

CONSUMER COMMUNITIES AND SECOND-HAND CLOTHING SWAPS AS DRIVERS OF CIRCULARITY IN FASHION INDUSTRY

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The transition to a circular economy in the fashion industry can provide answers to environmental problems such as waste production or water usage, while also contributing to the solution of social problems such as child labour and psychological problems arising from overconsumption, thereby contributing significantly to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Circular economy is mostly interpreted as an umbrella term that can define highly contradictory ideas of sustainable development especially regarding business actors. Thus, both in theory and practice, it is very important to involve various actors, including consumers, not just deal with corporate solutions. The basic assumption is that circular economy should be based on social and economic structures. That is why our research examines second-hand clothing swaps and other consumer community solutions and the potentials for linking them to corporate initiatives, giving greater opportunities for truly effective circular solutions and the cooperation of different stakeholders.

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1 Introduction

The fashion sector represents one of the most significant value creating industries, characterised by an extensive and complex supply chain (EURATEX, 2020). Despite its economic importance, it raises serious social issues. According to a 2020 report by the U.S. Department of Labor, child labour is present in five countries within the fashion and textile supply chain, forced labour occurs in one country, and three countries exhibit both forms of labour exploitation. Besides social concerns, fashion industry is among the world's most environmentally damaging industries, contributing substantially to global ecological issues (Abbate et al., 2023). The scale of its environmental footprint is illustrated by the fact that the fashion industry generates roughly 8% of global CO₂ emissions (Bailey et al., 2022), and each year around 85% of produced textiles end up in landfills (EPA, 2022). Its water consumption is similarly remarkable: UN data indicate that the sector produces more than 20% of global wastewater and uses approximately 215 trillion cubic metres of water annually (United Nations, 2025).

The prevailing operational model of the fashion industry is still largely shaped by linear economic logic and fast-fashion practices, emphasising rapid and high-volume production (Gazzola et al., 2020). Although shifting towards a circular economy offers potential pathways to alleviate both environmental and social challenges, and there are some initiatives dealing with the social side of sustainable supply chain management and the development of responsible business models (Muttingi, 2013), scholarly work disproportionately highlights the environmental dimension, leaving the social pillar comparatively underexplored. Yet social sustainability is a crucial component of sustainable supply chain management and the development of responsible business models within the sector (Jia et al., 2020).

That is why this article specifically examines a consumer clothing swap program and a workshop based on circularity in order to assess consumers' motivations and experiences, including the potential advantages and disadvantages of such schemes. By presenting new research findings from the consumer side, we can promote a better understanding of it and find possible points of connection with the corporate side.

We sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What motivates individuals to participate in clothing swap initiatives, and how do different motivational factors interact in shaping engagement?
2. To what extent are environmental sustainability considerations explicit versus implicit in consumers' participation in clothing swaps?
3. What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of clothing swaps?
4. How does awareness (or lack thereof) of clothing swap initiatives influence participation in community-based circular fashion practices?

2 Theoretical background and Literature review

As we highlighted, the environmental side of the topic is overemphasized, but there are some works related to the social aspects, too. Niero et al. (2017) emphasise environmental issues in relation to eco-efficient circular models but also point to the importance of social determinants and consumer behaviour. Molina and Pascua (2022) also focus on the environmental impact but point to the role of consumers in ensuring that products are used as much as possible before being returned to the production cycle or even passed on to other consumers.

In the transition toward a circular fashion system, consumers play a pivotal role not merely as end-users but as active agents shaping production models, business strategies, and policy outcomes. Consumers are an important part of the circular economy, both for practical reasons and to establish legitimacy: on the one hand, it is necessary to collect worn-out or unused clothing and textiles and deliver them to the recycling point, and on the other hand, their consent is also required to establish and maintain the system. Achieving meaningful circularity in fashion requires systemic transformation, including redesigned business models, stronger stakeholder alignment, and governance mechanisms that address both environmental impacts and social equity within supply chains, underscoring that incremental improvements are no longer adequate for the scale of change required (Burnstine & Ghattas, 2025).

Despite that current frameworks fall short in enabling meaningful collaboration among stakeholders, even though coordinated planning - encompassing resource allocation, viable operational processes and clearly defined roles - is essential. Only

such integrated approaches can ensure that production and consumption are viewed as interconnected parts of a single, continuous system. (Mukherjee et al., 2023).

Recent research highlights that circularity in the fashion industry - encompassing practices such as reuse, repair, resale, rental, and recycling - depends significantly on consumer acceptance, participation, and behavioral change (Klemm and Kaufman, 2024). Scaling circular fashion requires systemic shifts in consumption patterns, including moving away from fast-fashion norms toward durability, emotional attachment, and responsible disposal practices (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2024).

At the same time, studies emphasize the tension between pro-sustainability attitudes and actual purchasing behavior, pointing to structural barriers such as price sensitivity, convenience expectations, and limited trust in corporate sustainability claims (Csutora et al., 2024). Moreover, a study from Hungary indicates that environmental concern and personal lifestyle preferences help explain consumers' interest in alternative circular models like clothing swaps, underscoring the importance of psychosocial factors in motivating circular behaviour (Balogh & Harangozó, 2025).

Voukkali et al. (2023) show that, however much sustainability is talked about in public discourse, the biggest barrier to real sustainability and circular action and processes in rural and urban contexts is ignorance and lack of information on the topic: neither individuals nor small communities are aware of the negative environmental and social impacts of their consumption and related production, and of the impact they can have if they take conscious action to reduce them. In their study, they point out the social factors of community actions such as waste collection, exchanges, etc., and how the use of digital tools, including gamification, can be useful in raising awareness and shaping attitudes. The first step is social acceptance of actions and the financial and other capacity to join in, only this can lay the foundations for real and effective action. Thus, the environmental values, attitudes and awareness of individuals and communities are crucial for circular communities. They point out that academics and researchers have a particularly important role to play in shaping them.

Matthews and Hodges (2015) contend that consumers tend to engage in swapping initiatives primarily out of self-interest: seeking opportunities to dispose of unwanted garments while acquiring new, distinctive or even branded items. Their work also highlights that hedonic motives, such as the enjoyment of socialising, eating or simply spending time with others during swap events, play a meaningful role. They further note that in small community-based swapping contexts, adherence to shared rules - such as contributing good-quality items or actively participating in organising activities - is critical for sustaining cooperation and ensuring participants return. Notably, environmental concern appeared only marginally, if at all, among the motivations expressed by their interviewees.

More recent research supports and extends these observations. For instance, Karpova et al. (2022) show that clothing swaps often satisfy not only basic functional needs but also a range of psychological and social desires, while also revealing that perceived risks and social dynamics significantly shape participation in temporary exchange practices. Moreover, younger adults are largely drawn to clothing swaps because they offer low-cost wardrobe refreshment, opportunities for social connection and a sense of community - suggesting that hedonic and social rewards remain central drivers, even as environmental awareness grows (Armouch et al., 2024).

Thus, while their motivations are not primarily related to sustainability, consumers function simultaneously as drivers and constraints of circular transformation in fashion, making their motivations, capabilities, and contextual conditions central to achieving meaningful progress in the sector.

3 Methodology

The empirical research is embedded in a participatory action research (PAR) framework. PAR is a collaborative research approach in which researchers and participants jointly generate knowledge and foster change through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). A core principle of PAR is that knowledge and collaboration emerge progressively through reflexive engagement rather than being fully predefined at the outset.

In line with this logic, the multi-method research follows a gradual, stepwise design instead of involving all stakeholder groups simultaneously. The initial phase focused on community-based clothing swap initiatives as individual and collective grassroots practices and the overall consumer opinions related to the clothing swaps. The primary objective was to explore participants' motivations and experiences, including the potential advantages and disadvantages of such schemes.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants and organisers of two community clothing swaps and with a detailed questionnaire administered to workshop's participants. Altogether, 27 interviews and a semi-structured questionnaire with 8 respondents were conducted during three events (8 July 2024, 26 August 2024 and 5 December 2024). Respondents were recruited voluntarily.

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation: interviews were carried out and analysed in parallel, and data collection continued until no substantially new themes emerged, only further confirmation of existing patterns (Naeem et al., 2024).

Interviews were conducted in Hungarian, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. The material was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. An initial coding scheme, derived from the interview guide and research questions, was progressively refined through iterative reading, allowing additional themes and sub-themes to emerge inductively. Coding was supported by NVivo 12 software, facilitating systematic comparison across interviews.

We organized a workshop following our clothing swap events in order to also gather insights from individuals who did not have prior experience with such activities. The workshop focused on circularity in the fashion industry, introducing participants to key concepts such as reuse, recycling, and sustainable consumption. Given that this was a university workshop, the participants were predominantly female students in their twenties. One male student participated, and two women were over the age of 35. This obviously limits the generalizability of our findings; however, we observed that clothing swap events are also attended mainly by women, and taking this into account, it is still possible to draw relevant conclusions.

During this session, participants were asked to complete a semi-structured questionnaire. This allowed us to collect comparable data from a “control group” with no direct experience of clothing swaps, which we could then contrast with the interviews conducted among actual swap participants. The workshop is therefore relevant to the study because it helps us distinguish between perceptions shaped by firsthand participation in clothing swaps and those based solely on general awareness or attitudes toward circular fashion.

4 Results

4.1 Experiences and motivations

In consumers swaps, participation was driven by multiple, overlapping motivations rather than a single factor. A key driver was the desire to reduce clothing surplus and prevent waste by extending the life of garments, often framed as a morally preferable alternative to disposal. “My main motivation was that I have a lot of beautiful clothes that I can no longer wear, and I thought it would be nice to give them to someone who would appreciate them. I didn’t want to advertise them for sale, and then this initiative came along where I could bring them here right away and immediately choose new items in exchange for my old clothes. That works well for me - it’s good for everyone. I both give and receive.” (Interview 1) Hedonic aspects also mattered: participants highlighted the enjoyment of browsing, finding unique items, and the “treasure-hunting” experience, which they contrasted with conventional shopping. Social considerations were similarly important, including opportunities for interaction, community building, and a sense of belonging. “I consider this to be very socially useful. I believe it also has an aspect related to social responsibility and helping others.” (Interview 4) Environmental concerns were present, but typically embedded in everyday ethical reasoning rather than expressed as explicit sustainability goals. Overall, engagement reflected a combination of practical, emotional, social, and moral considerations.

Of the eight people asked at the workshop, seven do not yet participate in clothing swaps, and for six of them, their existence was new information. The available benefits were identified as motivational factors on three levels: individually, the hedonistic impulse is strong, updating one’s wardrobe, getting rid of old clothes, and bringing joy to oneself and others. “You can always have new clothes, and when you

get tired of them, you can pass them on.” (WS8) At the community level, there is a strong sense of togetherness and cooperation towards common goals. Connection to environmental sustainability was identified only at the societal level which indicates that participants feel distant from sustainability in the sense that they do not associate their own individual or community-level activities with this more global, higher-level concept. “At the societal level, this is particularly important, as clothing waste is a global problem and clothing swaps can help reduce it.” (WS5)

4.2 Advantages and disadvantages

Participants in the clothing swaps identified the economic and financial benefits before sustainability-related ones, although it was mentioned that these events could have an attitude-shaping, awareness-raising effect on people. “At a local, community level, it definitely brings people together. When we come from time to time, I can see that people actually get to know each other here.” (Interview 2) The participants interviewed could hardly find any drawbacks; rather, they mentioned that while the heavy workload might be difficult for the organizers, there is a risk that the initiative will not remain at this manageable, personal, community level. They cited factors that would eliminate the personal nature of the swaps as limitations, emphasizing that the family atmosphere and the trust associated with it are more important than having more events with more clothes. “If it were held in a larger venue, it would probably have the same purpose, but it might lose some of its charm and could potentially turn into something like a free flea market.” (Interview 1)

Workshop participants identified the opportunity for personal encounters as an advantage, as well as the fact that there is less risk of being cheated or receiving poor-quality clothes than on online platforms. At the same time, they mentioned stronger concerns about the cleanliness and condition of the clothes, as well as sizing issues. It can also be a problem if the clothes are not displayed attractively, as this can give a “cheap” impression. “Clothing swaps can also have disadvantages, such as issues related to quality and hygiene. Not all items meet expectations, which can lead to disappointment, and some people may feel uncomfortable wearing used clothes, especially if their cleanliness is not properly ensured.” (WS6) and another citation related to the lack of awareness: “It can be time-consuming; it’s possible that I won’t find anything I like (in that case, should I even give away my clothes, or should I ask money for them instead?).” (WS4)

5 Discussion

The 27 interviews conducted at the clothing swaps were supplemented by 8 workshop questionnaires, which served as a comparative group. While it was clear and well-known to the participants of the clothing swap that such grassroots initiatives exist, the majority of people who were otherwise interested in the topic and wanted to learn about it had not yet heard of this opportunity. The workshop results highlight a significant awareness gap: while interest in sustainable fashion exists, knowledge about community-based circular practices remains limited. Yet they all buy second-hand clothes and try to reduce the harmful environmental impact of their consumption by thinking carefully about their purchases.

Based on the analyses, as an answer for the research questions we can claim that participation in clothing swap initiatives is primarily motivated by community experience, practical considerations, and social interaction, while environmental motivations tend to be implicit. Community-based, non-monetized initiatives function as unique social spaces that differ from the logic of corporate circular models. The findings suggest that circular fashion practices may emerge not primarily from sustainability-oriented intentions but from socially embedded everyday motivations. Clothing swaps offer economic savings, social interaction, and trust-based exchanges as key advantages, while concerns about hygiene, sizing, and the quality or presentation of items represent their main disadvantages. Limited awareness significantly constrains participation, even among sustainability-conscious individuals who are otherwise open to second-hand consumption.

The organizers have learned that it is worth advertising the opportunity to a wider audience, which may seem simple but considering that one of the great advantages of such events is their personal nature, it is still important to find a healthy balance.

6 Conclusion

In this study, we have only processed the consumer swap and workshop interviews from the larger study, so this is only part of our research. However, the small sample size is mitigated by the fact that, in addition to the clothing swap interviews, we also spoke to subjects at the workshop who could be used as a comparative group. In the next phase of our research, building on this foundation, we will be able to

examine the question of how to organize more similar events and combine clothing swaps with other circular fashion solutions implemented by NGOs, SMEs, and larger companies. This indicates that corporate circular strategies may benefit from engaging with existing community practices rather than attempting to replace them.

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