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Higher Education & Gen Z's Perception and Motivations for Second-Hand Clothing Consumption

How Higher Education influences Gen Z's SHC Consumption

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Master Thesis

presented as partial requirement for obtaining a Master's Degree in Data-Driven Marketing

NOVA Information Management School
Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

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**HIGHER EDUCATION & GEN Z'S PERCEPTION AND MOTIVATIONS FOR SECOND-HAND
CLOTHING CONSUMPTION**

by

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Master Thesis presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master's degree in Data-Driven Marketing, with a specialization in Digital Marketing and Analytics

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism, any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

Lisboa, 1st of December 2024

DEDICATION

To the ones always present, for their support and patience. And to us for having persevered,
despite the constraints.

ABSTRACT

From the emerging need for a different way of perceiving the fashion industry comes the concept of ethical and sustainable fashion, with second-hand fashion being defined as an alternative to mass production and consumption. This study aimed to explore how higher education influences second-hand clothing consumption within the Generation Z community. A text-mining analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews reveals a notorious division of how second-hand fashion is perceived, valued, and consumed between Generation Z individuals with and without higher education. This study highlights the importance of understanding how education shapes Gen Z's perceptions of SHC, offering theoretical implications for more nuanced, intersectional research on education, sustainability, and generational dynamics valuable and practical insights for researchers, educators, policymakers, and marketers to further explore subgroup dynamics within this generation's consumption patterns.

KEYWORDS

Second-hand Fashion; Higher Education; Generation Z; Interviews; Text Mining

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):



RESUMO

Da necessidade emergente de uma forma diferente de perceber a indústria da moda surge o conceito de moda ética e sustentável, sendo a moda em segunda mão definida como uma alternativa à produção e consumo em massa. Este estudo teve como objetivo explorar como o nível de educação influencia o consumo de roupas em segunda mão dentro da Geração Z. Uma análise de 20 entrevistas semiestruturadas revela uma divisão notória de como a moda em segunda mão é percebida, valorizada e consumida entre indivíduos da Geração Z com e sem ensino superior. Este estudo destaca a importância de entender como a educação molda as percepções da Geração Z sobre moda em segunda mão. O mesmo sugere implicações teóricas como pesquisas interseccionais mais matizadas sobre educação, sustentabilidade e dinâmica geracional, além de *insights* práticos e valiosos para pesquisadores, educadores, criadores de políticas e profissionais de marketing explorarem ainda mais as dinâmicas de subgrupos dentro dos padrões de consumo desta geração.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Statement of Integrity.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Resumo.....	iv
List of Figures.....	vii
List of Tables.....	viii
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms.....	ix
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature review	3
2.1. The environmental impact of the fashion industry.....	3
2.2. Second-hand clothing as a new fashion paradigm.....	4
2.3. SHC Consumption drivers	5
2.3.1. Economic motivations	5
2.3.2. Recreational Motivations	5
2.3.3. Uniqueness Motivations.....	5
2.3.4. Sustainable Motivations	6
2.3.5. Fashion Motivations	6
2.3.6. Vintage Motivations	6
2.4. SHC Consumption barriers	7
2.4.1. Use and risk of contamination	7
2.4.2. Accessibility	7
2.4.3. Cost-benefit relationship.....	8
2.4.4. Availability restrictions	8
2.4.5. Feelings of inferiority and humiliation	8
2.5. Generation z and shc consumption.....	9
3. Methodology	11
4. Results.....	14
4.1. What are the perceptions of second-hand clothing among Gen Z?	16
4.2. Does the perception of the importance, value, and need for SHC consumption differ by education level?	17
4.3. What are the reasons for different education level groups to purchase or not purchase SHC	20
5. Discussion	24
5.1. Perception of SHC by Gen Z consumers	24

5.2. SHC Consumption Drivers.....	27
5.3. SHC Consumption Barriers	30
6. Conclusions and Future Research	33
6.1. Theoretical and managerial contributions	35
Bibliographical References	37
Appendix A	40
Appendix B	41

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - Key Concepts Map elaborated by Leximancer.....	14
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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 - Characterization of Interviewees	13
Table 2 - Top 10 words used to describe SHC	16
Table 3 - Top 10 words by education level	17
Table 4 - Main SHC purchase drives by education level	20
Table 5 - Barriers for SHC consumption by education level.....	22

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

SHC Second-hand clothing

Gen Z Generation Z

1. INTRODUCTION

To and Kan (2020) estimate that the fashion industry is one of the most socially and environmentally detrimental industries in the world. As a counterattack, rising global social movements are pushing for more sustainable ways of consuming fashion, while advocating not only for more radical business transparency but also corporate accountability (To & Kan, 2020). The result is an always increasing search for sustainable solutions as an effort to mitigate clothing waste and battle the current mass production fashion model (To & Kan, 2020), which favours the consumption of second-hand clothing (SHC) (Koay, Lim, Khoo, Xavier & Poon, 2024). However, sustainable purchase intentions do not always result in actual behaviour, as the latter is heavily influenced by a complex mix of differently weighted attributes (Montgomery, 2022).

Montgomery (2022) suggests that sustainability motivated fashion consumption is particularly more common within the Generation Z (Gen Z) community – people born between 1997 and 2012. The latter is due to Gen Z individuals being simultaneously more concerned about social and environmental issues and more likely to consume sustainable products or services than older generations (Montgomery, 2022). Nevertheless, the full potential of young consumers' values as an influence to consume sustainability has been neglected (Kovacs, 2021).

Despite the increasing interest, little is known about the personal motives that drive Gen Z consumers to buy SHC as pointed out by Herjanto et al. (2023), who referred to this as a topic of interest for future research. Researchers also acknowledge that the factors influencing consumers' intention to purchase second-hand clothing may differ across demographics according to education level, with Koay et al. (2024) highlighting that the education variable should be incorporated in future studies for a more comprehensive understanding.

Halicki et al. (2024) suggest that higher levels of ethical and environmental awareness, which is often linked to higher education, enhances consumer consumption of SHC. Despite that, given the broadness of the sample, the insights are still insufficient to allow a deep understanding of the extent of education's influence on SHC consumption by Gen Z

individuals. In addition, Mazanec and Harantová (2024) underscore the role of education for environmental awareness in shaping attitudes toward sustainable consumption, including second-hand clothing. However, the study concludes that consumers with better awareness of sustainability are more inclined to purchase second-hand items, failing again to describe how different levels of education (non-higher vs higher education) might influence Gen Z's perspective and engagement with SHC.

As shown, current research largely frames education as a tool to inform consumers about sustainability but does not dive into how different levels of education, non-higher and higher education, correlate to SHC consumption within the Gen Z community. That suggested the existence of a gap in the relevant literature which served as an exploratory field for the present study. Therefore, drawing upon the combination of gaps and future implications pointed out in the relevant literature abovementioned, the present study dives into Gen Z's motivation for SHC consumption according to their highest education level. Since studies employing a questionnaire-based approach have some drawbacks in explaining the psychological motivation of behaviours (Manley et al., 2023), it was decided on semi-structured interviews as a data collection method.

The present study was arranged in sections as follows. Firstly, the theoretical background of the research is explained in a single section dedicated to the literature review, and the research questions risen that guided the present investigation. It is, then, seconded by the research methodology section which consists of the sampling procedure description, data collection process and the tools utilized for the study's purpose. After, the results and discussion sections explain the findings and then, the insights discussed in parallel with the literature review. Lastly, the conclusion section includes a summary of the study followed by the research limitations and theoretical and managerial implications for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY

As To & Kan (2020) state, the environmental and social consequences of the fashion business are notoriously known. The same authors argue that, as a major participant in the global economy, its hefty use of resources, the environmental and social impact of garment's production, consumption, and end-of-life phases are heavily questioned in modern society. The state of the environmental pollution caused by the fashion industry has not recovered but risen day by day (To & Kan, 2020). Regularly used procedures for garment manufacturing have serious environmental consequences, due not only to energy and water intensive costs, but also to the use of harmful chemicals (Kerr & Landry, 2017). Parallely, fibre production has been growing significantly due to increasing demand (Kerr & Landry, 2017), resulting in substantial amounts of waste generated and dumped in landfills and water (Allwood et al., 2008).

Academics argue that the phase with the largest environmental footprint is precisely the phase of consumer use (To & Kan, 2020). Simply due to a lack of knowledge about reuse, most textile materials are disposed of in landfills (Park & Chertow, 2014). As Domina and Koch (1999) argue, textile waste is known to be a material with strong potential for reuse and recycling, however, it is still very underestimated. To and Kan (2020) state that in heavy fashion consuming nations, namely the United States of America and China, approximately 92 million tons of post-consumer textile wastes, like used clothing, end up in landfills yearly. This is significantly more worrying in developing countries, which host most production volumes and have less stringent environmental regulations (Allwood et al., 2008). As these numbers are expected to increase given the world's population continuous growth, post-consumer waste accumulation will be the next biggest problem and contributor to environmental destruction (To & Kan, 2020).

However, with the effective recycling of textile waste, it is possible to extend the life cycle of fashion items and thus reduce the rapid and mass production of fibres and end products (Domina & Koch, 1999). Scholars insist, therefore, on the importance of reflecting on the current model of production and consumption in the fashion industry, opting for more

sustainable ways of consuming fashion (To & Kan, 2020). One of the alternatives to be considered for the full use of post-consumer textile waste is the reuse of second-hand clothing (Lewis et al., 2017).

2.2. SECOND-HAND CLOTHING AS A NEW FASHION PARADIGM

From the emerging need for a different way of perceiving the industry arises the concept of second-hand fashion (Hur, 2020). On a global scale, as the ethical issues raised around the fashion industry continue to draw public attention, there is a greater interest in sustainable fashion consumption, which values second-hand fashion (Xu et al. (2014).

As Guiot and Roux (2010) argue, SHC was once seen as an irrelevant form of business. However, Xu et al. (2014) state that it is beginning to gain more ground with second-hand fashion in the spotlight. SHC consumption is defined by the reuse of fashion items, reducing the need for new pieces, which decreases consumption and the depletion of raw materials (Beard, 2008; Todeschini et al.2017). Iverson (2010) also identified the change in shopping patterns and, consequently, the increase in interest in second-hand garments as effects of the economic recession. However, today, environmentally conscious consumers, who demand solutions to the unethical practices of fashion companies (Xu et al., 2014) consider this type of consumption as a stance against mass production (Vehmas et al. ,2018).

Studies show that purchases and consumption of second-hand goods are increasing, demonstrating that the change which has occurred in previous years (Fitzgerald, 2015) is expanding due to growing concerns about the negative environmental and social impact of the fashion industry (Xu et al., 2014). The second-hand goods market, once viewed with great scepticism and prejudice, has become a trend in people's lives (Guiot & Roux, 2010).

2.3. SHC CONSUMPTION DRIVERS

The following section addresses the motivations that researchers argue influence second-hand fashion purchasing decisions.

2.3.1. ECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS

Economically motivated purchasing occurs when individuals regulate their spending by managing their resources in an effort to expand their purchasing power and, consequently, their ability to save money or shop fairly (Herjanto et al., 2016). Although frugality has been recognized by scholars (Guiot & Roux, 2010) as the central factor of SHC purchases (Cervellon & Shammas, 2013), the desire to discover alternative forms of consumption is often influenced by factors related to income and economics (Herjanto et al., 2016). For instance, buying second-hand branded pieces allows individuals to do so without spending the full price (Roux & Guiot, 2008). Similarly, consumers often choose to buy from second-hand markets because they see them as economic opportunities to invest, maintain the status quo, and form their own identities (Ferraro et al., 2016).

2.3.2. RECREATIONAL MOTIVATIONS

SHC consumers are also motivated by 'treasure hunting', as their main goal is to find the most unique and distinctive item at a lower cost (Cervellon et al., 2012), triggering feelings of joy and excitement when finding unexpected and exceptional items, often at lower prices (Ferraro et al., 2016). Furthermore, as opposed to traditional first-hand retailers (Guiot & Roux, 2010), for individuals who like to be surprised by their findings, a sense of pleasure that can arise throughout the exchange and communication between sellers and customers, provides a unique and playful environment to the thrifting experience (Herjanto et al., 2016).

2.3.3. UNIQUENESS MOTIVATIONS

Tian et al. (2001) define uniqueness as the quality of attaining individuality that is objective to others as a result of the purchase, use, and/or disposal of consumer items to elevate a person's social and personal perception. For Gullstrand et al. (2016), second-hand fashion allows consumers to achieve a certain degree of distinction to communicate their desired social self-image among other people or members of a group or community. Venturing

into SHC stores allows consumers to find products that are out of production, discontinued, or unique, which reassures people in their search for uniqueness and individuality, as discovering pieces out of the ordinary helps customers achieve a desirable amount of exclusiveness (Herjanto et al., 2016).

2.3.4. SUSTAINABLE MOTIVATIONS

Guiot & Roux, (2010) address the idea that the second-hand market offers a real choice for consumers to move away from the fast fashion model, since the purchase of used goods allows one to escape the mass consumerism prevalent in today's culture. Scholars state that with consumers progressively supporting the reduction of mass consumption of clothing (Guiot & Roux, 2010), as they become more environmentally friendly (Cervellon et al., 2012), this tactic may succeed in achieving the goal of minimizing the manufacture of new clothing (Herjanto et al., 2016). However, environmental concern is not cited in many studies as a compelling reason for second-hand consumption (Guiot & Roux, 2010). The degree of influence of sustainability is personal to each consumer (Cervellon & Shammas, 2013). Despite being a considered motivation, several studies have failed to establish a solid link between environmental concerns and second-hand consumption (Mcneill & Moore, 2015).

2.3.5. FASHION MOTIVATIONS

Although the meaning of fashion is not yet well understood, (Guiot & Roux, 2010), fashion is a concept that concerns the process of creating and reinforcing a person's identity, meaning, and experiences through clothing and accessories. For academics, while eschewing conventional fashion, SHC allows customers to create their own authentic and distinctive looks (Guiot & Roux, 2010).

2.3.6. VINTAGE MOTIVATIONS

The terms 'second-hand' and 'vintage' are often used interchangeably, but it is vital to recognize the distinctions between them. The main distinction between SHC and vintage clothing is that, while the former implies prior use, the latter does not necessarily, as vintage garments are characterized by the age of the items rather than by use (Cervellon & Shammas, 2013). While some vintage clothing may be second-hand, there are different motivations for vintage consumption. Nostalgia plays a significant role in motivating people to buy antique

pieces (Cervellon & Shamma, 2013). People who search for vintage fashion items are emotionally motivated, which makes them willing to spend more, even if it is an item of little value in the current market (Cervellon & Shamma, 2013). This implies that frugality is often not being considered as an antecedent of the intention to buy and consume vintage fashion items (Dawson & Cavell, 1987).

2.4. SHC CONSUMPTION BARRIERS

Although the demand for SHC has increased significantly in recent years, studies also point to the undeniable existence of factors that discourage the consumption of SHC. The following section addresses the factors that researchers argue discourage or prevent the purchase and use of SHC.

2.4.1. USE AND RISK OF CONTAMINATION

Guiot and Roux (2010) argue that the "second life" of a garment can be either a positive or a negative aspect, depending on the way the consumer understands SHC. For some consumers, used items are perceived as 'contaminated' because they have already been used before, as for them, clothing is understood as an extended part of the individual and, as such, is a symbol of the identity of its owner and the 'contamination' of the previous owner cannot be washed (Kristoffersson, 2015). At the same time, this notion of contamination can also be related to the hygienic aspect, and the greater the use or previous owners, the greater the feeling of dirt and the lower the probability of purchase (Yan, Bae & Xu, 2015). The same is observed in relation to the way SHC retail points are perceived (Mitchell & Montgomery, 2010). This, according to Kristoffersson (2015), also summarizes the unhygienic perception as an impediment to the purchase and consumption of recycled fashion.

2.4.2. ACCESSIBILITY

Unlike *fast fashion* clothing, sold both in the physical and digital space, there are few places to sell second-hand clothes (Hur, 2020). The lack of variety in stores does not allow easy access or even knowledge of them, which makes it difficult to buy (Mitchell & Montgomery, 2010). Also, contrary to the purchase of *fast fashion*, the sale of SHC in the digital space is usually viewed as an obstacle to consumption because of the impossibility of seeing the items

in person or assessing their real condition, causing distrust among buyers (Yan, Bae & Xu, 2015).

2.4.3. COST-BENEFIT RELATIONSHIP

Studies also indicate that, contrary to what has been developed previously, the monetary factor is not only a driving factor for the purchase and consumption of second-hand purchases (Hur, 2020). According to Kristoffersson, (2015), some consumers point out the high prices of some second-hand goods, compared to new items. Considering the uncertainty of quality and duration inherent in the fact that it is an already used item, consumers often doubt the cost-benefit ratio in buying SHC (Mitchell and Montgomery, 2010).

2.4.4. AVAILABILITY RESTRICTIONS

SHC available for purchase is conditioned by the will of the owner, or whoever has it, to sell it (Guiot & Roux, 2010) That said, unlike the *fast fashion* model, SHC consumers are restricted to the models and sizes of the pieces available, without much possibility of looking for alternative cuts, sizes, materials, or adhering to trends, which acts as a barrier to the purchase and consumption of used fashion items (Kristoffersson, 2015).

2.4.5. FEELINGS OF INFERIORITY AND HUMILIATION

Finally, studies also point to the notion of inferiority observed in some consumers, associated with the purchase and use of second-hand goods (Hur, 2020). These are seen as inferior goods to some (Kristoffersson, 2015), without the same value as a first-hand good, and therefore unable to confer the same status, exclusivity, and sense of uniqueness as a first-hand good (Mitchell and Montgomery, 2010). For some, buying, using, and being seen using a second-hand item is a sign of lack of economic power, associated with the inability to buy new goods, which causes many consumers to feel shame and humiliation (Guiot & Roux, 2010).

2.5. GENERATION Z AND SHC CONSUMPTION

Academics argue that SHC consumption has been gaining popularity as new generations show a growing preference for socially and environmentally conscious fashion practices (Herjanto et al., 2024). Gen Z consumers are growing aware of the fashion industry's waste challenges, which pushes them towards fashion re-commerce options such as the second-hand clothing market (Silva et al. 2020).

Manley et al. (2023) state that Gen Z consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability in their fashion consumption habits, however, consumers are not using specific vocabulary when discussing their perceptions of or reasons for purchasing sustainable clothing. In a recent study (Manley et al., 2023), Gen Z and Millennials defined sustainable clothing as clothing that is produced, used, and disposed of in a way that is environmentally, socially, and economically responsible. In this study, respondents frequently used nonspecific language like "long-lasting," "fair-labour," or "high-quality" to describe sustainable clothing. However, few consumers used specific terms like "biodegradable," "no pollutant," "second-hand," or "from safe working conditions" to describe sustainable clothing. For the authors, these findings suggested that Gen Z consumers only vaguely understand what sustainable clothing is or how it is produced. Nonetheless, Gen Z consumers understand that using second-hand clothing is a sustainable practice since it keeps clothing out of landfills and reduces the demand for new clothes (Manley et al., 2023).

Parallely, individuals in the higher educational level group tend to be more aware of the environmental consequences of mass consumption, which propels them to consume more recycled goods than any other group (Piao & Managi, 2023). Young college students are amongst the group of individuals that engage more in sustainable clothing consumption (Diddi et al., 2019). However, the factors that influence SHC consumption of Gen Z consumers may vary (Silva et al., 2020).

Studies showed that, Gen Z SHC consumers are mostly motivated by the lower prices of second-hand clothing, as this demographic tend to shop SHC in order to save money (Silva et al., 2020). Research also states that Gen Z feels that one affordable way to collect clothes is by purchasing second-hand clothing (Kawulur et al., 2022). As for the obstacles, constraints related to lack of offers in size stand out as the main barrier for SHC consumption in crossed

analysis, followed by the signs of obvious use such as stains (Kawulur et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2020; Herjanto et al., 2024).

According to Silva et al, (2022) and Manley et al. (2023), and stated in the introductory section, there is still a gap in literature which can demonstrate Gen Z's reasoning behind the rise in second-hand shopping and offer guidance to interpret consumer attitude towards second-hand shopping. Here in, to serve as a starting point for the present investigation, the following research questions were elaborated aiming to, first, obtain a broad knowledge of Gen Z consumer's perception of SHC and, secondly, a comparison of perspectives based on education levels.

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of second-hand clothing among Gen Z?

Research Question 2: Does the perception of the importance, value, and need for SHC consumption differ by education level?

The last research question was elaborated to gather insights regarding the motivations and barriers for SHC according to education level.

Research Question 3: What are the reasons for different education level groups to purchase or not purchase SHC?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study explored the factors that motivate Gen Z individuals with higher education and without higher education to consume or not SHC. The study followed a qualitative research approach based on the application of semi-structured interviews, since it was relevant to identify, from a qualitative point of view, the perceptions of respondents regarding second-hand fashion goods, as well as the motivations and impediments for consumption. Measurement items were taken from research conducted by Manley et al. (2023), which, in turn, adapted it from a previous study by Lundblad and Davies (2016).

The qualitative approach was aimed to deliver a more nuanced and thorough comprehension of SHC perceptions and its consumption and help contextualize the findings in a way that is not possible with a quantitative approach. As Thomas (2003) states, the fundamental objective of a qualitative approach is to release the conclusions of the research and circumvent the restrictions imposed by the organized procedures and the uniformity of the results obtained from the raw data. Despite recognizing the importance and relevance of quantitative studies that rely on questionnaires, the purpose of the present study was not to quantify, but to understand and fill, qualitatively, the gaps that previous quantitative studies pointed out.

As for remaining alternatives, within the realm of qualitative research methods, the choice of semi-structured interviews as a tool for extracting data directly from the source is supported by the attractiveness of their flexibility and openness characteristics (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2005). As Quivy and Campenhoudt (2005, pp. 11) indicate, "exploratory interviews have the role of decoding dynamics and providing clues for reflection, ideas and working hypotheses". The one-on-one environment was proved to be crucial for the observation and understanding of how individuals perceive and understand second-hand fashion, without being influenced by other personalities which could be the case with focus groups. The use of this technique is, therefore, linked to the objective of the present study to understand the dichotomies of perceptions among participants who are consumers of second-hand fashion, hoping to explore the relationship between education and the reasons that motivate and prevent SHC consumption. The qualitative approach also allowed the present study to move away from previous quantitative research, but of a similar nature elaborated

in the same field and allowed the collection of richer and more personalized data, reported through experiences and free opinions in relation to second-hand fashion. That said, semi-structured interviews were conducted following a script of pre-defined questions, which allowed free answers in a broader context aiming to encourage participants to share thoughts and perceptions without the need for guidance or external influence. Lundblad and Davies (2016) state that the questions were structured in a progressive manner starting from questions about their general understanding of the product in question, SHC, into why they consume it or not. Considering the script of the interviews, appendix A brings together the questions elaborated based on the theoretical framework and in accordance with the research questions that shaped this investigation.

The sample constitutes of Gen Z individuals who were approached personally and randomly, to ensure unbiased and diverse responses. In addition, the sample was established in such a way that there was an even number of interviewees with higher education and without higher education. Note that, for this study and according to the Oxford English Dictionary, higher education equates to any of various types of education given in postsecondary institutions of learning and usually affording, at the end of a course of study, a named degree, diploma, or certificate of higher studies. Additionally, it is relevant to say that this is a sample constructed only with individuals of Portuguese nationality residing in Portugal, who have purchased SHC, whose characterization is illustrated in table 1.

Table 1 – Characterization of Interviewees

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Highest Education Level Completed
P1	Female	19	High School
P2	Female	19	High School
P3	Male	18	High School
P4	Male	20	High School
P5	Male	24	High School
P6	Male	24	Bachelor’s Degree
P7	Male	23	Postgraduate
P8	Female	25	Postgraduate
P9	Female	23	Master’s Degree
P10	Female	22	Master’s Degree

Source: self-elaborated based on the results of qualitative research.

Participants were individually informed about the study and asked to participate in the interview. The interviews were conducted in person and online via TEAMS, during October 30th of 2024 and November 2nd of 2024. It was agreed and disclosed that the participant’s names and email addresses would remain confidential. For this reason, after conducted, the interviews were codified and transcribed, to ensure confidentiality and facilitate the processes of data analysis and triangulation. The programs *Leximancer*, a qualitative analysis software, and *excel*, for text-mining, were used to analyse the transcriptions.

Finally, it should be noted that the research began with a decisive moment of collection of existing data, secondary data, presented and examined in the initial chapters of the study. It therefore supports the entire subsequent methodological process, and the crossing of primary and secondary data presented later. Herein, in the following section, insights from the interviews will be juxtaposed to the primary data, which triangulation will allow answering the research questions.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of the results started with a crucial moment of data cleaning. After transcribed and coded, in order to guarantee an effective processing on behalf of *Leximancer*- qualitative research analysis tool- the data had to be cleaned. For that, the text was normalized with the deletion of stop words that did not contain contextual meaning, such as “tipo” (like and Portuguese) and the standardization of the terms “second-hand clothing” and synonyms to SHC.

Figure 1 is the concept map generated by *Leximancer* that shows key concepts and the correlation between them gathered from the qualitative results.

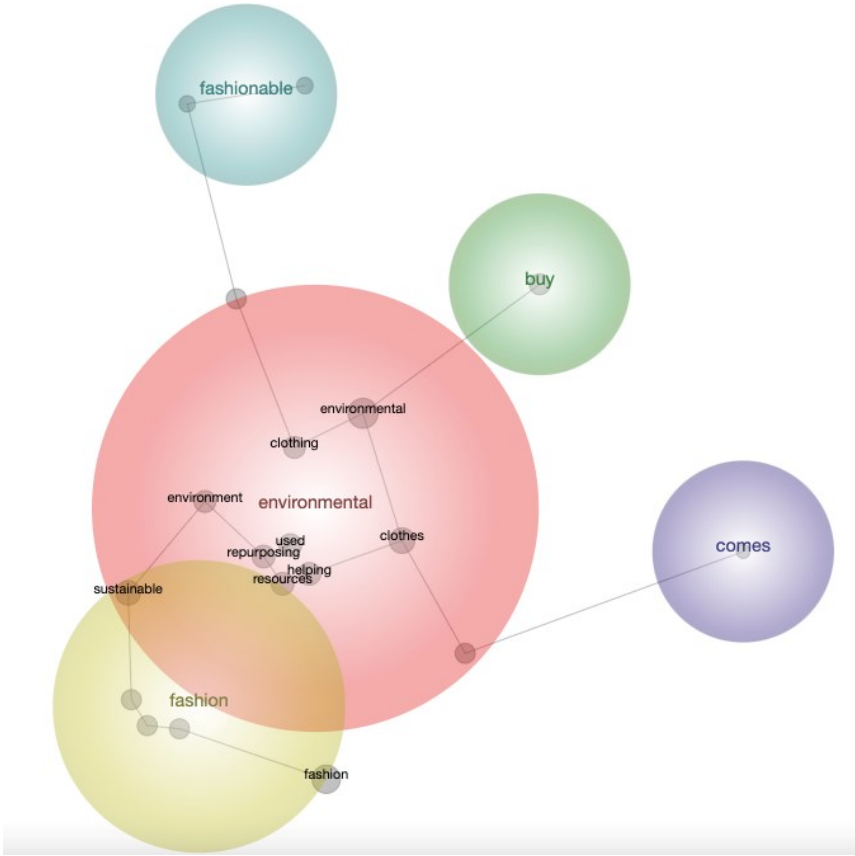


Figure 1.1 – Key Concepts Map elaborated by *Leximancer*.

The concept map highlights the predominance of two central topics: Environmentalism and Fashion. The dimension of the environmentalism sphere indicates that it is a prominent concept in the discussion as its centrality in the data base is linked to the high frequency of which the subject is mentioned. The smaller nodes, sub-concepts, inside the sphere indicate how the discussing around environmentalism is conducted. The highlighted topics “resources,” “helping,” “used,” and “repurposing” indicate the environmental perception of SHC and therefore its sustainable aspect.

Moreover, the Environment sphere is interconnected with the Fashion sphere, the second largest sphere in this concept universe. The closeness of these two spheres indicates a strong relationship or co-occurrence between them in the dataset. Therefore, as “Fashion” and “Environmental” are closely linked, it is safe to say that these ideas frequently appear together in discussions. SHC is mainly perceived and described as a “sustainable fashion” option. The closeness of these key concepts is explained by the frequency of which these two terms are used together when addressing SHC. However, despite the distance of the second fashion related sphere, “Fashionable”, it is important to note that the identification of such term, only linked to the environmental sphere through the “clothing” node, implies that it is a less frequent connection with other concepts. The distance between these two spheres relate to a very specific discussing concerning the trendiness and the fashionable aspect of SHC, which falls behind the prominent notion of SHC as a product primarily consumed for sustainable reasons.

It was not possible to find correlations between the concepts and participants’ levels of education with the concept map. Therefore, the following sections dive into the matter as the findings are used to answer the research questions.

4.1. WHAT ARE THE PERCEPTIONS OF SECOND-HAND CLOTHING AMONG GEN Z?

To answer the first research question, simple text mining techniques were applied on the transcripts with *Excel*, in which Count functions were used to count repeated terms in all twenty interviews. Note that, even if consumers may have repeated the terms, each keyword is only counted as one per person. Table 2 highlights how many Gen Z consumers, out of 10, utilized the top 10 identified keywords.

Table 2 – Top 10 words used to describe SHC

Keywords	Count
Reused	10
Sustainable	10
Eco-friendly	9
Repurposed	7
<i>Thrifted</i>	7
Mass Consumption Reduction	6
Waste Reduction	6
Anti-fast fashion	5
Slow fashion	5
Vintage	4

Source: self-elaborated based on findings

As shown in Table 3, “reused” and “sustainable” are the most common words used by participants when describing SHC. The terms were not only used by all interviewees, but synonyms “repurposed”, and “eco-friendly” were also used, repeatedly, in the same sentences, which suggests that these words are in-grained within Gen Z’s descriptive vocabulary and perception of SHC. The findings show that Gen Z consumers are highly aware of the environmental benefits of SHC consumption as environmental terms are predominant when describing second hand fashion. Overall, Gen Z’s perception of SHC shows this

demographic’s awareness of fashion’s environmental impact and priorities for specific environmental stressors.

4.2. DOES THE PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE, VALUE, AND NEED FOR SHC CONSUMPTION DIFFER BY EDUCATION LEVEL?

For this question, the results of the text mining process utilized to answer the first research question were divided by education level. Table 3 highlights how many Gen Z consumers, out of 5, utilized the top 10 keywords identified previously.

Table 3 – Top 10 words by education level

Gen Z without Higher Education		Gen Z with Higher Education	
Keywords	Count	Keywords	Count
Reused	5	Reused	5
Sustainable	5	Sustainable	5
Eco-friendly	5	Eco-friendly	4
Repurposed	2	Repurposed	5
Thrifted	5	Thrifted	2
Mass Consumption Reduction	5	Mass Consumption Reduction	1
Waste Reduction	5	Waste Reduction	1
Anti-fast fashion	5	Anti-fast fashion	0
Slow fashion	5	Slow fashion	0
Vintage	0	Vintage	4

Source: self-elaborated based on findings

There is a clear distinction of how Gen Z individuals with higher education and without higher education understand and value SHC. As seen in table 3, the notion of second-hand fashion as a type of ‘slow fashion’ is only pointed out by Gen Z consumers without higher education. For instance, participant P3 when asked to elaborate on his perception of SHC

starts by referring to it as the ‘most sustainable form of slow fashion’, as seen in the extract below.

Now that we talk so much about the importance of investing and consuming more slow fashion, SHC is the most sustainable form of slow fashion. There is nothing more sustainable than using what was already produced and is available already out there. -P3

All five interviewees without higher education say they value SHC due to its “anti-fast fashion characteristic” which is not an idea brought up by higher educated Gen Z consumers. As highlighted in the following interview extract, non-higher educated Gen Z consumers particularly emphasize their interest for SHC consumption as a stance against fast fashion.

There is a heavy social and I would say activist side of SHC that is linked to the fact that is a type of fashion associated to the manifest against capitalism and fast fashion. Because, if you think about it, when we buy second-hand we are kind of rebelling against the big fashion corporations because we are going against everything they do and represent. We are telling them we don't need more from you because we are not buying new. - P1

Moreover, Piao and Managi (2023), state that there is a correlation between higher education and more sustainable awareness and consumption practices. Scholars stated that individuals in the higher educational level group tend to be more aware of the environmental consequences of mass consumption, which propels them to consume more recycled goods than any other group (Piao & Managi,2023). However, although all non-higher educated Gen Z consumers understand SHC as a tool to reduce mass consumption and consequently waste, only one higher educated Gen Z consumer claims to value SHC for the same reasons. Unlike what the relevant literature on the topic states, the perceived value of SHC from higher educated Gen Z consumers relies mostly on the fact that it is a recycled fashion good. Higher educated Gen Z individuals do not often utilize exact and detailed vocabulary such as “slow fashion” and “waste reduction” when describing SHC, but, instead, repeat synonymous terms and use more common and generic vocabulary. The latter is observed in the following abstract.

Second hand fashion is about buying used clothing pieces and giving them a second life by reusing the clothes that are already available there. By recycling the clothes, we are helping the environment as we are not consuming new items that took more resources to be produced. - P7

When asked to elaborate, most participants, such as P10 whose interview extract is presented below for exemplification purposes, still failed to provide more detailed perceptions that stood out from the generic word-based interpretations.

When you buy and use a clothing item that is repurposed you are recycling clothes and not contributing to the environmental effects of clothing manufacturing that are extremely aggressive for the planet. Second-hand fashion is all about reducing, reusing, and recycling. - P10

The extracts highlighted previously suggest that the terminology used by higher educated Gen Z consumers revolves mostly around its usage and fails to dive into the environmental benefits of SHC consumption, unlike Gen Z individuals without higher education. That said, the findings show that recent studies still fail to grasp the complex relationship between education and sustainable practices in the fashion industry, as a higher education level within the Gen Z community may often not equate to full awareness of sustainable practices, specifically considering the fashion industry.

Overall, the frequencies of the top 10 keywords divided by education levels shows that SHC is perceived differently by Gen Z consumers with and without higher education.

4.3. WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR DIFFERENT EDUCATION LEVEL GROUPS TO PURCHASE OR NOT PURCHASE SHC

For this question, Gen Z consumers were asked to elaborate on the personal motives or values that drive them to consume SHC, taking into account that the first motive presented would be considered the most important one for each individual. Table 4 gathers how many Gen Z consumers recognize each purchase driver identified by the scholars as the first, most important, motivation for SHC consumption.

Table 4 – Main SHC purchase drives by education level

Gen Z without Higher Education		Gen Z with Higher Education	
Motivations	Count	Motivations	Count
Economic motivations	1	Economic motivations	0
Recreational Motivations	0	Recreational Motivations	0
Uniqueness Motivations	0	Uniqueness Motivations	0
Sustainable Motivations	4	Sustainable Motivations	1
Fashion Motivations	0	Fashion Motivations =“Trendy”	3
Vintage Motivations	0	Vintage Motivations	1

Source: self-elaborated based on findings

Although studies pointed out the economic motivation as the main driver for SHC consumption within the Gen Z community (Silva et al., 2020), findings show that they are mostly driven by sustainability (4/10) and fashion (3/10) purposes. The qualitative nature of the study allowed for more detailed responses from the participants which some of the relevant literature with quantitative approaches fails to grasp. For instance, one of the participants revealed some confusion when naming its primary reason for shopping SHC stating that “it is a cheap sustainable option”. When asked to elaborate, what first seemed an economic motivation turned out to be a sustainability-based consumption. The participant then asked to be counted as a sustainable motivation which could not have been the case with quantitative studies given the quickness of the surveys. The simple task of choosing an option

could result in oversimplified or not well thought responses, which could not be reflecting the full understanding of Gen Z's relationship with SHC consumption.

Additionally, it is also important to note that the drivers for SHC consumption are different between the two education groups. 4/5 of non-higher educated Gen Z claim to be primarily driven by sustainability purposes, which is intertwined with this group's interpretation of SHC consumption as environmentally beneficial, as seen previously. Most non-higher educated Gen Z consumers state to be influenced to shop SHC due to its eco-friendly characteristic. As seen in the extract below, participants are driven by sustainability to shop SHC when they show concern over the environmental impact of fashion consumption.

When I think about buying second-hand all comes down to the environmental benefits of it really. We were programmed to believe that we need to buy new clothes every month which is a lie. Are the environmental effects caused by the production of fashion, which are scientifically proven by the way, justified because we were made to believe that we need to buy new clothes constantly? For me, it is a no brainer. - P3

Moreover, the only individual who claims to be mainly motivated by the cheaper prices of SHC does not have a higher education degree.

As for the Gen Z individuals with higher education, a fifth claims to be driven by sustainable purposes, another fifth by vintage motivations and the majority claims to be driven by fashion purposes. However, a new idea of "fashion motivation" is presented as all 3 individuals claim to be recently drawn to SHC for its trendy aspect. Take participants P6 explanation, for instance.

I actually find myself quite drawn to the fashionable aspect of SHC because you can elevate your looks a lot more with second hand. Because second hand became a trend. It is cool to say that you buy second hand. That your style is thrifted. Because there is a higher fashion purpose behind it. Like you can prove that you are really a fashionable person and that you have really great style when you don't need to buy new all the time because it takes more effort to pull fashionable pieces among all the second-hand clothing. -P6

As seen in the abstract presented previously, some Gen Z individuals state that SHC consumption is currently a trend and individuals who engage in it are perceived as ‘cool’ and more ‘fashionable’. The idea of SHC consumption as a fashion statement linked to the expression of the self is overthrown by the ‘power of SHC as a fashion trend, “which just like any other trend will last its moment”, as one participant stated. Although it still is a type of consumption motivated by fashion purposes, quantitative studies have failed to identify this nuanced SHC consumption motivation, which seems to be relevant for Gen Z consumers.

In addition, as for the obstacles, the literature shows that constraints related to lack of offers in size stand out as the main barrier for SHC consumption, followed by the signs of obvious use such as stains (Kawulur et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2020; Herjanto et al., 2024). However, the findings suggest something different.

Table 5 gathers a sum of how many Gen Z consumers recognize each purchase barrier identified by the scholars as the first, most detrimental, discouragement for SHC consumption.

Table 5 – Barriers for SHC consumption by education level

Gen Z without Higher Education		Gen Z with Higher Education	
Barriers	Count	Barriers	Count
Use and risk of contamination	1	Use and risk of contamination	0
Accessibility	4	Accessibility	0
Cost-benefit relationship	0	Cost-benefit relationship	0
Availability restrictions	0	Availability restrictions	2
Inferiority and humiliation	0	Inferiority and humiliation	3

Source: self-elaborated based on findings

The most common barriers pointed out by Gen Z individuals are accessibility (4/10) and shame (3/10). Unlike the literature claimed, Gen Z consumers are mostly preoccupied with the difficulty in accessing SHC, for instance because of the ‘limited selling points’, and the feeling of inferiority and humiliation that may arise from using SHC. Moreover, the barriers

pointed out by Gen Z consumers without higher education do not coincide with the reasons pointed out by Gen Z individuals with higher education.

4/5 Gen Z individuals without higher education claimed to be discouraged by limited accessibility. P1 elaborates on the difficulties to access SHC selling spaces due to the fact that “There aren’t many thrift shops out there. Most SHC buyers go to the same spots which means that the stores are often full”. Contrary to the literature, only a fifth claims to be preoccupied with the hygiene and cleanliness of the garments.

Whereas most Gen Z consumers with higher education claim to be discouraged by the feeling of inferiority and humiliation that may come with the consumption of SHC. The remaining consumers raise concerns about the restrictions posed by the limited availability and lack of sizes, models, and cuts variation. Interestingly, two of the same individuals that stated being motivated by the trendiness of SHC consumption, claim to feel embarrassed by using SHC as it might equate to ‘lack of purchasing power’ of ‘financial instability’, as stated by P6 whose extract is highlighted below.

Despite the trendiness aspect of SHC it is still looked down on, I think it is still a sign that you may be struggling financially. For example, buying second-hand designer is not the same as buying SCH that came from a fast fashion house. I am ok with buying vintage and designer pieces, but I still feel somewhat inferior if it is just a random piece from ZARA for example. I have stopped myself from buying something that I actually liked because it looked too second hand. I have felt humiliated once when I said that I had SHC and people asked me why. – P10

Once again, relevant literature fails to encompass the nuanced and complex factors that influence positively and negatively SHC consumption.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. PERCEPTION OF SHC BY GEN Z CONSUMERS

Considering Gen Z's perception of SHC, the findings of this study reveal that this group mostly associate and identify SHC through terms like "reused", "sustainable", and "eco-friendly", which reflects an ingrained environmental awareness in their perception of SHC. These results align with the broader concerns highlighted in the literature about the environmental impact of the fashion industry (To & Kan, 2020). A divergence is noticeable when analysing the two educational cohorts separately, which proves that education does influence the framing and perception of SHC. Some assumptions in the literature regarding the relationship between higher education and sustainable consumption practices, particularly in the context of SHC, are challenged by the findings. This deviation suggests the need to examine the interplay of education to better understand how Gen Z engages with SHC consumption, suggesting that environmental awareness is not uniformly distributed within educational brackets but influenced by a range of contextual factors.

Scholars such as To and Kan (2020) and Kerr and Landry (2017) emphasize the significant resource consumption, waste generation, and pollution caused by traditional garment production and disposal practices. Gen Z's focus on the environmental benefits of SHC consumption suggests that this demographic is not only aware of such challenges but actively prioritizes addressing them through sustainable practices. While the literature predominantly critiques the environmental costs of fast fashion (Koay, Lim, Khoo, Xavier & Poon, 2024), the study highlights how Gen Z, further conforming Montgomery's findings (2022), are reframing clothing consumption by valuing recycling and sustainability.

The participants' understanding of SHC as "reused" and "repurposed" suggests a growing recognition of the potential to mitigate post-consumer waste through prolonged use and recycling. More mature studies, Park and Chertow (2014), and before Domina and Koch (1999), had argued about a significant barrier, which was the lack of consumer knowledge about reuse and consumption of fashion garments. The present insights' heavier focus on the reuse aspect of SHC highlights the increased collective awareness of recycling garments' potential as time progressed. The findings diverge from the literature in such aspect as

younger Gen Z individuals, despite of their educational background, prove to understand and value SHC for its recycling aspect.

The participants' focus on sustainability reflects an alignment with the academic call for rethinking current production and consumption models in the fashion industry, as To and Kan (2020) state. By actively engaging with SHC, Gen Z demonstrates a shift towards more sustainable fashion practices, addressing a key challenge highlighted in the literature: the need to extend the life cycle of fashion items through recycling (Domina & Koch, 1999). It is safe to say that, according to the findings, Gen Z demographic's prioritization of SHC as an eco-friendly alternative supports scholarly recommendations to consider reuse as a viable solution to managing post-consumer textile waste (Lewis et al., 2017). The literature heavily supports the idea that SHC consumption reflects a growing trend driven by environmental awareness which propel shifts in consumer values (Guiot & Roux, 2010; Xu et al., 2014). However, the study suggests that the framing of SHC, regardless of being a deliberate counterpoint to fast fashion or as a general sustainable practice, may vary based on educational background.

Existing studies generally posit that individuals with higher education are more aware of the environmental consequences of mass consumption and are, therefore, more likely to engage in sustainable practices, including SHC consumption (Diddi et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2020). Piao and Managi (2023) argue that individuals with higher education are more likely to adopt sustainable consumption practices due to heightened awareness of the environmental consequences of mass consumption. Nevertheless, the findings of this study reveal a clear and nuanced distinction in how Gen Z individuals with and without higher education perceive SHC, which expands on existing literature. Among Gen Z participants without higher education, SHC is not only strongly associated with the concept of "slow fashion", but also valued as an explicit stance against fast fashion. This group frequently emphasized SHC's "anti-fast fashion characteristics" (Vehmas et al., 2018), using more precise and targeted vocabulary when discussing these issues, while framing it as a sustainable alternative that counters the rapid production cycles and waste of mass-market fashion (Beard, 2008; Todeschini et al. 2017). In contrast with the literature, non-higher educated participants, not only expressed a stronger connection between SHC and sustainability but also framed it as a tool to challenge unsustainable practices in the fashion industry. Contrarily, participants with higher education

did not explicitly refer to SHC as slow fashion nor highlight its opposition to fast fashion, which suggests differences in how sustainability and SHC are contextualized within these subgroups. Higher-educated participants focus primarily on SHC's functional aspects, such as its usage, and thus tend to overlook or under express the broader environmental benefits of SHC consumption, struggling to articulate specific reasons for valuing SHC beyond its general status as a recycled good. In spite all, this partially aligns with the findings of Manley et al. (2023), who noted that Gen Z consumers often use nonspecific language when describing sustainable fashion, failing to use more detailed or technical terms. Nonetheless, these results suggest that within the Gen Z cohort, higher education does not necessarily equate to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability in the fashion industry, which is a level of complexity that remains underexplored in the literature.

Despite the division between educational groups, overall, Gen Z consumers recognize SHC value as a more sustainable and ethical fashion practice. While the shared emphasis on sustainability aligns with the literature's view of SHC as a means to reduce raw material consumption and mitigate environmental harm (Beard, 2008; Todeschini et al., 2017), the anti-fast fashion stance observed in participants without higher education mirrors broader societal trends identified by Vehmas et al. (2018), where SHC is increasingly regarded as a rejection of unethical mass production practices (Hur, 2020).

To sum up, although the literature highlights Gen Z's growing preference for socially and environmentally conscious fashion practices (Herjanto et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2020), this study suggests that education levels may influence the depth and specificity of how these values are expressed. While both groups demonstrate a general awareness of SHC as a sustainable practice, the more precise and activist-like framing from non-higher educated participants underscores the need to reconsider the assumption that higher education automatically correlates with more advanced or detailed sustainability discourse. This nuanced result adds complexity to the existing understanding of how educational background shapes sustainable consumption behaviour, suggesting that sustainability awareness is not solely determined by formal education but also by individual and cultural factors that are worthy of further exploration.

5.2. SHC CONSUMPTION DRIVERS

Considering the drivers for Gen Z's SHC consumption, the findings and literature both align and diverge, particularly regarding economic, sustainability, and fashion-based motivations.

Scholars have long emphasized that the ability to acquire branded pieces at reduced prices and expand purchasing power is a key appeal of SHC (Herjanto et al., 2016; Roux & Guiot, 2008). However, the findings reveal that economic motivations are not a significant driver for most Gen Z participants, with only one non-higher-educated individual citing affordability as their primary reason for SHC consumption. This contrasts sharply with the literature, which has traditionally identified frugality and economic savings as central motivations for SHC consumption (Guiot & Roux, 2010; Cervellon & Shammass, 2013). This discrepancy indicates a shift in motivations among younger consumers, particularly Gen Z with higher education, who, according to the findings, may prioritize other factors such as sustainability or fashion over affordability.

Considering the most mature studies on the topics, previous research highlights "treasure hunting" as a central driver for SHC consumption, with which consumers derive joy and excitement from discovering unique and unexpected items at a lower cost (Cervellon et al., 2012; Ferraro et al., 2016). This sense of pleasure is further enhanced by the playful environment of thrifting, including the interactions between sellers and buyers (Herjanto et al., 2016). However, the findings from this study do not emphasize recreational motivations as a significant driver among Gen Z participants. Instead, their focus lies primarily on sustainability and fashion related appeals. This suggests that the thrill of the "hunt" might be less central for Gen Z, or that perhaps this dimension of SHC consumption is not as explicitly articulated by the participants.

Moreover, the study reveals that sustainability is a dominant driver for SHC consumption among Gen Z participants, which is particularly pronounced among non-higher-educated Gen Z consumers, who consistently emphasize the eco-friendly benefits of SHC and its role in addressing the environmental impact of fashion consumption. While earlier studies noted the variability of sustainability as a motivation (Cervellon & Shammass, 2013), the

findings suggest that for Gen Z, particularly non-higher-educated individuals, sustainability plays a more consistent role in influencing SHC consumption. Mcneill and Moore (2015), stated that despite being a considered motivation, several studies have failed to establish a solid link between environmental concerns and second-hand consumption. However, the findings suggest a stronger link between environmental concerns and SHC consumption, particularly for the non-higher educated subgroup. This aligns with more mature studies that witnessed a growing consumer focus on reducing mass clothing consumption and supporting eco-friendly practices (Guiot & Roux, 2010; Cervellon et al., 2012), which points to a generational evolution in consumer attitudes, where environmental concerns have become increasingly embedded in purchasing decisions (Manley et al., 2023).

On top of the noticeable influence of sustainability for SHC consumption, fashion-based motivations are suggested to also play a major and more nuanced role among Gen Z consumers. Previous research has recognized SHC as a tool for creating authentic and individualistic looks which allows consumers to express their identities through unique fashion choices (Roux & Guiot, 2008). However, the findings suggest a departure from this traditional understanding of fashion-based motivations. For Gen Z participants with higher education, the appeal of SHC lays not only in its role in self-expression but also in its emergence as a fashion trend. SHC consumption is described as “cool” and “fashionable”, which emphasizes its current popularity rather than its potential for fostering individuality. Therefore, while the literature frames fashion as a means of reinforcing identity (Guiot & Roux, 2010), the findings suggest that for some Gen Z consumers, SHC’s fashion appeal is rooted more in its perceived social status as a trend rather than its capacity for individuality. This perspective repositions SHC as a trend-driven activity, which highlights a gap in the literature, as quantitative studies have yet to fully capture the nuanced nature of fashion trend motivations specific to SHC consumption among Gen Z. Consequently, given the depth of its nuances, the trendiness aspect of SHC extends to other motivations that will be discussed below.

Vintage motivations are also pointed out in the findings, which partially supports the literature, particularly when considering the emotional connection to vintage items. As the literature posits, consumers are willing to invest in vintage items due to the emotional appeal and nostalgia they evoke, without being frugal (Cervellon & Shammass, 2013; Dawson & Cavell,

1987). The findings similarly identify vintage motivations among Gen Z participants, specifically those with higher education, who value SHC for its vintage appeal. However, the findings also introduce a contemporary nuance as vintage motivations appear to overlap with fashion motivations, since vintage items are increasing in popularity and “trendiness” value. This connection suggests that Gen Z consumers may not always differentiate between vintage and trend-based motivations, viewing the two as complementary rather than distinct. On the same note, the findings also resonate with the literature in recognizing the importance of uniqueness as a motivation for SHC consumption, since both sources agree that SHC enables individuals to express individuality and distinguish themselves socially. Moreover, the literature emphasizes that discovering rare or discontinued items allows consumers to project a unique social self-image (Herjanto et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2001). Similarly, participants in this study, who are motivated by fashion purposes, also value SHC for the distinctiveness it offers, although this type of motivation appears to be intertwined with the current trendiness of SHC rather than a purely personal quest for uniqueness. It is possible to say that, with that distinction, a subtle shift is highlighted. While the literature frames uniqueness as deeply tied to identity and self-expression, the findings suggest that for some Gen Z consumers, particularly the higher-educated ones, uniqueness may also serve as a way to align with broader social and fashion trends.

To sum up, while the findings align with the literature on the role of fashion in SHC consumption, they diverge in their treatment of sustainability. The findings provide evidence of a stronger and more explicit connection between environmental concerns and SHC consumption among Gen Z, particularly non-higher-educated individuals, contrary to what is suggested by many prior studies. This highlights a gap in the literature regarding the evolving role of sustainability as a motivator, particularly for younger generations. Additionally, while both the findings and the literature recognize fashion as a motivator, the intersection between the findings and literature underscores evolving motivations for SHC consumption among Gen Z. While the literature emphasizes economic factors and the potential for fashion to act as a vehicle for self-expression, the study’s findings suggest that these traditional motivators are less relevant for contemporary Gen Z consumers. Instead, sustainability and the influence of social trends appear to play a more prominent role. With this, the idea of SHC as a trendy practice introduces a new layer to fashion motivations, marking a departure from the focus

on individualism described in previous studies. This divergence indicates the need for updated research to explore how generational and cultural shifts are reshaping SHC consumption motivations. In addition, it also calls for further investigation into how the perception of SHC as a trend influences long-term sustainability practices and whether this temporary motivation will evolve into deeper engagement with sustainable consumption in the future. The discussing between findings and literature, around SHC consumption drivers, highlight the evolving nature of SHC consumption among Gen Z which suggests a need for updated research to explore how generational and cultural shifts are reshaping traditional motivations for SHC consumption.

5.3. SHC CONSUMPTION BARRIERS

The findings and literature on barriers for SHC consumption reveal both areas of convergence and divergence, particularly regarding feelings of inferiority, restrictions in availability and accessibility, and the social stigma associated with SHC use. These insights not only underscore the evolving nature of SHC consumption within the Gen Z demographic but also highlight how social perceptions and structural limitations shape SHC consumption, with education-based variations.

Firstly, the findings challenge the emphasis on hygiene concerns often cited in the literature. While prior studies suggest that cleanliness is a common barrier for SHC consumption (Hur, 2020; Guiot & Roux, 2010), only one participant in the findings mentioned to be concerned with hygiene when engaging with SHC. This reflects a change in consumer attitudes, among Gen Z consumers, who may be less influenced by such concerns.

Secondly, it is noted that the limited availability of SHC selling points, both physical and digital, are perceived as an inconvenience for SHC purchase compared to fast fashion (Hur, 2020; Mitchell & Montgomery, 2010). Participants in this study have echoed this sentiment, which is particularly noticeable among non-higher-educated Gen Z individuals, who have emphasized limited thrift shop locations and overcrowded spaces as significant hurdles. Moreover, while the literature identifies the digital space as an obstacle due to the inability to inspect items physically (Yan, Bae, & Xu, 2015), this concern is not explicitly mentioned by any Gen Z consumer in the findings. No consumers have identified online SHC shopping has a

struggle, suggesting that Gen Z consumers may be more accustomed and thus less apprehensive about digital shopping.

Parallely, the findings and literature intersect on identifying availability restrictions as a significant challenge to SHC consumption. As Kristoffersson (2015) notes, SHC buyers face limitations in terms of sizes, models, and materials, unlike the vast options offered by fast fashion. Since, Guiot and Roux (2010) point out, SHC available for purchase is conditioned by the will of the owner, or whoever has it, to sell it, participants confirm that limited variety in sizes, cuts, and styles acts as a barrier to SHC purchase. In the intersection between a fashion-based motivation and availability barriers lays a highlighted concern expressed heavily by higher-educated Gen Z consumers. While availability is a universal challenge, higher-educated Gen Z consumers who seek specific styles or trends, voice often being particularly hesitant to engage in SHC shopping, highlighting the diverse expectations within this demographic. Such restrictions may be particularly discouraging for Gen Z consumers who, as Kawulur et al. (2022) indicate, are accustomed to the convenience and abundance of fast fashion.

Moreover, on top of feelings of inferiority and humiliation being pointed out as a major impediment to SHC shopping, the findings align with the literature in identifying social stigma as a barrier to SHC consumption. According to Guiot and Roux (2010), this stigma stems from societal perceptions that equate SHC use with financial hardship. However, only higher-educated Gen Z consumers express embarrassment associated with SHC consumption. Therefore, despite higher education levels in Gen Z being often linked to more environmental awareness and thus more engagement with recycled goods (Piao & Managi, 2023), it does not equate to the eradication of prejudice and feelings of inferiority associated with SHC consumption. Similarly, the findings suggest that feelings of inferiority persist mostly on higher educated Gen Z consumers, even among those who view SHC as fashionable. In spite recognizing that second-hand fashion allows them to create their own authentic and distinctive looks (Guiot & Roux, 2010), Gen Z consumers who view SHC as trendy also report feelings of shame, suggesting an internal conflict between the appeal of SHC as a fashion statement and societal perceptions that devalue its use. This is not directly addressed in the literature which suggests that SHC's growing mainstream appeal does not entirely negate its association with economic hardship and inferior value. The overlap between fashion motivations (e.g., trendiness) and humiliation barriers (e.g., stigma) observed in the findings

reflects the complex relationship between SHC's rising popularity and its lingering negative connotations. This duality is not explored in the literature, which tends to treat motivations and barriers as distinct and not intertwined.

To sum up, the findings and literature agree that feelings of inferiority and availability restrictions are critical barriers to SHC consumption. However, the findings expand on the literature by illustrating how these barriers interact with motivations, particularly among higher-educated Gen Z consumers. This intersection highlights the evolving but still conflicted perceptions of SHC, as it straddles the line between a sustainable choice (Guiot & Roux, 2010), fashionable but also a socially stigmatized practice (Hur, 2020).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

According to Silva et al, (2022) and Manley et al. (2023), there is still a gap in literature which can demonstrate Gen Z's perception of SHC consumption. Drawing upon the combination of gaps and future implications pointed out in the relevant literature, the present study delves into the factors that motivate and discourage Gen Z individuals with higher education and without higher education to consume or not SHC.

Since studies employing a questionnaire-based approach have some drawbacks in explaining the psychological motivation of behaviours (Manley et al., 2023), the study followed a qualitative research approach based on the application of semi-structured interviews. The qualitative approach was aimed to deliver a more nuanced and thorough comprehension of SHC perceptions and its consumption and help contextualize the findings in a way that is not possible with a quantitative approach.

Understanding the perceptions and consumption practices of Gen Z consumers has been proven complex yet necessary, as this generation represents the future of consumption (Manley et al., 2023). Through text mining processes on excel, and keywords identification, this consumer-centric study shows that even within the Gen Z community, different sub-groups have their distinct interpretations of SHC as well as consumer behaviours and practices.

The study revealed that Gen Z consumers with higher education, unlike non-higher educated consumers, are not using specific vocabulary when discussing their perceptions and value of SHC. Terminology used by higher educated individuals is often generic (e.g.: "repurposed", "sustainable"), with little to no use of specific terms that relate to the environmental factor of SHC (e.g.: "mass consumption reduction" and "waste reduction") which, in contrast, was evidenced by all Gen Z consumers without higher education. Although all non-higher educated Gen Z consumers understand SHC as a tool to reduce mass consumption and consequently waste, only one higher educated Gen Z consumer claims to value SHC for the same reasons. That indicates that higher education levels in Gen Z consumers does not necessarily equate to more in-depth sustainable awareness. Here in, the

findings reveal that even the most recent literature does not fully grasp the nuanced and complex interpretations of SHC by Gen Z.

Considering the SHC consumption drivers, although studies point out the economic motivation as the main driver for SHC consumption within the Gen Z community (Silva et al., 2020), the findings show that they are mostly driven by sustainability (4/10) and fashion (3/10) purposes. The findings also indicate that Gen Z consumers with higher education engage in SHC consumption for different reasons than Gen Z consumers without higher education. Gen Z consumers without higher education are mainly driven by sustainable purposes. This is intertwined with this group's interpretation of SHC consumption as environmentally beneficial, as seen previously. As for the Gen Z individuals with higher education, the majority claims to be driven by fashion purposes. However, a new idea of "fashion motivation" is presented as all 3 individuals claim to be recently drawn to SHC for its trendy aspect. These Gen Z individuals state that SHC consumption is currently a trend and individuals who engage in it as perceived as 'cool' and more 'fashionable'. The idea of SHC consumption as a fashion statement linked to expression of the self is overthrown by the 'power of SHC as a fashion trend. Although it still is a type of consumption motivated by fashion purposes, quantitative studies have failed to identify this nuanced SHC consumption motivation, which seems to be relevant for Gen Z consumers.

As for SHC consumption obstacles, the literature shows that constraints related to lack of offers in size stand out as the main barrier for SHC consumption, followed by the signs of obvious use such as stains (Kawulur et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2020; Herjanto et al., 2024). However, the findings suggest show that the most common barriers pointed out by Gen Z individuals are accessibility and shame. Gen Z consumers are preoccupied with the difficulty in accessing SHC, and the feeling of inferiority and humiliation that may arise from using SHC. Gen Z individuals without higher education claimed to be discouraged by limited accessibility and, whereas Gen Z consumers with higher education mostly claim to be discouraged by the feeling of inferiority and humiliation that may come with the consumption of SHC. Interestingly, Gen Z consumers who state being motivated by the trendiness of SHC consumption, claim to feel embarrassed by using SHC as it might equate to 'lack of purchasing power' of 'financial instability'. Once again, relevant literature fails to encompass the nuanced and complex factors that influence positively and negatively SHC consumption.

Overall, the findings indicate that Gen Z consumers perceive and value SHC for its environmental beneficial and fashionable aspects. However, when looking closely, the perception, motivations and discouragements for sustainable clothing consumption differ among individuals with and without higher education.

As for research limitations, it is also important to note that, the present study could not encompass the full understanding of SHC by Gen Z consumers, given its complexity. With that said, the limitations for this study can act as points of interest for future research. Future studies should include bigger samples in order to analyse larger sets of data and therefore extract more relevant insights. It is also relevant to continue understanding how different subgroups within the Gen Z community perceive SHC. Therefore, cross-disciplinary research can provide further tools to understand how Gen Z consumers' value and engage with SHC consumption, according to gender, income level or even academic field. Moreover, this study was conducted in a developed country which could raise questions about the generalizability of the findings to a broader, global population. Future studies should compare findings from samples in both developing and developed countries.

6.1. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In terms of theoretical implications, as stated previously the present study contributes to the literature by uncovering the nuanced and complex perceptions, purchase motivations and barriers of SHC consumption among Gen Z consumers. This study challenges the assumption that higher education in Gen Z individuals correlates with deeper sustainable awareness, revealing that were, instead, non-higher-educated Gen Z consumers who demonstrated a stronger alignment with deeper environmental awareness and motivations. Furthermore, the emergence of SHC as a fashion trend driven by its perceived "coolness" highlights a previously underexplored dimension of consumer behaviour, calling for a re-evaluation of existing theoretical frameworks on SHC consumption to incorporate the connection between sustainability, fashion trends, and social perceptions. Additionally, the study provides evidence that current research may oversimplify the drivers and barriers to SHC consumption by neglecting the social stigmas and accessibility issues that still influence behaviour. In conclusion, theoretical implications highlight the need for more nuanced, intersectional

approaches in future research on education, sustainability, and generational consumer dynamics.

Additionally, as for practical implications, these findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, marketers, and businesses aiming to promote SHC consumption among Gen Z. For non-higher-educated consumers, improving accessibility—such as more promotion of SHC retailers available, stricter verification of garment quality, and convenient purchase locations—could address key barriers. For higher-educated consumers, marketing strategies should emphasize the fashionable and trendy aspects of SHC which simultaneously would reframe its image and potentially reduce associations with financial instability. The findings suggest the importance of fostering inclusive communication that bridges the gap between sustainability and fashion to appeal to diverse educational and social backgrounds. To sum up, practical implications highlight the opportunity for businesses and organizations to leverage on the nuanced insights to design interventions that resonate more effectively with Gen Z's complex motivations and barriers, ultimately to increase SHC consumption.

To sum up, this study provides insight for researchers, educators, policymakers, marketers, and consumers on how the perception of SHC differs according to education, emphasizing the importance of continuing exploring how different subgroups within the Gen Z community engage with SHC consumption.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1- Interview Script and Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Statements/ Questions
	Age, Gender, and Education Level
RQ1: What are the perceptions of second-hand clothing among Gen Z?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In your own words, how would you describe “second hand clothing?” 2. How important is second hand clothing consumption to you?
RQ2: Does the perception of the importance, value, and need for SHC consumption differ by education level?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. How much do you value second hand clothing consumption? 4. How necessary is second hand clothing consumption in your daily life? 5. Based on your description of “second hand clothing,” have you ever purchased it?
RQ3: What are the reasons for different education level groups to purchase or not purchase SHC?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Please tell us your motivation(s) for purchasing. 7. Please tell us your discouragement(s) for purchasing.

Source: Adapted from Manley et al. (2023)

APPENDIX B



This is to certify that

Project No.: **DDMKT2024-11-172292**

Project Title: **Higher Education & Gen Z's Perception and Motivations for Second-Hand Consumption**

Principal Researcher: **Joana da Cruz Fonseca**

according to the regulations of the Ethics Committee of NOVA IMS and MagIC Research Center this project was considered to meet the requirements of the NOVA IMS Internal Review Board, being considered **APPROVED** on 11/17/2024.

It is the Principal Researcher's responsibility to ensure that all researchers and stakeholders associated with this project are aware of the conditions of approval and which documents have been approved.

The Principal Researcher is required to notify the Ethics Committee, via amendment or progress report, of

- Any significant change to the project and the reason for that change;
- Any unforeseen events or unexpected developments that merit notification;
- The inability of the Principal Researcher to continue in that role or any other change in research personnel involved in the project.

Lisbon, 11/17/2024



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