

Socially Responsible Consumer Behavior? Exploring Used Clothing Donation Behavior

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Abstract

Most research on socially responsible consumer behavior has focused on consumer purchasing behavior, therefore, little is known about it during the product disposal stage. This study sought an in-depth understanding of consumer disposal behavior in a used clothing donation setting. An interpretive analysis revealed that the primary motivation for participants' used clothing donation behavior was the need to create space in the closet for something new. The threat of feelings of guilt played a significant role throughout the process prior to donation, specifically in the decision whether to discard or donate a clothing item. Participants experienced both utilitarian and hedonic values regarding their donation behavior, and these values in turn impacted future donation intentions. A conceptual model based on the study findings is proposed which integrates a Theory of Reasoned Action framework with a consumer values perspective. Study implications and future research avenues are also discussed.

(Keywords) Apparel, Consumer, Decision-making, Disposal, Donation, Responsibility

Introduction

As consumption has increased in the United States, the level of social consciousness on the part of consumers has also increased (Roberts, 1995). Research on the topic of social responsibility has primarily focused on firms' strategies to meet growing consumer demands regarding societal issues. Findings often suggest best practices for firms, and have led to a research stream on the topic of corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR literature includes formulating socially responsible marketing objectives (Sirgy & Lee, 1996), evaluating a firm's socially responsible

buying criteria (Drumwright, 1994), or estimating the effect of a firm's socially responsible practices (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004). As more importance has been placed on understanding social responsibility for consumer behavior, a socially responsible consumer behavior (SRCB) research stream has also developed. Areas include investigating consumer perceptions of CSR practices (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001), cross-cultural studies of SRCB (Maignan, 2001), or empirical effects of a consumer behavior model related to SRCB (Dickson, 2000).

Most studies on SRCB, however, have been centered on the purchase setting of the consumption experience, reflecting the importance of sales within the goals of most firms. This purchase-oriented SRCB research stream has resulted in a critical gap in understanding of the overall consumption cycle. Apparel consumption in particular includes a wide range of different consumption stages, such as “acquiring, storing, using, maintaining, and discarding” for each apparel item (Winakor, 1969, p. 629). In this view, in addition to new clothing purchase, the recycling or donation of used clothing could be an important outlet for disposal and especially as part of socially responsible consumer behavior (Stephens, 1985). However, little is known about apparel donation behavior, despite the important role of disposal within the apparel consumption experience and the overall need to better understand SRCB.

Addressing this critical gap, the present study explored consumer disposal behavior in a used clothing donation setting that is typically considered socially responsible. Specifically, the study examined apparel consumers’ motivations, intentions, and other underlying factors of used clothing donation behavior to uncover whether or not it is an act of social responsibility. Given the fact that SRCB is a relatively new topic in the consumer behavior literature and little research has been conducted on consumers’ experiences with clothing disposal, the study approached the topic from the consumer’s perspective as donator. To do this, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was applied through the use of in-depth interviews and observation with consumers in a clothing disposal setting.

Literature Review

Socially responsible consumer behavior

Much research on social responsibility is found in business research. Historically, a major debate within CSR research has been whether corporate decision makers should pursue objectives other than economic profitability (Vibert, 2004). While research on CSR deals with social responsibility as a matter of firm strategy, consumer behavior researchers are often focused on understanding socially responsible consumption behavior. Adapted from Petkus and Woodruff’s (1992) definition of CSR, Mohr, Webb and Harris (2001) defined socially responsible consumer behavior (SRCB) as the behavior of a consumer who bases his or her acquisition, usage, and disposition of products and services on a desire to minimize or eliminate any destructive or harmful effects and to maximize the long-term beneficial impact on society. This definition distinguished SRCB from CSR as it provided the consumer’s perspective on social responsibility; however, it addressed only part of the whole consumption experience, being concerned primarily with product or service acquisition, usage, and disposition. Mohr and his colleagues’ definition of SRCB failed to include other important consumption stages that might affect consumers’ future acquisition, usage, and disposition, such as product information search, storage, and post-disposal evaluations of products or services.

Consequently, to fill this critical gap, the present study extends Mohr and his colleagues’ (2001) definition of SRCB to include the whole consumption process from the pre-purchase to post-disposal stage, that is, from product information search to post-disposal evaluation. Some consumers may want to be socially responsible in a particular stage of consumption, while others may exercise social responsibility throughout all of the consumption stages. Thus, this study defines SRCB as the

behavior of a consumer basing decisions on a desire to minimize or eliminate any harmful effects and to maximize any beneficial impacts on society in one or more consumption steps of the consumption process. This consumption process includes product information search, acquisition, usage, storage, disposal, and post-disposal evaluation. A socially responsible consumer would try to avoid searching for, buying, and using products and services from companies that may harm society, and instead, seek out products and services from companies that help society throughout the consumption experience (Mohr et al., 2001). In addition, a socially responsible consumer might influence other peoples' purchase decisions through negative feedback from the consumption experience of products or services provided by companies that do not practice CSR. In this vein, CSR might be an important evaluative criterion influencing SRCB. Additionally, a socially responsible consumer may consider both the environment and people as important to society; environmental responsibility and social responsibility are therefore considered to be part of SRCB.

Despite the fact that consumers can infuse social responsibility throughout the consumption experience, most SRCB research is centered on the purchase setting. For example, in their study investigating the impact of CSR on consumer buying behavior, Mohr and colleagues (2001) identified four groups of consumers—pre-contemplators, contemplators, the action group, and maintainers. Purchase behavior among these groups ranged from unresponsive to highly responsive to CSR practices. Getzner and Grabner-Kauter (2004) reported that a significant portion of consumers were willing to invest in “green shares” (a sub-class of corporate socially responsible investment) even in Australia where green investment is believed to be

much less popular than in other countries. Cross-cultural studies of SRCB in a purchase setting have also been popular as the study of cultural diversity within consumer segments has deepened. Maignan (2001) and Maignan and Ferrell (2003) concluded that both French and German consumers were significantly more willing to actively support socially responsible businesses than U.S. consumers. Moreover, French and German consumers were more concerned about businesses conforming to established legal and ethical standards, while U.S. consumers were more concerned about corporate economic responsibility. Comparing U.S. consumers with Chinese consumers, Shen and Dickson (2001) found that consumers who more closely identified with U.S. culture were more accepting of unethical clothing consumption activities, such as changing price-tags on clothing or returning an evening dress after wearing it for a special occasion, than were those who more closely identified with Chinese culture. Although previous studies offer important insights into SRCB, these purchase-oriented SRCB studies have often overlooked SRCB in a product disposal setting, a gap that needs to be addressed.

Clothing consumption and SRCB

Clothing provides a unique consumption experience for consumers. According to Winakor (1969), clothing consumption is different from food consumption in that food disappears when it is eaten or consumed. Food can be eaten or consumed only once, and once it is consumed, it cannot be stored or restored for further use. Clothing consumption differs from housing consumption in that the inventory and usage of housing is constant and the acquisition and disposal of housing occurs relatively infrequently (Winakor, 1969). From this perspective, clothing

consumption is much more complicated, providing a wider range of different stages than that of food or housing. Furthermore, each stage of clothing consumption, from product information search, acquisition, usage, storage, and disposal to post-disposal evaluation, is experienced on a regular basis by everyone (Winakor, 1969). Although there are other products that may require similar consumption stages as clothing, clothing is unique in that it is consumed by everyone and every day, unlike others. The unique nature of clothing consumption, therefore, provides an excellent opportunity to explore SRCB within different consumption stages, including disposal and post-disposal evaluation.

As with the predominant SRCB research stream, clothing research in the area of consumer social responsibility has focused on corporate and business practices, and particularly practices related to labor. Thus, the impact of this focus on human rights in the apparel and textile area has been noticeable. For example, Nike, Inc. has recently started to disclose the names and locations of over 700 factories currently producing its products as a way to illustrate their fair labor practices (Rafter, 2005). SRCB research in this context, however, is still limited to consumers' clothing purchase behavior, specifically responding to apparel firms' socially responsible business activities.

The role of disposal in clothing consumption is large. It is reported that an average person in the United States discards 67.9 pounds of used clothing and textiles, and, collectively, Americans contribute two quadrillion pounds of used clothing and textiles to landfills each year (Mitchell, 2008). Millions of pounds of used clothing and textiles are also reported to be donated yearly, either to family members or non-profit organizations, such as Salvation Army, Goodwill, REACH Caregivers [a faith-based,

non-profit organization operated by volunteers and community donations], and other religious organizations (Mitchell, 2008). It is clear that consumers are engaged in recycling or donation of their used clothing as part of the clothing consumption process. Despite the fact that donation to such agencies has been popularly defined as a form of socially responsible behavior, to date it has not been thoroughly examined (Stephens, 1985). To address this significant gap in SRCB research, this study explores the experiences of individuals who have recently participated in used clothing donation to understand the motivations, intentions, and other factors important to their donation behavior and the donation decision-making process.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of consumer disposal behavior in a used clothing donation setting from the perspective of consumers who have recently donated used clothing items. Therefore, the research design was interpretive in nature. Interpretive inquiry is described as "a systematic search for deep understanding of the ways in which persons subjectively experience the social world" (Hultgren, 1989, p. 41). One of several types of qualitative inquiry, the interpretive tradition aims to gain a deeper understanding of what people experience in their everyday lives through language (Hultgren, 1989; van Manen, 1990). Researchers using an interpretive approach believe that a phenomenon can be understood by rich descriptions of the way one experiences the world, and these descriptions are what make it possible for others to grasp the nature and significance of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

In order to obtain in-depth descriptions of participant experiences of their everyday world as experienced in a natural setting, in-depth interviews, a demographic questionnaire and observation were employed as methods. Language plays an important role in human understanding. Gadamer (1975), inspired by Heidegger [1889-1976], argued that human experience is formulated in and through language and, thus, an understanding of another person's experience is realized through language. Therefore, the in-depth interview is a commonly used method in interpretive research to grasp the essence of a phenomenon and reveal meanings of participant experiences (McCracken, 1988; Wengraf, 2001). Observation is another primary tool to obtain data within an interpretive framework. As per Merriam (1998), observations are useful for qualitative researchers because observations take place in the natural setting where the phenomenon occurs, and the data from observations represent first-hand contact with the phenomenon.

Data collection and analysis

Two sample selection methods were used. First, eleven participants were selected through snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Valentine, 1993). Second, four participants were approached by one of the researchers at a local donation site while in the process of donating used clothing. In total, 15 individuals who had donated at least one item of used clothing in the past six months participated in the study (see Table 1 for demographic information of the study participants). While 15 participants may seem a relatively small number, a review of the transcribed interviews during and after the interview process showed recycling of the emergent ideas mentioned by participants (Spiggle, 1994). This indicates

saturation, suggesting the interviews were sufficient for interpretive analysis and further interviews would have been unlikely to produce additional new information. The particular donation site was selected because it is a nonprofit organization well known for having a societal-centered community service focus, and providing education, training, and career counseling for disadvantaged and disabled individuals (Goodwill Industry International, Inc., 2006). Therefore, it was believed that individuals donating items at this site were inclined to be socially responsible to some degree.

Table 1 Here

Interviews lasted 25 to 35 minutes per participant. Upon receipt of Institutional Review Board approval, the interviews were audio-taped with participant consent and then transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. Interviews were semi-structured focusing on the used clothing donation experience specifically to explore participants' motivations, intentions, and other underlying factors related to used clothing donation. Examples of semi-structured interview questions were "when you dispose of your used clothing, why do you consider donation instead of tossing it into a garbage can?", "do you feel differently when you drop off your used clothing at a donation site as compared with tossing it into a garbage can?", "what is important for you when you consider donation sites?", and "will you continue donating your used clothing, and if so, what will motivate you to do so?" Some of the participants' responses were further probed to obtain a deeper and clearer understanding of the meaning of the specific experience (McCracken, 1988).

A questionnaire was used to collect participants' personal and demographic information such as age, gender, marital

status, as well as occupation. In addition, each participant was asked to list his or her favorite donation sites, donation items, and frequency of used clothing donations per year. This information provided a basic understanding of the participants (see Table 1). Participants' age ranged from 19 to 64; occupations included college student, Information Technology engineer, and retiree; frequency of donation ranged from once or twice per year to every month. Although each had a preferred donation site, none of the participants were able to articulate the site's role relative to society.

In addition to the interviews and questionnaire, observations were also conducted by one of the researchers in the drop-off area of the abovementioned donation site. Observations took place on two Saturdays during the springtime, at a time when many people were in the process of spring cleaning. Participants and donation site employees informed the researcher that weekends in spring are typically the busiest, with used clothing donations increasing as a result of spring cleaning. Observations made at the donation site were recorded as field notes. For example, the field notes indicated that most donors seemed to be so much in a hurry that they hardly agreed to participate in interviews sought by the researchers. When donors declined the interview possibility, they unanimously expressed that the act of used clothing behavior (dropping off at a donation site) was one of the chores that they had to complete while they have other important things to do. Therefore, very few even stepped out of their cars to help unload their donations.

The transcribed interview data, demographic questionnaire, and field notes were coded and then interpreted thematically and holistically to uncover the meaning of used clothing donation as experienced by the 15 participants (Spiggle,

1994; Thompson, 1997). Interpretation began with the finest details of each interview transcript and moved to more general observations (Thompson, 1997). This process of going from the particular to the general was repeated several times by the first author until distinctive emergent themes were culled from the data (Thompson, 1997). These themes were then grouped into relevant categories on the basis of general characteristics of theme essence (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Finally, an understanding of individual themes and the relationships among themes and theme categories occurred over time, with each reading conducted by the authors including a broader range of considerations.

Interpretation

Interpretation of the interview data, demographic profiles, and observations indicated a range of consumer motivations, intentions, and other underlying factors associated with used clothing donation. Within the interpretation, themes are grouped into five categories: (a) the primary motivation for used clothing donation, (b) the clothing selection process, (c) avoiding the threat of guilt, (d) donation site selection, and (e) values experienced from used clothing donation. The themes were organized according to their respective points during the donation process, that is, before, during and after donation.

Prior to the donation

Motivations for donation. The most prominent motivation for participants' used clothing donation behavior was expressed, as one of the participants, QE put it, "to get rid of stuff" during a "cleaning spree" to create closet space for new items. The timing of the interviews happened to

coincide with spring break at local schools and universities and a sudden climb in temperature as the season changed from winter to spring. Both external events seemed to prompt participants to begin the task of cleaning out their closets. For BK, used clothing donation is an outcome of an annual “closet inventory check,” a ritual conducted as part of her spring cleaning. Instead of throwing her used clothing away, BK decides to donate it:

BK: I usually go through my clothes, I guess, I check my “closet inventory.” When seasons change, I usually switch out new things and take out the winter clothes. Actually, when I’m putting up the winter clothes and taking out the summer clothes, I pull the winter clothes that I won’t wear again. Again, the summer clothes, for the same reason. It’s just the space issue, you know, as far as the closet. I normally like to donate items that I won’t use any more, instead of throwing them away.

Closet space seemed to be an issue that the participants were constantly challenged by; lessons were learned throughout their lives to create new closet space in order to acquire something new. QI and TR describe how closet cleaning gives justifications for buying something new:

QI: You get tired of what you have and you want something new. But you have so much that you feel bad if you buy something new. There is no place else to store it, so you give away old stuff that you’re tired of wearing. I only have so much closet space so, you know, I have to get rid of some of what I have in order to have something new.

TR: I’ve never lived in a big house, you know, with massive amounts of walk-in closets or whatever. So, I’ve always had certain amount of area. We were taught when we were younger that you can’t get anything new until you give something away. If we would get a new toy, we had to get rid of another toy. So, new clothes, I can validate my new clothes by getting rid of clothes. You make room, you can have more.

Despite the public perception that donation of used clothing is a form of socially responsible conduct (Goodwill Industries, Inc., 2006; Stephens, 1985), none of the participants mentioned that social consciousness was the primary motivation for their used clothing donation behavior. For the participants, food or monetary donations were “real” donations that they felt ethically inclined to contribute, while a used clothing donation was not considered “real.” Instead, used clothing donation was something to be done to accomplish the participants’ cleaning goals. Donations of food or money, according to participants, were more society-oriented, stemming from a genuine concern for people in need, thus considered acts of true altruism. In contrast, used clothing donations for the participants were more self-oriented and less society-oriented, and seemed to serve a utilitarian function. UX expresses that money donation is motivated by empathy and compassion, different from her typical used clothing donation. TR sees significant differences between “real charity” and used clothing donation. As per her argument, dropping off used clothing at a local donation center is not in itself an act of charity; instead, people who buy merchandise from the local donation center

are the ones making the contribution to society. That is, perhaps TR holds extremely high standards for social responsibility or charity; she does not see herself as a real donor by dropping off a few bags of used clothing:

UX: While my money donation to Red Cross after Katrina, that was totally different. That was more likely, you know, stepping out of my normal routine, and even be willing to be even inconvenient because there was a definite need for it. And also just feeling empathy and compassion, while clothing donation is not.

TR: Clothing donation, to me, is not donation. *Goodwill* [non-profit organization] is a place to drop off my old stuff. What they do with it ends up being a donation, but it's not MY donation. It's a donation of someone else who buys it. I see the people that are buying it and putting the money towards it, that's charity to me. That's where I see it as charity. If I wish to give a gift, I don't want it to be something used. I think a gift should be something nice and new. So, it's the same way when I am making a donation, it's a gift; it's something that is supposed to be special. It's not supposed to be something that I'm just not using any more.

Selecting what to donate. Once closet cleaning had begun, the study participants explained the steps they go through, including inspecting each item in the closet, evaluating the state of the item, and classifying it into one of two groups: those "to be kept" and those "to be given/thrown away." The very first criterion

that participants considered for used clothing classification was the physical condition of the item. Assessment of physical condition seemed to be mainly subjective. IM explains that she would not donate any clothing that she would not wear as she is convinced that no one else would want it. Her evaluation does not take into consideration how other people might evaluate the physical condition of that clothing item. Instead, she determines what is wearable and what is not wearable, and if the clothing is in bad shape or unwearable, then it would be thrown away:

IM: I won't give away anything that I wouldn't wear still. I will never give away something just beat up or ragged, I will just throw it away at that point. For me, it must be in good condition if I wanted to give it to somebody. If it's not wearable by me, then it won't be wearable by others. I wouldn't want anyone to wear something that I wouldn't wear personally.

In addition to the physical condition of clothing, participants felt strongly that certain types of clothing should not be donated, and particularly underwear. As QI explains, underwear is too intimate to consider giving away for other people to use:

QI: One thing I never, never get rid of is... I do not donate underwear. I feel very specific. No, I don't. I wore them out. When they're done, I throw them away. I have never donated my underwear because that is personal. It's too close.

Those items deemed to be in good condition were further divided into two groups: items with high sentimental value and items with little, if any, sentimental

value. Clothing with high sentimental value was often kept by the participants until the sentimental attachment became diluted with time. Clothing with little or no sentimental value was deemed suitable for donation. During this classification process, participants unanimously expressed the idea that some clothing items never lose their sentimental value; therefore, they would never be disposed of even if they became unwearable. Such clothes were physical objects of their personal history. As MQ describes, her soccer jerseys are her “own personal scrap books” that define part of her identity. She thinks fondly about this period in her life, and sees her jerseys as important tools to reflect on that period:

MQ: I played soccer for ten years. So I have all my old jerseys and I still have my old captain gowns [gowns that only the captain of the soccer team was allowed to wear] that we were able to keep. I would keep it even if I won't wear it. You know, those types of things...memory. It's like my own personal scrap book. I don't know when I'll give that up, I don't think so because it's just, it's just... When I look at them, awwww... I love soccer to this day, I watch it all the time, and it's still a big part of my life, even though I don't play it. It doesn't matter if they are still fitting or not, I will just keep them.

For others, clothing of the past, while unwearable today, acted as a significant reminder of close relationships. In the case of EF, the sweater that he received from his great uncle 16 years ago, when he was 3 years old, is the only physical object that still connects him to his uncle whom he cannot see again. This sweater, expressed as

“my” sweater, is an important part of his identity and, for EF, this sweater is one of the valuable objects “that reflect and shape the owner’s self” (Csikszentmihalyi & Roachberg-Halton, 1981, p. 17):

EF: I have a sweater that my great uncle, who passed away, gave me. He gave me when I was about 3 years old and I still have that sweater and I'm 19 years old. I would never give that sweater up because it's just that much personal to me. I won't even give that to my mom. That's MY sweater. So, you know, in that sense, clothing is very personal to me.

Avoiding feelings of guilt. Although participants' process of used clothing classification expedited closet cleaning, most mentioned that it was not an easy task. Two main challenges surfaced from the study data. First, the participants often spoke of feelings of anxiety during the clothing classification process and uncertainty about whether they were making the right decision to keep or to discard/donate a particular item. The participants appeared to experience mixed feelings in that they often thought that they would feel guilty if they simply discarded clothing that was in good condition or had sentimental value. Yet, they also felt guilty for letting unused or seldom worn clothing items take up closet space. QE describes this conundrum:

QE: I'm kind of visionary; I might not like it now but maybe I can do something with it. Then, again, I never end up wearing it again or having something to do with it. But my mind just thinks that way, maybe, I can do something with it or wear it again. Then, finally, I reason with it

and just get rid of it, just because I don't have any more room and it is simply taking up the space while it can be used by other people who are in need. (...) The moment I throw it in the bag, it's a hard decision for me. I can't make decisions. It's hard for me to make decisions. That would probably make me feel anxious.

A second source of guilt for the participants occurred when they realized how much clothing they owned that they never wore. UX's response involves clear acknowledgement of the unnecessary waste created by purchases she made that could have been prevented, and acknowledgement that the feelings of guilt increase when she realizes that she did not learn from previous closet cleaning experiences. Interestingly, however, according to UX, the threat of feelings of guilt, while substantial, is not strong enough to stop her from making similar purchase decisions in the future:

UX: I just shake my head, thinking about the waste. Waste! Just waste! For example, something that I didn't need in the first place, and that money could have been used toward something more important. I got bills. I could have paid bills with it. I could have cleaned up my credit, savings, or anything. It's just wasted on all these material things. And it just reiterates what I'm already doing and I get to see here yet another example! Look at this junk! It makes you feel bad, but only temporarily, and then look what happened. You know, it's just waste! Wasteful! Did I learn a lesson from it? Obviously I did not. Because the very next day, I will be like, hmmm, what's my next feel-good purchase? Argh....

Participants' experiences prior to used clothing donation provide the basis for a conceptual model illustrating the decision-making process (Figure 1). Based on the themes that emerged in responses describing the pre-donation period, Figure 1 depicts the typical process as explained by the participants, beginning with cleaning the closet and ending with either discarding, keeping, or donating items. Anxiety and guilt emerged as important factors guiding the decision-making process. Wearability of items, along with the level of sentimental value associated with them surfaced as important considerations during the decision-making process.

Figure 1 Here

During and after used clothing donation

Donation site selection. Once finished with closet cleaning, it was common for the participants to consider several outlets for donation. Close family members and friends were most participants' first choice for their used clothing. However, they found it difficult to do so, given the issue of size. Therefore, the majority of used clothing items were donated and donations were made at a variety of donation sites. In selecting donation sites, the participants clearly expressed that the convenience of the site was the most important factor, expressing little concern about what each donation site would do with donated items. The location, operating hours, parking space, and availability of employees at donation sites were described as specific examples of convenience sought by participants. For instance, UX finds no reason to make an extra effort to donate as part of a church program because convenience of drop-off is the most important factor for her:

UX: My church actually has an urban outreach where they take clothes in, but the only reason I don't give it to my church, even though I go there? Because it's very inconvenient. It's VERY inconvenient. There is only one place where you can take your stuff to. It's not like you can drop it off at church. When you happened to be there, you have to go to a separate place only during a certain time. If you have a big thing, you have to bring it all in, I mean, forget it. Why would I want to go through all that when I can just drop it off here, here, here, here. So, that's one thing that the *Goodwill* non-profit donation organization has accomplished by making it convenient to drop your stuff off. Whenever you happen to be out running errands or whatever, just throw it in your trunk, eventually you're gonna see a place where you can drop it.

Values experienced from used clothing donation. In general, the consumer behavior literature suggests that consumers experience two types of values from product/service consumption: (a) hedonic and (b) utilitarian (Solomon, 2004). Hedonic value refers to the value derived from pleasurable experiences and utilitarian value refers to the value derived from efficient (economic) experiences (Carpenter, Moore, & Fairhurst, 2005). Consumers are thought to seek utilitarian value in a task-oriented, rational manner, while seeking hedonic value from the emotional or psychological facets of an experience (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2000; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In this study, participants seemed to experience both types of values as a result of their donation behavior.

From the utilitarian value perspective, by donating their used clothing, the participants found that they were greatly relieved that they had accomplished their original goal for closet cleaning: creating room in the closet for future purchases. Interestingly, none of the participants expressed that receiving a tax deduction was an important benefit of used clothing donation. From the hedonic value perspective, the participants shared that they "felt better" after making their used clothing donations. Hedonic values appeared to be primarily centered on personal pleasure or enjoyment from diminishing the threat of guilt, whether it was guilt caused by wasteful past purchase behavior or because little worn items were taking up closet space. For participants, satisfaction derived from helping society by donating used clothing seemed less important than removing the threat of guilt. Thus, both utilitarian and hedonic values gained from used clothing donation seemed more self-oriented than socially-oriented. Again, this is in contrast to public perception (Goodwill Industries, Inc., 2006; Stephens, 1985). For example, UX describes how her used clothing donation is done for reasons pertaining to the self rather than society:

UX: The main thing I feel is that I just get it out of the house. You know, because if I'm constantly bringing something new into the house, something's gotta go. So it may as well go to someone who's gonna do something with it [drop it off at donation sites].....They're [donation sites] helping ME out. Instead of I'm helping society, society's helping me out!

Interviewer: The donation sites provide the place for your old clothes that you don't know what to do with!

UX: Exactly! So, it's kind of selfish, isn't it?

Participants unanimously emphasized that they would continue to donate their used clothing as long as they would purchase more new clothing. Despite many other alternatives to donation, it seemed that used clothing donation was a vital part of the whole consumption cycle. Thus, without making future donations, the participants would not be able to repeat the consumption experience. For instance, relieved of the anxiety caused by too many unworn clothing items and excited by the opportunity to buy something new, QI experiences both utilitarian and hedonic values from her used clothing donation, which allow her to continue the cycle of buying, wearing, and disposing clothing:

QI: Clothing donation is just simply part of my life. Whatever they [donation sites] do with my clothes doesn't really change my mind. It's just a routine that I go through every year to thin out my oversupply. Once I clean it out enough, then I don't really have to worry about it any more. It just gives me another opportunity to go out and shop. (...) I would continue to donate my clothes because I would continue to buy new ones, and I would continue to clean out my closet. Clothing donation is the best way to clean out my closet.

Discussion

The findings from interpretive analysis often provide an important opportunity to evaluate extant theories or propose a new theory to explain a specific reality in query (Wengraf, 2001). Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned

Action (TRA) and a consumer values perspective were deemed appropriate to be compared with the study findings. First, TRA is one of the theories explaining many different aspects of consumers' willful behaviors, including used clothing donation. The theory explains that during the process of deliberation to action, a person forms intentions to engage in a certain behavior. Intentions are affected by an individual's attitude toward the behavior (the personal factor) and subjective norms (the social factor) and these intentions, capturing the motivational factors of behavior, are then believed to be translated into action when the appropriate time and opportunity comes. Thus, intentions are expected to be highly correlated with a person's volitional, willful behavior. Second, values that consumers experience by consuming products or services were also compared with the study findings, as they were found to surface in participants' intentions regarding used clothing donations.

The analysis revealed that participants' intention to donate instead of discard used clothing was primarily motivated by the need to clean out the closet, and, in turn, provided a means to avoid the threat of feeling guilty about their consumption behavior. Outcomes of donation behavior offered both utilitarian and hedonic values to the study participants, by providing more closet space and alleviating feelings of guilt largely caused by purchasing clothing that was rarely worn, which in turn took up space in the closet. These values, in turn, positively reinforced participants' intentions to make future donations. Despite many non-profit organizations' attempts to emphasize the social responsibility component of used clothing donation, social responsibility emerged as a weak motivation for used clothing donation. In contrast to the TRA, the participants' attitudes toward the

donation behavior and social pressures regarding ethical consumption practices were not found to be important to participants' intentions to donate used clothing. Positive attitudes and social pressure seemed more strongly related to money or food donations seen as "real charity" by the study participants. Participants' evaluations of the convenience of services available at donation sites, such as easy access to drop-off, were more important to their used clothing donation behavior, and specifically when executing the actual donation.

In sum, the study findings were partially supportive for TRA. The relationship between used clothing donation intention and donation behavior was consistent with the theory. The role of consumer attitudes and social pressure, however, did not appear to have a strong association with donors' intention as TRA suggests. The findings also supported a consumer value perspective as participants indicated those values impacted their donation intentions and behavior. Figure 2 provides a conceptual model of used clothing donation behavior based on the study findings, integrating a TRA framework with a consumer values perspective.

Figure 2 Here

Conclusions and Implications

In response to growing interest in socially responsible consumer behavior, this study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of consumer behavior in a clothing disposal setting, and particularly with regard to used clothing donation behavior. Because of the dearth of research in used clothing donation behavior, particularly investigating various perspectives of donors, the study applied

interpretive methods, considered appropriate for exploring a phenomenon in-depth (Wengref, 2001). Interpretation of the study data revealed five theme categories—primary motivations for used clothing donation, the clothing selection process, avoiding the threat of guilt, donation site selection, and values experienced from used clothing donation. Findings were then further discussed to evaluate the Theory of Reasoned Action as well as a consumer values perspective. This approach to interpretation helped illuminate the role of social responsibility within the donation decision-making process.

In this study, used clothing donation was primarily initiated by the participants' utilitarian desire to create more closet space. A "cleaning spree" or "spring cleaning" were the terms most often used by the participants to explain the first step in the used clothing donation process. Once having achieved this goal, the classification of used clothing took place based on the criteria of physical condition of the clothing and the degree of sentimental meaning that that item provided. While clothes in poor condition were not deemed suitable for donation, clothes in good condition were then reassessed and categorized into one of two groups: items with sentimental meaning and items without sentimental meaning. This classification process required a constant back and forth between consideration of an item's sentimental value and its level of use, causing the participants some anxiety. At a deeper level, the participants indicated that they suffer from feelings of guilt due either to not wearing an item enough or to past purchase mistakes. However, once a donation decision is made and the clothing items are dropped off at donation sites, the participants no longer experienced either anxiety or guilt. As noted by the participants, this freedom from guilty feelings (hedonic values) as well as

more closet space (utilitarian values) positively impacted their intentions to make donations of used clothing in the future. Finally, the convenience of donation sites emerged to be most critical criterion when executing the act of donation, and in this case, dropping off used clothing.

Contrary to popular perception of used clothing donation as socially responsible behavior (Goodwill Industries, Inc., 2006; Stephens, 1985), social consciousness had little, if any, impact on used clothing donation decision-making for the participants in this study. Instead, used clothing donation was just one part of the entire clothing consumption process, one that created space for future clothing purchases. Indeed, without disposal of used clothing items, new clothing items could not be purchased, and, therefore, the consumption cycle could not continue. Although social responsibility may impact consumers' decision-making in the process of used clothing disposal, according to the participants, their donation decisions had little influence on their desire to minimize or eliminate any harmful and maximize any beneficial effects on society. Consequently, when viewed through the lens of our current definition of SRCB, used clothing donation would not be considered a socially responsible behavior by some consumers.

The study made several important contributions to consumer behavior research. First, this study addressed gaps in the consumer behavior literature by providing insight into the used clothing disposal process and the underlying factors associated with it. The disposal stage is often overlooked in consumer research as it makes an indirect impact on consumers' purchase decision. The study findings, however, clearly show that consumers struggle with limited closet space, preventing them from future product acquisition; therefore, disposal is directly

linked to acquisition. An investigation of consumer behavior in a disposal setting thus improves our understanding of the broader context of the overall consumption experience. Second, the study results raised the issue of whether or not used clothing donation is an act of social responsibility. The findings suggested a possible gap between how non-profit organizations describe the act of used clothing donation and how consumers perceive such behavior. Third, although the findings were partially supportive, the study illustrated how Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action may be useful for disposal and post-disposal behavior research. Historically, most research within a TRA framework has focused on the purchase stage but the present study applied it within post-purchase consumption stages. In addition, the study also pointed to the need for further integration of consumer values (both utilitarian and hedonic) within the TRA and for expanding it in such a way that it could be used to predict used clothing donation behavior. Fourth, the study illuminated the process that consumers follow to classify clothing for donation and highlighted the role of guilt within this process.

Broad application of the interpretation presented here should be done with caution due to the small participant sample and specific donation site selected. Further study is needed to apply findings to a larger population or across donation sites and geographical areas, as well as to understand the profile of used clothing donors in general. However, the present study does have important implications for non-profit organizations whose main goal is to solicit used clothing donations. Results indicate that in contrast to donations made for disaster relief purposes, used clothing donated after closet cleaning or spring cleaning is not primarily motivated by the need to act in a socially responsible manner.

In fact, some participants did not even consider used clothing donations to be “real charity” in comparison with donations of food or money. To address this issue, non-profit organizations may want to distinguish used clothing donation from food or monetary donation and explain the uniquely important role of used clothing donations in helping society. The more consumers understand the importance of used clothing to these non-profit organizations, the more motivated they may be to seek out such locations for clothing donation. Second, results indicate that the participants overwhelmingly considered the convenience of a donation site to be more important than its particular charity mission. This finding implies that today’s consumers have little time to spend on making donation decisions, and, in turn, on selecting a donation site. Non-profit organizations may want to consider how to adjust their accessibility and/or hours of operations, and simplify the process of used clothing donation to offer the conveniences sought by donors.

This study provides several important future research opportunities. First, an investigation of relationships among each construct on the proposed model of used clothing donation behavior (Figure 2) would shed light on the topic, and provide an opportunity to further advance Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1980) TRA by integrating a consumer values perspective within the disposal stage of the consumption cycle. Particularly, the areas of consumer attitudes toward donation behavior, social pressure regarding ethical consumption, and social responsibility value relative to clothing donation intention offer fertile ground for future researchers to explore. Second, further investigation into the role of guilt within the process of used clothing disposal is needed, including how consumers evaluate and manage guilt throughout the consumption cycle. This

could improve our understanding of clothing disposal behavior and provide practical implications for non-profit organizations that are dependent upon regular donations of used clothing by consumers. Third, further research is needed that would clarify why consumers think food or money donations constitute “real charity” while dismissing the charitable value of used clothing donations. Fourth, today’s consumers have multiple potential agencies to choose from when donating used clothing, further research on factors of consumer donation site selection could help such agencies find ways to promote their social service mission, and in turn, to create awareness among consumers as to how their donations of used clothing are ultimately acts of social responsibility.

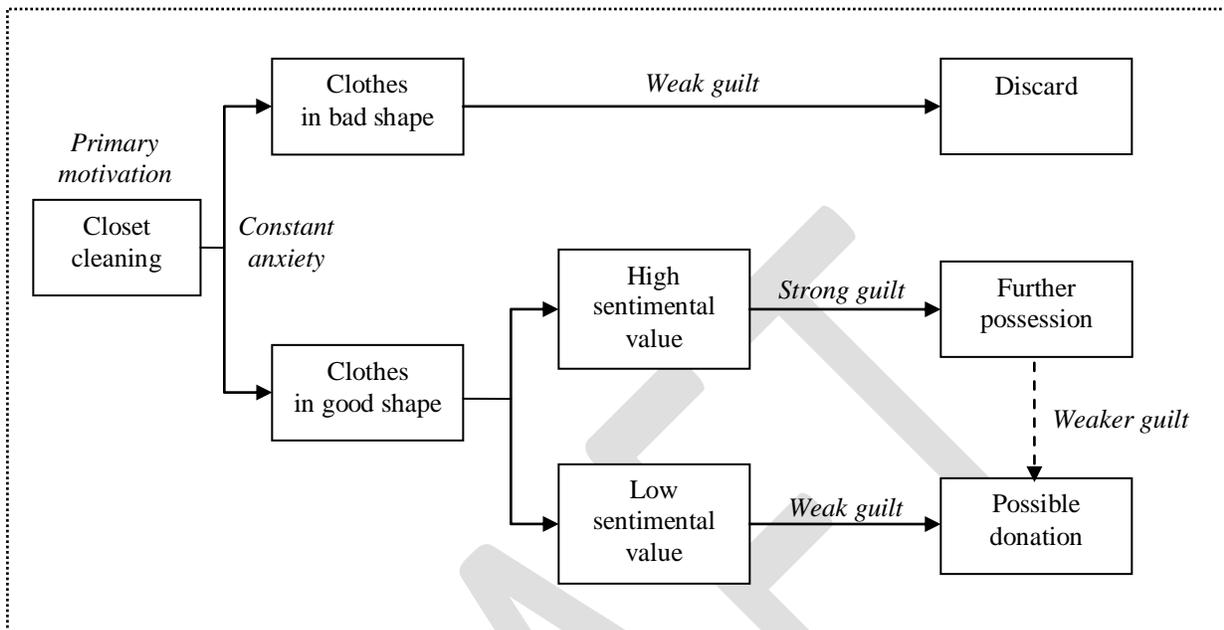
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Figure 1. Consumers' Used Clothing Classification Process Prior to Donation¹



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Figure 2. Proposed Conceptual Model for Used Clothing Donation Behavior

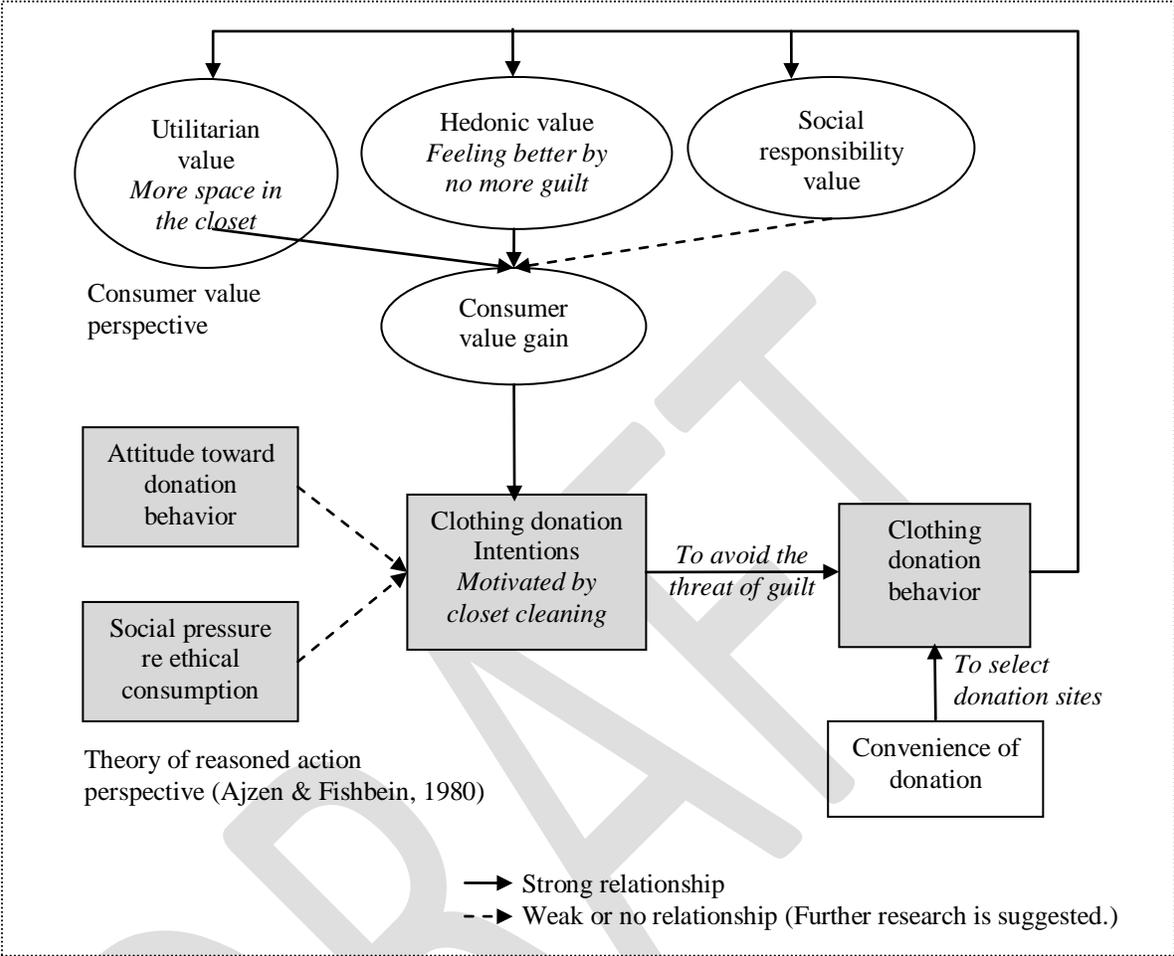


Table 1. Characteristics of the Participants

Participant ¹	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Occupation	Frequency of Donation (per year)	Donation Locations
BH	24	Female	Married	Administrative Assistant	4	Goodwill, Churches
MQ	20	Female	Single	College Student	3-4	Goodwill, Churches, Fire Departments
UX	34	Female	Single/Divorced	Sales Associate	10-12	Goodwill
CG	28	Female	Single	Administrative Assistant	6-8	Salvation Army, Friends, Churches
EF	19	Male	Single	College Student	4-6	Salvation Army, Goodwill
QI	53	Female	Divorced	IT Engineer	2-3	Salvation Army, Goodwill, Churches
TR	27	Female	Single	IT Associate	6-7	Goodwill, Churches
IM	29	Female	Married	Graduate Student	10-12	Relatives, Friends, Goodwill
BM	21	Female	Single	College Student	3-4	Goodwill, Salvation Army
DX	33	Female	Married	Small Business Owner	8-10	Salvation Army
DT	20	Female	Single	College Student	2-3	REACH Caregivers (A faith-based, non-profit organization)
NL	22	Female	Single	College Student	3-4	Shelters, Goodwill
LH	21	Female	Single	College Student	3-4	Goodwill, Thrift Stores, Friends
QE	21	Female	Single	College Student	2-4	Goodwill
NC	64	Female	Married	Retiree	1-2	Salvation Army

Note. ¹ Reference to each participant is indicated by initials of a pseudonym.