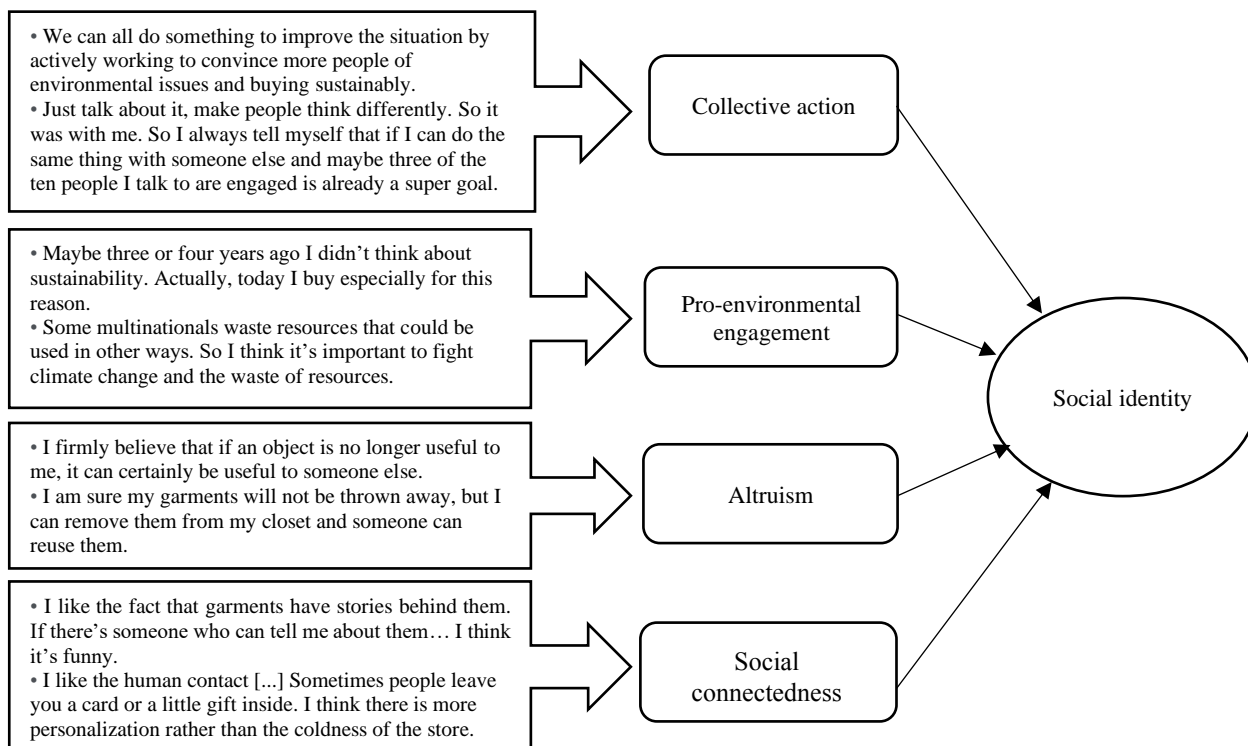
Method

This qualitative research uses an interview-based approach to understand which identity aspects play a significant role in motivating consumers of second-hand clothing on online apps. We decided to use an interpretive methodology in order to gain a deeper understanding of consumer identity expression processes. The guideline for the interviews was created based on previous studies (Perera, 2014; Saraiva et al., 2020). We chose to conduct one-to-one interviews and not focus groups, because interviewing people in a group setting could impact participants who share culturally expected points of view or socially desired responses (Bell et al., 2019), especially considering the subject matter. Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted (84% women, average age = 27.8; SD = 6.71). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and data analysis of the transcripts was carried out according to the three-step process of Gioia et al. (2013). This approach has been largely used in the study of identity and sustainable behavior (Garnelo-Gomez et al., 2022; Laari-Salmela et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2020).

Findings

Following Gioia et al. (2013) approach, a myriad of informant terms, codes, and categories have emerged in the 1st-order analysis. In the second step we gave those categories labels or phrasal descriptors, focusing particular attention on nascent concepts that did not seem to have adequate theoretical referents in the existing literature or existing concepts that emerged due to their relevance to a new domain (Gioia et al., 2013). Then, we have further distilled these 2nd-order themes into ‘aggregate dimensions’. This three-step process gave us the basis for building the data structure below:





The collected data suggested that consumers' identity-based motivation to buy second-hand fashion on online apps is related to eight different identity aspects. Four main aspects are linked to the personal identity dimension: distinctiveness, hedonism, personal beliefs and values, and utilitarianism. The other four main aspects are related to the social identity dimension: pro-environmental engagement, collective action, altruism, and social connectedness. Distinctiveness refers to the consumers' need to communicate their uniqueness (Sedikides & Hart, 2022) through the second-hand fashion purchase, which is considered a way to find unique pieces capable of defining one's identity and differentiating it from others through self-expression:

'It has actually become part of my style. People tell me "This garment is just for you because it's vintage".' (Respondent 23, age 26, female)

Hedonism is linked to the pursuit of well-being through the search of pleasure and happiness (Kahneman et al., 1999). In this case, the sustainable purchase on online apps is motivated by identity aspects linked to the gratification and enjoyment of the individual:

'I really like to wait for the package, take it, open it, and see if I got what I expected.' (Respondent 19, age 36, female)

'I gratify myself with buying, I associate buying with my gratification.' (Respondent 17, age 29, female)

Personal beliefs and values (such as responsibility, love for nature, respect, minimalism) are at the core of one's moral identity (Hitlin, 2003). For consumers, being consistent with their own beliefs and values is central for defining their personal identity (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016):

'I use second-hand apps because I actually share their vision, their reasons, everything that is behind them.' (Respondent 12, age 28, female)

'I do not seek a positive opinion from others. I do it for myself, I like to be myself as I am.' (Respondent 6, age 20, female)

Utilitarianism involves a focus solely on the total amounts of utility at stake in various outcomes (Shoemaker, 1999). Findings showed that consumers buy second-hand fashion on online apps also

for purely selfish reasons, such as the convenience of shopping from home without going to stores, the economic convenience, the best quality of the garments, etc. This identity aspect translates into doing what is best for oneself, considering only one's own interest.

'I feel safe on this app, and I think it is very practical.' (Respondent 13, age 23, female)

As regards the main aspects related to the social identity dimension, pro-environmental engagement refers to motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and actions that stimulate individuals to engage in activities in favor of the natural environment (Bouman et al., 2020). In this case the identity aspects underlying the motivation to purchase concern the social dimension, and consumers' choices reflect the protection of the environment:

'Some multinationals waste resources that could be used in other ways. So, I think it's important to fight climate change and the waste of resources.' (Respondent 24, age 27, male)

Collective action is instead connected to the sense of belonging to a community, which leads to a sense of responsibility towards the community and the conviction that together we can make a difference (Ardoin et al., 2022):

'We can all do something to improve the situation by actively working to convince more people of environmental issues and buying sustainably.' (Respondent 2, age 27, male)

'Just talk about it, make people think differently. So, it was with me.' (Respondent 7, age 29, female)

Altruism is an identity aspect related to the social dimension and it is defined as a behavior aimed at benefiting others (Soosai-Nathan et al., 2013). It reflects the expression of an identity component that cares about others and thinks about their needs.

'I firmly believe that if an object is no longer useful to me, it can certainly be useful to someone else.' (Respondent 7, age 29, female)

Finally, social connectedness alludes to the experience of belonging and relatedness between people (Bel et al., 2009). It concerns an interpersonal dimension that gives relevance to the connections with others. These connections can be both concrete (such as the relationship between buyer and seller) and symbolic (like the connection between old and new owner).

'I like the fact that [garments] have stories behind them. If there's someone who can tell me about them... I think it's funny.' (Respondent 15, age 24, female)

'I like human contact [...] Sometimes people leave you a card or a little gift inside [the package]. I think there is more personalization rather than the coldness of the store.' (Respondent 19, age, 36, female)

In general, the results also show a consciousness-raising on consumer's behalf. As many studies show (Vehmas et al., 2018), consumers have begun to become increasingly aware of the impacts of their purchasing choices. What emerges from the interviews is that this acquired sensitivity often goes hand in hand with a path of personal growth, which gradually leads consumers to align consumption motivations based on personal identity aspects and those based on social identity aspects.

'A few years ago, as soon as I saw something I liked, I bought it. Now I try to be more careful. I try to buy only what I need. I try to think about it more before buying a garment.' (Respondent 21, age 24, female)

'Along the way, I have become more aware that I have lived in an age where consumerism, waste and disposable mentality have caused huge disasters and I am trying to do what I can to change direction. I would like to help improve - if possible - to preserve and improve our environment. I don't want to destroy it anymore.' (Respondent 20, age 56, female).

Thanks to this acquired awareness, consumers try to reconcile both identity aspects (personal and social) in their consumption choices: for example, they do not buy just to feel unique or just because they care about the environment, but they begin to conceive these concepts together. Consumers also seem to be aware of this new consciousness, describing sustainable consumption as something that involves the relationship with oneself and, at the same time, also the relationship with society:

'I feel much more comfortable with the lifestyle I have acquired in the last three years. And I feel much better in my relationship with society as well. I've learned that we don't always have to overdo it, be the ones we're not, follow the trends. I think I have reached this awareness because I am becoming more adult.' (Respondent 15, age 24, female)

'My whole mindset and my approach to life in general have changed. And consequently, my way of purchasing, recycling and reusing clothes'. (Respondent 12, age 28, female)

Finally, participants talk about the transition to more responsible consumer behavior as a 'holistic' event (*'It is a situation that becomes holistic'*, Respondent 9, age 32 female), which involves their wholeness, their mentality and their approach to life. A dimension, therefore, where personal and social identity aspects merge together.

General discussion and conclusion

This research shed light on the identity aspects that play a significant role in motivating the purchase of second-hand fashion products on apps. The findings hint that, as previously suggested by IBM theory, there is a link between sustainable consumption and identity.

In particular, social identity aspects are present as much as personal ones: sustainable products are not purchased only for the environment or for others, but also for oneself. In fact, on the one hand some identity aspects are linked to feeling part of a community and the sense of responsibility that derives from this sense of belonging, while on the other hand some aspects are related to the individual (i.e., the need to express uniqueness and distinctiveness, the consistency with one's personal beliefs, as well as selfish utilitarian needs).

From a consumer behavior perspective, the results indicate that there may be a change in consumption orientations. Consumers are more and more aware of their consumption choices due to a gradual consciousness-raising of one's impact on the planet and an attempt at a responsible approach to consumption. Future consumption choices might be driven by an even stronger effort to reconcile motivations linked to personal identity aspects and motivations linked to social identity aspects.

Limitations and Further Research

This exploratory work, based on qualitative methods, was intended to stimulate further research on how to better understand sustainable consumer practices on the basis suggested here. Although this study provides interesting insights, some major limitations should be mentioned. First, this research was conducted entirely in Italy, which has particular cultural features. Future research should extend the spectrum of identity aspects involved in sustainable fashion consumption by undertaking an international study. Second, this study focuses only on the context of second-hand fashion consumption on online apps, limiting the applicability of the findings to a very specific field. In terms of future research, it would be relevant to examine a different type of sustainable consumption in the fashion field (e.g.: renting, swapping) to observe if the identity aspects involved are the same or differ.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial point of view, this study offers implications on how to improve marketing strategies in the sustainable fashion sector. The purchase of second-hand fashion on apps is not only

about the social dimension of identity but also the personal one. It is a choice that is made not only for the environment or for others, but also for oneself. It is important in marketing promotion to be able to balance these two dimensions and the different aspects related to them. In particular, it is important to communicate effectively the many opportunities that lie behind a sustainable choice for consumers. Communication campaigns could evoke both collective and individual objectives, also leveraging the emerging consumers' awareness.

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