

# EXPLORING PRE-LOVED

– CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF  
THE PRE-LOVED CONCEPT IN A TRADITIONAL  
CLOTHING STORE ENVIRONMENT

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**Title:** Exploring pre-loved – consumers' perception of the pre-loved concept in a traditional clothing store environment

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to explore consumer perceptions regarding the emerging trend among traditional clothing stores in Gothenburg, Sweden, where a section of their retail space is dedicated to reselling pre-loved clothing. Additionally, it seeks to investigate the factors influencing consumers' preference for these sections over conventional thrift stores. Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducts 10 shop-along sessions comprising semi-structured interviews and unstructured observations in four traditional clothing stores, each featuring an integrated pre-loved section. The theoretical framework encompasses consumer value theory, supplemented by the Means-End Chain Theory, which is utilized to analyze the findings. Results reveal a positive response from participants toward pre-loved initiatives, indicating an overall favorable perception. Findings show that consumers perceive pre-loved initiatives as multiple valuable, including economic savings, functional quality, social value, and an enjoyable, empowering, and satisfying experience. Furthermore, various factors such as curated pieces, well-organized sections, unique garments, and diverse assortments influence consumers, leading to different consequences and values such as feeling efficient, self-fulfillment/self-expression, and enjoyment, thus favoring pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrift stores. In conclusion, the study sheds light on the growing preference for pre-loved initiatives among consumers in traditional clothing stores.

**Keywords:** Pre-loved, Second-hand, Consumer Perception, Customer Perception, Traditional Clothing Store, Consumer Value Theory, Means-End Chain Theory, Shop-Along, Conventional Thrift Store

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# Table of content

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Background	5
1.1.1 Pre-loved, the new second-hand	7
1.2 Previous research and problem discussion	8
1.3 Purpose and research question	11
1.4 Delimitations	11
1.5 Outline	12
<b>2. Literature review</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Definition of concept - Pre-loved fashion consumption	13
2.1.1 The phenomenon of pre-loved sections within traditional clothing stores	15
2.2 Consumer Perception and Consumer Perceived Value	16
2.3 Theoretical framework - Consumer value theory	17
2.4 Revised Theoretical Framework - Means-End Chain Theory	20
<b>3. Method</b>	<b>24</b>
3.1 Research design and strategy	24
3.2 Shop-along, semi-structured interviews and unstructured observations	27
3.2.1 Semi-structured interview	28
3.2.2 Unstructured observation	29
3.2.3 Sampling - the selection of interview and observation participants	30
3.2.4 Sampling of stores	31
3.2.5 Implementation of the Shop-along's	33
3.2.6 Processing of the shop-along's	35
3.3 Ethical principles in research	36
3.4 Trustworthiness and limitations	37
<b>4. Result and Analysis</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 Result - Customer Perceptions of the Pre-loved Initiative	39
4.1.1 Cultivating conscious consumption	39
4.1.2 Perceived reputation	41
4.2 Analysis - RQ1	43
4.2.1 The customers perceived functional and economical value	43
4.2.2 The customers perceived social and relational value	45
4.2.3 Emotional Value	48
4.3 Result - Factors Shaping Customer Preferences: Pre-loved vs. Conventional Thrifting Store	49
4.3.1 Curated Convenience: The Appeal of Pre-Loved Sections	49

4.4 - Analysis - RQ2	53
4.4.1 Linkage 1 - Consumer Efficiency	53
4.4.2 Linkage 2 - Self expression and Self fulfillment	56
4.4.3 Linkage 3 - Enjoyable experience	58
<b>5. Discussion</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>67</b>
6.1 Future research	68
<b>References</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>75</b>
Appendix 1 - interview guide	75

# 1. Introduction

*The following introduction section provides background in relation to previous knowledge about second-hand clothing. Furthermore, a problem discussion is presented, where previous research is highlighted to identify the knowledge gap the researchers aim to fill. Finally, the purpose and research question of the study are outlined followed by delimitations.*

## 1.1 Background

Our present era has come to be characterized by environmental degradation and a consumption pattern that falls short of what is needed to ensure the availability of resources for future generations (Geegamage, Ranaweea & Halwatura 2023). A clear contributor in this sustainability crisis is the clothing industry, whose impact has only escalated over time. We witness how overconsumption and inadequate regulations in production have deprived future generations of valuable resources and undermined the possibility of a healthy planet and sustainable future (ibid).

As awareness of the detrimental effects of clothing production and consumption on the environment and climate grows, consumers are increasingly changing their attitudes and behaviors (Yan, Bae & Xu 2015). This change, driven by an increased understanding of sustainability issues, has resulted in a more conscious and responsible consumption pattern. Consequently, there has been a notable surge in the demand for second-hand clothing, along with a rising interest in reuse practices within the fashion industry. This is because second-hand products are considered to be an environmentally friendly practice, as they contribute to the reduction of waste and the conservation of resources (Geegamage, Ranaweea & Halwatura 2023).

There are multiple indications that the growing interest in second-hand items extends to the Swedish market, reflecting a broader global trend towards sustainable and ethical consumption practices. For instance, Svensk Handel (2024a), a trade organization representing the retail sector in Sweden, has recently introduced a new *pre-loved indicator*, a tool designed to provide comprehensive insights into the consumption patterns of second-hand clothing within Sweden. This initiative not only highlights the increasing popularity of pre-loved items in Sweden but also underscores the importance of monitoring

and understanding consumer behavior in the context of sustainable fashion. Additionally, earlier this year, Myrorna's (Swedish second-hand chain) CEO, Caroline Andermatt stated how six years ago, 75% of Swedish consumers didn't even consider purchasing second-hand clothing, whereas today, that figure has increased to 75% of Swedish consumers not only being open to buying second-hand clothing but also actively doing so (P3 dystopia 2024). Moreover, the forecast by Svensk Handel (2024b) suggests that the enthusiasm for pre-loved items is not merely a passing fad but rather a sustained shift in consumer preferences. As awareness grows regarding the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion, more individuals are embracing the concept of pre-loved clothing as a way to reduce waste and contribute to a more sustainable future. This trend is expected to persist and potentially escalate further as consumers continue to prioritize sustainability in their purchasing decisions (ibid).

The growing interest and pressure for sustainable clothing consumption have sparked increased interest in sustainable consumption, particularly in second-hand items (Svensk Handel 2024a). It also entails a complete change in consumer behavior, transitioning from purchasing new items to embracing reused ones (ibid). However, amidst this transformative landscape, the question arises: How does this paradigm shift manifest within the Swedish clothing market?

According to Deloite (2024), the concept of sustainable fashion market now encompasses a wide spectrum, ranging from offering vegan products to abstaining from Black Friday sales events. However, the author explains that more is required. Clothing retailers face increasing demands to become even more innovative and forward-thinking to keep up with the shift towards a more sustainable operation (ibid). One such innovative initiative, in line with the trend towards sustainable fashion and reflected in traditional Swedish clothing retail, is the so-called 'pre-loved initiative' (Svensk Handel 2024b). This can be described as a new phenomenon where traditional clothing stores include small-scale sections of second-hand clothing items, in an environment where newly produced garments are sold as well. The shift towards a more sustainable industry has led clothing stores, even those whose primary business is not the sale of second-hand clothes, to begin incorporating this into their sales model. And it is possible to see how more and more clothing stores are taking on this type of initiative (ibid).

Given the surge of interest in second-hand items, there remains a lack of comprehensive theoretical or empirical understanding regarding consumer perception towards the value of second-hand consumption (Geegamage, Ranaweea & Halwatura 2023). Additionally, the integration of pre-loved initiatives into traditional clothing stores, has not yet been studied in a scientific context. The trend represents a significant shift in the retail landscape, reflecting broader changes in consumer behavior. As traditional clothing stores adapt their sales models to incorporate pre-loved sections, it becomes crucial to examine how consumers perceive and engage with these new offerings. Therefore, a study on this topic of customers' perception of the phenomenon of pre-loved initiatives, could be particularly interesting and provide valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of sustainable fashion and its impact on consumer behavior.

In light of the ongoing developments in the fashion industry to become more sustainable, and the growing phenomenon of incorporating second-hand clothing into traditional clothing stores, this study focuses on exploring consumer perception in such a retail environment. By examining how consumers perceive and react to this integration of used garments in previously exclusively new clothing outlets, this study aims to shed light on key insights into consumer behavior and preferences. By delving deeper into questions such as why certain consumers choose to engage in this environment, what factors influence their purchasing decisions, and how their experience differs from other retail settings, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of the growing trend of sustainable fashion consumption.

### **1.1.1 Pre-loved, the new second-hand**

To define second-hand, the authors Yan, Henninger and Brydges (2023) explains how a *second-hand garment* can be defined as a garment that has been used by at least one person and that the person in question has decided that the garment has reached its usefulness in life for them. The no longer wanted garment can then be sold, swapped, donated or given away to another person, the authors state.

Although second-hand is a well known term, the usage of other terms such as pre-owned and pre-loved are increasing due to some of the barriers of the term second-hand (Yan, Henninger & Brydges 2023). However, pre-owned might have negative connotations for some as it has a slightly tainted meaning to people that might not be comfortable to wear garments that have

had another owner previously. It is therefore argued that the term pre-loved has the most positive connotation due to the word love and the embedded feelings connected to it. Additionally, describing an item as loved also indicates that it has been cared for previously and should therefore be treated as so now (ibid). Pre-loved could therefore be described as a relatively new and modern term, but its meaning is the same as second-hand. Therefore, moving forward the term pre-loved will be used synonymously to the term second-hand due to its positive connotation and the modern view of today's second-hand market.

The positive connotation of the new term may explain why modern stores choose to call their second hand initiatives pre-loved. Furthermore, having become acquainted with the concept of pre-loved initiatives in-store, it has become apparent that more and more stores have begun to include similar sections in their establishments. However, this phenomenon remains unstudied and therefore absent in a scientific definition. Thus, the phenomenon is designated as pre-loved initiatives and can be described as a section in a traditional clothing store dedicated to the sale of pre-loved items, even though it does not fall under the store's primary sales model. Furthermore, in this thesis, regular second-hand stores, a store that solely sells second-hand, will be referred to as "conventional thrift stores" to clearly distinguish them from traditional clothing stores whose primary purpose is to sell new clothes and also have a pre-loved initiative.

## **1.2 Previous research and problem discussion**

Research shows that to meet the increasing demand from customers for sustainable products, companies must thoroughly understand consumers' attitudes and beliefs regarding environmentally conscious purchasing (Hsiao, Yen & Li). Today, it is known from earlier research that the interest in second-hand has grown stronger as awareness of the environmental impact of clothing consumption has increased (Yan, Bae & Xu 2015). An interesting contribution to the consumption field comes from authors Wagner and Heinzl (2020), who present a literature review on human perceptions of circular fashion. The authors observe that researchers have investigated consumer behavior and attitudes related to the purchase, use, reuse, recycling, upcycling, and disposal of fashion products. Among them, a study by Park and Lin (2020) suggests that consumers generally perceive circular fashion, including recycled materials and clothing reuse, as a more sustainable alternative compared

to traditionally newly produced garments. The studies presented largely indicate that consumers have a positive attitude towards circular activities in sustainable fashion and that this adds value, but it does not always lead to changed purchasing behavior (Park & Lin 2020).

Furthermore, the literature review by Wagner and Heinzl (2020) highlights how a study by Paço, Leal Filho, Ávila, and Dennis (2020) emphasizes that consumers not only perceive increased value in second-hand shopping as a more sustainable alternative, but also how factors such as rarity and costs benefits have been significant positive aspects of second-hand clothing. Moreover, Yan, Bae and Xu (2015) highlight how American college students view shopping at existing second-hand stores as an action that aligns with their sustainability attitudes. Additionally, students felt that shopping at a second-hand store allowed them to differentiate themselves from those who did not, contributing to a unique style and personal expression. Therefore, the authors argue that second-hand shopping has evolved to be about more than just price sensitivity, but also about expressing one's personality (ibid). Thus, Yan, Bae and Xu (2015) present another perspective on the experience that consumers have when engaging in second-hand shopping in stores.

However, there are also studies showing negative emotions among consumers, as explained by Wagner and Heinzl (2020). For instance, Paço et al. (2020) describe how consumers may experience negative experiences related to the poor product quality within circular systems. The authors note that consumers tend to feel negativity towards second-hand garments due to concerns about hygiene and previous ownership, as well as availability. On the other hand, another study by Magnier, Mugge and Schoormans (2019) suggests that consumers rarely experience risks regarding quality, or functionality when it comes to second-hand garments.

Although there is increasing research about sustainable fashion, Geegamage, Ranawee and Halwatura (2023) states that there still exists a lack of understanding concerning consumer attitudes and perceptions toward the value of second-hand consumption. As the fashion industry represents a volatile market, characterized by rapid shifts in trends and continuous creative and innovative changes over time, this applies to the phenomenon of second-hand as well. Although previous research has provided valuable insights, there remain unexplored areas within this field that justify further research (ibid). It can be observed how the pre-loved phenomenon has made its way into existing stores (Svensk Handel 2024b). Despite previous

studies exploring consumer experiences with second-hand goods, an important aspect remains unexplored: how consumers perceive the new pre-loved initiatives being integrated into existing, traditional clothing store environments. It is particularly relevant to understand how this development impacts consumer attitudes, behaviors, and preferences towards second-hand shopping, as it appears to be a new direction in the modern retail landscape.

A clear understanding has not yet been attained regarding the differences in consumer perceptions between conventional thrift stores and the new phenomenon observed in today's modern retail environment. The applicability of these insights to the emerging modern retail landscape remains uncertain. Since the phenomenon of pre-loved sections has not been thoroughly explored previously, it prompts further questions and interest in the subject, particularly regarding the distinctions in perception between these sections in traditional clothing stores and conventional thrifting stores.

Furthermore, there is a general lack of research on second-hand in Sweden. Appelgren and Bohlin (2015) confirm that the trend of second-hand shopping is also reflected in the Swedish consumption climate, especially in the Gothenburg area. Additionally, the Svensk Handels (2024) newly launched pre-loved indicator suggests that the topic is timely within a Swedish context. This gives reason to study the continued trend in the area of Gothenburg. Delving into this research can provide a more detailed understanding of consumer preferences regarding second-hand shopping and the growing interest in pre-loved fashion in Sweden.

Exploring this area can offer valuable insights into the influence of pre-loved sections on consumer attitudes and behaviors within traditional clothing store settings, as well as their impact on shopping decisions. Through examining this phenomenon, one can gain deeper insights into the role of pre-loved sections in enhancing overall store experiences and shaping consumer perceptions of brands and sustainability practices. It can also help to identify potential challenges or obstacles that may arise when implementing and/or expose pre-loved initiatives in store environments. This understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote sustainable consumption behavior and to meet customers' expectations and needs in the market. This study represents a step forward in the research on consumer experience and perceptions related to pre-loved initiatives. Thus, delving into this aspect can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the increasing trend of pre-loved shopping and

its integration into traditional clothing stores.

### **1.3 Purpose and research question**

The purpose of this study is to investigate consumers' perception of the new initiative of traditional clothing stores that use a part of their space to resell pre-loved clothing. The study will also investigate the factors that drive consumers to choose a pre-loved section within a traditional clothing store over shopping at a conventional thrift store.

The research questions will therefore be the following:

- RQ1: *How do customers perceive the traditional clothing store's pre-loved initiative?*
- RQ2: *What factors influence customers' preferences for pre-loved items in a traditional clothing store compared to a conventional thrift store?*

### **1.4 Delimitations**

In this thesis, delimitations are made to clearly define the focus areas in accordance with the formulated purpose and research questions. Firstly, the study will focus on the clothing industry, as this is the specific area intended to investigate. Additionally, the launch of Svensk Handel's (2024a) pre-loved indicator indicates that it is within the clothing industry that interest in and the phenomenon of pre-loved items are most pronounced.

This research will also limit itself to the Swedish market and the city of Gothenburg. This is for both practical research reasons, but also because previous research has shown interest in the concept of pre-loved sections in clothing stores, in for instance Gothenburg (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2015). This interest is crucial for this study as it indicates potential relevance and demand for the subject being studied. Additionally, the selection is limited to four clothing stores in Gothenburg, chosen specifically for their inclusion of pre-loved sections.

Although the trend of including such sections is on the rise according to Svensk Handel (2024), there are still few stores that have implemented them. Therefore, the focus of this research will be on the stores who already have an established pre-loved section. This meticulous selection process ensures that one can gain a thorough understanding of how these

sections operate and impact consumer perceptions, which is crucial for this study. Additionally, Alvehus (2013) explains that it is evident to understand how observational studies work and includes the importance of selecting the environment where observations are to be conducted. It is necessary that this choice of environment is based on the research question addressed by the study. The author also emphasizes the significance of ensuring that the selection of the environment aligns with the empirical method previously chosen for the investigation, in this case, clothing stores and the method of shop-along sessions.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that this study solely examines the consumer perspective. Consequently, it will not encompass other viewpoints, such as the conventional thrift stores or traditional clothing stores perspective of e.g marketing positions, business strategies or marketing efforts towards consumers. Instead, the study will concentrate on understanding how consumers perceive pre-loved sections in clothing stores and how this perception influences their decision-making process in favor of pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrifting stores. It will not, for instance, delve into returns on investment or other financial aspects associated with sales.

## **1.5 Outline**

The structure of this research is outlined as follows: an introduction to the research and background of the subject has been presented, followed by a review of previous research and a discussion of the problem, including the purpose, research questions, and delimitations.

This will then be followed by a literature review containing definitions of concepts and theories of consumer perceptions, setting the stage by outlining the semi-structured interview questions. As the final heading of this chapter, the revised theoretical framework of Means-End Chain theory will be further explained as this theory was added in retrospect. The concept definitions and theoretical framework will be introduced to support the analysis of the empirical data regarding both research questions.

As a following chapter to this, the methodology of this research will be described in detail including the strategic approach and data collection procedures. Following the methodology chapter, the results from the shop-along semi-structured interviews and observations regarding RQ1 will be presented, followed by an in-depth analysis of the findings.

Subsequently, the results pertaining to RQ2 will be presented, followed by an analysis employing the revised theoretical framework. This analytical approach will aid in examining and interpreting the findings within the context of the chosen theoretical framework. Following this, a discussion will ensue regarding the findings in alignment with the revised theoretical framework. In conclusion, the final chapter will succinctly summarize the discoveries, providing valuable insights and proposing avenues for future research.

## **2. Literature review**

*In the second chapter of the thesis, the literature review is presented and divided into several key sections. First, the concept of 'pre-loved' fashion consumption is defined, including the emerging phenomenon of 'pre-loved sections' within traditional clothing stores. Next, the focus shifts to consumer perception, followed by the Consumer Value Theory as part of the theoretical framework, setting the stage for the development of semi-structured interview questions and further analysis of consumer perceptions in subsequent chapters. Finally, the chapter presents a revised theoretical framework based on the Means-End Chain Theory that has been added in retrospect.*

### **2.1 Definition of Concept - Pre-loved Fashion Consumption**

In recent years, heightened awareness among businesses, coupled with evolving customer expectations for sustainable consumption, has fueled a rapid expansion of the pre-loved market, now an integral component of the retail industry (Svensk Handel 2024b). The new pre-loved indicator, according to Svensk Handel (2024b), reflects a growing demand over time, indicating a sustained rise in interest. However, this hasn't always been the norm.

Second-hand, or pre-loved consumption has evolved over time, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries one could see emergence and expansion only to find decline and stigmatization in the twentieth century (Ferraro, Sands & Brace-Govan 2016). During the 2000s, pre-loved consumption gained de-stigmatization and renewal of popularity and has since then seen a rapid growth across global markets. Previously, thrifting stores were traditionally seen as the “poor man’s shop”, whilst today the stores have attracted a broad range of customers which in turn has made consuming pre-loved goods more legitimized as normal (Schadenberg & Folmer 2022). This is due to the rise of environmental awareness that pushes people to consume differently (ibid).

When it comes to pre-loved consumption, the term itself is linked to different meanings across different demographics and financial backgrounds (Yan, Henninger & Brydges 2023). It has positive connotations such as sustainable lifestyle but also negative connotations such as someone else's waste, and the garment's material can be seen as below standard quality. For instance, in Germany pre-loved items remain stigmatized due to being associated with a

lower socioeconomic status. Meanwhile in the UK, thrifting stores are a part of the high street landscape (Yan, Henninger & Brydges 2023). Moreover, studies indicate that consumers facing financial constraints tended to patronize thrifting stores (Gopalakrishnan & Matthews 2018). However, in recent years, consumers have increasingly embraced pre-loved consumption by choice rather than solely for economic reasons (ibid).

One reason for the growth of pre-loved consumption may also be the emergence of Millennials and Generations Z as significant consumers, exhibiting eco-friendly and ethical consumption behaviors (Kim, Jung & Lee 2021). The younger generation of consumers are increasingly more conscious of the environmental footprint generated by the fashion industry (Tu, Hsu & Creativani 2022). As a consequence, they are exercising greater caution and integrating social responsibility into their shopping habits (ibid). Additionally, there has been a general increase in interest in sustainability and sustainable fashion among consumers. Wearing pre-loved garments has become fashionable, offering a more authentic alternative to conventional options (Ferraro, Sands & Brace-Govan 2016). Moreover, another driving force for consumers to shop for pre-loved garments is the desire to find unique items unavailable through traditional channels, alongside growing environmental concerns, which have been shown to heighten consumers' inclination towards pre-loved products (Yan, Bae & Xu 2015). Furthermore, consumers exhibit various purchase intentions, including seeking lower prices and discovering unique limited edition items that are no longer available (Tu, Hsu & Creativani 2022).

The textiles and fashion industry is viewed as low-value due to its trend towards a more complex and fast supply chain which leaves behind a negative ecological footprint (Kant Hvass 2014). Thus, consuming pre-loved has been widely recognised as one of many solutions to the fashion industry's sustainability problem due to extending the life of clothing by an extra nine months, could reduce carbon, waste, and water footprints by around 20-30% for each garment (Yan, Henninger & Brydges 2023). Consuming pre-loved instead of newly produced clothing might therefore be one of the answers towards a more sustainable fashion industry (Yan, Henninger & Brydges 2023) and the attitude towards it has changed over time towards a more positive standpoint (Ferraro, Sands & Brace-Govan 2016; Yan, Bae & Xu 2015; Gopalakrishnan & Matthews 2018), it only seems likely that the pre-loved industry will grow over time.

### **2.1.1 The Phenomenon of Pre-Loved Sections Within Traditional Clothing Stores**

As mentioned earlier, shifts in consumer behavior have led to the expansion of the pre-loved retail sector, prompting traditional clothing retailers to adapt (Ferraro, Sands & Brace-Govan 2016). For example, the renowned traditional fashion retailer Bergdorf Goodman in New York responded to this trend by creating an immersive experience for customers, hosting a flea market to showcase their vintage collections. Similarly, Ralph Lauren incorporated pre-loved pieces from previous collections into their flagship stores, alongside new collections (Ferraro, Sands & Brace-Govan 2016), establishing Bergdorf Goodman and Ralph Lauren as early trendsetters in the realm of pre-loved initiatives.

Additionally, a notable transformation occurred in a traditional clothing store in Sweden when the Swedish brand Haglöfs introduced "swap stories" with the slogan "Let your old Haglöfs products live on" (Appelgren & Bohlin 2015). Customers could bring in used garments and receive a discount voucher for their next purchase. These garments would then be resold along with information about their previous life to the new owner, and the profits generated by Haglöfs would be donated to charity (ibid).

Another illustration comes from the Swedish fashion chain Gina Tricot, which provides pre-loved jeans for teenagers in selected stores, branded as 'Gina Tricot young pre-loved' (Gina Tricot 2024). Similarly, Monki, a part of the H&M group, has introduced dedicated sections within their stores or online platforms, offering previously owned items for sale (Monki 2024). These used garments are collected and resold by Monki, enabling customers to purchase reused items alongside their regular offerings (ibid).

As evident from the examples above, with consumers increasingly favoring sustainable options, it becomes crucial for businesses to understand their perceptions in order to adapt their strategies effectively. Additionally, Amin and Tarun (2020) emphasize the importance of grasping individuals' values to gain insights into their perceptions of adopting sustainable products, such as pre-loved items. This understanding allows companies to design products and marketing strategies that attract and engage customers. Thus, theories related to consumer perceptions are vital for examining and understanding pre-loved sections in

traditional retail environments and navigating the fast-paced retail industry successfully.

## **2.2 Consumer Perception and Consumer Perceived Value**

In order to delve deeper into perception-related topics and improve the formulation of effective semi-structured interview questions for the shop-along sessions, a preliminary exploration of consumer perceptions has been undertaken. This exploration is aimed to provide a foundational understanding of how consumers perceive various aspects of pre-loved sections in traditional clothing stores, thus facilitating more insightful and targeted interview inquiries during the research process.

According to Tang and Li (2023, p. 5) consumer perception could be defined as:

[...] the amalgamation of consumers' subjective feelings and insights about objective products and services, shaped by their needs, comprehension of products, and their evaluation of enterprise services. This perception wields substantial influence over consumer actions and choices. In the realm of psychology, perception is a complex process that unites human sensory experiences and cognition, enabling individuals to extract valuable information about the world around them.

Additionally, the authors elaborate on the significance of understanding consumer behavior within a constantly evolving marketplace (Tang & Li 2023), which is crucial for addressing the central research question of this thesis, particularly concerning the emergence of the new concept of pre-loved items in traditional clothing stores. This acknowledgment highlights the importance of discerning how consumers perceive and interact with products, services, and initiatives amidst the dynamic landscape of the market. These diverse influences collectively shape consumers' perception, as well as their future purchase decisions and behaviors during their shopping experiences (ibid).

Furthermore, Tang and Li (2023) introduce a significant addition to consumer perception theory: the concept of consumer-perceived value. This concept goes beyond the traditional considerations of product quality, price, and brand, encompassing additional aspects such as service quality, emotional perception, symbolic meaning, and corporate reputation. Moreover, the authors Ng, Cheung, Lit, Wan and Choy (2023) explain that, in order to understand

consumer perception and decision making about adopting sustainable products and their willingness to make sustainable purchases, it is crucial to understand the consumers various dimensions of perceived value. By exploring how consumers evaluate the value of products or services, consumer-perceived value theory shows how value shapes the consumers overall perception and subsequent actions (Tang & Li 2023). Furthermore, Hsiao, Yen, and Li (2012), suggests that consumer behavior is influenced by the consumer perceived value, both utilitarian and hedonic. Utilitarian value reflects consumers' focus on efficiently achieving their goals, while hedonic value emphasizes the enjoyment derived from the shopping experience itself, including sensory appeal, social interaction, and the overall atmosphere of the shopping environment (ibid).

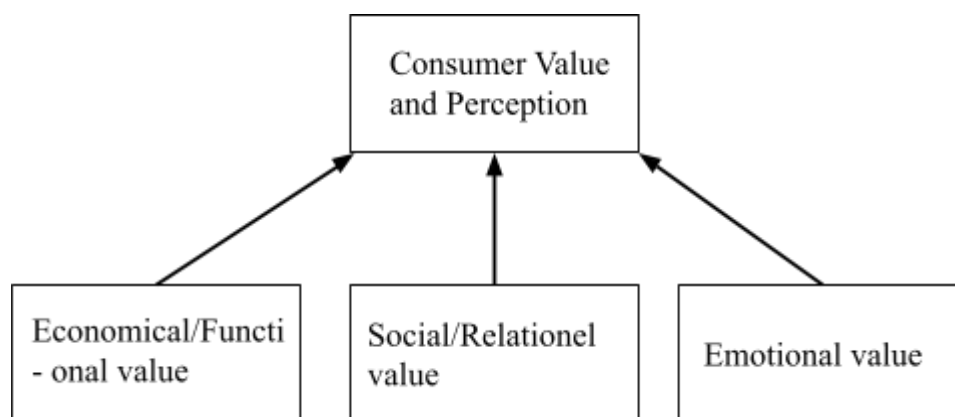
Furthermore, Hsiao, Yen and Li (2012) explain that individuals often engage in deliberate shopping behaviors to fulfill their values. When consumer values are fully realized, shopping experiences become considerably more satisfying. This satisfaction is not merely an objective evaluation but rather a subjective sensation that varies depending on products, services, and contexts. It involves striking a delicate equilibrium between the benefits and costs associated with the purchase decision, and it is precisely this equilibrium that forms the core of one's consumption experience and perception (ibid).

## **2.3 Theoretical Framework - Consumer Value Theory**

In order to effectively explore and respond to the research first inquiry presented in this thesis, it is essential to delve into the intricate realm of customer perceptions. Understanding these perceptions is rooted in grasping the values that customers attach to products, services, and overall consumer experiences (Ng et al. 2023). Therefore, to provide a robust framework for analyzing and interpreting these perceptions, consumer value theory has been integrated into this research.

Further in the research on consumer value, theories argue that perceived value consists of two main dimensions: cognitive and affective. This is in line with how the previously mentioned authors Hsiao, Yen, and Li (2012) explain how consumer behavior is driven by both hedonic and utilitarian values. Furthermore these dimensions are further graded by different types of value, such as functional, economical, social, relational and emotional (Ng et al. 2023;

Fathima, Khan & Alam 2023). Moreover, other research suggests there are additional dimensions (Sheth, Newman, & Gross 1991), but this study is confined to the five previously mentioned. This is because researchers traditionally have made similar choices of drawing the line to not include further dimensions in order to understand a phenomenon more thoroughly (E.g Ng et al. 2023; Fathima, Khan & Alam 2023). By carefully selecting the dimensions to investigate, as illustrated by the researchers of this thesis in Figure 1, it is also possible to enhance understanding and facilitate a more nuanced analysis of the subject.



*Figure 1 - Illustration of Consumer Value Theory*

Emotional value refers to the perceived benefit obtained from an alternative's ability to evoke emotions or affective states. This value is attributed to an alternative when it is linked with particular feelings or triggers and sustains those emotions (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991). And according to Ng et al. (2023) the emotional value describes the joy and satisfaction experienced when using a product or service. It is based on the idea that participation in a consumption environment gives rise to positive emotions, such as excitement, which can motivate consumers to make purchase decisions (Kim, Gupta & Koh 2012). Furthermore, Ng et al. (2023) adds that sustainability-conscious consumers experience a higher degree of emotional value associated with consumption.

Furthermore, functional and/or economical value refers to the perceived usefulness obtained from an alternative's ability to fulfill functional, utilitarian, or physical needs. This value is acquired when the alternative possesses notable functional, utilitarian, or physical attributes (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991). According to Roh, Seok, and Kim (2022), this means that the customer forms their perception of the functional value by making logical decisions when consuming. Furthermore, the concept of functional value takes a theoretical basis in the

theory of economic utility (ibid). The perspective on functional value as a key factor in consumer choices reflects the economic theory of how people make decisions based on the practical utility and costs of products and services. It emphasizes that people tend to choose products and services that provide them with the greatest utility considering their needs and budget (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991). Economic value can therefore be measured by how much utility or satisfaction a good or service provides to consumers (ibid). Jan, Ji, and Yeo (2019) explain how the economic value associated with sustainable consumption, such as purchasing pre-loved items, resembles the functional value. It can be seen as the economic benefit that a sustainable product offers, including features such as durability, reliability, and price. Simply put, the functional value, which also encompasses the economic value, explains that the overall benefit of a product or service arises from the perceived quality characteristics and the price of the product (ibid).

When it comes to sustainable consumption, consumers may not always see sustainable products as particularly practical or functional, which can make them less inclined to pay higher prices for them (Kim, Gupta & Koh 2012). If a product is perceived as very useful and practical, consumers often associate it with high quality. Therefore, those who perceive a product as very useful are also likely to perceive it as high quality. Ng et al. (2023) also add that consumers with a more sustainable consumption style tend to assess the quality of products to a greater extent than consumers who do not prioritize sustainability in their consumption.

Social value, on the other hand, refers to the perceived benefit obtained from an alternative's connection to one or more particular social groups. This value is attained when the alternative is linked with demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural-ethnic groups (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991). This refers to the perceived value that extends beyond the purely functional and arises through the consumer's interaction with group membership (ibid). This definition of social value bears significant similarities to what Ng et al. (2023) define as relational value. Ng et al. (2023) describe how relational value entails that the customer experiences refer to the social benefits they perceive in relation to their surroundings, which contributes to how consumers further utilize consumption for their own social self-fulfillment. This type of value also considers the relationship and interaction between the consumer and the company (Cheung, Leung, Cheah & Ting 2022), in this case, the store.

Furthermore, Engel, Vaske and Bath (2020) emphasize that when people engage in environmentally friendly actions, it is important for them to build stable relationships and strong bonds with like-minded individuals, creating social value. The opinions and ideas influenced by close friends and peers play a crucial role in creating a positive social atmosphere. When people see their friends and acquaintances making sustainable consumption choices, such as shopping pre-loved or visiting pre-loved stores, they tend to also want to make similar choices to fit into their social circle (Ruangkanjanases, You, Chien, Ma, Chen & Chao 2020). This creates stronger bonds with their loved ones, thereby increasing perceived value, which further impacts on the consumer's consumer behavior. Additionally, Ruangkanjanases et al. (2020) explain that the quality of the products consumers buy may be linked to how well they feel they fit into their social circle. When consumers see that more sustainable products of high quality can promote a sustainable lifestyle, they become even more inclined to make sustainable consumption choices (ibid).

## **2.4 Revised Theoretical Framework - Means-End Chain Theory**

During the shop-alongs, some unexpected findings emerged that could not be solely connected to the participants' perceived values. These findings revealed deeper insights into the shopping experience, which played a crucial role in shaping their perceptions and behaviors. As limitations of consumer value theory in explaining consumer decisions were uncovered, the necessity of adopting an additional theoretical perspective was acknowledged to analyze the factors influencing participants' choices of pre-loved goods over conventional thrift stores, examining the thesis second research question. For example, when participants highlighted various attributes of the pre-loved items and section, this influenced their preference for pre-loved items. Therefore, it's crucial to further analyze these attributes that influenced the participants' preferences and decision-making processes, to understand their implications on consumer behavior. Given such statements, it becomes imperative to incorporate additional theoretical frameworks.

As research question two delves into the various factors influencing customers' preference for pre-loved items within a traditional clothing store over a conventional thrift store, consumer value theory alone cannot fully explain these complexities. As consumer value theory does not explain the specific attributes that drive consumer actions, making it difficult to fully

understand customers' decision making processes. For example, how can a well-organized section with curated pieces prompt the participant to act in a certain way? How can we comprehend their experiences regarding the provision of unique garments and its impact on amplifying consumer preference for pre-loved items? As these unexpected questions were raised and the emergence of unexpected findings became apparent, it became evident that a deeper exploration of the underlying factors driving consumer behavior during the shop-alongs was necessary. This recognition has prompted the incorporation of Means-End Chain Theory into the analysis.

The Means-End Chain Theory (MEC) can help explain consumers' decision-making processes, such as choosing pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrift stores. The theory explains how decisions contemplate the attributes of e.g a product or a brand (the means) that further generate outcomes facilitating the attainment of values they deem significant in life (ends) (Lin, Fu & Chen 2019; Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012; Jiang, Scott & Din 2015). Therefore, this theory can be considered useful for deciphering the means and ends that lead consumers to prefer pre-loved items in traditional stores over conventional thrift stores.

The choice of this theory is based on its explanation that value constitutes one of the primary reasons for a purchase (Sundjaja, Utomo, Matthew, Hellianto & Putra 2024; Borgardt 2020), facilitating connections to previously selected consumer value theory. Additionally, the principal of the MEC theory is to elucidate consumer decision-making (Borgardt 2020), which is suitable for the thesis' second research question. The theory explains how purchases of products or services can contribute to fulfilling consumers' values. Hence, the core concept of MEC theory posits the presence of invisible chains within consumers' subconscious minds. These chains consist of three levels: the product's attributes, the consequences of consumption, and personal values, thereby forming a three-step conceptual model (Lin, Fu & Chen, 2019; Hsiao, Yen & Li, 2012; Jiang, Scott & Ding, 2015). Furthermore, Wagner (2007) explains that MEC suits well for qualitative research and that such design appears valuable due to the strong potential to establish an in-depth understanding, thus making this theory suitable for this research.

Moreover, the theory suggests that consumers prioritize fulfilling end-level objectives, even in seemingly ordinary purchase scenarios (Lin, Fu & Chen 2019; Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012; Jiang, Scott & Din 2015) In this study, the MEC theory will be applied as follows: the

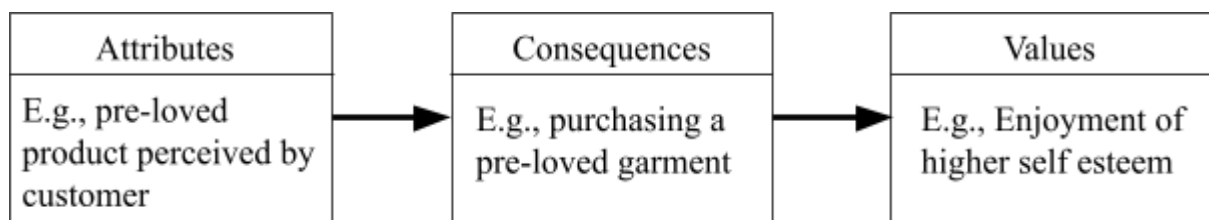
“product” is the pre-loved product that can be found in the pre-loved section of the traditional clothing store, and/or the section itself. By applying the MEC framework, concept, and model (Lin, Fu & Chen 2019; Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012; Jiang, Scott & Din 2015) it becomes possible to identify the most critical attributes, consequences, and values that shape customer decisions (Borgard 2020), such as preferring pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrifting stores. The theory therefore argues that consumers are goal-oriented and choose products based on the consequences or benefits they offer, as well as the personal values they satisfy (Sundjaja et al., 2024). In this theory, values constitute the ultimate goal, which consumers strive to achieve when purchasing or using products and services (ibid). This creates a chain where consumers' perception of product attributes leads to actions that ultimately satisfy a value (Lin, Fu & Chen, 2019). Consumer motivation to engage in activities is therefore linked to their pursuit of meaningful goals or purposes (Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012).

Attributes are defined as characteristics of a product or service (Jiang, Scott & Ding 2015; Lin & Chang 2012) . These characteristics can either be physical and concrete, such as the function of the product or service, or abstract, such as the atmosphere. It can also include things like style, traits, color, material, price, brand and longevity (ibid). It is also argued that attributes are the most concrete elements that indicate the characteristics of a product perceived by consumers (Lin, Fu & Chen 2019). Consequences encompass any outcomes, whether it is physiological or psychological, that directly or indirectly affect the consumer as a result of their behavior (Jiang, Scott & Ding 2015). For example, buying a garment might immediately uplift your mood (direct consequence), which subsequently prompts you to engage more socially with those around you (indirect consequence) (Lin & Chang 2012).

Additionally, consequences are the outcomes of purchasing or using goods/services, encompassing both positive and negative feelings arising from the consumption experience (Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012), where positive consequences can be seen as benefits and negative consequences as a risk (Lin, Fu & Chen 2019). Furthermore, consequences refer to the advantages or benefits that consumers derive from using a product or service (Lin & Chang 2012). Unlike product attributes, consequences are not directly observable within the product itself; rather, they manifest as outcomes associated with using one or more products. Examples of consequences include ease of use, comfort, creativity, inspiration, purchasing ease, economic benefit, trust and convenience (ibid).

Lastly, value can be defined as a trade-off between benefits and costs, and a preference that lies in the heart of the consumption experience (Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012). Within the MEC theory, it is conceptualized as learned beliefs that act as guiding principles shaping individual behavior (Jiang, Scott & Ding 2015). It represents the perceived value and ultimate objective for the customer, encompassing a spectrum of values. These may include feelings of accomplishment, excitement, security, social identity, belonging, self-fulfillment, interpersonal bonding, relationship building, respect, or simply experiencing enjoyment and pleasure and having a good time (Lin & Chang 2012).

Additionally, the theory provides a suitable framework for understanding specific consumption contexts (Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012). This framework organizes attributes, consequences, and values into a map, which aids in comprehending consumer decision-making processes and the interaction between products and consumer perceptions across various domains (Lin, Fu & Chen 2019). Consequently, it proves invaluable when analyzing interview transcripts and observation notes, offering a structured approach to understanding customer behavior. The linkage conceptual model therefore serves as the foundation for this map, organizing data into attributes, consequences, and values to address the second research question. Thus, this conceptual model will be diligently applied throughout this research, as depicted in Figure 2.



*Figure 2 - Revised conceptual linkage model of the MEC Theory (Hsiao, Yen & Li 2012)*

### **3. Method**

*In the third chapter of the thesis, the methodological approach of the study is presented. Initially, the research design and strategy are outlined. Furthermore, the chapter describes the methodological choices, sampling, data processing, and implementation. The chapter concludes with a presentation of methodological review, limitations, and finally, research ethics principles.*

#### **3.1 Research Design and Strategy**

This research entails an analysis of consumer perceptions during visits to selected traditional clothing store settings that have dedicated a section for pre-loved clothing and accessories. By combining observations of customers' interactions and expressed emotions with the in-store environment and subsequent semi-structured interview questions, the aim is to gain a nuanced understanding of the customer's perception of the pre-loved initiative. Hence, the research strategy is based on a qualitative methodology emphasizing the quality and depth of words from findings in the observation and words from participants in the semi-structured interviews, rather than quantification of data collected through e.g. a survey, aligning with Bryman's (2011) recommendations of qualitative research. Thus, this study focuses on feelings and perceptions. With the purpose of this research in mind, quantitative measurement and questions amenable to quantification has been avoided meaning that the study has been formed in such way that it is not quantifiable, this study employs a qualitative research approach (Bryman, 2011), involving shop-along sessions, semi-structured interviews, and observations.

Furthermore, this thesis is grounded in an understanding of behavior within a specific context: the interpretive perspective (Bryman 2011). The aim is to explore and comprehend how the participants in this study decipher and construct their reality through their actions and interactions when visiting a store with an integrated pre-loved section. With this in mind, the aim is to achieve a better interpretation and understanding throughout the course of this study. To achieve this, the focus will be on the conceptions of social actors, and the understanding will be based on the experience of those involved (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). Additionally, by adopting this perspective, the aim is to deepen understanding of how informants perceive and make sense of their social reality within the specific environment

they inhabit (Bryman 2011; Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). This approach emphasizes the importance of analyzing and interpreting participants' perspectives and experiences to illuminate the complexity of their worldview and behavior, and is particularly relevant within qualitative research (ibid). Thus, the epistemological orientation of this thesis is also rooted in a constructionist ontology, focusing on members' subjective perceptions of reality and how these are continuously shaped, reconstructed, and interpreted over time. (ibid).

Furthermore, in this study, the understanding of the relationship between theory and practice is based on an *abductive* approach (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019; Bryman 2016). Similar to inductive and deductive approaches, abduction can be employed to draw logical inferences and formulate theories about the world (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). This involves a fluctuation between empirical and theoretical reflection, where researchers continuously shift between examining real-world data and theoretical frameworks to explore the relevance of the studied material in relation to existing theories (ibid). In this research, consumer value theory was explored prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews. However, the authors of this study were required to go back and forth between this theoretical framework and the empirical data collected, owing to identified limitations within the theory. The identified limitations found showed that an additional theoretical framework needed to be applied to further explain the customers value connected to consumers' decision-making process to be able to provide an answer for RQ2. In this case, the theory Means-End Chain Theory was added in retrospect in chapter 2.4.

Abduction offers a valuable avenue for addressing the limitations inherent in deductive and inductive approaches, particularly in the context of this study on consumer perceptions of pre-loved initiatives in traditional clothing store settings. An abductive approach commences with the identification of unexpected or surprising situations, seeking to unravel their underlying explanations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In this research, unexpected situations are manifested when encountering empirical phenomena that existing theories fail to elucidate, such as the nuanced motivations behind consumers' engagement with pre-loved sections in traditional clothing stores.

Abductive reasoning entails trying to determine the circumstances that would make these phenomena less surprising, transforming unusual facts into more expected occurrences. This process involves actively engaging with the social world to generate theoretical insights and

with existing literature, resulting in a back-and-forth exchange of ideas (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). For instance, the study incorporates observations of customers' interactions and emotions within the store environment, prompting reflection on the circumstances that render these observations either surprising or expected. By integrating these insights with existing literature and theoretical frameworks, a continual exchange of ideas occurs to refine the understanding of consumer behavior in relation to pre-loved initiatives. Moreover, when using an abductive approach one must describe and understand the world from the participants perspective (Bryman 2016). This implies that researchers must construct a social scientific understanding of the social world based on the perspectives of the participants and not discard their views throughout the research process (Bryman 2016). Consequently, this research prioritizes the exploration of consumer perceptions and behaviors from the vantage point of the participants, ensuring that their voices are central to the interpretation of the data and findings.

By implementing the above in this research, it can enhance the theoretical understanding as well as the empirical insights. This approach thus promotes a holistic and integrated understanding of the consumer perspective, while discoveries are made with a background in previous relevant research within the framework of consumer behavior and perception (Bryman 2016). Consequently, the theoretical chapter of the thesis holds a theoretical framework that has been present during the preparation for data collection, as well as an additional theory in the findings that has been developed during the work process.

### **3.2 Shop-along, Semi-Structured Interviews and Unstructured Observations**

In this study, 'shop-along interviews,' or also called 'go-along interviews' (Kusenbach 2003), constitute the foundation for addressing the research questions. Go-along interviews are a method of qualitative fieldwork where research participants physically guide the researcher through their experiences, on-site, either by walking, driving, swimming, cycling, paddling, or similar means (Kusenbach 2003), in this thesis, while going *shopping*, therefore it will be called *shop-along* in this research.

A go-along, or in this case shop-along method, could be defined as a technique within ethn methodology where the researcher accompanies the interviewee in various local environments and observes the participants behavior while conducting an interview (Kusenbach 2003). This entails the researcher being led through the interviewee's environment and experiences to gather insightful material (Carpiano 2009). By asking questions and carefully observing, the researcher can explore how participants act and interpret situations at a pace and in a place where both parties are engaged. This type of method is particularly suitable when investigating people's navigation, experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of an environment (ibid).

Bell and Bush (2021) explain that there are several methodological advantages with combining talk with action. The authors elucidate that researchers who have conducted similar methods perceive it as effective due to engagement in a series of developed contextual environments that can yield more discoveries and clues than a traditional interview would. Furthermore, the authors highlight how participants may gain fresh insights, such as experiences of sound, visual impressions, and a greater overall impression of the location, which the researchers might have missed if they had chosen a method conducted after the experience itself (Bell & Bush 2021). Additionally, the authors describe how the participant may feel more relaxed when the focus is on their environment and activity, rather than the social interaction and conversation with the researcher. This, the authors explain, can lead to a more intricate participant experience owing to the altered mental and emotional dynamics.

Therefore, the adoption of this methodology aligns with the objectives of this research, given that it specifically centers on the customers' perceptions, which constitute the focal point of this thesis. By interacting live with the participant, the researchers of this study minimize the risk of missing various sensory impressions that may shape the participants perception, as the interview and observation takes place in real-time. Additionally, the opportunity to simultaneously observe the interviewee allows for a better understanding of their behavior in the store.

### **3.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview**

As previously mentioned, the shop-along method constitutes a unique method that combines traditional interviewing with observation. Through this method, researchers are given the

opportunity to not only gather verbal responses from participants but also to observe their actions and behaviors in various situations.

The interview during the shop-along is held in a semi-structured format, with the interviewer having a list of questions and topics to cover, also known as an interview guide (Bryman 2016; Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). This means that the interviewee has considerable freedom in how they respond, and questions may not adhere strictly to the format outlined in the guide which also allows the interviewer to ask questions that are not included in the guide that might be appropriate depending on the interviewees response (Bryman 2016). Additionally, according to Carpiano (2009), this is a common method when conducting a shop-along interview.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviewing enables researchers to remain flexible in exploring what they need to understand, allowing concepts and theories to emerge organically from the data (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). This allows the researchers to be flexible during each semi-structured interview but also to stay within the topic by having a guide. Moreover, the interview guide, as seen in appendix 1, incorporates a blend of introductory (question 1-3), follow-up, and probing questions, strategically designed to elicit comprehensive responses and explore various avenues for a deeper understanding (Bryman 2016). The interview concluded with a final question aimed at capturing the participant's overall experience and ensuring that nothing significant was overlooked.

The interview questions were designed to capture the various values outlined in the consumer value theory (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991). For example, when seeking to delve deeper into the participants' social values, they were asked about their perceptions of the store's reputation. This approach aimed to address Research Questions 1 and 2. Moreover, the semi-structured interview questions have been divided into different categories depending on if the participant acknowledged the pre-loved section or not. There is also a distinction between interview questions pertaining to RQ1 and those related to RQ2. For instance, questions 4-12 primarily focus on values and perceptions. In contrast, questions 13-19 are more centered on participants' *changes* in perception, exploring their previous experiences with second-hand, see Appendix. Furthermore, question 20-22 was developed to capture the perception of pre-loved initiatives even for those participants who did not see it. This approach has been implemented to ensure that the participants are not influenced in any

particular direction during the shop-along. Therefore, different questions for the participants depending on their acknowledgment of the pre-loved section have been formulated to maintain neutrality and ensure unbiased exploration of participants' shopping experiences and perceptions.

### **3.2.2 Unstructured Observation**

Due to the decision to conduct a shop-along semi-structured interview and observation, the researchers in this thesis will participate in the observation. However, it is important to bear in mind that this method needs to be seen as an organic process (Bush & Bell 2021) and the researchers will therefore be responsible to not steer the subject in any type of direction. Thus, the observation will be a participant observation since the researchers will act as observers and participate during the shop-along to observe the behavior, listening and posing questions to the participants (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). Furthermore, the observations will be conducted in an unstructured manner, wherein events, behaviors, or phenomena are observed without following a predetermined structure or schedule (Bryman, 2016). Rather than adhering to a predefined list of variables or events, unstructured observation allows for greater flexibility, enabling the observer to follow what appears to be relevant or interesting during the observation.

This method is also employed to observe a participants behavior in social settings and to understand the meanings they attribute to their environment and the observer can vary in how much they choose to participate in the social settings (Bryman 2016). This will be crucial during the shop-along experience as the researchers aim to be careful in how much they participate to be able to keep the process as organic as possible. Furthermore, this allows one to be active and passive at the same time. Both to avoid the feeling of losing credibility when being too passive (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019) and also being active in a way that allows one to ask questions to the participant without steering them into any kind of direction. The participants will also know the role that the researchers of this study has and will therefore be participant-as-observers (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). This is due to ethical reasons such as avoidance of misunderstanding and also to be able to introduce the researchers properly to the participants.

Additionally, it is acknowledged that a participant observation usually takes place during a longer period of time and one can therefore use micro-participant observation when conducting for instance a thesis (Bryman 2011; Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). Therefore, the decision to use a form of micro-participant observation has been made as it is difficult to observe during a long period of time due the short time length of this research but also due to the participants time in the store. Furthermore, micro-participant observation focuses on a particular aspect of organizational culture, such as the way the organization in question has implemented something (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). In this case it is a traditional clothing store setting that has implemented a pre-loved setting to be able to observe and interview the participants on this matter.

### **3.2.3 Sampling - The Selection of Interview and Observation Participants**

As previously noted, the shop-along process emphasizes the organic nature of participant-led exploration, with the participant guiding the process rather than the researcher (Bush & Bells 2021). In line with this, it is prioritized to select individuals who have voluntarily chosen to be in the specific environment - the clothing store environment. The aim is to foster a relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere, allowing for a deeper interaction. By granting participants this freedom, the objective is to capture their genuine experiences, thoughts, and feelings without imposing.

This type of selection can be considered a convenience sampling. Bryman (2011) explains how participatory ethnographies, which interviews in a shop-along process partly are, are often associated with convenience sampling. According to Bryman (2011), non-probability sampling consists of individuals selected in a convenient manner and through spontaneity, such as randomly encountering people along a road or in a store. The choice of sampling also stems from the intention to not study the perceptions of a specific group of individuals, but rather the general perception among customers. The focus lies on customers as a group, rather than a specific individual group based on for instance gender or age.

Although Bryman (2011) distinguishes between convenience sampling and purposive sampling, the selection can still be considered partly purposive, as the chosen individuals are selected based on specific criteria. Which is, individuals who decided for themselves to visit the store. Bryman (2016) explains that purposive sampling involves researchers strategically

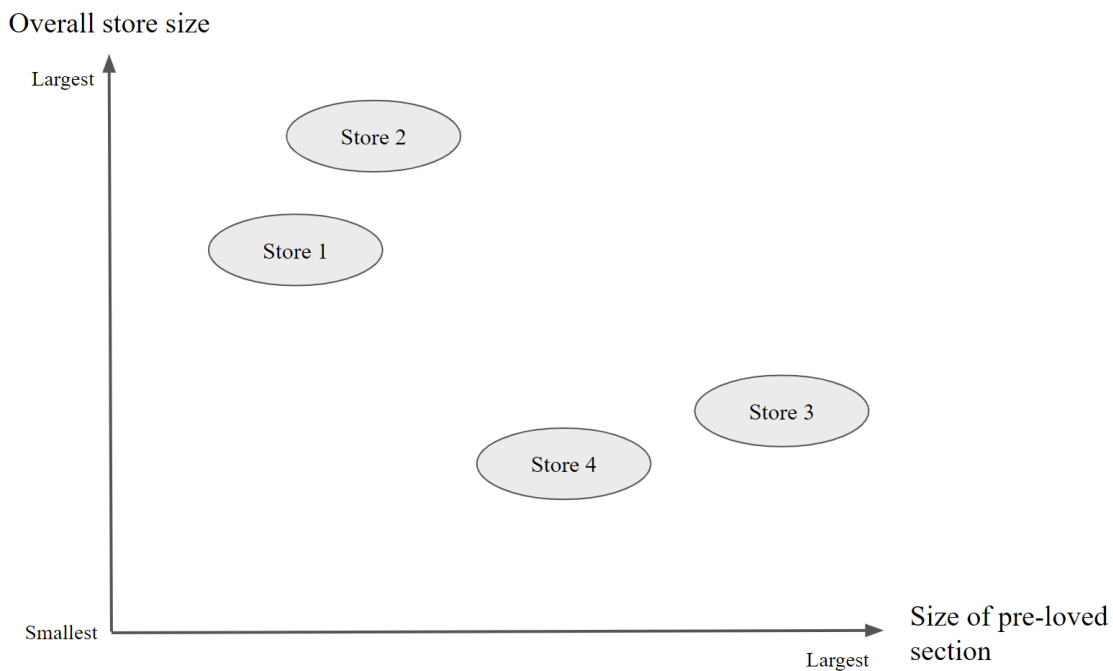
selecting sampling individuals to capture relevant participants. Individuals who choose to visit the store out of their own interest and thus identify as consumers are selected, aligning with the previously formulated research questions regarding consumer perceptions and behavior. However, it is important to note that this selection process was not intended to ensure variation, which Bryman (2011) also describes as a purpose of purposive sampling.

Furthermore, Bryman (2011) highlights the challenge in qualitative research of determining the appropriate sample size. Due to limited time, the decision was made to interview and observe 10 participants. This number was deemed manageable within the available time frame. Since the shop-along semi-structured interview is characterized by the interviewee leading the process (Bush & Bell), the length of the interviews depends entirely on the interviewee's preferences and pace. Consequently, the duration of the interviews can vary depending on how long each individual chooses to stay and engage with the store environment. This approach allowed for a comprehensive yet time-efficient data collection process.

### **3.2.4 Sampling of Stores**

For the shop-along sessions, four stores in the Gothenburg city center were selected. All selected stores differ from one another in aspects such as price, style, size, recognition and target demographic. However, they share a common feature: the inclusion of a pre-loved section within their traditional clothing store environment. The names of the stores will not be disclosed in this study, as it focuses on the consumer perspective. Therefore, they will be referred to as Store 1, Store 2, Store 3, and Store 4.

As previously mentioned, the selected stores vary in size of their retail area, and also the size of their pre-loved section when it comes to the amount of garments in the section. In Figure 3, one can see that Store 2 is the largest one in the selection of the four but has one of the smallest sections of pre-loved. Meanwhile, Store 3 is one of the smaller stores but has the largest section of pre-loved. Store 1 on the other hand has a large overall store size but the pre-loved section has the smallest section yet, and Store 4 has the smallest store size although they have created the second largest pre-loved section in this study. The size in both the general store size and the pre-loved section is highlighted to separate them from one another but also to describe the store without referring to them by name.



*Figure 3 - Store differences*

The motivation behind choosing four different stores is that it enabled this research to see a variation of how a pre-loved section can come across in different settings. Furthermore, as the different stores vary in conditions and possess distinct features regarding both the overall floor space and the pre-loved section, this could also provide this research with a more comprehensive understanding of how such initiatives are perceived by potential consumers compared to if only in store or several similar stores were being studied.

Moreover, different stores have different customer groups with varying preferences and behaviors. By examining multiple stores, this research can gain insight into how different customer groups perceive the same initiative. This in turn will be valuable for this research since a research gap within this topic has been found and it will therefore allow a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions. Additionally, this choice of selecting multiple different stores can enhance the validity of the research, strengthening the credibility and transferability of the findings, thereby facilitating the generation of more insightful conclusions and recommendations for future research directions.

### **3.2.5 Implementation of the Shop-along's**

Carpiano (2009) explains that the preparation of questions can be considered an integral part of conducting the shop-along process. Since the decision was made to conduct shop-alongs using a semi-structured interview technique, questions were prepared in advance (see Appendix 1). Additionally, the semi-structured interview guide allowed for some flexibility and improvisation, letting the consumer's behavior determine the types of questions to be asked (Bryman 2011). For example, it was discovered during the interviews that some participants were not aware of the pre-loved initiative in the store, which also shaped their perception. Therefore, starting to ask about the pre-loved section to these participants, without them having noticed it previously, could potentially bias the results of the study. This is because of the risk of introducing a new idea or concept to the participants, which could affect their response and create a distorted picture of their actual opinions and experiences. Thus, this resulted in variations in the number of questions posed to the interviewee. For instance, if the participant did acknowledge the pre-loved section in the store, questions were asked to understand their perception of it. However, if the participant did not acknowledge the pre-loved section, they were not asked nor informed about it until they walked out of the store and the ending questions were being asked.

The shop-along was initiated by actively approaching individuals entering the chosen store to inquire if they would like to participate in a study. It was planned to conduct individual interviews with each participant, primarily focusing on individuals who were alone when visiting the store. This strategic decision aimed to optimize the data collection process and prevent participants' opinions from influencing each other. Moreover, it was emphasized that this shop-along was for a master's level thesis for the Swedish School of Textile in Borås. However, it was deliberately chosen to not disclose the exact purpose or topic of the study to avoid influencing participants' behavior and opinions. By withholding this information about the study's focus during the initial phases of the semi-structured interview process, it was ensured that the participants responded to the questions without preconceived notions or expectations.

Once the participants had been introduced to the study, the requirement for consent and that the semi-structured interview would be recorded for accurate documentation of the discussion was explained. Moreover, the participants were ensured that their real name would not be

disclosed and that an alias would be created for them. The participants were asked to behave naturally, occasionally posing the semi-structured interview questions. Once approved by the individual to be a participant, the interview questions started either outside of the store or by the entrance of the store depending on where the individual was encountered. To be able to capture the behavior and expression of feelings, one researcher observed and one held the interview. Additionally, it was made sure that the participant had room for self reflection by occasionally keeping a distance by both the interviewer and observer. Once the participant felt done with their visit, the ending questions of the semi-structured interview were held outside of the store to create a space of free expression when it came to the overall experience in the store. The shop-alongs lasted approximately 10-25 minutes, as seen in Table 1.

Store	Participant	Time spent in store	Pre-loved selection acknowledged
Store 1	Louise	12 minutes	No
Store 1	Wilma	19 minutes	Yes
Store 2	Ida	15 minutes	Yes
Store 2	Sofia	20 minutes	No
Store 3	Adam	10 minutes	Yes
Store 3	Jonas	24 minutes	Yes
Store 3	Malin	11 minutes	Yes
Store 3	Rebecka	23 minutes	Yes
Store 4	Anna	23 minutes	Yes
Store 4	Lisa	16 minutes	Yes

*Table 1 - Summary of participant information*

As shown in Table 1, in total 10 participants were solicited which agreed to engage in this research, where two out of these did not acknowledge the pre-loved section. Therefore, they were not asked any questions regarding the pre-loved section until they were outside of the store and the ending questions started.

### **3.2.6 Processing of the Shop-along's**

To facilitate the analysis of the material, all shop-along interviews were recorded, to carefully review the participants' responses afterwards. Bryman (2011) explains that by recording the interviews, distractions such as needing to take notes every word during the semi-structured interview are reduced. This allows the interviewer to focus more on the interaction and situation with the participant. Additionally, field notes were taken during each shop-along to enhance the comprehension of participants' experiences. These notes encompass summaries of events, behaviors, and initial reflections (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019), all documented during the observation phase. To be able to focus on the semi-structured interview and also taking thorough notes, the two researchers were present on all shop-along's to assist each other. Moreover, all participants in this research are Swedish native speakers, thus the interviews were held in Swedish to create a comfortable environment to speak freely in their native language. However, all interviews have been translated into English. This was done by using an internet based English dictionary and manually translating the Swedish based transcription.

In the transcription process, it was also opted to exclude filler words and sounds like "eh" and "hm," unless they were deemed to contribute to the understanding or meaning of the transcription. This methodology was applied to create more focused and readable transcripts, thus facilitating the analysis of the collected material. Furthermore, the interview questions were emphasized by highlighting them in bold text, which aided in identifying dialogue and question sequences. Additionally, the material was structured based on previous relevant themes identified in the theoretical framework of consumer value theory. Values such as economic, functional, social, emotional, and also feelings and pre-loved related themes, to ease the analysis process. The different themes and values identified were then color-coded in both the transcribed interviews and observation and it was also chosen to compare the transcribed material with each other. This strategy aided us in more clearly identifying and understanding correlations and patterns in the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2015).

Furthermore, observation notes were merged with the transcribed material to ensure accurate and consistent documentation of each interaction. This facilitated the accurate linking of relevant notes and observations to each participant, thereby enhancing the analysis and interpretation of the data.

### 3.3 Ethical Principles in Research

During the course of this research several research ethics questions arise that are directly related to privacy concerns. Bryman (2016) mentions that it is only if the researchers are aware of the issues involved that they can make informed decisions about the implications.

Therefore, prior to conducting all interviews and observations, careful consideration was given to different aspects and potential obstacles regarding the ethical conduct of this research.

Considerations within ethical principles were taken into account which has according to Bryman (2016) four main areas; whether there is harm to participants, whether there is a lack of informed consent, whether there is an invasion of privacy, whether deception is involved. Furthermore, all research investigations must ensure the protection of human participants by adhering to appropriate ethical guidelines (Arifin 2018). This is particularly emphasized in qualitative research due to its in-depth study method (ibid). For instance, to avoid harm to the participants all personal information given will be confidential and they will receive total anonymity. This is done by giving the participants aliases, as seen in table 1 the participants will be referred to by a name. However, this name is only an alias.

However, as Bryman (2016) states there can be some difficulties to keep identities confidential in qualitative research. Although, in this research this will not be an obstacle since the subjects in the shop-along process will be selected according to convenience sampling as explained in point 3.2.3. This problem is minimized as the semi-structured interview participants are unknown individuals to the researchers, and there is no need for them to provide personal details such as name and age. According to Bryman (2016), anonymity is an area of ethical concern to consider due to the risk of emotional or professional harm. Since personal information is not requested, individuals' anonymity can be maintained throughout the whole research.

To ensure informed consent to the participants, the identity of the researchers were not unknown and as much information as possible about the project was given without compromising the organic process wanted so that the participants were able to make an informed decision to participate or not (Bryman 2016). The interviewer secured full agreement from the interviewee and emphasized that the research was conducted solely for academic purposes, ensuring the protection of all participants' privacy. To assure the

participants that the project was conducted through a university, university ID's were shown to the participants.

### **3.4 Trustworthiness and Limitations**

To assess the quality of this study, Bryman (2011) emphasizes the importance of discussing the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study. When evaluating the trustworthiness of the study, four sub-criterias are mainly discussed, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Bryman 2011; Bryman 2016). The approach employed to ensure the credibility of the results in this thesis is triangulation, wherein multiple methods have been utilized to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Bryman 2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain broader insights on how consumers perceive the concept of pre-loved sections in a traditional clothing store environment and combined with observing the participants to capture the behavior and expressions.

To ensure the transferability of this research, a thick-description approach has been utilized, providing readers with rich, detailed information about the phenomena under study (Bryman 2016). This allows other researchers to evaluate the applicability of the findings across different contexts, timeframes, and locations, thereby enhancing the overall transferability of the thesis (ibid). This involved the following steps: first, interpreting the semi-structured interview results; second, capturing participants' thoughts and emotions during the observation and during the interviews through thoughtful follow-up questions; and lastly, the researchers encouraged the participants to express their perception and thoughts openly.

In terms of dependability, an audit trail has been kept throughout the research which has ensured that complete records have been kept during the research process such as fieldwork notes, interview transcripts and shop-along participants (Bryman 2016). During the course of this research, a peer student has scrutinized the study with critical eyes to ensure that proper procedures have been followed during the process. This was to ensure that the research was not solely relying on a subjective review.

Furthermore, to ensure confirmability in this research, the authors have meticulously documented the procedures for verifying and re-verifying the data throughout the study.

Confirmability focuses on ensuring that despite the impossibility of achieving complete objectivity, the authors have remained unbiased, refraining from allowing personal values or theoretical inclinations to influence the conduct of the research and the resulting findings (Bryman 2016).

A limitation that has been brought to attention before conducting the shop-alongs was that the participants might be affected by their surroundings, such as not feeling comfortable speaking freely in the store when surrounded by other customers or the store staff. Although, to ensure authentic and true statements from the participants, questions were also asked when being outside of the store after the shop-along visit. Another limitation is the choice to have a convenience sample which lacks spread of potential participants and the selection can be hard to generalize (Bryman 2011). Furthermore, given the small sample size and the emphasis on a qualitative research approach, the generalizability of the findings in this study may be limited. While qualitative methods offer rich insights into individual experiences and perceptions, their generalizability to broader populations or settings can be limited (ibid). However, while our study provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of pre-loved initiatives, it is important to acknowledge that our research is not intended to yield generalizable results.

## **4. Result and Analysis**

*In the subsequent section, the results and analysis will be presented. Initially, the findings from the empirical data regarding RQ1 will be reported. These findings will then undergo analysis based on the previously introduced Consumer Value Theory. Following this, the data associated with RQ2 will be presented, succeeded by the application of an adopted theoretical framework to facilitate a more in-depth analysis of the findings.*

### **4.1 Result - Customer Perceptions of the Pre-loved Initiative**

This section presents the findings related to the thesis's first research question from the shop-alongs, including the semi-structured interviews and combined observations, which subsequently form the basis for the forthcoming analysis section. During these shop-alongs, participants have shared their thoughts, opinions, and experiences related to the current pre-loved initiative in a traditional clothing store setting. By collecting and analyzing this data, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of customers' perception and what factors influence their decisions to purchase pre-loved items in a traditional clothing store environment over a conventional thrift store, which further will be analyzed with the theoretical framework of consumer value theory in the next part of this chapter.

#### **4.1.1 Cultivating Conscious Consumption**

The initial notation of the shop-alongs' revealed a distinct positive response towards the stores' pre-loved initiatives amongst the participants. No negative viewpoints or perception was expressed regarding this initiative amongst the participants in any of the chosen stores. This can be seen in connection with the participants being asked about their feelings regarding the store's pre-loved initiative, and what they considered to be of additional value in the store:

I think it's really nice that they have their second-hand section so central. It's the first thing you see right when you come in. I feel that if stores have these kinds of second-hand shopping areas, they usually are tucked away deep in the store, so it's fun that you're presented with, this is, you can buy new stuff here, but they really focus a lot on second-hand. Also, I feel that the atmosphere here is generally very pleasant and cozy, it feels like they've taken a summer cottage and placed it right in the city, a unique, rustic,

nice, cozy atmosphere. (Jonas, Store 3)

I'm heading towards the pre-loved section. I always start here. Don't know why, but I think it's the feeling of finding a bargain? It makes you happy! (Anna, Store 4)

Subsequent discussions regarding the positive reception of these initiatives among participants were elaborative, focusing particularly on the subjective value of being able to acquire unique, qualitative clothing items at affordable prices. The discussion explored how this opportunity to obtain unique pieces not only satisfies individual aesthetic preferences but also instills a sense of exclusivity and personal style. It was also emphasized how this offering of unique garments at reasonable prices created an atmosphere of accessibility and inclusivity, where customers from different economic backgrounds can participate in and benefit from the opportunity to acquire high-quality clothing, both in terms of longevity and in terms of brand, at a reasonable cost. For instance, Anna (Store 4) explained that previously they were purchasing pre-loved items from the brand online through private sellers:

I often come here because they've recently started second-hand sections in the store. Kids grow so fast, and I usually buy online on platforms like Tradera or Facebook Marketplace, but then you always have to pay a lot for shipping. [...] and since this store started with second-hand, I just come here instead, so I avoid the shipping, can feel and touch the item directly and determine if it's interesting right away. And I often buy this brand but on other platforms, so this is perfect. I find that very valuable. Also, the brand has been around for so many years and is quite established, you trust them more, you know what I mean? That also feels valuable. Especially when it comes to children's clothes, you want them to be good quality. (Anna, Store 4)

This dialogue demonstrated an increasing appreciation amongst the participants for such initiatives, primarily as an economically advantageous alternative, and will therefore be further discussed within the analyzing part.

During the study, it also emerged that some participants expressed specific appreciation for the pre-loved initiatives based on their ability to promote a more sustainable shopping practice. One of these expressions can be seen when participants particularly highlighted that they perceived the garments to be of high quality, in terms of longevity, which was considered a key factor for both the garments and the initiatives to be perceived as

sustainable. It emerged that whenever the participant discussed the sustainability of a garment, they tended to refer to its long-lasting qualities. When asked about what the participant thought about sustainability when shopping, Adam responded:

Yes, to some extent. I buy clothes with the intention that they will last a long time. The worst thing I know is buying clothes that break or shrink in the wash after just a month. I want them to be good quality so that I don't have to spend a lot of money on clothes unnecessarily! (Adam, Store 3)

Subsequently, some participants also expressed the value of sustainability by emphasizing how shopping for pre-loved items provided them with the opportunity to extend the lifespan of clothing items and reduce the need for new products, thereby contributing to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and resource consumption. These customers reflected on how their participation in pre-loved shopping was not only about finding unique clothes at affordable prices but also about actively contributing to reducing their environmental impact by choosing second-hand options. Furthermore, these customers expressed a sense of personal satisfaction and responsibility through their participation in pre-loved shopping. By making conscious choices that support sustainability, they felt they were actively contributing to shaping a more positive and responsible consumer culture. This acknowledgement will therefore further be analyzed in the next part of this chapter.

#### **4.1.2 Perceived Reputation**

The findings of the empirical material also suggest that the perceived reputation of the store prior and post visit had an overall impact on the customers perception of the pre-loved initiative. Those who had perceived a reputation from their social settings, such as from friends, in regards to the store prior to their visit had an overall positive perception of the store which did not change during or after their visit. This becomes apparent when participants were asked about their perception of the store's reputation, for example:

They're good at displaying the clothes nicely, they have clothes for everyone, and I think the quality is good, which is always a plus. So, in that way, they've probably created a good reputation, or at least I feel like that is what is said by my friends and family. But also maybe because they have everything from children's clothes to home decor, shoes, accessories, and so on. A bit of a one-stop-shop for me. (Ida, Store 2)

It also occurred that participants went to the store due to the perceived perception by friends when it comes to the overall store characteristics, the selection of apparel available, and for their pre-loved initiative. In this case the most common stores recommended by a participant's social setting was Store 2 and Store 3. It was also discovered that Store 4 had a high tendency to be recommended by the participants in this study due to their perceived reputation of the store but also to assist other potential customers in discovering this initiative and the benefits that come with it. When asked if Malin thought that Store 4 had a good reputation, she replied:

Yes, absolutely! Like, when me and my friends talk about the store, we always end up talking about the second-hand stuff. I remember the first time I went to this store, a few months ago, together with a friend of mine who had spoken good about the store. You walk in there and get this vibe, like, "Hey, I could totally find something here!" And it's not just about the second-hand gear; you also get to check out what's fresh and new. So, it's like the best of both worlds. (Malin, Store 3)

This suggests that multiple motivations, influenced by other peoples experiences, play a role in attracting customers to the store, and indicates that there are social aspects influencing the participants' overall perception of the store, which will be further analyzed in the next part of this thesis.

Moreover, many participants mentioned that they perceive the store as having a good reputation due to their pre-loved initiative and that by having it, they are taking a better responsibility in regards to environmental issues. Participants who did not have a clear perception of the store before the visit showed a clear transition towards a more positive view once they found out or saw the pre-loved initiative in the store. This was mostly due to the perception that the store was taking accountability and aiming for a more sustainable consumption behavior. The participants also felt that they would highly recommend this initiative to their social settings such as friends or colleagues. They perceived the store positively, which could contribute to a favorable reputation among their peers, which will be analyzed and discussed further into the next part of this thesis.

## **4.2 Analysis - RQ1**

Under this heading, the empirical data presented above will be analyzed utilizing the dimensions of value previously introduced alongside consumer value theory. This approach aims to enhance comprehension and, by establishing a theoretical foundation, to address the question: What is the consumer perception of the new pre-loved initiative within traditional clothing stores?

### **4.2.1 The Customers Perceived Functional and Economical Value**

In a few instances, it was observed how customers expressed their functional preferences during their store visits. A clear example of this emerged with the desire for thinner jackets as spring arrived and temperatures started to climb. This exemplifies the functional value of a product, where customers sought garments that suited the current weather conditions and fulfilled their need for lighter attire. This is because functional value is defined as the benefit a product or service provides by meeting specific needs or purposes of the user (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991). For example, a jacket's ability to keep the wearer warm in cold weather. By seeking thinner jackets, customers demonstrate their awareness of and interest in the functional aspect of the clothing they choose. Furthermore, it was also stated by participants how the pre-loved garment had the functionality of being more sustainable than the new garments provided by the store. They often described pre-loved items as high-quality garments, which could be linked to their perceived functional value (Kim, Gupta & Koh, 2012).

However, it appeared that customers often prioritized factors other than functionality when visiting the pre-loved sections. Instead, they appeared to focus on other dimensions, such as the economic value. During the collection of empirical data, the researchers were able to study certain behaviors that indicate consumers value the economic aspects of pre-loved initiatives. For instance, it was observed how participants examine receipts on their way out of the store and appear satisfied in doing so. Furthermore, Malin (Store 3) exhibited a positive attitude towards the economic value the section seemed to provide. It was observed how she not only regarded the brands as valuable but also meticulously examined the prices, expressing a sense of joy and some surprise at finding such advantageous deals. She expressed her admiration for the store's selection of well-established brands and conveyed her

appreciation for the reasonable prices of the clothing found in the pre-loved section. Participant Ida also expressed a similar value of attractive brands within the pre-loved section, at a more advantageous price:

If that dress I mentioned earlier had been available in my size, I probably would have bought it. It was a good price for that brand, in my opinion, which pleasantly surprised me. Also, it was so easy to find it. (Ida, Store 2)

Furthermore, in the quotes below, it is possible to see how consumers express themselves in relation to the perceived economic value of the pre-loved sections:

I was heading towards what looks like the boys' section, but then stopped here, it looks like they have some second-hand stuff here, which is good. [...] It's really good that they have these kinds of initiatives. I can imagine it's very valuable for parents who don't want to spend too much money and buy new stuff all the time. [...] I think it looks like they've really put effort into it and they want to show consumers that there's this kind of initiative, which is good. I didn't know about it before, and when I look at the clothes, they seem to have very good prices, like this onesie here. This one, for example, costs 80. I believe it costs at least 149 if you were to buy it new, for example. (Lisa, Store 4)

When questioned about their perspective on the availability of pre-loved clothing, Adam responded:

Yes, one does consider it a bit, especially for the price tag maybe. And that there are still very good clothes that suit my taste [...] But it's precisely that you can find something unique at a slightly better price. (Adam, Store 3)

And when asked if the perception of the store has changed since the customer understood that the store had a pre-loved initiative, the participant Adam responded: "Maybe the pricing has changed a bit, that they can offer branded products of good quality at a good price because they are second hand." (Adam, Store 3).

The participants' responses provide insight into how price is a critical factor in shaping perceptions of the pre-loved initiative, demonstrating an appreciation for its economic value (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991). It is evident that consumers view items within the pre-loved section as successful in balancing cost with the utility that comes from owning the product. This balance indicates that consumers not only assess products based on their price tag but also consider the practical usefulness and value they add to their lifestyle.

This reasoning aligns with the theory of economic utility, which emphasizes that people tend to make choices based on a product or service's practical usefulness and its cost (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991). According to Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991), consumers typically choose products that provide them with the greatest possible utility considering their individual needs and budget. This means that consumers, in line with the theory presented by the authors, not only strive to access products that satisfy their needs and preferences but also take into account their economic circumstances. They thus choose products that not only hold a specific value for them but also fit within their financial constraints and contribute to their overall well-being and satisfaction. This aligns with the findings of Jan, Ji, and Yeo (2019), who assert that the economic advantages stem from the quality and functionality of the products, alongside their pricing, thereby bolstering the perception of pre-loved items as economically and functionally valuable.

#### **4.2.2 The Customers Perceived Social and Relational Value**

Based on the results, it can be inferred how the interviewees' social networks, including friends and acquaintances, influenced their perception of the pre-loved initiative. When asked whether the consumer thinks the store has a good reputation, the consumers respond as follows:

I would really say that the store has a good reputation. Many people speak highly of the store and many people shop here. Mainly because there seems to be such quality in the clothes, you know that when you come here, there are always good and stylish things of quality. I usually come here with both my girlfriend and sometimes with my friends. There are many of us in my social circle who like it! [...] Yes, but I think they have many brands that are my style, like Samsoe Samsoe and Wood Wood [Speaking about the pre-loved initiatives]. They have a lot that suits my style! They have stylish basics of

good quality. Not a lot of strange clothes with large logos and stuff like that. (Adam, Store 3)

Yes, I would definitely say that this store has a good reputation. It feels like they've found a good vibe here. My friends and I like this store because of their pre-loved section; it's like you come here to browse for fun, not necessarily to buy anything. It's quite laid-back, which I think many customers appreciate. A bit unpretentious. (Jonas, Store 3)

It became evident that a significant factor motivating customers to visit the store and its pre-loved section was the image they had formed based on its reputation among friends. This indicates that the consumer's perception was influenced by their social circle (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991), suggesting that the consumer attributes both social and/or relational value to both the store in general, but also the pre-loved initiative. This can be stated against the backdrop that social value is described as the perceived benefit that extends beyond any functional properties; that is, the perceived significance that a product, service, or activity has through its association with a specific social group or community (ibid). Interestingly, the customers' visits were often motivated by the enjoyment of the experience rather than solely for the purpose of making purchases, which indicates that the consumer finds value in something beyond the functional value of the products.

The reputation did not just focus on the fact that the store included a pre-loved section, but also on the store's high quality garments and range, which could be seen in Adams quote above. This becomes intriguing considering how Ruangkanjanases et al. (2020) explain that the quality of the product can affect how well they feel they fit into their social circle.

Furthermore, from the results, it can be inferred how customers emphasize the importance of the garments in the store's pre-loved section aligning with their style. Based on Adams quote above, it is possible to discern how he describes his style through the store's brands, but also how he distances himself from another type of style. The importance of style and brand was also recurrent during other shop-alongs. When asked if she is interested in pre-loved garments, Rebecka responded:

Yes, I try to shop most things second-hand. So maybe 80% of my clothes are second-hand anyway. A lot of classic stuff like jackets and pants, maybe a bit harder with tops and stuff you use more, but some more expensive things that you might invest in, I usually try

to find used. I also think it's nice because then you don't look like everyone else and get a bit of your own style. (Rebecka, Store 3)

Exploring one's unique style through purchasing pre-loved items signals that the consumer is seeking a relational value in the form of personal self-realization (Ng et al. 2023). The relational value is often equated with the social connection between the consumer and their environment, but it also extends to the interaction between the consumer and the store (Cheung et al. 2022). This dynamic indicates that the consumer views the pre-loved section as a source of self-realization, as it allows them to express a specific style and feel unique.

Furthermore, the same participant, Rebecka, expressed the following when asked what she and her social setting says and thinks of the store and if sustainability usually is brought up in this context:

My friends speak highly of this store and often mention finding nice things here. I was in here with some friends last week, and we were just saying that it's fun with shops that have this kind of concept [speaking about the pre-loved initiatives]. And yes, sustainability usually comes up in that conversation. It feels like with the whole sustainability debate, more and more people see sustainable consumption as important, or at least that's the case between me and my friends anyway. But the store also comes up in the context of having good second-hand items when discussing which stores in town are good. (Rebecka, Store 3)

The quote further highlights that pre-loved initiatives extend far beyond simple transactions; they constitute a sense of community where sustainability, reuse, and individual style expression are valued. This can also be understood in line with Engel, Vaske, and Bath's (2020) argument about how strong social bonds can be formed among like-minded individuals by engaging in eco-friendly activities. When individuals observe their friends and acquaintances making sustainable choices in their consumption, the tendency increases that they themselves will adopt similar behaviors to fit into their social circle (Ruangkanjanases et al. 2020). Through this quote, insight is gained into how Rebecka and her friends value sustainable consumption and how this is reflected in their choice to purchase pre-loved products, which according to Engel, Vaske, and Bath (2020), further creates a social value.

### 4.2.3 The Customers Perceived Emotional Value

The findings in this research can also be directly linked to emotional value. To better illustrate the emotional significance attributed to pre-loved initiatives in this study, it's imperative to explore the sentiments expressed by the participants. For example, participant Sofia (Store 2) conveyed emotions when discussing the pre-loved initiative in the store. She expressed feeling excitement and found the experience of consuming pre-loved items to be enjoyable. According to Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991), emotional value stems from how something makes individuals feel, and when certain emotions are evoked or sustained, it adds to its emotional value. These types of feelings can further be seen when the participant Anna (Store 4) expressed when asked how she felt when entering the stores pre-loved initiatives, she responded:

I find it cozy, I can already see a lot of nice things that makes me feel inspired! And I think it's fun to come here. I always find something when I go in here [...] It feels like a treasure trove of amazing finds. I feel like there is just this sense of excitement in the air, which I don't feel like whenever stepping into a regular store, like you never know what awesome thing you might stumble upon next. (Anna, Store 4)

Moreover, the findings revealed that customers expressed personal satisfaction and a sense of responsibility in their consumption choices, particularly in embracing pre-loved items as a means to achieve this. They mentioned feeling empowered by making conscious decisions towards a more sustainable lifestyle, believing they were actively contributing to a positive and responsible consumer culture. This aligns with Ng et al. (2023), who noted that consumers concerned about sustainability tend to feel emotionally connected to their purchases, as evidenced by the participants. For instance, Sofia emphasized how consuming pre-loved and sustainable products uplifted her mood and resonated with her on a deeper level when asked about her interest towards pre-loved or second-hand stores:

I don't know, you feel like a better person when you shop like that, not destroying the environment and when clothes get a longer life. Feels good in the soul somehow. (Sofia, Store 2)

Similarly, Wilma from Store 1 highlighted a shift in her consumption habits when a

question about her interest towards second-hand/pre-loved, she expressed a growing importance of sustainability and a consequent inclination towards it:

There has been a shift there that I've been following just in the past few years or so. Before, I didn't think about how I consumed at all, but now that I'm a bit more informed about my consumption and its consequences, I would definitely say that consuming sustainably has become increasingly important to me, which has led me to start shopping more second-hand. (Wilma, Store 1)

Furthermore, Sofia's sentiment about feeling like a better person when making sustainable choices reflects the emotional fulfillment associated with such practices, echoing the sentiments shared by Wilma. This underscores the emotional value that participants attributed to consuming sustainable products, particularly pre-loved garments. It's evident that this practice has become increasingly significant to consumers, not only for its environmental impact but also for the personal satisfaction and sense of well-being it brings.

### **4.3 Result - Factors Shaping Customer Preferences: Pre-loved vs. Conventional Thrifting Store**

This section presents the findings related to the thesis second research question from the gathered data, which subsequently form the basis for the forthcoming analysis of 'what factors influence customers' preferences for pre-loved items in a traditional clothing store compared to a conventional thrift store?'. Through immersive shop-along experiences, it became evident that a significant number of participants favored visiting traditional clothing stores with dedicated pre-loved sections rather than opting for conventional thrift stores. Through meticulous collection and analysis of this data, the aim is to delve deeper into the underlying factors shaping customers' inclinations towards pre-loved items in a traditional clothing store setting.

#### **4.3.1 Curated Convenience: The Appeal of Pre-Loved Sections**

When investigating customers' perceptions of the pre-loved initiatives, an intriguing aspect emerged. While some customers demonstrated a pre-existing understanding and interest in the second-hand market, others exhibited no prior engagement with it. However, this

disparity did not seem to affect the perception of the pre-loved initiatives. When asked about his interest in pre-loved items, Adam, who had not previously shopped for pre-loved items, responded:

Not really, as I mentioned, it can be difficult enough for me to find clothes in my size. I usually go with my girlfriend; she buys a lot of second-hand! But I rarely find anything that fits me. (Adam, Store 3)

Despite the variation in prior experiences with pre-loved shopping, all customers remained open to considering purchasing pre-loved products. This suggests that the pre-loved initiatives are indeed influencing consumer behavior. For example, Adam did in fact buy a pre-loved item during his visit, even though his negative connotations for second hand.

Furthermore, during the shop-along sessions, it became evident that participants perceived stores that exclusively offered second-hand items as overwhelming, cluttered, and disorganized. Participants who expressed these concerns about the second-hand market had avoided visiting such conventional thrift stores. Adam again:

Sometimes I also feel that it gets a bit crowded in those second-hand stores. But it's a bit fun, like what this store has done, having a small section of second-hand with a lot of nice and unique items while being well-organized. I can imagine that it makes people who don't usually visit second-hand stores still buy from such a section, and that's good if we talk about the environment, for example! (Adam, Store 3)

Interestingly, several participants who had no previous interest in pre-loved items still expressed a positive attitude towards pre-loved initiatives. They described how these initiatives not only attracted customers who were already interested in second-hand items but also could appeal to new customer segments who might not have otherwise considered shopping pre-loved. This might be due to the accessibility to find pre-loved in a setting where you can also find new items, as explained by Ida:

I appreciate the fact that they offer both new clothing and second-hand items. I can see how this can appeal to a wide range of customers, including those who primarily shop second-hand and those who have no interest in it, since the store still predominantly sells newly produced items. (Ida, Store 2)

Contrary to the perception of a conventional thrift store, participants often described the pre-loved initiatives in traditional clothing stores as "structured," "well-curated," "pleasant," and "inspiring". Furthermore, there were many instances when a participant expressed the benefits of a more curated section of pre-loved items, and where often explained as organized, it is both time saving and it was perceived that the traditional clothing store had done the “heavy lifting” when it comes to finding good pieces for the section. Participant Ida again:

Well, this is great for me, for example, who struggles to find second-hand clothes and doesn't have the patience to go through all the racks. Now I found maybe 3 items I could consider buying. This makes it very nice to kind of get "help" to be more sustainable when you might find it difficult. I think they bring in items that they themselves think fit in here, so they have sort of done the heavy work for you. (Ida, store 2)

Ida was a participant who had struggled finding anything in conventional thrift stores. She expressed that this was due to a lack of patience to go through the large assortment a second-hand so often has. However, when looking at the pre-loved section in Store 2, she found three pieces that she could consider buying, which was quite unusual for her. Furthermore, she explained how it felt as if she got help to find these pieces as the store had already laid out the work for her or as she said “ done the heavy work” which in turn made it easier to consume sustainably.

This suggests that pre-loved initiatives can not only attract existing customers but also broaden the target audience and promote more sustainable consumption among various consumer groups. Moreover, this also suggests that creating the availability of pre-loved can capture new consumers who normally would not purchase it, which lead to a general positive perception of the initiatives due to its inclusivity and availability within the market.

Furthermore, Jonas (Store 3) also expresses how a conventional thrift store, such as the Swedish store Myrornas, can be perceived as overwhelming due to the large amount of items to go through. Meanwhile, pre-loved sections in a traditional clothing store were expressed to be more well-organized and that the participants were prepared to pay a premium price for this:

It's been very good, it feels like you get a good feeling of secondhand without it being overwhelming like it can be, for example, at Myrornas where there are 2000 items. Here it's well-organized, and I can imagine paying a premium for second hand when it's this well-organized! (Jonas, Store 3)

Jonas, and others emphasized the inspiring nature of the well-curated section for pre-loved items. The participants highlighted how the carefully selected range of unique and high-quality garments, from well-known brands, formed a significant part of the positive experience. For many participants, it wasn't just the selection itself that influenced their perception of the section, but also the way the garments were presented and arranged. It was about more than just clothes – it was about creating an atmosphere of creativity and possibilities, where the garments offered a unique opportunity for self-expression. When Rebecka received the question in regards to what inspired her in the store, she responded:

Yes, but I like that it's a mix of art, fashion, and interior design. I like that concept. Then I think they've styled the mannequins very nicely [pointing at a mannequin in the pre-loved section]. That also inspires me. I also like that you can really look around and that it's organized and that they display some stylish outfits and such. It feels like in this part [speaking about the pre-loved section] they've really been able to find unique pieces, which makes me very inspired! (Rebecka, Store 3)

At the same time, several participants, while expressing their appreciation for the positive experience of the pre-loved section, voiced deep frustration over the lack of inspiration and variety in conventional thrift stores. These places were often seen as dull and impersonal, in stark contrast to the stimulating environment they experienced in the curated pre-loved sections. The participant expressed how conventional thrift stores lacked the carefully selected mix of items and the aesthetic presentation that attracted and engaged customers. As a result, the shopping experience was less satisfying, and it was harder to find garments that truly appealed and inspired.

The participant's observation regarding the well-organized and curated nature of pre-loved initiatives will thus be subject to further analysis in the subsequent section of this chapter.

## **4.4 - Analysis - RQ2**

In this section of the chapter, the findings related to research question two will be examined and analyzed using the adopted theory of Means-End Chain Theory. Through this theory, the aim is to enhance understanding and provide theoretical insights to address the question: What factors influence customers' preferences for pre-loved items in a traditional clothing store compared to a conventional thrift store?

### **4.4.1 Linkage 1 - Consumer Efficiency**

The findings suggest that participants favored pre-loved initiatives primarily due to their well-organized and structured nature, which prompted comparisons with the often-disorganized layout of conventional thrift stores. Building upon Borgardt's (2020) explanation of the Means-End Chain (MEC) theory, which emphasizes the identification of specific attributes and their significance within a particular context, the attributes of the pre-loved section have been further explored in this study. This investigation seeks to understand not only what attributes are important to consumers but also why they hold significance within their specific circumstances, as elucidated through the insights shared by interview participants (ibid).

By drawing from the concept that attributes represent the physical characteristics of a product or service, such as traits and style (Jiang, Scott & Ding, 2015), it becomes evident that a well-organized arrangement of the pre-loved section can indeed be considered a crucial attribute of pre-loved initiatives. Consequently, this aspect could be regarded as a factor influencing customers' decisions to prefer pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrifting stores. This attribute encompasses not only the physical arrangement of items but also extends to the overall presentation, accessibility, and ease of navigation within the section.

Furthermore, during the shop-alongs, it became evident that there was a perceived connection between the well-organized pre-loved sections and time-saving, which was also considered valuable by the participants. When asked about what the participant found valuable about the stores pre-loved initiatives, they responded:

A major reason why I don't visit second-hand stores, which my girlfriend reluctantly drags me to sometimes, is that it feels like it takes so damn long to find what you want. Here, it feels more like someone has chosen the items for you, so that I don't have to go through miles of racks of stuff [...] I would mainly say that it's very well-organized, and not too crowded. It's open and sleek, quite airy. Even though there might be some good music playing, I find it calm and harmonious. I like that! (Adam, Store 3)

It still feels like you can save some time by coming here instead of going to a regular second-hand store, like Myrorna, where it doesn't feel at all like there's the same well-curated selection. (Anna, Store 4)

Moreover, the participant Louise (Store 1) pointed out the importance of having a well organized pre-loved section when the question in regards to what could enhance her experience in the store arised:

Maybe make it a bit more organized to navigate. It was quite difficult for me to find what I was looking for and felt like I was going around in circles at times which I did not have time for really. So, that's what I would say. (Louise, Store 1)

Additionally, when the participant Ida (Store 2) was asked in regards to what she found valuable in the pre-loved section, she answered:

This makes it very nice to kind of get "help" to be more sustainable when you might find it difficult. I think they bring in items that they themselves think fit in here, so they have sort of done the heavy work for you. (Ida, Store 2)

Since a consequence can be things such as user-friendliness or comfort (Lin and Chang, 2012), and these aspects can be both physiological or psychological, both direct and indirect, it becomes evident how time-saving can be seen as a direct result of the well-organized and curated pieces in a pre-loved section. This is explained through Lin and Chang's (2012) explanation of how a direct consequence can be the positive experience that occurs when the consumer decides to make a purchase. Here, it is clear how participants' experience of the section leads to a direct consequence of time-saving. This establishes the link of connections between the perceived attribute of curated pieces and a well-organized pre-loved section, which results in the consequence of consumers saving time. In turn, this seems to foster a

value of participants feeling efficient, as seen in the quotes above. The MEC theory explains how value is defined as the object for the consumer and can encompass factors that enhance the overall pleasurable experience (Jiang, Scott & Ding 2015; Lin & Chang 2012). Thus, a well-organized setting and curated pieces contributes to a positive customer experience, facilitating efficient browsing and enhancing the perceived value of pre-loved offerings.

Furthermore, as demonstrated in the findings, the attribute of a well-organized store can also lead to the consequence of converting non-pre-loved consumers into pre-loved consumers when these sections are meticulously sorted and feature carefully curated pieces in their assortment. This can be interpreted in light of how the consequence of customers' perceived attributes can influence purchasing behavior (Lin & Chang, 2012). For example, as observed in the case of Adam, a participant who avoided conventional thrift stores due to their unstructured characteristics, he purchased a pre-loved item from the store's pre-loved section. He also explained that he believed the store's initiative indeed persuaded people like him to purchase these items.

This connection between well-organization, which results in both time-saving and converting non-pre-loved consumers, enhances the value of feeling efficient. Furthermore, having curated pieces in the pre-loved section not only saves time but also attracts non-pre-loved consumers, reinforcing the sense of efficiency. Building upon the MEC theory, which posits that the linkage between consumer perception of attributes, consequences, and values influences their decision-making (Wagner, 2007), it becomes evident how a well-organized section featuring curated pieces, leading to time-saving and efficiency, can be regarded as factors contributing to why consumers prefer pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrift stores. These linkages are encapsulated in the model inspired by Hsiao, Yen, and Li (2012) outlined below in Figure 4.

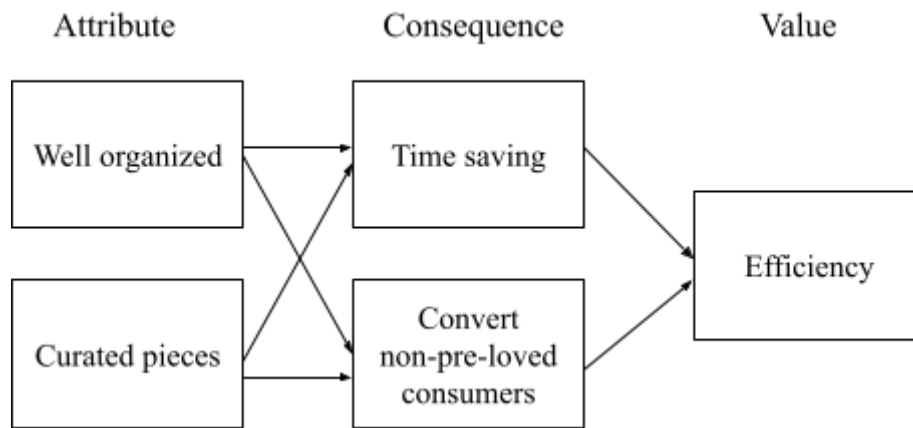


Figure 4 - Linkage 1: Efficiency Linkage

#### 4.4.2 Linkage 2 - Self expression and Self fulfillment

The findings also revealed that when the store had a well-organized pre-loved section featuring curated and unique garments, which could be considered attributes (Lin & Cheng 2012), participants felt inspired, which could be seen as a common consequence within the context of retail (ibid). A notable illustration of this phenomenon is exemplified by Malin's experience at Store 3. Many participants perceived Store 3 as offering a selection of both unique and curated garments, often visiting it for inspiration, as evidenced in the findings. This sentiment is echoed in Malin's response below:

When you go to a regular thrift store, it feels like you gotta be kind of inspired beforehand, you know? Like, you almost gotta have pictures with you and a plan for what you are gonna look for. But in the thrift section of this store, you get inspired right there on the spot 'cause there are all these nice, unique clothes right in front of you.

(Malin, Store 3)

Although there are no direct quotations explicitly articulating the value of unique clothing, research indicates that the significance derived from inspirational shopping and unique pieces is rooted in the emotional aspect of self-expression (Yan, Bae & Xu, 2015). Drawing upon the understanding that consumers naturally tend to be goal-oriented in their decision-making (Sundjaja et al., 2024), it could be suggested that the pursuit of self-expression, facilitated by the availability of unique garments and resulting in participants feeling inspired, may influence their decisions and behaviors towards favoring pre-loved sections.

This emotional value is deeply tied to the ability of individuals to express themselves through their clothing choices. When individuals find clothing items that resonate with their personal style and identity, it enhances their sense of self-expression (Yan, Bae & Xu, 2015). This emotional connection to unique pieces fosters a deeper engagement with the shopping experience and contributes to the overall satisfaction derived from finding garments that reflect one's individuality, feeling self fulfilled (ibid). The preference for pre-loved items over conventional thrift stores can therefore be attributed to the significance of values such as self-fulfillment and self-expression in shaping consumer decisions. It underscores the notion that consumer choices are primarily driven by value (Sundjaja, Utomo, Matthew, Hellianto & Putra 2024; Borgardt 2020).

Furthermore, the inspiration gained from the assortment also plays a role in converting new customers who typically struggle to find any pre-loved garments to their liking. For example, Ida (Store 2), who usually had trouble finding anything appealing in second-hand stores, instantly discovered pieces she could consider purchasing when she encountered a curated section with unique garments. This experience effectively converted her into a pre-loved consumer.

As shown in Figure 5, the attributes of having unique and curated pieces both lead to the consequence of feeling inspired and to convert non-pre-loved customers. These consequences also lead to the customer's value of self fulfillment such as consuming more sustainably and finding unique garments that will help one stand out.

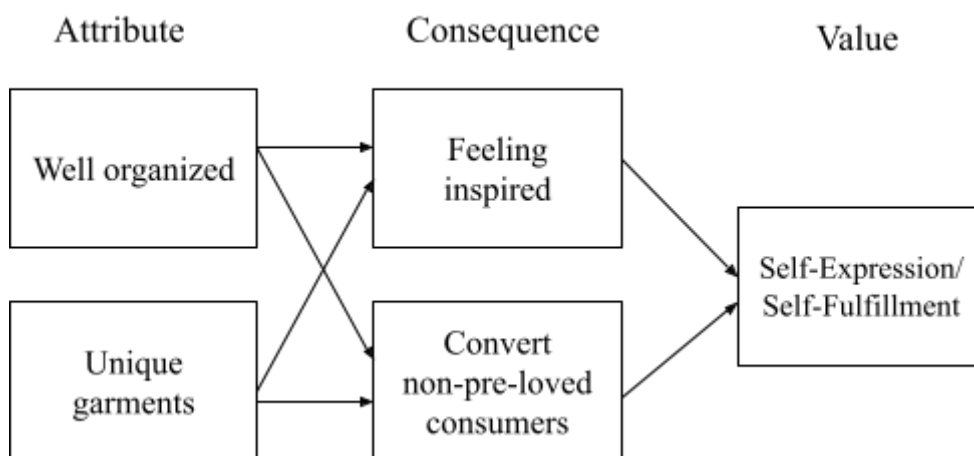


Figure 5 - Linkage 2: Self-expression/Fulfillment Linkage

#### 4.4.3 Linkage 3 - Enjoyable Experience

The final linkage identified in the results underscores the diversity of offerings within the store. By offering both new clothes and pre-loved goods, the store provides customers with an expanded array of options, the participants explained. This not only broadens their choices but also enhances their overall shopping experience, leading to a heightened sense of pleasure. This can be seen in the quotation below. When asked what Lisa finds valuable about the store concept of including a pre-loved section, she responded:

I have recognised other stores having the same concept of adding a smaller second hand part within the store, which I find exciting! It feels like you get more, you know? If you take for example 'Store 2', I already have an insight of their regular new collections of clothing. I regularly check their Instagram to stay updated since they frequently post about new arrivals and upcoming items, but they don't do that for their second hand garments in the store. Therefore I feel like there is an excitement going to the second hand section, since I don't know what's there! (Lisa, Store 4).

The feeling of excitement among participants due to the inclusivity of having a pre-loved section within the traditional clothing store was also observed during the shop along with Adam (Store 3). After finding the white t-shirt that he was looking for, he glanced towards the cashier register as if he was about to complete his purchase, with a neutral face expression. Suddenly, he veered off towards the pre-loved section, looking excited. While scanning the pre-loved section, he spotted a cap and purposefully made his way to it, trying it on and checking himself out in the mirror, looking happy and a bit surprised. Adam quickly checked the price tag and held a firm grip on the cap. After checking the price, he continued to browse through the items in the pre-loved section, examining the items presented. It was noticeable that he paid extra attention to certain items, first checking the price tag, then the size. He spent quite some time in the pre-loved section meanwhile holding on to the cap he found, even though he had already found what he was looking for (a new white t-shirt).

The outcome of the attribute of diverse range of both pre-loved and newly produced garments therefore seems to give the consequence of the customer feeling like the options are expanded (as seen explained in previous observation). Given that attributes can encompass a range of factors including specific traits, brand reputation, and perceived quality (Jiang, Scott & Ding 2015; Lin & Chang 2012), it follows that the extensive product range can also be considered

an attribute. Here, the diverse range is perceived as an attribute—a distinguishing characteristic or feature—of the product offering, which becomes relevant in terms of which factors further influence customers towards preferring pre-loved initiatives. This implies that customers may perceive a wider range of options as indicative of greater diversity, choice, and potential suitability for their individual needs or preferences.

This observation further highlights how participants' reactions can extend beyond mere participation or engagement. It illuminates how their involvement translates into the expression of emotions such as excitement and enjoyment. These emotional responses can be viewed as a shared or common value among the participants (Lin & Chang 2012).

Moreover, participants who found both pre-loved and newly produced clothes in the same store perceived this as positive even though some had little experience with consuming pre-loved items. Thus, a linkage of having a broad assortment, such as a mix of pre-loved and new clothes, also led to converting customers into a pre-loved enthusiast which also led to a value of enjoyment. For instance, Adam (Store 3) was not a regular pre-loved consumer but he always walked by that section because he found enjoyment there. On this occasion Adam (Store 3) purchased a newly produced t-shirt and he found a pre-loved cap which he purchased, this was unusual for him but it was also stated that this is why he always walks by the section “because you never know”.

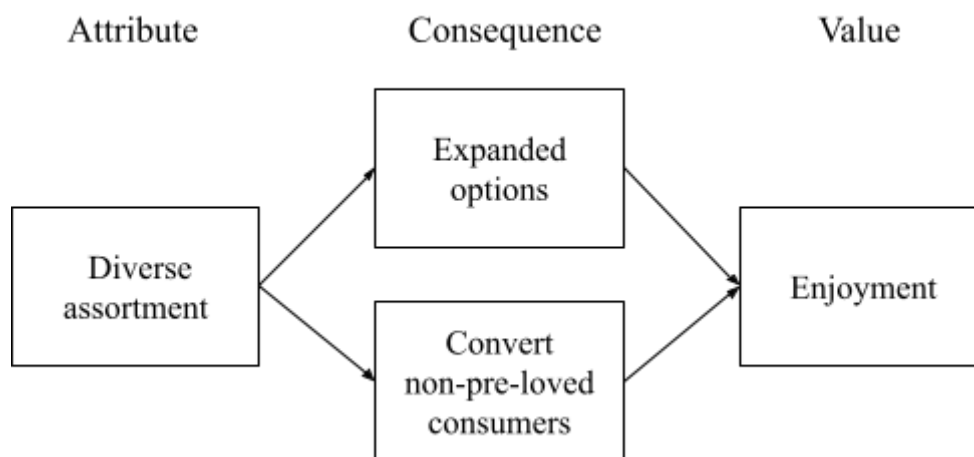
When arriving to the pre loved section he said:

I want to see if they have something nice and something that fits. Sometimes I feel they have some fun and unique things here, like this cap! I actually very rarely find anything in this section, but I think it's a bit fun and entertaining to check anyway [...] Second hand may not be for everyone, but I think the section can make it so that everyone who doesn't usually shop second hand might still consider shopping here, for example. At the same time, it might make people who usually shop second hand also come here (Adam, Store 3)

When asked the question ‘What do you think of stores like this that are a physical store that sells pre-loved while also having new clothes?’, Lisa responded:

I think it's great. [...] Then I think it can make people who maybe don't go to charity shops or thrift stores, they might still consider buying second hand here. Now, I already shop a bit, but I can really imagine that those who don't usually do it will start doing it here, which is good for the environment and so on. (Lisa, Store 4)

In Figure 6, thus, the linkage of the attribute "diverse range" illustrates how it leads to two outcomes: participants experiencing expanded options and the conversion of new pre-loved shopping customers. This, in turn, has been shown to contribute to the value of an enjoyable experience. Considering that decision-making, as per the MEC theory, is strongly influenced by the consumer's perceived value (Sundjaja, Utomo, Matthew, Hellianto & Putra 2024; Borgardt 2020), it's possible to interpret how an enjoyable experience and excitement resulting from the expanded options provided by the diverse range can be seen as reasons for preferring pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrift stores.



*Figure 6 - Linkage 3: Enjoyment Linkage*

## 5. Discussion

The increasing awareness of the environmental impacts of clothing production has propelled consumers to seek alternative options, resulting in a growing demand for second-hand, or pre-loved garments (Yan, Bae & Xu 2015). This sustainability-driven shift has encouraged traditional clothing stores to incorporate pre-loved sales into their business models, known as pre-loved initiatives (Svensk Handel, 2024). Given the novelty of these pre-loved initiatives, there is a lack of scientific research on the topic, including insufficient exploration of consumers' perceptions regarding the value of pre-loved items. Despite previous research examining consumer experiences with second-hand goods, an essential aspect has remained unexplored: how consumers perceive the integration of new pre-loved initiatives into existing, traditional clothing store environments, and how it differs from conventional thrifting stores.

This thesis confirms previous research indicating an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards pre-loved items (Park & Lin 2020), which also extends to positive reactions towards pre-loved initiatives in traditional clothing stores. According to this thesis, this favorable perception is associated with a range of values spanning economic, functional, emotional, and social dimensions. This research shows that consumers experienced an economic advantage when engaging with pre-loved initiatives, which aligns with previous studies that have highlighted how second-hand shopping is often associated with the opportunity to make wise economic choices and get more value for one's money (Paço et al. 2020). Participants especially appreciated the ability to acquire quality clothing at affordable prices, which not only enabled them to save money but also fostered a sense of economic responsibility and mindfulness in their purchasing decisions. On one hand, this highlights consumers' perception of the pre-loved initiative as economically valuable.

On the other hand, the findings also reveal the significant influence of customers' social networks, including friends and acquaintances, on their perception of pre-loved initiatives. These networks impacted participants' views of the store and its reputation, which was a significant factor behind their visits to the store and the pre-loved section. This suggests that customers' perceptions were influenced by their social circles, attributing both social and relational (Ng et al. 2023). These visits were often motivated by enjoyment of the experience rather than solely for making purchases, indicating that consumers found value beyond the

functional value of the products (Sheth, Newman & Gross 1991). The results show how pre-loved initiatives extend far beyond simple transactions; they foster a sense of community where sustainability and individual style expression are valued. This perspective provides an insight of how consumers and their social circles prioritize sustainable consumption, influencing their decision to purchase pre-loved products and shaping their perception accordingly. This aligns with previous research, which indicates that the acquisition of unique garments and engagement in second-hand shopping activities are utilized for personal expression and to affirm group membership (Yan, Bae & Xu 2015).

Furthermore, findings show that customers experienced a range of emotions associated with consuming pre-loved items and engaging within the pre-loved section. Feelings of excitement, inspiration, and personal satisfaction were frequently mentioned, underscoring the emotional fulfillment that contributes to the overall perception. On the one hand, previous research does not specifically address the emotional aspects of participating in second-hand environments. On the other hand, theoretical contexts emphasize a general aspect of shopping experiences where shopping is often described as an activity that evokes positive emotions (Kim, Gupta & Koh 2012). This was also evident among the participants in this research, who experienced feelings of excitement when engaging with pre-loved initiatives.

The combination of perceived value encompassing economic, social/relational, and emotional dimensions can be summarized in Figure 7 below, illustrating how these types of value collectively influence the perception of pre-loved initiatives within the traditional clothing store.

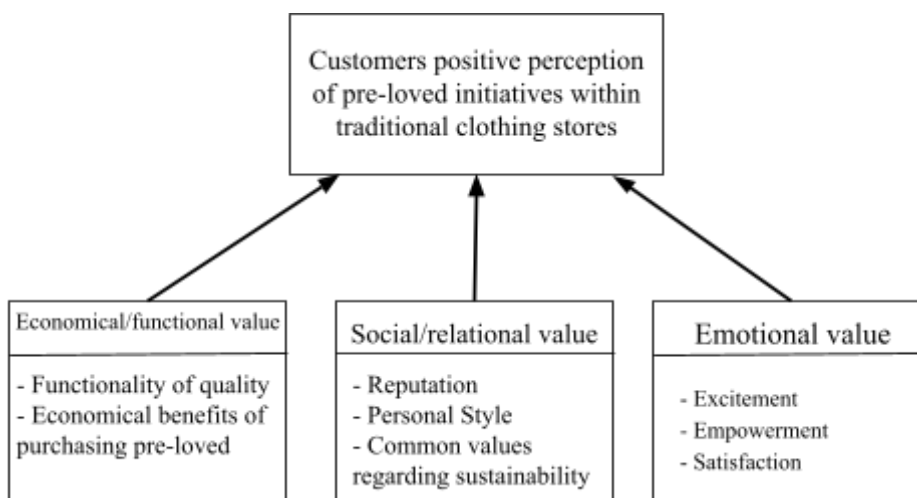


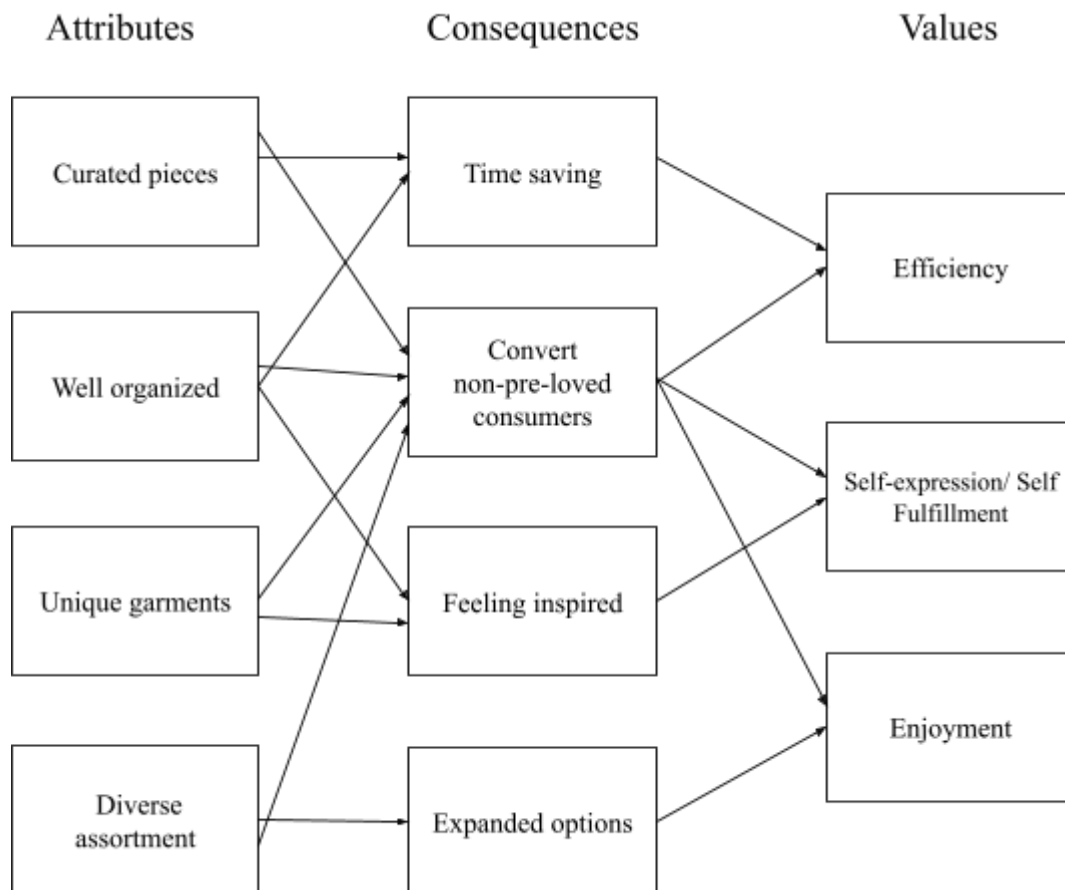
Figure 7 - The perception of pre-loved initiatives within traditional clothing stores

As previously mentioned, customers' perceived value can offer valuable insights into their perception of pre-loved initiatives. It became evident how the values presented in Figure 7 all provide insight into consumers' positive perceptions of pre-loved initiatives within traditional clothing stores.

Additionally, this thesis provides insights into the factors influencing consumers' preference for pre-loved initiatives over conventional thrift stores, addressing RQ2. Previous discussion have focused on the value that customers experience when interacting with the pre-loved initiative, which often aligns with previous research on general second-hand activities. However, there is a lack of research examining the factors influencing consumers' preferences for pre-loved initiatives. This knowledge gap motivates such investigation, which is presented in this study. When addressing the thesis' second research question, it becomes evident within the findings that various attributes, consequences, and perceived values play a role in shaping customers' preferences for pre-loved initiatives.

The study's unexpected findings firstly reveal an ongoing comparison between customers' perceptions of pre-loved initiatives and conventional thrift stores. Participants indicated that various attributes characterize the emerging phenomenon of pre-loved initiatives, yet these were not typically associated with their perception of conventional thrift stores. These attributes include curated pieces, unique garments, well-structured layouts, and diverse assortments. While "unique garments" have been recognized in previous research as a significant feature of general second-hand shopping (Yan, Bae & Xu 2015), this study has also discovered that these unique garments are a crucial attribute of pre-loved initiatives. Furthermore, it has been found that this uniqueness leads to the consequence of feeling inspired, adding value by enabling self-expression and self-fulfillment.

To visually present and summarize the findings regarding the factors influencing customers' preference for pre-loved initiatives, a map inspired by Lin, Fu & Chen (2019) has been developed. This map illustrates the connections between attributes, consequences, and values, as depicted in Figure 8.



*Figure 8 - Map of all linkages identified*

As seen in Figure 8, the attributes further lead to the consequences of time saving, feeling inspired and expanded options. The time-saving consequence is a result of the customer experiencing the attributes of a well-organized section that consists of curated pieces. Moreover, it is also possible to deduce how a well-organized section also leads to the consumer feeling inspired, which is also the case for the attribute of obtaining unique garments. Finally, it was highlighted how the combination of both pre-loved garments and new garments resulted in a consequence of the customer feeling that their choices expanded. Furthermore, this thesis revealed how the consequences of the perceived attributes led to various values of efficiency, self-expression/self-fulfillment, and enjoyment. Given that consumers are goal-oriented according to the MEC theory (Sundjaja et al., 2024), these values could be seen as the primary reasons of consumers preferring pre-loved initiatives within a traditional clothing setting, rather than conventional thrift stores.

Furthermore, the research also shed light on how the inclusion of pre-loved sections resulted in converting non-pre-loved consumers into considering or purchasing pre-loved items. As

depicted in Figure 8, all attributes are linked to the consequence of converting non-pre-loved consumers into pre-loved consumers. The findings show that both participants who originally were not interested in pre-loved, and participants who did have an earlier interest with general second-hand, expressed the crucial attributes of pre-loved, influencing them to their preference. For instance, participants such as Adam (Store 3), who were new to pre-loved shopping, explained how they seldom purchased pre-loved items but always browsed through them when available in a store. However, as observed, Adam found a pre-loved item he liked and decided to purchase it, thus transitioning him into a pre-loved consumer. Another pre-loved consumer, Anna, expressed that it was a bit dangerous for her as she almost always finds something in the pre-loved section and was a regular customer.

As can be seen in the findings, when customers described their newfound inclination to consider or actually purchase pre-loved items in the selected stores, seeing all the associated attributes, consequences, and values, they also emphasized the sustainability aspect of pre-loved garments. This can be explained by what was previously mentioned in the background of this thesis, that purchasing a pre-loved item is perceived and considered to be a better choice for the environment (Yan, Henninger & Brydges 2023; Geegamage, Ranaweea & Halwatura 2023). However, the consumer behaviors demonstrated by the participants Adam and Anna prompt inquiries into the true sustainability of pre-loved initiatives. While they and other participants may express a feeling of contributing to sustainability through their pre-loved purchases, the presence of impulsive buying and excessive consumption adds complexity to this perception, which may challenge the notion of pre-loved sections as a wholly sustainable consumption practice. This raises the question, can a pre-loved section in a traditional clothing store encourage consumers into overconsumption due to the easy access of curated and unique pieces rather than going to a conventional thrift store, and therefore be seen as a threat to sustainable consumption efforts? As the fashion industry significantly contributes to environmental harm, there's an urgent call to reevaluate consumption patterns (Geegamage, Ranaweea & Halwatura 2023). This suggests a need for a deeper examination of the overall impact and effectiveness of pre-loved initiatives in promoting sustainable consumer behavior.

While pre-loved sections offer benefits such as time-saving and expanded choices, concerns arise regarding impulse buying and overconsumption, potentially challenging customers' sustainable purchasing patterns, something that has proven to be crucial for the future of our

planet (Geegamage, Ranaweea & Halwatura 2023). Even though questions regarding consumer behavior and overconsumption arise, pre-loved consumption still appears to be a better choice in terms of sustainability for the consumer as it prolongs the life of the garment (ibid). Despite lingering concerns, embracing pre-loved items remains a crucial step towards fostering sustainable purchasing habits and mitigating the fashion industry's environmental footprint, signaling a promising path forward for a more sustainable future.

## 6. Conclusion

This study contributes knowledge on how customers perceive pre-loved initiatives and why they prefer it over shopping at a conventional thrift store, a topic not previously explored in research. Additionally, this study identifies different values that explain customer perceptions of pre-loved initiatives. By utilizing a qualitative shop-along method, which includes both semi-structured interviews and unstructured observations, and applying these to the theoretical frameworks of consumer value theory and the Means-End Chain Theory, this methodology enhances the understanding and analysis of the investigated field.

The study's findings regarding RQ1 'How do customers perceive the traditional clothing store's pre-loved initiative?', reveal a positive response from participants towards pre-loved initiatives in traditional clothing stores. Participants appreciated the initiatives, valuing the opportunity to find unique, high-quality items at affordable prices. Additionally, participants showed a growing appreciation for the sustainability aspect of pre-loved shopping, seeing it as a way to extend the lifespan of clothing items and reduce the need for new products. Positive recommendations also influenced participants' perceptions, enhancing their sense of community and belonging. Overall, consumers place value on the economic, functional, social, and emotional aspects of pre-loved shopping, seeking affordability, uniqueness, sustainability, and social connection. These insights deepen our understanding of customers preferences in the evolving retail landscape.

Findings related to RQ2, 'What factors influence customers' preferences for pre-loved items in a traditional clothing store compared to a conventional thrift store?', showed multiple factors explaining why customers are willing to choose a pre-loved section over shopping at conventional thrift stores. This is due to the attributes identified which are curated pieces, well organized sections, unique garments, and a diverse assortment. The consequences of these attributes were found to be time saving, conversion of non-pre-loved consumers, feelings of inspiration and expanded options. These consequences ultimately led to three experienced values; efficiency, self-expression/self-fulfillment and enjoyment. Firstly, the value of efficiency is evident, as consumers are attracted to well-organized and curated sections, leading to time-saving outcomes for both pre-loved enthusiasts and non-pre-loved consumers. Secondly, there is an emphasis on the emotional value of self-expression and fulfillment found in curated sections, which deepens engagement and converts non-pre-loved

consumers into advocates. Lastly, an enjoyable shopping experience, facilitated by a diverse range of offerings, enhances consumer choices and contributes to the conversion of new pre-loved shoppers.

Overall, these findings underscore the complexity of consumer preferences and perceptions, encompassing different attributes, consequences, and values. The three highlighted values, efficiency, self-expression/self-fulfillment, and enjoyment, explain why consumers prefer pre-loved sections over conventional thrift stores. Reflecting on these insights in the context of the broader issues initially motivating this study, it becomes clear that understanding these nuanced consumer behaviors is crucial for retailers. By integrating these values into their business strategies, retailers can create more relevant and effective second-hand offerings, contributing to sustainable consumption practices in the fashion industry. This study's findings therefore offer valuable implications for how traditional clothing stores can better meet evolving consumer demands and promote sustainability within the retail sector.

## **6.1 Future research**

This research aims to illuminate the varying perceptions of pre-loved initiatives among different consumers in a traditional clothing store and to identify the factors that influence their preference for pre-loved sections over conventional thrift stores. It is important to note that the scope of this study does not extend to generalizing the findings of consumers' perceptions of the initiative.

Since customer perception of pre-loved initiatives in traditional clothing store environments has not previously been studied, this research has adopted a broad perspective on customer perception and thus refrained from segmenting customers or stores. Future research endeavors may seek to delve into the variances among customer and store segments and their impact on interactions with and responses to pre-loved initiatives in traditional clothing store environments. This would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of customer behavior and preferences, and provide valuable insights for companies and stores who are aiming to create relevant and effective pre-loved offerings.

During the collection of the empirical data, another significant discovery emerged regarding the visibility of the pre-loved initiative in the stores. It was striking how the size of the general store relative to its pre-loved initiative influenced the overall perception, where the perception of the pre-loved initiative was stronger and more positive in stores with a broader range and more visible marketing of these alternatives. Where visibility was low or even concealed in other stores, a widespread sense of disappointment was noted among consumers. If any negative opinions were expressed, they tended to target the perception that the initiative was "diminishing" and considered too limited in scope. Some customers also felt confused when navigating the larger stores and not finding what they were originally looking for, namely pre-loved items. Several consumers expressed a desire for the initiative to encompass a significantly larger part of one's store's operation. It is therefore suggested that for future research investigate how the size of the store and its pre-loved section influences the customers perception more in depth.

It was also discovered in this research that the pre-loved initiative had a tendency to affect the consumer in a way of making an impulsive purchase. This was mostly due to the easy access of a well-organized, diverse assortment and the feeling of purchasing a bargain. Therefore, recommendation for future research is suggested to look further into this as this can lead to overconsumption or purchasing unnecessary items that the consumer is not in need for. As also indicated by Geegamage, Ranaweea and Halwatura (2023), the authors explain how our present era is characterized by a consumption pattern that falls short and that consumer perception towards the value of pre-loved consumption still needs empirical understanding. Further research is therefore needed to fully comprehend the potential consequences of these purchasing behaviors.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1 - interview guide

### Introducing questions:

1. Have you visited this store before?
2. What prompted you to come here today?
  - Additional question: how do you perceive the store itself when you enter?
3. Are you looking for anything specific here today?
  - Additional question: Why are you looking for this?

### Questions during the shopping

*Regardless of whether they were within the pre-loved section or not:*

4. What do you consider to be particularly valuable in this store?
  - Additional question: does it differ from other retail/clothing stores?
5. What are your thoughts as you walk around here? Where are you headed?
6. Do you believe this store has a good reputation/why or why not?
  - Additional question: Do you usually come here with friends or alone?
7. Do you think the products in the store seem sustainable?
8. If a garment is touched: What are you looking for?

### *If they see/move within the pre-loved section:*

9. What led you to visit this section?
10. How do you perceive it?
11. What value do you see in this section?
12. What do you think about the products they have in this section?

### *If they do not see/move within the pre-loved section:*

13. Did you notice anything different about this store?

*Regardless of whether they were within the pre-loved section or not:*

14. Are you interested in second hand/pre-loved?
  - Additional question: what have your earlier experiences been?

- Additional question if talking about conventional thrift stores: do you usually purchase second hand/pre-loved?
15. How would you describe your experience of the store visit?
  16. What do you think the store could have done differently to enhance your store visit experience?
  17. Would you have consumed differently if the store had a larger selection of pre-loved products?

*If they have interacted within pre-loved:*

18. What led you to consume this pre-loved garment? / What prevented you from making a purchase?
19. Has your perception changed about this store since they introduced a pre-loved section?

*If they have not interacted within pre-loved:*

20. Did you notice that the store had a section with used garments inside?
21. What do you think about physical stores that sell new and used garments in the same area?
22. What could have been different for you to notice this pre-loved section they have? - Would you have wanted to see it?

**Before saying goodbye:**

23. Is there anything you would like to add about your visit today?