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Sustainable Citizenship**

Exploring the Relation between Sustainable and Second-hand Fashion and the Self

Master Thesis

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“In an ideal world, what would be your dream job?”

“I do not know if it exists, but I would love to be able to combine my academic knowledge with my passion for photography and fashion”

These quotes represent a conversation with my friends about our futures. Without being aware of it, in my answer I represented the core of this thesis.

Disclaimer: This paper has been written from an anthropological perspective, exclusively for academic purposes and does not aim to undermine the reputation of people or corporations mentioned.

Introduction

The fashion industry is the world's second largest industry and also one of the most polluting industries as it is responsible for 10% of total global carbon emissions, and therefore contributes to a major share of environmental degradation (European Parliament News 2020). Nowadays, the fashion industry is largely dominated by fast fashion brands that produce their clothes at a fast pace, following the latest fashion trends and by using low-quality materials in order to release the garments in the market at an affordable price. The emergence of fast fashion can be seen as a direct consequence of the process of globalization during the 80s and 90s, where consumers were introduced to transnational corporations and mass media (Ledezma 2017, 72). This caused a massive demand on trendy and ready-to-wear clothes, as opposed to handmade and *haute couture* fashion. For brands and companies to keep up with this speed while maintaining high levels of profit, retailers found themselves opting for the cheapest and quickest manufacturing processes, which often resulted in moving their production sites to countries with lower material and labor costs (Ledezma 2017, 75). Sustainable fashion or slow fashion, can be regarded as the contrary concepts to fast fashion, and these terms first emerged in the 1960s when consumers became conscious of the numerous environmental impacts that the garment industry was causing, and therefore demanded a change in its practices (Henninger et al. 2016, 400). Within sustainable fashion, two differences can be made between ethical clothing and eco-clothing. Ethical clothing refers to clothes that take into consideration the impact of the manufacturing process both on the environment and the factory workers. On the other hand, eco-clothing refers to all pieces that have been produced by using more environmentally friendly processes or recycled textiles (Lundblad and Davies 2016). At first, sustainable fashion did not gain much popularity, however, during the last decades, sustainability has appeared into the fashion agenda as a new powerful driver, as well as a marketing tool, that aims to transform the current manners of consumerism into a more mindful and ethical consumption.

The concept of sustainable fashion englobes not only challenging the current fast fashion paradigm to ensure environmental preservation, but also fair working conditions and fair wages (Henninger et al 2016, 401). Furthermore, younger generations in constant growth, have shown to identify with these concepts and values and some have assumed them as part of their own identity or as a way of belonging to a community

(Kale 2021). This phenomenon can happen in a conscious and unconscious manner, however, the internal drivers for consumers to make an ethical purchasing decision can act as an indicator of such, by intertwining the identity and ideology of the consumer. In addition, those born between the 90s and 00s, or generation Z, are typically associated with being a more environmentally aware generation due to their bigger interest in buying second hand while also being one of the biggest consumers of fast fashion (Kale 2021).

In academics, fashion has been an understudied topic, as it was regarded as not academic enough, however, the globalized evolution of the fashion industry turned this into an issue of interest for academia and anthropologists, however, the way fast fashion has been researched mostly relates to the business model perspective rather than to the consumer's perspective (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst 2010, 170). For this reason, I aim to fill in this gap by connecting the concepts of sustainable fashion and personal identity in relation to generation Z, and how their sustainable fashion consumption intertwines with the creation of a personal identity. To do this, I have explored the efforts that fast fashion brands are making towards becoming more sustainable and how the second-hand or vintage market has evolved through the lens of neoliberalism and capitalism. This thesis will unpack the main drivers and motivators that lead to an ethical consumption among young adults in The Netherlands, by exploring the relationship between the shaping of their personal identity with buying sustainable fashion with the aim of answering the following research question: "How is the consumption of sustainable and second-hand fashion related to the shaping of personal identity among young adults in the cities of Amsterdam and Utrecht?".

This thesis contributes to the anthropological debate concerning sustainable in relation to younger generations' personal identity, where the combination of an anthropological lens with empirical data allow for a holistic approach on understanding sociocultural transformations through fashion and clothing.

Research population and location

In order to answer my research question, I will be using the empirical data that I have gathered during my fieldwork period in Amsterdam and in Utrecht. I focused on a young generation of people aged between 18 and 30 that live in these two cities, and I

will introduce my participants throughout the empirical chapters by adding quotes or other valuable data. I chose this specific population because, according to several sources (Lundblad and Davies 2016, Kale 2021, Mireles 2021), the main consumers of sustainable fashion constitute the generation of millennials and generation Z, as they have shown to be quicker to avoid fast fashion brands due to their growing awareness of the consequences and impacts of such industry on both the environment and on human rights (Mireles 2021). Another reason for this choice, that also contributes to the selected two locations are the fact that both Amsterdam and Utrecht are prominent student cities and therefore mainly host a young population of people, making them appropriate locations to conduct my research at. Another relevant point about this specific population is, however, their social position. Most young people between the age of 18 and 30 do not have full financial stability or have just started to be economically stable. This is especially interesting for this research thesis as the fact that their income may be lower compared to older generations may influence the likeliness to buy sustainable fashion due to its typical higher cost. This creates a juxtaposition with the previous argument of being a generation that is highly concerned with environmental issues, as their generational economic issues meets their desire to transition towards an ethical and eco-consumption that requires a higher economical income. This is thus linked with their personal identity, which may be reflected through fashion in a conscious or unconscious way, where second-hand fashion has appeared as an alternative and has therefore become one of the main focuses of this thesis. These are, however, different hypotheses that concern different social processes, and this thesis is positioned at the intersection, in order to show the connection between sustainable fashion, personal identity and younger generations.

Ethics and positionality

Anonymity and confidentiality have been granted to my research participants by means of verbal consent. To further ensure this, I have made use of pseudonyms as an alternative to their real names in order to not reveal their identity. Verbal consent for participation has been orally stated by including information about the research topic and what participation entailed. Participants were made aware of the possibility of withdrawing from the participation at any given moment and I have been respectful of this at all times during my fieldwork period. At the beginning of each interview, I kindly asked my participants to orally express their agreement to having the

conversation recorded. Furthermore, interview questions were formulated in a way that avoided making anyone feel uncomfortable have solely been focused on sustainable fashion, their fashion consumption and questions of personal identity. In addition, I avoided external subjects in the taking of photographs during the activities of participant observation in order to respect the identity and anonymity of people outside of my research population.

Regarding my positionality within this thesis, it is important to note that I started being a sales associate at Vans and later became employed at Dr. Martens. This made me intersect through three different positions, and therefore adapt a triangulated positionality from being a retailer, a consumer and a researcher. In addition to this, for being an active consumer of second-hand and sustainable fashion and being 22 years old, I am inevitably part of my own research population, which has also affected my data both positively and negatively. From my current employment position, I came up with my research topic as I am continuously involved in the fashion industry, as well as fashion has always played an important role in my life. I decided to look at fashion within a sustainable consumerism perspective as I believe that environmental consciousness and ethicality has become one of the most contested topics amongst younger populations and therefore sparked my interest. My position as a retailer has given me the opportunity to learn about different skills to approach customers based on a quick analysis on their style in order to sell a specific product that may fit them. This has made me insanely curious about how clothing can give meaning to people's own identity, whether consciously or unconsciously. This skill could lead to potential biases in my research thesis by being already familiar with the topic of fashion and trends. Nevertheless, I am aware of my positionality and I am reflexive about my own experiences, judgements and practices when analyzing my collected empirical data.

Furthermore, apart from being a retailer, I also take the position of being a customer of sustainable fashion. In my spare time I enjoy going into the city and most of the times I find myself in a shopping district where vintage and second-hand shops dominate. My personal taste and fashion consumption may have influenced the type of participants that I have approached based on a similar lifestyle, however, I am aware of this bias and I have reflected on this pattern. Nevertheless, my positionality has been an important factor in obtaining useful data during my fieldwork period, as it has given me the

advantage of having the necessary knowledge and understanding about the second-hand market, since I have been a consumer of such a fashion since the age of 14. This has inevitably shaped the direction of my fieldwork into a focus of second-hand and vintage clothing, rather than just sustainable retail, as this type of fashion has also appeared as a way of dealing with the previously mentioned paradox of environmental awareness and economic limitations, and therefore has also impacted the type of data that I have gathered. Due to my fascination for the topic of second-hand fashion I have been able to identify the flaws and contradictions that this market carries and how this relates to my research population.

Methodology

My fieldwork period consisted on three months of research, in which I focused on 9 different people. Initially this number was 10, however, one of them decided to not participate anymore. I focused on a rather small group of people in order to be able to build a rapport in which I could connect with them on a more personal level and dedicate the necessary time to each of them.

To write this thesis, I conducted a series of ethnographic methods that include participant observation and interviews, as well photographs as a visual method. These methods have offered me the possibility of gathering specific data in different manners, to further analyze them in order to respond my research question. By conducting participant observation, I was able to intertwine my position of being a researcher with being part of the daily lives and occurrences of my participants. I did this by combining doing observations on my own as well as together with my participants. These research activities consisted in going to several hotspots in both Amsterdam and Utrecht, flea markets and second-hand shops, as well as retail and clothing repair stores. This method has been extremely prominent and valuable for my research, as I could combine my anthropological knowledge together with my own visual observation, and this led to the gathering of highly detailed data. Furthermore, by conducting participant observation with my participants, I was able to analyze their shopping behaviour by separating myself from the act of consumption and adopting the role of a researcher while still being integrated in the environment. This integration was also a key aspect of my fieldwork, as it allowed me to understand certain practices from another perspective, despite the fact of being an active participant of second-hand shopping myself. I mainly

observed how sustainable fashion could potentially indicate a certain social class or perpetuate inequalities, how brands portray and advertise their products, whether they make sustainable claims and how, and lastly the way they purchase, whether it is in big quantities or smaller ones, whether the items are statement pieces of more staple and everyday pieces. This provided me sufficient information to understand and analyze their shopping behavior and the role that personal identity comes to play.

For the interviews, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews in total, as some of the interviews were shorter than others and therefore required a second part or a continuation. Sometimes, the number of interviews with each person also depended on the topics that were raised, as often the interviewee would lead the way onto a highly interesting topic from which I decided to also ask my other interviewees about. Conducting semi-structured interviews suited my research the most as it allowed my participants to flow throughout the conversation, and potentially go off topic if it felt necessary, while also being able to go back to some of the primary questions. This made every interview unique despite sharing a similar structure and same initial questions. The interviews were scheduled throughout the end of February, March and April, and they were separate from participant observation. Based on the oral consent given from my participants, I recorded most of the interviews on my phone, and some other interviews were written down in the moment without a recording. In addition, I stayed in contact with my participants by being up to date with their shopping behaviour during this period by reaching out to them every few weeks with questions that concerned their last purchases and where it was from.

Lastly, from the photographs that I took during my fieldwork period, I was able to identify two research perspectives as they have served as both a research tool to look back to and remember specific moments, and also as a subject of study by contributing to my empirical data. According to Pink (2012, 74) the use of visual media in anthropology offers researchers a two-fold dimension of being the object of research and the method of data gathering. Photographs have contributed majorly to this thesis by being able to share the outcomes of my participant observation by elaborating on still images that represent a specific moment of my fieldwork in relation to my field notes and further findings.

Apart from conducting interviews, engaging in participant observation and the taking of photographs, this research also includes some key informants, which are not considered participants but that provided relevant information about the topic. This includes mainly the people I talked to at some shops and some of the event organizers from COSH, a sustainable shopping guide. In addition, fieldnotes were taken and included into my fieldwork diary, where I wrote specific information about my day-to-day life during my research period. The conscious shopping platform COSH became a very useful platform for me during my fieldwork period, as their website and Instagram account offered valuable information about where to buy sustainably, as well as multiple informative articles and guides. In addition, in April they launched their site in Amsterdam and hosted several workshops and informative talks, which contributed majorly to my data gathering.

This thesis is structured by an introductory chapter, followed by three main chapters and its according sub-headings and finished by a concluding chapter with limitations and a bibliography. Every chapter will provide a unique perspective and argument on the issue of sustainable fashion in relation to different concepts; however, these chapters may intersect and refer to each other consequently due to the dynamics surrounding the self, sustainable and second-hand fashion and younger generations. Chapter one will be dedicated to the connection between the self and the possession of clothes through the analysis of the concepts of wellness and consciousness introduced by Primark and H&M. This will be followed by how fast fashion brands have incorporated sustainability into their business models and how this contributes to further consumerism and finished by how fashion trends have evolved through the process of globalization and how this relates to younger generations and their shopping behaviour. My main argument in chapter two will be focused on how the second-hand market has been introduced as a powerful driver and motivator to consume sustainably and how neoliberalism has impacted this industry by also including how second-hand fashion has shifted to a more privileged market due to its commodification. Furthermore, chapter three considers sustainable and second-hand shopping as a form of status and belonging and how young people engage with the sense of self in recycled clothing. Lastly, this chapter offers the alternatives given by my participants on engaging in sustainable fashion while taking into consideration economic difficulties and their desire for

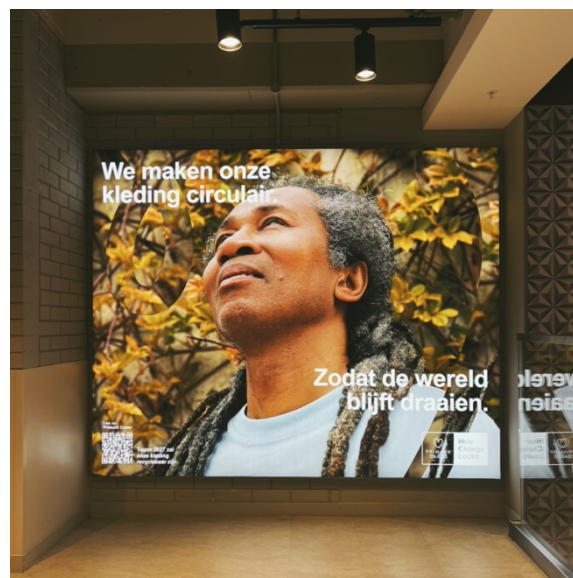
uniqueness and distinction through second-hand clothing and their participation in activities such as the upcycling of clothes and clothing swap events.

Every chapter opens up with a vignette, and despite starting chronologically with the first vignette, this will not be followed in the second and third chapter, as the aim of these vignettes is to give a more detailed and sensorial feeling of the main concepts of the chapter and are therefore not tied to a specific timeline.

Moreover, throughout this thesis, visual data that was captured during my fieldwork in Amsterdam and Utrecht will be shown with the aim of giving visual representation and context to my data, with the purpose of a better interpretation.

Chapter 1

As I entered the shopping mall of Hoog Catharijne in Utrecht, I noticed how busy it was for a Tuesday afternoon. I feel rather uncomfortable with the fact that I am not here for a shopping purpose, as almost everyone around me, but for research. I looked to my left and the first shop I see is Primark, which was one of the busiest shops I entered that day. The noise of people chatting to each other would almost completely suppress the music coming from my earphones. I usually never go to this store as its big crowds overwhelm me, but I am familiar with the items and the structure of the shop. The shop is divided in four different stories and you can choose to descend or ascend by an escalator. These escalators are the ones that make you feel annoyed by having to give a full turn to the whole floor, instead of having a sensible order. Of course, this is a well thought marketing strategy that forces you to walk through an isle that you would not consider walking through otherwise. I notice that next to these elevators, huge and luminous posters advertise CO2 reduction and sustainable clothing.



I was extremely surprised at first, as I am sure that the last time I entered this store, probably even before starting this masters, these posters did not even exist. To me they felt as the biggest and clearest physical paradoxes of the ethics of this store: cheap clothes and cheap labor.

Next to this giant poster, there is a pile of five-euro sneakers, and another pile of other type of sneakers which look like converse or Nike knockoffs.



A few meters away from these piles, I find a wellness section. I thought “wellness? Of what? I approach the wellness section with certain curiosity, as the usage of this word makes me question the meaning of this particular section. I instantly notice how empty it is, compared to the rest of the store, I could hear my own music again. Everything looked gray and light brown, kind of the clothes you would wear to a beach club in the summer, or the type of clothes you picture a bohemian person with, or in other words, the aesthetical stereotype of a person involved with sustainability. I get closer and I observe the prices of this wellness section. Most of the items are accessories such as socks, underwear and bags, and the prices are comparable to all of the other prices in the store. After noticing this section, I started to pay more attention to this store, and realized, that many other sustainable claims were being made, together with a big sign advertising the cheap price of the product. I stayed at this particular spot for about 20 minutes, watching people come and go and give zero appreciation to this wellness section. As I am taking pictures and writing in my diary, I bump into a classmate from university and thought “how convenient!”.

We chat for a bit and she explains to me how she is looking for towels and chose this store for being so much cheaper than other stores. She mentioned H&M and I therefore thought to myself “that’s where I am going to next”. The conversation was brief, but I started thinking in my head: “maybe these sustainable claims are true, but how are they making it still so cheap? What other reason than low prices makes this place so busy? And why is the wellness section being so ignored?”

I head to H&M, and similarly to Primark, I observe lots of emphasis on being conscious and on their conscious collection of recycled clothing. Contrary to Primark, the conscious collection was almost unavoidable, as most clothes were part of this collection, as shown in the tags. These tags also showed the materials that were used to make each piece, such as recycled polyester or recycled cotton. Compared to Primark, H&M was just as busy, but it felt less chaotic. I started to think how the concepts of wellness and conscious relate to sustainable fashion and how these words could directly imply a sort of attitude and whether it has an impact on consumption at all. I observed all the tags and took photographs of them and thought to myself that H&M was doing a great job at becoming more environmentally conscious.

This first vignette serves as an introduction to understanding the value and meaning of possessions in relation to the self, as well as it is one of the first more explicit examples of vast consumption, juxtaposed with sustainability through claims on recycling. In addition, we start to see how the biggest fast fashion brands are moving towards becoming more sustainable and environmentally conscious by appealing to the consumer’s interest with terms that relate to health, wellbeing and consciousness. These concepts will be further unpacked in this chapter, in relation to the self and through the consumption of possessions.

Possessions and the self

Clothing is regarded to be one of the most visible forms of consumption (Crane 2012) and can therefore offer an alternative lens to analyzing the relation between consumption and the process of self-identification. As stated by Lundblad (2016, 4)

fashion can be more than simply wearing clothes for the physical need of wearing clothes. Possessions and personal identity have been two highly contested topics among scholars (Belk 1988, Crane 2012, Lundblad 2016) who aim to draw connections between the two concepts. Russel Belk (1988, 139) contributed to this topic by emphasizing on the understanding of consumer behaviour in relation to the meanings that consumers may attach to possessions. He further argued that one's possessions can reproduce images of the desired self, which therefore leads to the assumption that identification processes can be reflected through means of consumption. He argues that "we regard our possessions as part of ourselves" (1988, 139) which can be linked to the way identity is constructed by means of fashion and clothing, by also acknowledging the value that is given to the possession of clothes as part of an identity shaping process. Belk (1988, 139) dived into the issue of possessions and the self by offering empirical data that confirmed this relationship. This was achieved by looking at how possessions can act as self-perception methods, by analyzing how the loss of possessions can have an effect on identity, and how the investment in self-objects can offer a relevant perspective to the topic of self-identification. These, as stated by Ronald and Rodman (1999), can offer alternative approaches to regard clothing as not only a tool for protecting the body from weather conditions but also as a way to communicate and interact with others by means of giving clothing a social context and cultural value. Therefore, clothing can be used to display socioeconomic status, education, moral status, athletic ability, beliefs and many other ways to express someone's identity. For this reason, fashion can be one of the most visible markers of social status, making clothes a prominent indication of how people perceive themselves and are perceived by others, as well as it allows to create a space in which identities can be negotiated and constructed (Crane 2012, 1).

As mentioned in the introduction, the shopping industry is mainly dominated by the fast fashion model, by offering low-cost and often low-quality clothing made in developing countries, followed by unethical manufacturing processes, which has been made possible due to globalization and international free trade (Ledezma 2017). Because of this phenomenon, the fashion industry managed to distance itself from being exclusive and hand-made in order to satisfy a greater audience by offering *pret-a-porter* or ready-to-wear clothes which were made accessible to all social classes in different sizes (Ledezma 2017). Despite this shift, the symbolic value and importance of high fashion

or *haute couture* has not been impacted by this, but rather, it has now become more accessible to be able to express someone's own identity through fashion and more specifically fast fashion (Crane 2012). According to several newspaper articles published by Forbes (Kraaijenbrink 2019) and the Guardian (Hinsliff 2019) concerning the popularity of fast fashion, Primark is highlighted for its competing success, due to not only offering low prices but also for having a great number of items to choose from. Because of this, consumers are able to buy in greater quantities while still investing relatively low amounts of money. As shown in the vignette, Primark remains to be the main competitor of other fast fashion brands as it allows consumer to explore their identity through a great range of clothing at affordable prices. Primark is a fast fashion brand that originated 53 years ago in Dublin, now known as one of the most affordable and widespread brands with approximately 400 stores around Europe and the US. In relation to the vignette, Primark has slowly moved towards sustainability by introducing recycling bins and advertising their sustainable efforts by using signs and posters throughout their shops (Hinsliff 2019). At the Primark store in Utrecht, sustainability claims were spotted repeatedly throughout the store, with the addition of a wellness section dedicated to products that have been made with recycled cotton and polyester, as shown in figure 1.

1



The literal meaning of the word wellness, as stated in the Oxford dictionary, stands for the state of being in good health, but also the progress towards achieving such goal. It is the aim for finding a balance between physical and mental health. As explained by Pfizer (2020), wellness is the act of thriving instead of just surviving. It is then

¹ Photograph taken at Primark showing the wellness/ sustainability section.

important to relate this to the overall business model of Primark and how this linguistic choice may affect the attitude of consumers when they think about their overall wellbeing in regard to their consumption. The concept of wellness can be linked to fashion possessions as according to the Business of Fashion, “feeling good is the new looking good” (Hoang 2016). Limei Hoang continues to explain how this has pushed fashion companies to switch and invest into the health and wellness sector, as this transformation of putting money on mind and body experiences is rising at a rapid speed. Due to this, it is no surprise that Primark or H&M have jumped into the health and wellness group in order to keep up with the shifts of the market and consumers’ demands, as the fast fashion model is based on giving a quick response to the wants and needs of its consumers. The evolution of the fashion industry from being elitist and exclusive to being more accessible and low-priced, has made the concept of wellness become more accessible too. Though wellness and the act of purchasing experiences was tied to be luxurious, this has now changed according to a luxury goods analyst at Euromonitor, as younger generations tend to be more interested in transformational experiences than in buying material goods (Hoang 2016). This therefore relates to their overall consumption in a way that it is important to portray a conscious, healthy and meaningful lifestyle behind products in order for them to become more appealing for the youth.

2



3



² Photograph taken at H&M showing some items of the conscious collection.

³ Photograph taken at H&M. Translation of text: Members can save conscious points for making sustainable decisions.

Nevertheless, the main driver for fashion companies to include health and wellness into their business is strongly linked to marketing purposes. Primark's wellness section aims to make the consumer feel pampered about buying something that will potentially make their life better and more sustainable. H&M introduced a similar strategy with its conscious collection, which consists on clothes made entirely or partly from recycled materials, which by 2022 can be applicable to almost all of the items that are sold within these stores. However, it is important to ask the question of why it is expected to feel good, healthy, conscious, and connected with the mind and body through the means of fast fashion, since this goes against the discourse of a sustainable consumption where basic needs are prioritized and waste is aimed to be minimized. As shown in figure 3, H&M takes part in this wellness journey by offering a membership to their company, in which making conscious decisions, or in other words sustainable decisions, can give you exclusive sales and free shipping, among others. While this uncontrollably leads to a potential increase in consumption, it also relates to the self in a way in which doing something that is objectively perceived as good can also give you access to benefits that would otherwise not exist. This contributes to the ability of enjoying a luxury at a lower price and lower effort, that is at the same time recomforting and almost turned into a game in which one can gain sustainable points. Similarly, Primark assemblages this within its wellness section by keeping the prices as low as possible but by changing its usual appearance of busy and messy into a calm, relaxing and color-neutral area. This effort may be linked to the desire of wanting to be more relatable to the issues that are particularly concerning nowadays among younger populations, but yet it falls into the cliché and stereotype of what sustainability must look like, when in reality, sustainability concerns a broad topic with different forms and shapes depending on its specific focus.

Despite the positive aspects of introducing sustainability as a powerful driver within the fashion industry, sustainable claims are often shown through adopting a certain aesthetic and display that aim to appeal to the consumer by its clean and organized look. This was pointed out by Esmeralda, a 24-year old student living in Utrecht, in our first interview: "companies need to step away from what looks sustainable and turn to what actually is sustainable. It cannot look aesthetically pleasing. Sustainability is messy, it needs to look raw". What Esmeralda aimed to express, is that sustainability can and

should take up multiple forms, and that it is necessary to step away from the stereotypes around this concept, in order to shape it into one's taste and personal identity. This quote relates to most fast fashion brands that are turning sustainable; however, it is extremely accurate when taking the radical switch that Primark takes in its effort to look aesthetically pleasing within its wellness section.

Though the values and motivations around sustainable consumption behaviour in relation to personal identity remains an infra-researched area in anthropology, the most common motivations around buying sustainable fashion constitute “multiple end goals, including self-expression, aesthetic satisfaction and group conformity” as well as ethical obligations or avoiding feelings of guilt (Lundblad and Davies 2016, 7). The use of green aesthetics and ethical claims are introduced by fast fashion brands with the intention of offering a pleasant experience through visual attractiveness with the goal of relating to people's self-expression and personal identity.

“Honestly, I can say that I have bought clothes based on the look and the aesthetic. If it looks pretty in the store, it catches more my attention, and if it is sustainable, even better” – Alice (Interview, April 29th).

Alice, a 26-year-old graduate from Amsterdam raised the issue of visual beauty in clothes in relation to a sustainable consumption. As mentioned, during my fieldwork I was able to observe and identify how green aesthetics were introduced in order to create a good-looking and color coordinated section, in which the benefits for the environment and the self were especially pointed out. Nevertheless, most fast fashion brands have been called out for greenwashing due to portraying themselves as environmentally friendly businesses but lacking transparency and ethical working conditions, causing a contradiction between the concept of sustainability and fast fashion.

The paradox of fast fashion and sustainability

All the interviews I conducted with my participants started with an open question about how they would define their style, and what sustainability means to them. These answers have all been unique in their own way and have explained sustainability from several perspectives. More specifically, one of my participants described sustainable fashion as “fashion that is doing more good than harm”, as a way to show the desire for

finding a balance between doing what is objectively considered as good for the environment with a necessary evil. The fast fashion industry has been highly criticized for being unethical and unsustainable, both in its manufacturing process and the items it produces, which often makes fashion and sustainability come across as opposite concepts, due to the vast domination of fast fashion within the industry (Lundblad and Davies 2016). During my fieldwork, I spent a great amount of time at fast fashion retail stores such as H&M, Zara, Primark and Pull&bear, and I was able to observe the speed in which the collections changed and how trends were being constantly adapted and updated. “For me, buying at Zara means seeing the same pair of jeans I saw last season, but with a different cut, or a different pattern, with bleach, or no bleach, it is just the same essentially, but made differently so that you want to buy it again” Paula explained.

The fashion industry emits around 5 billion tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere every year and generates 92 million tons of textile waste (Niinimäki et al. 2020). According to the ratings from Good on You, a platform which offers thousands of articles and expertise on ethical and sustainable fashion, Zara receives a “not good enough” rating on both its environmental impact and its labor conditions (Dockrill 2022). On the other hand, H&M was given a slight better rating, though still being fairly low. One of the reasons given for this better review, comes from H&M being more transparent and open about its suppliers and supply chain policies, despite still creating short-span fast fashion. During my participant observation, I took especial attention to H&M based on the fact that it is considered more ethical and sustainable than other retail stores by offering detailed information within the tags of the garment pieces, sometimes with a QR code that offer more information.

This was also confirmed during my research process by some of my participants, for instance, Marvin, a 21-year-old student living in Utrecht, who makes a living out of extreme sports due to his sponsorships. He expressed: “When I don’t buy second hand, for example when I need underwear, I tend to go to H&M. I find it important to check for the materials and fabrics that have been used, and that usually influences my decision to buy a certain thing or not”. With this quote, Marvin indicated his need to check these informative tags and therefore showed a pattern of mindful and meditated decision-making. Nevertheless, one of the things that caught my attention the most

during my multiple observations at H&M was the fact that the prices were still rather low, and therefore also student friendly, as Marvin noted.

4



5



During our interview, he explained how his lifestyle makes him need new shoes more frequently than any other person of his age, as he easily breaks them while skating.

“I usually buy clothes about once a month. I am a student, so I don’t have that much money to spend on clothes. Usually I buy one or two things and that’s it. Unfortunately, I do have to buy shoes often as I break them easily because of scootering ⁶” – Marvin (Interview, February 20th).

In addition, Marvin noted that skateboarding brands are expensive, making him only afford one or two pieces, however, he acknowledged a greater quality within skateboarding brands as opposed to fast fashion brands. This thought relates to Paula, a 24-year-old student living in Amsterdam who recently moved from Latin America.

⁴ Photograph taken at H&M in Utrecht.

⁵ Photograph taken at H&M in Utrecht.

⁶ Scootering refers to the sport of skating with a scooter or step.

“I prefer buying one or two pieces every few months that are a bit more expensive, such as Carhartt ⁷ hoodies or pants. I definitely prefer quality over quantity.” – Paula (Interview, February 10th).

By observing numerous shops moving to sustainability, I could observe an emphasis on being responsible about the clothes that already represent one’s possessions and how this relates to sustainability as well. This involves several changes in habits such as the frequency in which clothes are washed and the care that they are taken care of. H&M portrayed this concern within their website by offering tips and hacks that encourage consumers to take a greater care of their clothes depending on the material and as a consequence, making them last longer. When I attended an event hosted by COSH ⁸, one of my key informants which owned a sustainable shop in Amsterdam West told me about going beyond just recycling or reusing clothes. She emphasized on the importance of taking care of the items we possess in order to ensure them of a lengthier lifetime.

“In Scandinavia, they have opted for washing clothes less often. Instead, they use a spray with a sort of freshener in order to reduce the odor, and they hang them outside to dry.” - (Participant observation, April 22nd).

This change in habit does not only impact the state of clothes, but also avoids thousands of plastic particles to be released during washes, as clothes mostly contain microplastics that are found in polyester and nylon (Helbig 2018).

The event I attended consisted on a two-day launch of the company throughout the whole city of Amsterdam, where everyone was welcome to join the workshops and activities. For ethical considerations I will not reveal her identity, however, one of the persons I talked with became one of my main informants as she agreed on talking to me about her job at a sustainable store and what sustainable fashion meant to her. She became extremely interested in my thesis topic and we spent an hour talking to each other.

⁷ Carhartt constitutes a workwear brand that is often chosen by skaters and incorporated into street style.

⁸ COSH is a sustainable shopping guide that offers workshops and informative articles about fashion and sustainability.



Figure 9 shows the map that was handed in by the event organizers that allowed people to partake in several activities, as well as the address of sustainable shops was given, including a brief description of each. I also got the opportunity to meet lots of other interesting and inspiring women, including the founder of COSH.

Another sustainable move that I could observe was the use of recycling boxes within shops like H&M and Zara. Since 2013, H&M has joined the initiative of recycling garments in which any pieces of clothes, regardless of their brand or state could be brought to an H&M store, to then later receive a voucher at the cash desk. The company responsible for collecting the boxes sorts the clothes in order to reuse or recycle them. Since 2019, a rental service was launched in one of the stores from Stockholm, in which the customer could choose to rent from a few selected outfits. Despite these initiatives, globalization and the low cost of fashion have played a significant role in the industry's expanding environmental effect, as lower-cost clothing increases the desire to purchase. Primark, H&M, Zara, C&A and many more, continue to contribute to consumerism, cheapness and waste.

Apart from joining the physical event, I also followed the activities of COSH on social media, as their presence was very active during that day but also on a regular basis, and they provide lots of useful information either on Instagram stories or posts.

⁹ A sustainable shopping map of Amsterdam offered by COSH.



When you just spent 200€ on the cutest little recycled polyester dress, only to find out that it releases even more microplastics into the ocean than before



In figure 10 we can observe a photograph posted by COSH, which is intended as a meme or a critique to recycled polyester, often used by fast fashion companies. As previously mentioned, some of the biggest retailers in the world are moving their business models towards sustainability in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and most of the actions taken include using recycled or sustainable materials. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the Instagram post shown in figure 12, research on recycled polyester has revealed to release higher rates of microplastics during washes than regular polyester. In 2021, the H&M group, which also owns “& other stories”, “Arket”, “Monki”, “Weekday” and “COS”, tripled its use of recycled materials and their aim is to reach a 30% by 2030 (H&M Group 2022). H&M is regarded as one of the most transparent fashion companies, as they share most of their activities in annual reports on their website, as well as other useful information. These reports include their current performance on sustainability and their goals among other useful information. In March 2021, H&M launched a project of turning waste into clothes and accessories and recycled around 500 tons of waste. While this sounds, superficially, as a great

¹⁰ Screenshot taken from an Instagram post of COSH.

opportunity to tackle environmental issues, the truth is that research has shown that using recycled polyester does not solve the problems caused by the fashion industry. According to Fashion United UK, recycled polyester is obtained from re-spinning plastic into new polyester fiber (Van Elven 2018).

Though recycled polyester allows for a second life for materials that would otherwise end up in landfills, recycled polyester comes with several negative points, one of them being its blend with other materials, as recycled polyester can hardly ever be recycled alone, which makes them harder to recycle again. Another negative point is that recycling plastics is not an endless process and therefore, cannot be done forever, even if it consists of just recycled polyester alone (Van Elven 2018). For this reason, despite its positive aspects, recycled polyester cannot be regarded as the only solution to the issue of sustainable fashion. This, unfortunately, makes the efforts made by certain companies or brands seem insufficient if the only initiative being taken is the recycling of materials.

11



12



As seen in figure 11, the speech bubble aims to imitate a conversation between two people in which a compliment is given to an outfit, to which the response emphasizes on the fact that it is in fact sustainable. This photograph serves as an active

¹¹ Photograph taken at MONKI. “Cool outfit, Thanks it’s sustainable”

¹² Photograph taken at H&M showing two types of recycled material.

representation of how consumption and decision-making can be influenced by sustainability by promoting this as cool, trendy and something to positively point out. This therefore incites consumers to shop sustainably in order to get validation and acceptance in return, turning sustainability into another fashion trend.

The role of fashion trends

Following trends is a big part of the consumer's personal identity as fashion marketing creates the constant need or urge to be in style and up to date with the latest fashion trends, which can be connected to the process of self-identification for being an ongoing process of change and discovery (Venkatasamy 2015). The speed of capitalism and globalization is directly portrayed within the fashion industry and requires constant innovation. Therefore, the modern conception of fashion is considered to be in an ongoing process of change, as its trends constantly come and go at a fast rate (Lundblad and Davies 2016). A fashion trend is explained by four stages: introduction and adoption, growth and increase, mass conformity, and decline or saturation. In between these stages, mid-seasons are created with a smaller lifetime and are based purely on the need to satisfy consumer demand. As mentioned, younger generations, such as Gen Z and millennials are considered a more environmentally conscious generation, however, a clear separation and even paradox has been identified between being environmentally aware and being one of the most loyal consumers of fast fashion, as mentioned by Sirin Kale (2021) "Young people have this feeling of complexity and ambiguity related to sustainability. They all agreed that they thought of themselves as conscious consumers, but on the other hand, they were incentivized to buy more and consume more because of the need to stay trendy". Overconsumption, fast fashion and fashion trends are three concepts which are constantly interconnected, as one can be considered a consequence of the other. They may also be analyzed as such, due to fashion trends being portrayed within fast fashion, which produces low quality and cheap materials that lead to overconsumption due to easily broken pieces and the never-ending excitement of buying and seeing what is new. As communicated and agreed upon by my participants, going into the city and checking what is new has become a habit that repeats itself every few weeks.

Interviewer: "Do you think you engage or follow trends?"

Esmeralda: “Mmm... No. Or well, I think I subconsciously do, we all do. I don’t really base my outfit on whatever is trendy at the moment, I actually sometimes do the opposite, but I think as a generation we all follow a certain trend, even if the trend is to not follow trends. Sometimes you see your friend wearing something you like as well and you get inspired, or you follow trends based on your interests”.

Similar to Esmeralda’s quote, scholars have shown that the success of fashion trends depends on the way society interprets and judges the trend, and therefore, is measured by its social acceptance (Saravan and Nithyaprakash 2016). This creates a reciprocal process between consumers shaping trends and trends shaping consumers, which can be appreciated in the way sustainability is navigating through fashion, as consumers’ environmental concerns are being portrayed within trends while trends, simultaneously, shape a certain discourse on sustainability, as previously argued.

Interviewer: “So is your wardrobe based on staple and easier to combine clothes then? Pieces that can go with anything and are, in a sense, atemporal?”

Esmeralda: “Absolutely, I mean my clothes have a particular vibe or style, which relates to me, but I don’t really care about fall/spring trends, I actually almost always wear the same thing all year around, I just layer up, like an onion”.

What is explained in this short excerpt from an interview with Esmeralda, is that younger generations more likely portray their interest and taste on their way of dressing. In addition, Marvin stated the following: “Your style will be always influenced by others, that’s where you start. My style is inspired by my music taste and what I like, such as the 60s and 70s era”. These interview excerpts align with the findings of previous studies on fashion trends and younger generations, where Saravan and Nithyaprakash 2016, 2) argue how today’s youth as a high tendency to shop in an experimental way, making them decide on the lifetime of a trend. Furthermore, they claim that in a contemporary and globalized society, physical appearance allows for non-verbal communication and cues about a person’s values and lifestyle.

This can be identified in some of the conversations I kept with my participants, in which the influence of taste and inspiration on clothing was being discussed in relation to their own identity, and connects to Sassatelli's views on consumption as a creative activity in which people reinterpret and reorganize their clothing and possessions according to a particular style that they continuously engage to accomplish (2007, Saravan and Nithyaprakash 2016, 4). This therefore means that, based on my empirical data, consumers are strongly influenced by their environment and social context when deciding on their clothing style, while at the same time allowing for the necessary creativity and uniqueness to express themselves.

“I was that weird kid at school who wore very unique clothes and got laughed at, but I was just being myself. Now I guess that my style fits a bit more the norm of a classic skater” – Marvin (Interview, February 20th).

The speed that globalization started to demand and the competitiveness that this creative in the fashion industry also affected the way fashion trends work. In the 80s, fashion retailers aimed to forecast consumer demand and based on that, decided to produce certain clothes into the market (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst 2010). Nowadays, retailers such as Zara and other members of the Inditex apparel company deliver new seasons every few weeks, as opposed to the traditional model of Fall and Spring. This encourages consumers to visit their stores more frequently, as well as it provokes a certain excitement to see what is new (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst 2010, 166). As mentioned by Sproles 1979 (Ibid, 167) fashion is considered a temporal phenomenon which makes the life cycle of fashion trends rather limited.

Furthermore, Crewe and Davenport (1992, Bhardwaj & Fairhurst 2010) have argued that younger generations are more likely to prefer buying higher quantities of cheap and low-quality clothes that are trendy or in fashion, and on the contrary, baby boomers are more likely to purchase fewer pieces of a higher quality. This comes to show that younger generations give a higher importance to stay within the fast flow of fashion trends that are offered within fast fashion clothes, as they can afford to buy more regularly due to lower prices. Though these arguments align with my own data, many participants considering switching their consumption styles towards a consumption that prioritizes fewer pieces from greater quality and saving up money in order to afford

these. However, my participants also showed patterns of wanting to remain in fashion within their own particular style. This necessity to stay in fashion is highly linked to identity formation, as this type of consumption shows a constant wardrobe renewal, which allows the consumer to play and experiment with their style of clothes, instead of a timeless style that older generations usually go for as argued by Crewe and Davenport. Younger people, as revealed during my fieldwork, are in the constant process of discovering themselves and this is portrayed through their clothes, however, as a more environmentally conscious generation, they may encounter an ethical dilemma or paradox in their shopping behaviour where their economic limitations guide them towards a cheaper fashion consumption mainly found at fast fashion stores. Some of my participants showed habits of overconsumption as a need to stay connected to the latest releases and trends, which can be associated to a broader issue of generation Z as shown in an article by the Guardian (Kale 2021) where students expressed their need to constantly buy new clothes and never really considered their own impact or how harmful the fashion industry could actually be. This highlights the paradox that younger generations face by wanting to be trendy but also fight for climate justice

Another interesting point to consider when regarding fashion clothes, is the repetition of styles and trends. Despite the fact that trends can be adopted in a subjective way, the latest trends during the past years have been marked by certain decades such as the 90s in 2020, 70s in 2021, and the 00s in 2022. This is due to the fact that, according to the DSN English report on fashion trends, trends tend to repeat themselves every 20 or 30 years (Goulette 2021). Lauren Goulette expresses the following quote in her article (2021): “If you’ve ever worn mom jeans before in front of a 50-year old adult, you know the kind of response you’re going to get, [I wore those when I was your age!]”. Nowadays, low-rise jeans and a Y2K¹³ aesthetic represents a new trend that was actually lived by generation Z when they were kids. Nevertheless, the repetition of fashion trends has been a phenomenon that has seen its peak after the early 00s until nowadays, in which almost everything from the past 50 to 20 years can be considered trendy. This is an observation I made before starting my ethnographic fieldwork but that I dived deeper into when conducting research by especially paying attention to the constant revival of past trends both at retail stores and online through social media

¹³ Y2K refers to “Year 2000” and represents the fashion trends of that era such as low-rise jeans, denim on denim and crop tops.

platforms. Based on this observation, second-hand and vintage stores can be considered as one of the best options to shop at, as usually the range of clothes that are offered actually come from these past eras, and in addition, they serve as an alternative for gen Z and younger millennials to buy more sustainably while still remaining in fashion.

Chapter 2

It was the afternoon of the first day of April. Interestingly enough, that morning it had snowed, but the heat of the sun had melted it by now. It was extremely quiet for this time of the day at this specific location, and most of the regular stands were missing at the market. Lexi and I entered the kilo store that was next to Candy, another vintage store by Waterlooplein in Amsterdam. This place was rather interesting because the price per kg depended on the item, so for example, jeans had a price per kg, t-shirts another one and so on. Or at least, that was my first thought, but later I saw that these colors arrangements were given out very randomly, following little to no criteria. There were 5 different color options, starting from 30€ per kilo going up to 90€.



I found this to be contrary to the idea of shopping per kg itself, especially because some pieces that received the same color and were therefore put in the same category or given the same value, were not at all in the same state, nor were they from the same brand. To me, it would make sense that if they are going to be so picky about the price per kilo, that they would also take into consideration the state of the item, but this was not the case.

By the time we were there for about 15 minutes, a woman asked me whether buying a certain shoe was a worth it purchase or not. Unfortunately, I advised her not to get them, as they were in pretty bad condition and were quite pricy. Apart from this lady, there were not many other people in the shop. After browsing for a while, we decided to do a little game which consisted on taking 3 random things and weighing them on the scale, to then compare the prices according to state and value. They all had the same color tag, which was orange, and therefore 45€ per kg. One item was a very well-preserved Levi's brown/beige trousers, another was a worn off sweater with stains, and the other was a very much worn flannel jacket. The trousers came out for 26€ according to the scale, the sweater 20.52€, and the flannel also 19.26€. Lexi then stated that out of these 3, the only worth it piece, that was also true to price, were the Levi's trousers.



To weigh these items was actually Lexi's idea and I loved how invested she was in our little shopping experience and the way she was engaging with the topic of my research. She was also realizing that, if you don't stop and think about comparing items, that some things may seem overpriced, but also that these stores do have good finds, you just have to patiently search for them. Outside of the store, the few stands of the flea market gave this area of Amsterdam a very different atmosphere than the rest of the city, which is usually more noisy, crowded and full of bikes. Instead, Waterlooplein was almost like a ghost town.

When deciding where to go next, whether to look at a stand or go to another vintage shop, a man completely broke the silence of the street by violently screaming at us. It got to a point where we got scared and quickly entered Episode, almost as a safe space, as there seemed to be more people there. And this was correct, Episode was indeed crowded. Tourists were there but also locals, laughing and talking to each other, giving each other advice, trying clothes on outside of the changing rooms. It almost felt a bit chaotic, but we just wanted to escape from the man outside. One of the reasons to justify the business at Episode could be by the fact that the market was so empty, but I also think that popularity is the next reason. We did not stay for long, as Lexi preferred to look at the market, so we did that. We immediately found a white, Tommy Hilfiger sweater for 20€ which was in great condition, had no stains and also barely any signs of being worn. This is when Lexi talked to me about how great markets are for her, and about the fact that people should visit them more often. She also raised the issue of now being unable to afford some of the trendier second-hand clothing due to its high pricing and that she used to buy second-hand in order to be able to afford certain things, while now it is almost the opposite. When we looked at another stand, we also found lots of designer clothes such as a real Burberry blazer in perfect condition, and many other designer pieces, for about 70€, which is not pricy considering the state and brand, but also especially comparing it to the prices that another store chose for their racing jackets and workwear overalls, which were between 100-200€.



Second-hand vs. Vintage

The shopping day with Lexi, as described above, serves as a clear example of a casual day of thrifting, in which the consumer can appreciate the differences within buying second-hand, such as vintage shops, kilo shops and markets. However, it is important to understand how the second-hand market has evolved through time, and how this has had an effect on the terminology of second-hand as opposed to vintage. According to several academic sources (Cassidy and Bennett 2012, Cervellon et al 2012) the sudden rise in vintage fashion in the past decade could be consequential to the negative publicity that the fast fashion industry has been receiving for its unethical and unsustainable modes of production and manufacturing among other issues. Thrifting or second-hand shopping can be traced back to the late 19th century, though it became more popularized by the 1950s and 1960s. However, the awareness and interest for vintage clothing increased since the 1990s up until today, as clothing was made more available by its lower or more affordable price (Cervellon., et al 2012). To understand the differences between second-hand and vintage, it is important to understand the meaning of each concepts separately, despite the fact that they often intertwine and also confused with each other. Vintage refers to a piece of art, design or clothing that is not necessarily new, but that serves as a good example of a style from the past, that is still attractive nowadays for its antique look. On the other hand, second-hand refers to acquiring something after being used by another person. This therefore means that, vintage pieces could be second-hand, but not all vintage pieces are previously been used, and that not all second-hand pieces are old per se (Cervellon., et al 2012). This overlap may cause some confusion about how these two terms interrelate and how they are also concepts on their own. Vintage or second-hand clothes can be found at shops, from which we can differentiate vintage shops, second-hand shops, kilo stores¹⁴, charity shops and consignment stores, markets such as flea markets, or on the internet through platforms such as Vinted, Depop and Marketplace, among others. This wide range of shopping locations means that buying vintage or second-hand clothes has become more accessible through several means both physically and online.

¹⁴ Kilo stores refers to shops in which the price is determined by the weight of the item. Usually the price per kilogram is determined by the shop owners and is advertised outside of the shop.

As expressed by most of my participants, buying second-hand has become a significant part of their fashion consumption. Lorenzo is a 26-year-old working student, who works at a skateboarding, snowboarding and surf shop in Utrecht. Lorenzo claimed to barely shop for clothes at retail stores, as he prefers buying second hand due to its cheaper price: “Already since I started making my own money, I never go to just Zara or any of those stores to buy my clothes. If even, I would buy something from a skate shop as I know the clothes are more durable, but honestly, I just don’t even do that anymore. I usually try to buy second-hand skate clothes. This way I save up a lot of money”. Similarly, Marvin talked to me about how he has been thrifting since he is 8 years old, due to his mother: “Since I grew up in a small town near Valencia, I used to go to flea markets with my mum. We would love it because it was so much cheaper, and at the same time also more original. I felt like I could really develop my own style. As a Dutch person growing up in Spain, I took this as another factor to make myself different”. Fast fashion has made personal style and individuality more difficult, as its widespread around the globe, offering almost the same type of products, has made the uniqueness of clothes be a lacking factor in people’s wardrobe (Cassidy and Bennett 2012, 240). This has meant that more people have switched to a second-hand consumption of clothes as a necessity to break the norm and express their own personal style. Despite the longevity of the concept of buying used clothing, within this type of market, several differences can be made between what is considered vintage and second-hand. During my fieldwork, I noticed several key differences amongst shops that sold used clothing. These three key differences consisted on type of audience or consumer, price and clothing organization. I noticed how charity shops hosted a greater number of middle-aged women, as opposed to the audience found at other more *hipster* type of shops which were often vintage franchises or chains.

During the three months of my research period, I tried to capture as much differentiative data between one shop and another, by especially paying attention to price and quality of an item being sold, but also taking into consideration the type of people that were in these shops, such as their approximate age and social group, and whether these shops advertised themselves as vintage or second-hand. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that despite the existing difference in terminology between vintage and second-hand, these terms are often confused or even overlapped, as appreciated in figures 15 and 16.



Shops in Amsterdam and Utrecht that referred more to the term vintage were the types of stores that hosted a greater number of younger people and usually also consisted in chains, such as Episode, Vintage Island or Bij Ons. These are also considered the most famous vintage stores in these two cities, as they can also be found online at most blogs and vintage shopping guides. The type of customers that these stores attracted were very similar to one another and mainly consisted in a young audience in their 20s. From outside, Episode shows several mannequins showing outfits with a 70s or 80s style by using popular items from Levi's in combination with flannel t-shirts and accessories like hats and bandanas. This pattern repeated itself throughout its multiple stores in Amsterdam and Utrecht with the aim of owning and portraying a certain clothing style. Vintage Island and Bij Ons did not necessarily show mannequins at every location, however, pieces of clothes were shown on hangers in order to get a glimpse of what can be found inside. By allowing customers to have an idea of the items that are sold at their stores, a greater number of people will be attracted to them and enter to take a look.

¹⁵ Photograph taken in Amsterdam showing a vintage store.

¹⁶ Photograph taken in Amsterdam showing a second-hand store.

This can also be considered a marketing strategy, as oftentimes these stores looked like they offered high-quality and well-preserved vintage or second-hand pieces, when in reality, many broken or dirty articles were sold inside at relatively high prices. It is common that cities have small second-hand districts located somewhat nearby to the city center, these being the *Negen Straatjes* in Amsterdam or *Oudegracht* in Utrecht. Due to their location, the stores located in these streets were the busiest and often also the more expensive ones. On the contrary, smaller and more local second-hand stores found in other areas in Amsterdam and Utrecht usually offered better deals in relation to quality and price, and although the popularity of certain other stores made them less busy, it did not necessarily make them cheaper. The issue of price is a recurrent matter to discuss, as it creates the main paradox that generation Z faces by wanting so to shop sustainably and develop their style or identity, but on a budget.

Style and sustainability

As mentioned, millennials and gen Z represent the young adults that are the most dedicated towards fighting the climate crisis (Wallis 2021) and often turn into buying second-hand as a way to tackle this, however, another prominent factor for choosing second-hand has been reaching the goal of finding unique and exclusive items that they can relate to oneself. Contrary to fast fashion, second-hand stores offer unique and rare pieces, most of the times only in one size or in one color. According to Lynn (1991), people appreciate the scarcity of things or products as it gives them the pleasure of distinction, which consequently makes people look for further ways of being distinct or unique by looking for products that help them express this sense of uniqueness within their personal identity. Clothes are possessions that are regarded as closely linked to one's personal identity and are therefore powerful tools to use in order to find one's style (Belk 1988). This urgency for distinction is considered a direct effect of globalization, as in a globalized world, society is more concerned with uniqueness of their culture and the sense of self (Wang 2007, 85). This therefore implies that the search for unique clothes in a globalized society comes from a desire of understanding oneself in which second-hand stores can help ease this search by offering the possibility to explore with pieces and styles from different eras. Furthermore, based on my own observations and also affirmed by my participants, second-hand stores have shown to give people a higher sense of freedom due to not following conventional retail store organizations, in which men and women's sections are clearly separated, but rather

offering a messy and chaotic look, in which clothes are not organized by colors or size per se. This type of messy outlook is similar to those found at flea-markets which offer consumers the possibility to shop based on their taste and style, and not necessarily by the standards imposed by society. This was one of the most important reasons my participants gave to buying second-hand, as they highly valued being able to express themselves freely and not feeling judged when entering a section of clothes that is technically dedicated to the opposite gender. Figures 17 and 18 represent the outlook that is mostly adopted by second-hand stores and flea-markets, where the most common organization is based on the item and not on the added societal stereotypes. It is also common that these types of stores offer big trunks of clothes that often display items for sale in which all types of clothes and styles are mixed with each other. Studies focused on students and second-hand shopping have shown similar findings to those of my participants, where the biggest reason to buying second-hand clothes was indeed the ability to create and explore their own style and, in essence, feeling more special about themselves (Yan et al. 2015).

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Furthermore, according to several academic (Markova & Grajeda 2018, Einollahi & Kim 2020) and non-academic sources (NPR 2021, The Guardian 2021), social media has appeared as a key factor for promoting second-hand fashion towards younger

¹⁷ Photograph taken at Vintage Island Shop in Utrecht

¹⁸ Photograph taken at Waterloopleinmarkt in Amsterdam

generations, mainly through the platforms of Instagram and Tik Tok. This has led to a normalization of second-hand consumption and as a consequence, in an increase in popularity among younger generations within the last few years, due to their desire of differentiation but also for their search for freedom, as communicated by my participants. Some of my participants have been buying second-hand for almost their whole lives and have shared their experiences with me by also going into how this industry has changed through time, which will be unpacked throughout this chapter.

“Growing up I couldn’t afford most of the clothes that people were wearing or that were trendy. I used to buy second-hand because that’s what I could afford. Me and my mum used to go to the flea markets or charity shops and buy several items for 10€ in total.” – Lexi (Interview, April 1st).

Lexi is a 26-year old chef that has been living in Amsterdam for the last two years. Though she did not express any feelings of embarrassment for buying from second-hand stores when growing up, it is important to note that this type of shopping has been far more normalized during the last couple of years and Lexi has been aware of this factor, as she can now see more people of her age buy from the same stores and sites as her. What Lexi communicated aligns to what other young people have expressed online about the normalization of thrifting: “thrifting has been normalized, since so many people are doing it, it is now seen as cooler. It is seen better than going to the mall, young people find it fun, like a game, a hunt for something unique (Sicurella 2021). Since millennials and generation Z are highly invested in the online world and social media, a natural consequence has been the rise of online second-hand platforms. As shown by Sicurella (2021), generation Z has embraced the second-hand fashion faster than any other age group, as most of the users of platforms such as Etsy, Depop and Vinted are below the age of 26 and also constitute a 90% of the total users. In addition, the promotion of fashion trends and the popularity of thrift-shopping hauls ¹⁹ through social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Tik Tok have shown to have a major impact on a rise in consumption of second-hand clothes, as several of my participants have also said to have found new shopping tips mostly through these platforms.

¹⁹ Haul refers to a video showing the most recent clothing purchase, mostly of a famous or relevant internet person. Hauls often lead to new fashion trends.

Nevertheless, not only does generation Z get a glimpse of thrifting being promoted as a fashion statement or a trend, they also get information on how exploitative the fast fashion industry is both with the environment and their workers. However, despite the fact that the increase of buying second-hand can be regarded as a positive increase, it is important to note that the overconsumption of sustainable products is still overconsumption. Second-hand store owners find themselves in a situation in which their businesses have to meet the models of capitalism in order to succeed and make a living, and therefore, constantly include new and exciting pieces that will eventually sell at a high speed. One of the most popular second-hand stores in both Amsterdam and Utrecht is Episode, which has stores all across The Netherlands and a few others in Belgium and France. Episode is a shop that I frequently visited during my fieldwork, and it can be regarded as one of the best examples of a capitalistic second-hand shop. As shown in the vignette, Episode is a store that reflects a behavior of overconsumption, in which customers believe that buying plenty sustainable items will not have the same impact as buying from retailers, and that their consumption will instantly have a positive impact on the planet. Episode mainly distinguishes itself from other second-hand stores as it resembles a regular retail store by having several identical items, a range of sizes, prices per category and not per item, and an outlook based on what is trendy at the moment. Their business model mainly focuses on attracting young people, analyzing the current trends and setting them on display. The constant busyness of Episode was regarded by Martin as a positive indicator of societal change, however, it is important to keep in mind that overconsumption goes against the basic principles of sustainability, and that due to the popularization of thrift shopping, this type of consumption is mainly associated with good attributes when it has also negative aspects to discuss such as the ambiguity that these types of stores pose to sustainability but also the impact on self-expression and distinction, as this becomes more homogeneous when items are offered in bigger quantities.

Daniel is a 27-year old working person who was born and raised in the province of Utrecht. He has a fascination for self-expression, and he does so mainly through his clothes and tattoos. During our interview, he shared his knowledge about the way Episode functions, as he added that he has several friends who used to work there:

“Episode receives huge and huge amounts of clothing in big bags from their, I don’t know, I guess vintage dealer or provider. From that, they will make a selection of what is worthy to put out to sell. This is usually a 10% of all the clothes they get, and the rest, they throw away” – Daniel (Interview, April 15th).

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21



Episode distinguishes itself from other second-hand stores for being one of the most visited ones by younger generations. However, other stores follow similar business models and could mostly be found in Amsterdam such as Zipper, Bij Ons and Marble’s Vintage. These stores are all chains and several of them can be spotted also in other cities.

“I actually don’t mind that there are second-hand shops that are selective with what they sell, I think it is okay. If their image is to be street and cool then they should go for it, but of course, I don’t think it’s fair. I also think it’s unfair that

²⁰ Photograph taken at Episode in Utrecht showing pile of shoes and Levi’s jeans.

²¹ Photograph taken at Episode in Amsterdam showing big amounts of adidas trackpants and denim jackets.

sometimes they sell fake items or replicas still at a high price. This makes me not want to trust the shop” – Paula (Interview, February 10th).

The issue explained by Paula in this quote, shows the distrust that some have developed towards more famous second-hand stores, as they have been caught to sell fake items or replicas, at a price of what the original second-hand item would cost. She also mentioned that she feels this way about Vinted, as she is not sure whether to trust the seller about the authenticity of the item. Throughout our interview, she also mentioned that these more common or mainstream stores have shifted from the idea of second-hand, by denying the practice of clothing donation, which is usually the biggest representation and provider of these type of businesses.

“I also find it unfair that I cannot just go to Episode and donate a bunch of clothes, because I actually have a lot of clothes that have been sitting in a bag because I don’t know what to do with them. I don’t want to just give them away because they have a certain value. Where I am from, I used to always go to the church and donate clothes, but here I don’t know where to do it. I prefer not to use those containers next to recycling bins because I have heard that instead of being given to a good cause, they end up being sold at vintage stores” – Paula (Interview, February 10th).

The issue that Paula explains in this segment of our interview describes the frustration of not being able to trust clothing donations, especially when it comes to valuable pieces. The fact that trendier shops are not allowed to accept donations serves as a contradiction to the idea of selling second-hand or used clothes, and even as a paradox to sustainability as a whole. In essence, trendier second-hand shops incite a more compulsive shopping behaviour by offering clothes that are in style at the moment, as well as vast quantities of best-selling items such as Levi’s jeans or denim jackets, as seen in figures 20 and 21. By offering trendy pieces that have been previously handpicked and strictly selected based on the aesthetic that the shop wants to portray, the prices of the items also increase consequently. Paula thought that having cheaper second-hand stores that offer all kinds of clothes and then having more selective stores at a more expensive price was actually fair towards the sellers because having a critical eye and knowing what is going to sell more also costs time and effort. However, she

also regarded this as contrary to the idea of reusing clothes as an environmental choice, making this another form of capitalistic consumption instead of a positive factor in reducing environmental costs. This, once again, intersects with the paradox that generation Z faces when looking at how their self-expression clashes with wanting to purchase in an ethical and sustainable manner, and how economic issues and the shift of the second market constantly gets in their way of trying to be more environmentally conscious.

The commodification of the second-hand market

Despite the uniqueness and exclusivity offered by second-hand shops, this has now become more mainstream and popularized and therefore, lost its initial exclusive or rare touch. As expressed by Palmer (2005, 197): “vintage has now shifted from subculture to mass culture because of the disappointing fact that, regardless of price, fashion today is rarely exclusive”. As a consequence of second-hand fashion becoming more popular, more businesses have emerged, which has led not only to more competitiveness but also to a vast price increase. In addition, this increase in price has also come hand in hand with a worsening of quality or state of the clothes being sold. This is an issue that can be observed within the vignette during the test that Lexi proposed to do, in which price and quality did not match the pieces that were being weighed. This showed how some of the concepts that were integrated a few years ago, such as shopping per kilogram, have been adapted into the business model of profiting of the second-hand shopping trend and even turned this into a priority. Furthermore, fast fashion brands have joined this model and introduced second-hand clothes into their stores by offering reused and reworked pieces. This is the case a shop called Urban Outfitters and their second-hand line called Urban Renewal. Urban Outfitters is known worldwide for selling trendy clothes from brands that are most popular at the time and mainly attract young consumers, as I observed during my fieldwork. As mentioned by one key informant, who currently works at this shop, the Urban Renewal collection mainly comes from deadstock that is later reworked into a new piece, from vintage collectors and donations. In their website they claim to restock these vintage clothing racks every week and they emphasize that every piece is unique, as there is only one of a kind.



In the figures 22 and 23, two pieces from the Urban Renewal collection are shown, both at a price of 55€. Throughout my fieldwork period, I visited this shop several times and took photographs of items that I thought had an inadequate price in relation to quality or simply just overpriced. By doing this, I found that the sweater shown in figure 23 remained unsold from the first time I saw it in March till at least May, meaning that this piece did not get sold for at least the three months of my fieldwork. Furthermore, despite their portrayal of selling unique pieces, I found identical pieces that I had also found at other second-hand stores such as Levi's shorts and other sweaters and shirts, making their claim of unique and exclusive rather inaccurate.

Costas, a 23-year-old graduate, differs himself to most of my other participants for not being involved in the second-hand shopping spectrum, as he explained that he barely goes shopping as he almost feels like he hates it. Nevertheless, he expressed with me his knowledge about clothing donations and how second-hand stores and chains profit from this. He explained that a very famous second-hand store called Humana, which is spread all around Europe, actually accepts store donations, unlike other chains. However, Costas explained that they also get most of their clothes from containers, and that once they receive the bags of clothes, nearly half of it gets exported to Africa and the rest gets sold in the store. Costas further argued that, objectively, this is perceived as a good

²² Photograph taken at Urban Outfitters showing a piece of the urban renewal collection on sale for 55€

²³ Photograph taken at Urban Outfitters showing a sweater for 55€

deed, but that in reality, most of these clothes were meant to get donated to poverty and that profit is still being made out of them. By combining the arguments given both by my participants, younger people find it hard to trust clothes containers due to the uncertainty and lack of transparency of where they are going to end up and therefore abstain themselves from taking part in this activity due to the capitalistic nature behind it. In other words, second-hand stores reject in person donations while still selling donated clothes from containers at higher prices behind the justification of selling exclusive and handpicked pieces. This raises the question of how the second-hand market has been commodified by the upper and richer social classes who can afford to pay higher prices to be in style with the newest trend of thrifting, while those who have been thrifting their whole life based on economic difficulties get this habit pushed away from them and become excluded. As Lexi was explaining during the interview, she used to only be able to afford second-hand clothes, however, she noted how this now changed: “Now it is almost the opposite, in the sense of, now I cannot afford second-hand because it has become so expensive. Of course, I still have the markets and charity shops to go to, but it has definitely changed”. Others, such as Marvin, have expressed their indifference with this shift in how the second-hand market has changed:

“Honestly, yes, I can see how it has changed from when I first started doing it (at 8 years old), but I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing. I think it’s good that people are buying more second-hand and it’s only natural that prices also increase and quality worsens when it becomes mainstream” – Marvin (Interview, February 20th).

In an article posted by COSH, it is argued that this price increase is a direct consequence of thrifting being a trend. They further argue that for some people, buying second hand is a necessity and that the ecological or sustainability part of it remains a secondary consequence, and that being able to afford second-hand as an ecological choice is more associated with privilege. In order to understand this, they use the example of cultural appropriation in a way that, a habit that has been looked down upon for ages, suddenly becomes trendy and adopted by higher classes and consequently become more accepted and later also more expensive. From my empirical data, I can mostly agree to this argument as this was an issue explained by Lexi, who comes from a working-class background and was used to buying second-hand. Mostly, this increase in

price and also often a worsening of quality can be found in second-hand chains rather than in local or independent second-hand stores. I observed this during my fieldwork period by paying special attention to price and quality.

24



25



In the city of Utrecht, I found a shop called *Sisters Betaalbare Tweedehandswinkel* which stands for affordable second-hand shop, which can be observed in figure 24. This is a small local shop run by the owner, where browsing for a good piece would usually take a bit more time than at other more obvious trendy shop but with the difference that prices remained rather low. They still offered branded pieces and in very good state, and mostly under the price of 20€, however, these are found when spending a longer time browsing for clothes. Figure 25 shows a photograph taken at a store in Utrecht called Vintage Department Store and shows a very worn-off The North Face fleece jacket for 29.95€, which is quite expensive as opposed to a new looking adidas hoodie found at Sisters. This relates back to the vignette by the fact that good pieces are indeed possible to find, however, it is important to pay attention to the quality and brand, as it is easy to be fooled behind the label of vintage. Similar to Lexi, Joe, a 24-year-old student who is local from Utrecht, shared his experience with buying from shops like Episode or Vintage Island.

²⁴ Photograph taken in Utrecht showing a local second-hand shop

²⁵ Photograph taken in Utrecht showing an ítem with the Price of 29.95€

“I grew up having just enough. Luckily now I can afford more expensive brands such as Levi’s, Carhartt or Dickies which I find in shops like Episode or Vintage Island. I know they might be overpriced sometimes, but at the same time I cannot afford to buy them new from the store” – Joe (Interview, April 20th)

Despite the negative aspects that have been pointed out, trendier and more mainstream shops do offer the possibility to wear brands that may not be affordable to most young people, and will, as mentioned by COSH, consequently make them take part in a more sustainable act than buying from a fast fashion brand. Nevertheless, it is necessary to critically analyze the effects of the commodification of the second-hand market and how this is mostly paid by lower-income classes, especially when buying recycled clothes sometimes overcomes its own retail price. This is not the usual, however, I encountered this at a second-hand shop in Amsterdam called Bij Ons, which was selling a bomber jacket for 49€ that seemed in fairly good state, but when looking more closely in detail, it could be appreciated that it came from the shop Pull&Bear, which is a fast fashion brand that is part of the same retail group as Zara. Similarly, an article online from Pop Buzz explained how a Primark shirt was found at the Urban Renewal section of Urban Outfitters at a price of 45€ (Smith 2017).

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²⁶ Photograph taken at Bij Ons showing a bomber jacket from Pull&Bear.

This could be regarded almost as a full circle moment, in which fast fashion meets second-hand, where the fast speed of buying and throwing away creates an intertwine between poor-quality retail pieces and vintage clothes from the 80s, all in one store. It is also prominent to note that jackets at Pull&Bear usually carry a price between 30 and 40€, which only comes to show how some second-hand businesses are taking advantage of the trend of thrifting in order to make the highest possible profit. This also relates back to the vignette in which second-hand workwear clothes from Carhartt and Dickies were being sold for double its retail price, when in reality this price increase is solely based on the nature of profit making based on a fashion trend that is far away from being sustainable. Thus, the commodification of the second-hand market has impacted not only the quality of the items being sold but also created a contradiction by wanting to portray a sustainable and ethical market that is based on the rejection of donations and an emphasized exclusivity of products that can only be afforded by a set of consumers that aim to differentiate themselves from others, when in reality, due to the massification of this industry, similar items can be found in most popular second-hand stores, which is an issue that will be further discussed in chapter 3.

Chapter 3

As I was walking through the city center of Amsterdam on a sunny morning in April, entering shop after shop and walking for hours, I stopped to get a coffee and I started writing a few thoughts in my fieldwork diary. I continued my journey and started heading to the area of De Pijp as I knew that a big market is hosted there every day called Albert Cuyp markt. This market had mainly food stands where people would buy their afternoon snack, grab a bite with their friends or do their weekly groceries. Similar to Waterlooplein markt, next to this market there were several second-hand shops, from which one was also a kilo store. I entered to see what I could find in there, and I realized it had the same system of colors per kilogram, as another kilo store that I had entered a few weeks before. I immediately observed some of the same patterns of clothing that I had observed at other shops in Amsterdam and Utrecht such as the flannel shirts and the polos, or the denim jackets and the levi's jeans. The shop was full of young people, both locals and tourists, all young and excited to see what the store had to offer. I heard people talking to each other and giving advice about buying a certain item. I saw people taking selfies in the mirrors, others taking 10 items of clothes into the fitting rooms. Without a doubt, I felt a bit uncomfortable knowing I was there observing all of these behaviours and not really shopping like everyone else, but I remember thinking to myself: "I don't know why they are so excited about this shop, if it has just the same things as others, and even more expensive". As I walked outside, I noticed a clothing stand from the Albert Cuyp market with big signs saying "VINTAGE".



Surprisingly, or actually not surprisingly, there was no one at this stand. Well, of course the owner of the stand was there, and he looked like a middle-aged man that has been selling in this market for his whole life. He did not look like most of the employees at thrift stores with a cool outfit and style. This stand was much cheaper than the stores next to the market, but there was not a soul in sight. People just walked by and completely ignored this stand, as if it did not exist. The people at the market were more interested in the food being sold or in socializing. After walking through this market, I decided to take the tram and go again to Waterloomarkt, just to see whether I could spot any contrasts. As I arrived, I saw plenty of clothing stands with huge piles of clothes that were sold for a euro or two. Contrary to Albert Cuyp, there was plenty of young people browsing through these piles of worn clothes, ranging from sweaters, skirts, jeans, shoes and everything one could imagine.



The fact that mostly young people were browsing and buying items did not surprise me, as I could almost picture my mum or dad saying, “why would these people want to buy old and dirty clothes?”. Well, because it is trendy. If thrift stores are becoming more expensive and do not allow donations, then markets are still a great way to find unique pieces at low prices. While being there I tried to act as normal as possible and decided to browse myself as well, for the purpose of this research but also for myself, and to be honest, you have to spend a fair amount of time looking, and you have to have a good eye. It is certainly easier to give up and go to the well-put and organized vintage store.

As vintage and second-hand clothes have become more popular, especially among the youth, more research has been done about the drivers and motivators of engaging in this industry, as well as new debates have appeared that concern the relation of possessions to the self in reused clothing. Furthermore, buying second-hand has been studied as more than just an individual practice but also as a social activity in which individuals communicate with each other and exchange belongings. In addition, this chapter analyzes these practices and debates by looking at how the second-hand industry reproduces a sense of belonging in which the search for differentiation creates a shared identity, but also the solutions that younger generations have come up with by trying to balance self-expression and economic limitations.

Recycling the sense of self and belonging

Though academic articles (Roux 2006, 31) have shown that when the association to the self with possessions is low that consumers are more likely to purchase reused clothes, on the contrary, my participants have shown a greater interest in buying second-hand by acknowledging and imagining the past lives or owners of the items. This is the example of Daniel and Lexi, who both said to reimagine the stories behind a certain item and how this impacts their decision to purchase more second-hand. The arguments given by Roux's participants on avoiding thinking about the previous owners were mostly related to hygiene and a feeling of discomfort when acknowledging another self, while my participants were not bothered by these two main factors. This difference in arguments can be justified by the fact that Roux's population did not solely consist on young people, while my population is entirely dedicated to this generation.

“One other thing that I love about buying second-hand or from flea markets is that I can sort of think of the story behind of who has worn this, when, to where... I love it, it makes it (the item) come to life in a sort of way!” – Lexi (Interview, April 1st).

Furthermore, other motivations for purchasing second-hand according to Roux (2006, 32) was the desire for distinction and uniqueness, which aligns with previous arguments given in chapter 2. Though this argumentation successfully connects to my empirical data when concerning the interviews that were conducted with my participants, I must highlight a paradoxical factor that has been created by the popularity of the second-hand

market. Relating back to the vignette of this chapter, during my fieldwork I experienced a sense of repetition within the second-hand stores that I visited both in Amsterdam and Utrecht. I noticed how stores offered very similar items and almost identical organizational outlooks, by making the same separated sections of colorful polos, denim jackets, sports sweatshirts, flannels and Hawaiian shirts. These patterns were followed by almost every single store I visited during my fieldwork period and also remained the same during those three months of research as I constantly visited them to see what was new. This observation was also shared by one of my participants, who said to not buy from second-hand stores anymore due to a feeling of boredom and sameness.

“Honestly, I don’t even go to second-hand stores anymore... I have the feeling as if they all have the same clothes, and I already have some polo shirts and flannels, I don’t need any more” – Lorenzo (Interview, April 12th).

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28



²⁷ Photograph taken at Bij Ons in Amsterdam

²⁸ Photograph taken at Bij Ons in Amsterdam

The figures 27 and 28 show the most recurrent pieces of clothes that are visible at most second-hand shops in the cities that I conducted my research at. The clothes shown can be categorized under the style of informal and casual and represent the overall comfortable and more unbothered look that younger people usually go for, and it is therefore understandable why this certain style is chosen and displayed. Nevertheless, the offering of similar and recurrent patterns of styles within these shops, causes a contradiction to the desire of finding uniqueness at second-hand shops, which may have a consequent effect on the overall identity of young people. From this contradiction, my participants have shown how two different paths are created: one being the search for an alternative purchasing behavior in which differentiation and sustainability are still the main factors and is achieved by not shopping at popular second-hand stores, and the other one having a greater desire and attraction to these types of stores by the sense of belonging that this offers despite not being entirely unique or different. Based on my observations during my fieldwork, I could appreciate hundreds of young people wanting to buy from popular second-hand stores despite higher prices and similar products. This can therefore imply that a larger group of people want to be part of a social group or community that is in constant growth due to its popularity, in which a certain style or attitude is portrayed, and a feeling of belonging is being shared, but where differentiation only exists when compared to those outside of this community. Therefore, it can be argued that this rising trend of buying second-hand is not only offering the youth an alternative way for shopping more sustainably, but also giving them a sense of belonging to a multifaceted community in which their values and interests are shared across the different fields of sustainability, the rejection to fast fashion or being in style or trendy.

“Shops like Episode or Vintage Island offer the more cool stuff, like all the brands that people want to wear these days” – Paula (Interview, February 10th).

As explained by most of my participants and based on my own observation, shops that are considered more cool or trendy, hosted a majority of people in their 20s browsing through the hangers of clothes and asking for advice between each other, as shown in the vignette. Despite customers being generally distinct to one another and having different reasons for shopping at a certain vintage store, once all gathered, there is a sense of collectiveness and unplanned socialization. Katherine et al. (2012, 521) argue

that shopping vintage or second-hand can be considered a social practice, based on the perspective of seeing consumption as more than just an economic endeavor but also as a social, relational and active phenomenon. This can be seen in the vignette by how people interacted with one another, and preferred a more crowded place over a quiet market stand.

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Another interesting point raised by Katherine et al. (2012, 522) relates to putting a vintage look into practice within second-hand stores in order to raise credibility and acceptance. Based on my observations, this vintage look was adopted by every single detail of the stores that aimed to portray a strong fashion statement within the second-hand industry, and this look also included the way staff members were dressed. Most of the times, the personnel at these shops were young, funky looking people in their late 20s and early 30s that wore similar clothes to those being sold and who interacted with customers about fashion. This observation relates to my overall research, as well as to my population, in a way that a certain image or style is being portrayed with the aim of fitting into the overall theme of second-hand style but as a form of seeking validation and acceptance among others. This is possible through seeing clothes as more than just a garment but as a possibility to express an emotion, creativity or a taste in a non-verbal manner. Moreover, American sociologists have considered clothing one of the key communicators of belonging to a certain social class, which is a phenomenon that can be traced back in history when looking at ancient Rome and Egypt, in which accessories

²⁹ Photograph taken at Blackfish showing flannel shirts

and clothing market one's superior or inferior status (Akdemir 2018). Despite this notion becoming blurrier and more mixed in the twenty-first-century, distinctions can still be found in the way people dress, however, the second-hand market has played a key role in allowing lower income people to afford certain pieces or brands.

“I often get questions from where I got my Nike jacket or shoes and I always say they are thrifted, sometimes people are surprised because they expected them to be new” - Joe (Interview, April 20th).

From re-cycling to up-cycling

The most common and widespread sustainable practice within the fashion industry is in fact the recycling of clothes and has therefore constituted the main part of this thesis, however, other practices, that are not necessarily new, have been on the rise, such as clothing swap events and upcycling clothes. A clothing swap is an exchange of clothing items between two or more consumers without the exchange of money (Matthews and Hodges 2016, 91) and they can occur both in person and online. At these events clothes usually are organized by category ranging from value and brand in order to ensure the fairest swaps. On the other hand, upcycling takes garment waste and turns it into a fashionable piece and therefore offers it another life cycle. The process of upcycling goes through the following steps: selection of garment or waste, identification of defects if any, creation of design and significance of the product developed. These concepts have given a different meaning to the recycling of clothes and consist of both social and individual practices in which people explore their identity through sustainable fashion at a lower or no cost at all.

Many organizations have been actively promoting these activities, such as COSH, which has hosted several clothes swapping and upcycling workshops throughout the city of Amsterdam during the month of April 2022. In addition, the Green Office of Utrecht University has also been organizing clothing swaps for several years now and appear to be a successful tool for giving clothes a second or even a third life. During one of the clothing swaps organized by COSH in Amsterdam that I attended, I was able to picture the past lives of each item more vividly through having the previous owner in the same room as me. This feeling is in fact not possible through a regular consumption at stores, as the previous life of the clothes can only be subject of my imagination and

will not ever become a reality. According to Roux (2006), the act of swapping clothes back in the 70s and 80s used to frequently happen between friends or people with trust, however, nowadays it is more common to see clothing swaps happening between people that are not related to each other whatsoever. From attending these events I have observed and analyzed that clothing swaps allow for people to meet and interact with the previous owners of the displayed clothes, and as a consequence, it makes the consumer see beyond the item, into the self and identity of the previous owner. This creates a greater trust among consumers about the origin of the clothes, which is an aspect that is lacking at second-hand stores, as it is a more impersonal type of purchase. Moreover, not only do clothing swaps offer a more trustful purchase or excitement through the acquisition of a new item that does not require spending money, but they also offer a great possibility for socialization and the creation of a sense of community. My participants who attended clothing swaps throughout the past years highly valued the socializing part of these activities as they could physically express their enthusiasm about getting new items with other people and establish a connection with them. The fact that clothing swaps are becoming more popular among young people can be attributed to the fact that clothing swaps serve as an alternative for the traditional mode of exchange or consumption, in which a sustainable lifestyle is being promoted around the notions of socialization and nonmonetary practices, which goes along with the lifestyle of a young person.

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³⁰ Screenshot from a post at COSH's Instagram account

Apart from clothing swaps, upcycling has been on the rise among younger generations and some of my participants have shown to frequently take part in this activity in order to revive their closet. The term upcycling was defined in 1994 by Reiner Pilz who refers to this concept as the adding of value to old or used products, instead of the usual definition of recycling which reduces the value of products (Vadicherla et al. 2017, 4). Most of the times, upcycling creates a better and new form of used or disposed items, in which a concern for the environment is mixed with creativity and innovation, as well as skills and hard work, that results in a unique sustainable and handmade piece (Vadicherla et al., 2017, 5).

“I love going to the flea market and browsing through the pile of 1€ clothes. Sometimes I find like a boring t-shirt and I make it into a cute crop top, or a long ugly dress and then I make a scrunchie, a top and a skirt, all from one item” – Lexi (Interview, April 1st).

Some of my participants shared the same fascination for upcycling clothes and all agreed to the fact that this allows them to see what more a certain piece can offer. One participant also mentioned that she upcycles items whenever she finds them boring and then tries to reimagine and recreate more trendier designs such as bikini tops and skirts out of polo shirts. Upcycling can also be named after the acronym of DIY which stands for Do It Yourself. According to a Vogue Business issue in 2020, young people are increasingly more interested in customizing, upcycling and reconstructing clothes, and this has seen an important rise amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Maguire 2020). Not only are young people making these new designs for their own wardrobe, but they are also selling them online through platforms such as Depop, Vinted or Marketplace. Though the upcycling trend may be disliked by businesses, some brands such as Dickies decided to sell and give away their deadstock fabric during lockdown, in order to encourage people to be creative and look for hobbies that revolve around making fashion (Maguire 2020). The process of upcycling occurs with both new and used clothes and offers a great alternative for finding unique style and creativity at a low environmental and monetary cost. However, my participants have showed a preference for upcycling second-hand clothes found at markets of thrift stores for being cheaper and already more unique, rather than using the deadstock of fabrics. The wanting to tear apart clothes and reimagine them into a new piece is a great alternative for gen Z and

millennials to express their creativity into fashion, and certainly relates to the creation of a personal identity as this is being affected by the urge of wanting to be sustainable and therefore avoiding the mainstream and popular second-hand stores that have commodified this practice and turned into a business model for higher profit. The fact that young people are starting to learn how to sew and assemble pieces together can be seen as a way of looking for alternatives to escape the contradiction that their generational issues is constantly placing them in for wanting to have a positive contribution on the planet while wanting to express themselves through unique clothes at a price that meets their economic necessities. In addition, platforms such as Instagram and Tik Tok have played an important role in setting trends for its users by offering sewing tutorials and DIY hacks, as well as other inspirations and ideas for upcycling.

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32



Upcycled clothes can be seen as a way of escaping the normality and the ordinary, as these overpass the previous uniqueness that second-hand clothes used to offer before its popularization and commodification. Young people are known to be more creative and

³¹ Screenshot from the Instagram account called vintagepalace_ showing an upcycled bag made out of denim jeans.

³² Screenshot from the Instagram account called les_essentiels_de_gaelle showing upcycled children clothes.

playful, and some of my participants showing patterns of boredom towards what is established as the norm, and they therefore try to escape this by finding alternative ways to style their clothes with what is already in their wardrobe, in someone else's wardrobe or at shops and markets. While conducting participant observations, I found myself wanting to upcycle a polo shirt that I found at a kilo store in Utrecht, where the price per kilogram is 15€. Not only did I only spend 4€ on this item, but it was also from a high fashion brand called Yves Saint Laurent.

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34



After this purchase I called a good friend who has been doing this for years and asked for her advice to transform this red shirt into a new piece, as she has been doing this herself for years and figure 34 shows one of the multiple ways in which she transforms polo shirts. Though this shirt remains in its original state due to the prioritization of other tasks, for being part of my own population I found myself being influenced by others and inspired to upcycle clothes because of friends and social media.

“I have been repairing some old clothes that I loved and was not wearing because they had holes or a broken zipper, now I am taking them to repair and I could not be happier” – Lorenzo (Interview, April 12th).

³³ Photograph taken at Vintage Island Kilo in Utrecht showing red YSL polo shirt.

³⁴ Screenshot from the Instagram account Nelagoomi showing an upcycled polo shirt.

The repairing of clothes was an activity that was frequently brought up by some of my participants as an alternative to buying new clothes, such as Paula, who claimed to have brought 10 pieces to repair that were too big or broken. She explained how she spent around 70€ and how this was worth it as usually she would have spent this amount in just a pair of jeans, but instead, she now could wear 10 unworn pieces from her wardrobe.

“I had some jeans that I loved but were just not the right fit for me and I got them tailored now and I am so happy, I wish more people did this instead of buying new clothes and throwing old ones” – Paula (Interview, February 10th).

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As seen in figures 35 and 36, I accompanied my participant Lorenzo to repair one of his favorite jackets, as well as a t-shirt. As my participants expressed, repairing clothes also gave them a sense of going shopping without actually going shopping, as the fact that an item that had been forgotten in their wardrobe is coming back to life again, gives them the excitement of a new purchase. Though these items mostly remain the same as they were bought and can therefore not be considered as upcycled, they do offer similar sensations and contribute positively to the environment by not throwing these pieces

³⁵ Photograph showing a broken jacket from the participant Lorenzo.

³⁶ Photograph taken at a clothing repair store in Utrecht.

away and replacing them for new ones. Repairing clothes can therefore also be considered a great alternative for being sustainable at a lower cost in relation to the paradox that this generation faces towards ethical and eco-fashion.

One of the multiple workshops offered by COSH during their launch event in Amsterdam also consisted in reworking pieces and repairing old clothes. Some businesses have incorporated the fixing of clothing into their marketing strategies, such as a shop that I found while walking around Amsterdam, in which one could bring in their old jeans and get a discount for the next ones, as well as they offered a free repairing service. As mentioned by several participants, more shops are joining this initiative as a way of promoting more a sustainable lifestyle while keeping their businesses alive, as in fact, sustainability promotes practices that are often opposed to the capitalistic nature of the fashion industry.

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38



The recent resurgence of businesses and stores portraying more sustainable practices can be seen as a way to survive the rising environmental awareness within the younger

³⁷ Photograph taken in Amsterdam from the shop Nudie jeans.

³⁸ Photograph taken in Amsterdam from the shop Nudie jeans.

population in a way that their marketing still fits and matches the values that are expressed and denounced. As expressed by my informant from COSH, it is difficult to be 100% sustainable, and she in fact confessed that we might never be fully green and eco, but that small efforts can make a huge difference. Furthermore, she emphasized on the importance to appeal to young people within the sustainable market, by also showing that sustainable fashion can be trendy, and it does not necessarily have to follow a nude color palette to be sustainable. As she explained this to me, she showed me some of the clothes sold at her shop that were made with volcanic materials and linen, and how others portrayed the art pieces of several artists, who also got a share of the profit once the item got sold. In addition, she showed me a more street-style brand based in London called Stay Creative or SCRT, that also uses sustainable materials and to which younger people can relate to more. However, as stated by the writer, teacher and activist Sharifa Jamaladin at one of the COSH events: “there is no sustainable fashion without fair pay”. Sustainable fashion often goes hand in hand with higher prices, often also due to the juxtaposition of the low prices of fast fashion. Nevertheless, in order to promote sustainable practices among the population, it is important to consider fair wages and economic stability, which is something that is at times lacking among the lives of young generations and causes them to experience an ethical dilemma. Therefore, it is also important to acknowledge the existence of certain practices that make sustainable living less pricey, such as upcycling or clothing swaps, as well as to promote more durable clothing at a higher price as opposed to low quality material with a smaller lifespan. My participants have shown to be slowly shifting their modes of consumption as they try to navigate around the paradoxes and contradictions that their generation inevitable positions them in, by looking for a balance between a sustainable consumption, economic challenges and self-expression through clothing.

Conclusion

The fashion industry is regarded as one of the most polluting industries of the world, and its link with personal identity and younger generations has been shown throughout this thesis by analyzing the role of fashion trends, the meaning of style and sustainable practices, among others, in order to prove this relationship. This thesis has shown that younger generations, in an effort of wanting to differentiate themselves and consume in a more sustainable way, have turned to second-hand fashion as an alternative to fast fashion. However, in this process, various dilemmas are being faced by these generations in which the initial desire for uniqueness intertwines with the rising trend of buying second-hand and where brands and shops have adapted their business models in order to satisfy consumer's demands and have consequently increased their prices, which has affected those who have been shopping second-hand for economic necessities and not necessarily sustainable concerns. Some have shown patterns of indifference with not being entirely unique anymore, as the sense of belonging to a second-hand fashion community is highly valued, but others have looked for alternatives that fit their budget and morals through creativity and self-expression within sustainable fashion by swapping, repairing or upcycling clothes. Furthermore, younger generations have shown positive responses to the growth of sustainability within fast fashion companies and the rising trend of buying second-hand, while at the same time, have shown an awareness of its negative aspects or the often use of greenwashing strategies.

My fascination for this topic has made this journey enjoyable as well as highly motivating, as it englobes all of my interests and concerns, from which several key points that I have given throughout this paper can be highlighted. One of the most important arguments is related to the issue of capitalism and globalization, in which the fashion world operates. Fast fashion brands have been concerned with meeting the expectations of younger generations and overall society to start reducing their carbon emissions and turn into a more sustainable business model, and though it seems as if they have been listening to these messages and criticisms, it has been observed that most of these efforts appear to be another marketing strategy to remain relevant and within the trend loop. Ethical business models often require higher prices as their manufacturing costs are high, however, fast fashion brands continue to offer low prices on their green and recycled products in order to still attract or even amplify their

consumer audience. Another key point mentioned in this thesis relates to the meaning of fashion trends, as younger generations, in order to discover themselves are constantly exploring their style and staying up to date with the latest trends. Furthermore, due to fashion repeating itself throughout history and constantly reviving styles from past eras, the second-hand market has seen its highest peak, not only for environmental reasons but for being in fashion or trendy. Younger people have switched their consumption style to buying more from second-hand stores and markets as this has shown to positively impact their lives both by a feeling of environmental-consciousness but also as it allows them to express their style in freedom of stereotypes and assigned gender roles, which are usually more followed by retail stores. Another key point revolves around how fast fashion brands have caught up with the necessity of feeling good about purchases and how this has been portrayed into their business models by introducing concepts such as wellness and consciousness within their sustainable clothing lines, as an aim to appeal more consumers, and especially young people. Lastly, during this thesis, the issue of fair wages has been discussed in relation to sustainable fashion by emphasizing on the fact that the popularity of second-hand fashion has affected the lives of those who have been buying reused clothes out of an economic necessity and how they are being pushed away from this by a sudden increase of prices and worsening of quality, making them excluded from this activity and commodifying this type of market that had previously been looked down upon.

I believe that this thesis will contribute, from an anthropological perspective, to responding to how younger generations express themselves and show their own identity through fashion and the consumption of sustainable clothing. Furthermore, it offers a critical analysis on how fast fashion brands and fashion trends have introduced sustainability into their business models. In addition, the themes of neoliberalism and globalization through the second-hand market and what this means for status and belonging at the individual and collective level of identity has been explored and highlighted, as well as the link between sustainable fashion and self-identification. Reflecting on the research question posed in the introduction, it can be concluded that sustainable and second-hand fashion relates to the self and identity of younger populations as not only a tool for self-expression and creativity but also as a way to become connected to others through the creation of an unconscious collective identity.

Limitations

This thesis carries potential limitations due to a relatively short fieldwork period and a small research population. Furthermore, my positionality may have influenced this research with personal biases for being part of my own research population. These limitations have inevitably had an impact on the outcome and response of my research question by not being fully applicable to other cities in The Netherlands or other countries, making generalizations not possible. In addition, a limited availability of academic research on the topic of sustainable fashion from a consumer's perspective has also contributed to a lack of academic evidence which had to be compensated with newspaper articles and other online resources. For this reason, this thesis can offer a foundation for further research in which a broader population size and geographical scope can lead to more accurate results in the field of sustainable fashion and personal identity.

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