

Challenging Overconsumption: Do Second-Hand Markets Provide a Solution or Bear a Hidden Cost?

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Podcast Description

Is second-hand shopping truly sustainable? This episode explores the paradox of resale markets - while they provide potential solutions to our throwaway culture, growing commercialization may be feeding rather than fighting overconsumption. With a critical assessment of both the potential benefits and possible negatives of second-hand markets, we explore how to move beyond simple resale solutions to address the root causes of the overconsumption issue.

Transcript

Welcome to Debating Marketing & Climate Change, where we explore innovative solutions for a more sustainable future. Today, we're diving into a fascinating paradox: Are second-hand markets the solution to overconsumption, or are they themselves becoming part of the problem?

Before we go into today's topic, I would like to ask my listeners to picture this for me. Imagine yourself walking into a vintage store - like Armstrong & Son in Edinburgh, one of my favourite spots. Packed among the tight spaces are leather jackets from the 1960s and vintage dresses from the 1920s. Every piece tells a story, each garment gets a second chance at life instead of gathering dust in someone's wardrobe or worse, ending up in a landfill.

This scene represents what many see as the ideal of second-hand markets - It is not only the exchange space for used or pre-owned products (Hristova, 2019) but also gives new life to old items while reducing waste. And this is a rapidly growing market. The global second-hand market is currently valued at nearly \$200 billion, with a projected growth to \$300 billion by 2026 (Thredup, 2024). Even luxury brands like Gucci and Balenciaga are jumping on the bandwagon, partnering with resale platforms and promoting what they call the "circular fashion revolution" (Inflow, 2024).

But before we celebrate this growth, let's understand what we're trying to fix. Overconsumption can be understood as a complex resource dilemma, where the total resource size is unknown, the access to these resources are unequal and we, as consumers, lack clear information about how our consumption choices impact these resources (Brown & Cameron, 2000). While the roots of the problem are complex, the figures are rather simple: if everyone on Earth consumed like the average British person, we'd need 2.6 planets to sustain our lifestyle (Earth Overshoot Day, 2023). This unsustainable level of consumption is closely tied to our current "linear" system- we make, use, and throw away, with little thought about the consequences. It's a system that promotes obsolescence by shortening product lifespan and increasing repair fees, a system that is fuelling a throwaway mindset that we embrace, a relic from our industrial race (Gullstrand Edbring, et al., 2016).

Second-hand markets seem like a perfect solution to this issue. Take the example of cotton t-shirts - recycling one ton of t-shirts saves about one ton of carbon but reusing them could save twelve times that amount (Zero Waste Scotland, 2025). And It's not just about carbon either; it's about extending product life cycles and reducing the need for new production.

However - and this is where it gets complicated - recent research suggests that the growing commercialization of second-hand markets might be undermining their potential to address overconsumption. First is what we call 'the affordance paradox', as research by Dekhili et al., (2025) shows that the very features that make second-hand platforms more accessible, like transaction facilities and promotional bundles, are triggering increased consumption. Think of your neighbourhood charity shop, the convenience plus affordability means thrifting that 7-pound dress is just irresistible, and the online platforms like Vinted, where the process of buying and selling are increasingly simplified and regular notifications on price drops and new offers are designed to promote impulsive consumption. This creates what researchers term a "circular rebound effect," where the environmental benefits of reuse are offset by increased consumption volume (Dekhili et al., 2025).

Moreover, we're seeing a profound "profit versus purpose" dilemma. For-profit businesses entering the market are prioritizing financial returns over environmental benefits (Persson & Hinton, 2023). This is forcing traditional non-profit organizations to potentially compromise their social missions just to remain competitive. Some for-profit businesses even rely on revenue from selling new clothes to sustain their second-hand operations – meaning that they support the fast-fashion system they're supposed to be replacing. Take for example the resale platform launched by Zara and Shein. While these companies claim to be promoting circularity, industry expert like Maxine Bédar points out that they might actually increase consumption of new items, because people are led to believe their purchases have no consequences as they now can be resold (Webb, 2022). Shein even admitted themselves that resale threatens to cannibalize the sale of new items (Webb, 2022) - suggesting their move into resale is more about controlling the second-hand market than promoting sustainability.

So where does the solution lie? Well, it may in fact lie with us, the consumers. We have seen the good of second-hand markets, the non-profit organizations promoting prolonged product lifespan to achieve environmental and social benefits, and we have seen the bad, the for-profit actors leveraging the sustainability trend only to drive further consumption. And as consumers, we hold the power. Every purchase decision we make is a vote for the kind of system we want to support. When we choose where to buy and sell our second-hand items, we're not just making a transaction - we're supporting a particular business model and its associated values. And so, consider where you want to buy and sell. Support local non-profit organizations and be wary of greenwashing. Just because a platform sells second-hand items doesn't mean it's automatically sustainable. Look at their overall business model and consider what else they're selling. Finally, remember that buying second-hand isn't a license to consume more. The most sustainable item is still the one you don't buy.

To conclude today's episode, the second-hand market is indeed standing at a crossroads. Will it become a true alternative to our throwaway culture, or just another face of consumerism? The answer depends on the choices we make as consumers. What we need isn't just a change in where

we buy our clothes, but a fundamental shift from self-interested consumerist values to prosocial and pro-environmental values (Brown & Cameron, 2000, p.2), moving beyond seeing second-hand simply as a way to save money or find unique items and instead as part of a broader movement toward truly sustainable consumption.

Thank you for listening, I'll see you next time!

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