



Circular Fashion in Practice: How Thrift Stores Champion the Circular Economy and Drive Sustainability

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Abstract

The fashion industry is among the world's most polluting sectors, responsible for approximately 8% of global carbon emissions and significant water consumption. In Brazil, the rise of thrift stores has introduced a sustainable alternative aligned with the circular economy, which emphasizes reducing waste through reuse and recycling. Thrift stores contribute to this model by extending the lifecycle of clothing, thus decreasing demand for new production and conserving resources. This study examines thrift stores to understand their role in the circular economy evaluating the city of Maringa, Parana as a case study. Using a qualitative multi-case approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with store owners. Findings indicate that thrift stores contribute significantly to sustainability by offering second-hand clothing options and raising awareness about environmental impact. However, challenges remain, such as a limited use of environmental metrics. The results highlight thrift stores' potential in fostering a sustainable fashion industry, addressing environmental, economic and social aspects.

Keywords: Circular economy; Sustainability in fashion; Thrift stores; Conscious consumption

Introduction

The fashion industry remains one of the most polluting industries in the world, responsible for approximately 8% of global carbon emissions. Additionally, it consumes between 20 and 200 trillion liters of water annually, making it one of the largest water consumers globally. Textile dyeing is the world's second largest water polluter and producing a single pair of jeans can require about 7,500 liters of water. Reports highlight that labor conditions resembling modern slavery persist in supply chains, particularly in sectors like textiles and agriculture, where workers are often subjected to excessive hours, inadequate pay, and unsafe working environments. As noted by Landman and Silverman, the lack of political and economic freedoms in some regions exacerbates these exploitative conditions, trapping

workers in cycles of economic and social vulnerability. Economically, the global textile sector was valued at approximately USD 1.837 trillion in 2023, reflecting its significant weight in the world economy [1].

According to Ferraro et al., motivations for second-hand shopping have evolved, with fashion now being a significant factor driving consumer behavior in this market. This article aims to explore how thrift stores, also referred to as "brechos", vintage stores, second-hand stores, consignment shops and used clothing stores, contribute to the circular economy, highlighting their environmental, economic and social impacts.

In Brazil, where fashion represents a significant portion of the GDP, the thrift store market has gained prominence as a sustainable alternative to traditional consumption. According to the Brazilian Association of Thrift Stores-ABB, the country now has over 10,000 registered thrift stores, generating approximately 500 million reais annually. This growth reflects a search for more conscious consumption practices aligned with the concept of the circular economy, which seeks to reduce resource extraction and waste by promoting product reuse, material recovery and recycling [2].

Beyond sustainability, the increase in thrift store consumption is also driven by economic and social motivations. Many consumers cite affordability, quality and uniqueness of items as appealing factors, while the positive environmental impact and ethical awareness have become decisive for a growing segment of the public. Data shows that globally, the second-hand market is expected to double by 2027, spurred by shifting consumption habits, especially among younger consumers who consider sustainability and environmental impact in their purchasing decisions.

The circular economy concept aims to replace the traditional linear model of extract, produce, discard with a regenerative system that promotes reuse, reconditioning and recycling materials, aiming to reduce waste and maximize resource efficiency, thereby contributing to environmental, economic and social sustainability. However, challenges such as thermodynamic limits, system boundaries and governance can hinder its effectiveness. Research suggests that adopting circular practices could reduce resource use and environmental impact by up to 80% in some sectors. Despite these benefits, overcoming barriers like cross-sector collaboration and technological lock-in is essential for broad implementation [3].

In recent years, the concept of a circular economy has become a key approach to reducing waste and resource use, especially in the fashion industry. The second-hand fashion market plays a vital role in the circular economy by extending the life of products through reuse. Consumers actively participate as buyers and sellers, contributing to sustainability by promoting alternative consumption models.

Additionally, thrift stores contribute to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8, 12 and 13. SDG 8 seeks to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work. Thrift stores align with this goal by generating jobs, supporting local economies and creating entrepreneurship opportunities, particularly in vulnerable communities. SDG 12 aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, a principle that thrift stores embrace by promoting product reuse, reducing the demand for new production and conserving resources. Finally, SDG 13 focuses on taking urgent action

to combat climate change and its impacts. By reducing demand for new clothing, thrift stores contribute to lowering carbon emissions and water consumption, mitigating the environmental impact of the fashion industry [4].

This work aims to analyze the role of thrift stores in advancing the circular economy within the fashion sector, highlighting the environmental, economic and social benefits they bring. This study explores how thrift stores extend the life cycle of clothing and reduce waste, while also navigating the challenges and opportunities involved in promoting a sustainable model. By examining these factors, the research seeks to answer key questions such as: What is the socio-environmental impact of the fashion industry? What motivates customers to choose thrift stores for their clothing purchases, from the thrift stores perspective? What is the current state of the circular economy within the fashion market? How do thrift stores help minimize these impacts through circular practices? These questions guide an in-depth look at how thrift stores contribute to a more circular and sustainable fashion system [5].

Materials and Methods

The circular economy emerges as an alternative to the traditional linear economic model, which follows the cycle of extract, produce, discard. This linear model, predominant in modern society, has led to the depletion of natural resources and excessive waste generation, posing a threat to long-term environmental sustainability. In the fashion sector, this reality is especially concerning, as this industry is one of the most polluting globally, with fast production cycles and increasing volumes of waste. In contrast, the circular economy proposes an approach that aims to keep materials and products in use for as long as possible by promoting reuse, repurposing and recycling, thereby minimizing environmental impacts.

In the context of sustainable fashion, the circular economy gains relevance, particularly through initiatives aimed at extending the lifecycle of clothing. One such initiative is the operation of thrift stores, establishments that promote the resale of used clothing, extending its usefulness. These thrift stores play an important role in reducing the need for new garment production, which in turn conserves natural resources like water and energy and decreases textile waste generation, a major source of pollution in the fast fashion sector. Additionally, thrift stores offer a practical and accessible solution for consumers, encouraging adoption of a more conscious and responsible consumption model [6].

The environmental impact of the linear fashion production model is evident. Mass production of clothing consumes large quantities of resources and contributes to pollution through intensive industrial processes. Adding to this is the premature disposal of clothes that are often still in good condition but discarded due to reasons such as changing trends or light wear. This further exacerbates the problem of textile waste, which accumulates in landfills. In this context, the circular economy, with its focus on material reuse, emerges as a viable solution to minimize the environmental impacts of fashion.

In addition to environmental benefits, the circular economy also offers economic and social advantages. In the case of thrift stores, the resale model allows consumers access to quality clothing at more affordable prices, encouraging more conscious consumption. These establishments not only offer second-hand clothes but often serve as advocates for awareness, promoting campaigns that educate consumers on the benefits of responsible consumption. The economic

role of thrift stores also stands out for its support of local economies, generating jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities, particularly in more vulnerable communities.

Consumers play a central role in the implementation of the circular economy in the fashion sector. The success of thrift stores depends on consumers' willingness to embrace buying and selling used clothes, a shift that has been gradually taking place. Studies show that factors like cost-effectiveness, environmental impact and even fashion trends directly influence consumer behavior, with a growing appreciation for purchasing second-hand clothing. This movement is essential to strengthen the circular model and reach a broader audience, enabling a more effective transition to sustainable fashion [7].

However, implementing the circular economy in fashion faces significant challenges. Among these are the lack of adequate infrastructure for textile waste collection and recycling, and consumer resistance, as some still prefer to buy new clothes over used items. Additionally, there are technological and economic barriers that make it difficult for large fashion companies to adopt circular business models, particularly due to the initial costs associated with transitioning to this new model.

A practice gaining traction in thrift stores is "upcycling," which involves the creative transformation of used clothing into new products with higher added value. This practice not only extends the life of clothing but also reduces the volume of waste generated by the fashion industry and fosters innovation in sustainable design. Upcycling offers an appealing alternative for consumers who wish to dress uniquely and sustainably while supporting the circular economy. Additionally, some textile recycling initiatives have been implemented, with thrift stores promoting clothing collection for recycling and reuse in new product manufacturing [8].

Thrift stores also play a fundamental role in environmental education by raising consumer awareness about the importance of responsible consumption. By offering sustainable and accessible alternatives, such as the sale of second-hand clothing, these establishments challenge the logic of fast and disposable consumption. Marketing campaigns that promote reuse and sustainability have been crucial in transforming consumer perceptions of thrift stores, which are often seen merely as low-cost options, but are now increasingly valued as part of a sustainable solution.

Innovation is a determining factor in the transition to a circular fashion model. Fashion companies and thrift stores are exploring new technologies that facilitate textile recycling and the creation of more sustainable materials. Furthermore, the digitalization of thrift stores has been an important step in expanding their reach, allowing more consumers to access second-hand clothing through online platforms. E-commerce makes it easier to buy and sell used items, contributing to the democratization of sustainable fashion and promoting more conscious consumption [9].

In addition to environmental and economic impact, thrift stores also promote social inclusion. By offering affordable clothing, they make fashion more democratic and accessible to people from different social classes. These establishments also generate job opportunities, especially for women and minorities, contributing to inclusion and local economic development. In many cases, thrift stores are operated by community organizations or social initiatives that seek not only to reduce environmental impact but also to generate a positive social impact.

For the circular economy to consolidate in the fashion sector, public policies that encourage sustainable practices are essential. This includes creating tax incentives for companies that adopt circular models and taxing businesses that continue operating in the linear model, thus contributing to resource waste. Additionally, awareness campaigns promoted by governments and NGOs are necessary to educate both consumers and companies about the benefits of the circular economy and how they can contribute to this movement.

The future of thrift stores in circular fashion is promising. As awareness of the environmental impacts of fast fashion grows and consumer behavior shifts, the second-hand clothing market is expected to continue expanding. Furthermore, technological innovation and digitalization should further facilitate access to these products, allowing an increasing number of people to adopt more sustainable consumption practices. Thus, thrift stores have the potential to become an even more integral part of the fashion industry, helping to shape a more sustainable future.

Therefore, thrift stores are an essential component of the circular economy in the fashion sector, promoting reuse and the extension of clothing life cycles. Beyond the obvious environmental benefits, this business model offers economic and social advantages, making fashion more accessible and inclusive for all. However, to fully realize the potential of thrift stores, challenges related to infrastructure, regulation and consumer awareness need to be addressed. With the right strategies and the support of public policies, thrift stores can continue to play a crucial role in transforming the fashion industry into a more sustainable and responsible sector.

Research method

This article is based on research by Barbaritano et al. and Jesus et al. and presents a qualitative cross-case study aimed at understanding how thrift stores in the city of Maringa contribute to the circular economy in the fashion sector. This method employs an empirical investigation that assesses multiple cases, seeking to understand the unique aspects of each thrift store and identify each store's current context, followed by a cross-case analysis to identify shared patterns and practices. Thus, this methodology forms a multiple-case study that yields a unique set of conclusions.

This study employs a multi-case study approach, particularly well-suited for examining contemporary phenomena and practices, as it enables an in-depth exploration of under-researched areas. Although qualitative research generally prioritizes depth over breadth, the use of multiple cases allows for the identification of recurring patterns and insights across different entities, thereby enriching the analysis. According to Creswell, while a larger number of cases may dilute individual case depth, including multiple, purposefully selected cases enhances the study's robustness without sacrificing detailed analysis.

In this context, a structured plan was developed for conducting the case study, including problem definition, objective setting and data collection, followed by analysis, discussion and final considerations, as presented in Figure 1.

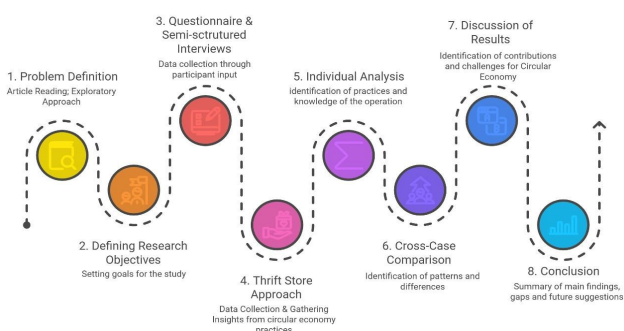


Figure 1: Structure used for research using multi-case study analysis.

After structuring the research, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to gather comprehensive information directly from thrift store owners. A semi-structured questionnaire is a research tool that combines predefined questions with the flexibility to explore new topics as they arise, allowing for both consistency in responses and depth in understanding participants' unique insights. This study was conducted in the city of Maringa, where 46 thrift stores were identified. Of these, 16 owners agreed to participate, providing a meaningful and diverse sample of perspectives from within the city. This number aligns with Creswell's guidance, which suggests that at least five cases are typically sufficient to achieve meaningful insights, especially for studies not aiming for broad generalizability. The selected sample provides an adequate foundation for understanding the contribution of thrift stores to the circular economy in Maringa while balancing depth and variety across cases.

The survey form was developed by the authors with the aim of addressing the research problem outlined in the introduction. The structure of the questionnaire includes questions focused on characterizing the thrift stores, understanding the operations of each establishment, characterizing the clientele from the perspective of the thrift stores and exploring owners' views on the circular economy. Figure 2 illustrates the structure of the form, highlighting the subgroups mentioned and all the questions posed to the respondents.

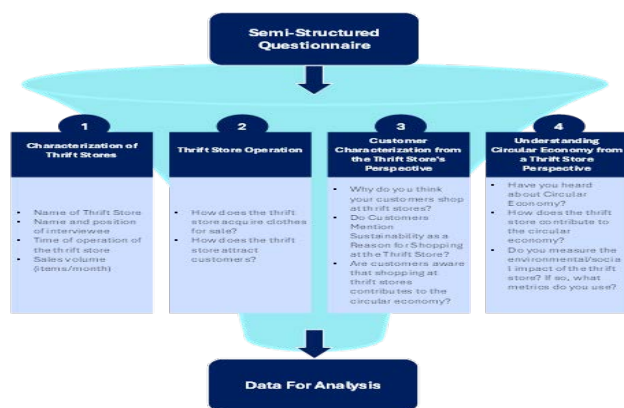


Figure 2: Semi-structured questionnaire for multiple case studies.

Results and Discussion

Characterization of thrift stores

Upon analyzing all the data, it was observed that all thrift stores in the study are in Maringa, Parana, Brazil, highlighting the regional

focus of the research and allowing for insights into the local impact on sustainable fashion practices. Every respondent was an owner, underscoring the direct involvement of business leaders in the study and ensuring that the insights gathered reflect first-hand operational and strategic perspectives. Table 1 shows some of the findings with the questionnaire summarized.

Thrift store	Thrift store age	Sales volume (unit/month)	Know circular economy?	Have indicators?
#1	3-5 years	1000	Yes	No
#2	>5 years	30	Yes	No
#3	3-5 years	1900	Yes	Yes
#4	1-3 years	500	No	No
#5	3-5 years	700	Yes	No
#6	>5 years	-	Yes	No
#7	1-3 years	800	Yes	No
#8	3-5 years	70	Yes	No
#9	>5 years	6000	Yes	No
#10	3-5 years	150	Yes	No
#11	1-3 years	500	Yes	No
#12	1-3 years	300	Yes	No
#13	1-3 years	350	Yes	No
#14	<1 year	170	Yes	No
#15	3-5 years	125	Yes	No
#16	1-3 years	-	Yes	No

Table 1: Thrift stores characterization.

The analysis shows a promising trend in female entrepreneurship within the sustainable fashion sector, as evidenced by 88% of the thrift store owners surveyed being women (Figure 3). This outcome aligns with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal #5 (SDG 5), which emphasizes gender equality and the empowerment of women, Goal #12 (SDG 12), which emphasizes responsible consumption and production patterns to ensure sustainable resource use and reduce environmental impact and Goal #8 (SDG 8), which emphasizes promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

According to the 2024 SDG progress report, advancements in gender equality have been gradual, with ongoing challenges such as gender disparity in managerial roles and persistent high rates of violence against women and girls.

The prevalence of women-led thrift stores in Maringa, however, reflects a positive development that supports SDG 5's objectives, particularly in terms of women's active participation in business and economic growth.

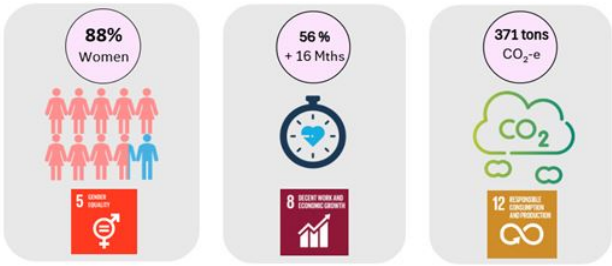


Figure 3: Thrift store contribution.

Additionally, the longevity of thrift stores in Maringa supports the principles of Sustainable Development Goal #8 (SDG 8), which promotes sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, as well as productive employment. The fact that 56% of the thrift stores in this study have been in operation for more than 16 months compared to the average lifespan of 10 to 16 months for 50% of new businesses in Brazil highlights the sector's resilience. This resilience contributes to the local economy by creating stable business opportunities and fostering employment, particularly in a sector increasingly aligned with sustainability.

The thrift store model aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goal #12 (SDG 12), which seeks to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. This goal emphasizes the need to reduce resource use, minimize waste and promote more efficient use of materials throughout the lifecycle of goods and services. By extending the lifespan of clothing and reducing textile waste, thrift stores play a critical role in addressing the growing challenges of overproduction and overconsumption in the fashion industry. SDG 12 also highlights the importance of fostering a circular economy one where resources are reused, repaired and recycled to minimize environmental impact. Thrift stores embody these principles, offering consumers an accessible way to participate in sustainable practices while raising awareness about the environmental and social consequences of fast fashion. Additionally, they address economic and social dimensions by providing affordable clothing options and often supporting local communities, making them key enablers of a holistic approach to sustainability (Figure 4).

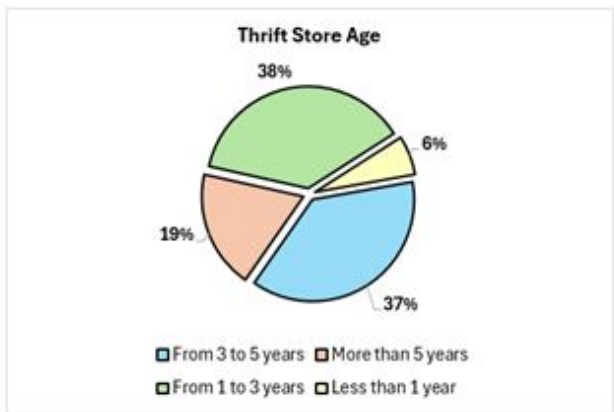


Figure 4: Thrift stores age.

Regarding the types of clothing sold, most thrift stores focus on selling used clothing, especially for the female audience (94%). Another popular trend is the sale of vintage clothing (50%). Vintage clothing consists of historical, older pieces recognized for specific styles, unique characteristics, production periods and quality, with the used aspect taking a secondary role (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Type of clothes sold at thrift stores.

Within the study group, one thrift store specialized in children’s clothing, one complemented its sales with new clothing obtained through partnerships with manufacturers and one, besides selling used clothing, had its own production line, using recycled macrame threads.

The average sales volume ranged from 6,000 pieces per month to 30 pieces per month, highlighting variations in the size and maturity of the thrift stores. The average monthly sales for the sample analyzed are approximately 900 pieces. While some respondents were unable to provide precise data, these numbers reflect the substantial contribution of thrift stores to the circular economy by keeping clothing in use and reducing the demand for new items (Figure 6).

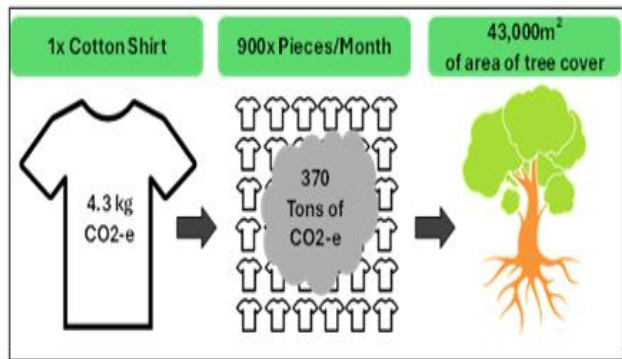


Figure 6: CO₂-e Impact of cotton shirt production.

Studies like Kirchain reveal that each cotton T-shirt produced emits approximately 4.3 kg of CO₂-e into the atmosphere. Based on the average of 899 items sold monthly, if these were cotton T-shirts, thrift stores would collectively avoid 3.8 tons of CO₂-e emissions per establishment each month. For the 16 thrift stores studied, this translates to 371 tons of CO₂-e avoided annually, equivalent to the carbon sequestered by 43,000 m² of tree cover in one year.

Other studies, such as Laitala, suggest that a garment’s lifespan is around 4 years. This indicates that the services provided by thrift stores extend this lifespan, reducing the need for new items to be manufactured and minimizing environmental impact. These findings align with Sustainable Development Goal #12 (SDG 12), which emphasizes sustainable consumption and production. By fostering practices that retain garments in circulation and reduce the demand for new manufacturing, thrift stores contribute to the circular economy. Their operations support a shift toward more sustainable resource use and waste reduction in the fashion industry.

Thrift store operation

In terms of operations, the study examined how thrift stores acquire their clothing and attract customers. The collected data is presented in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Sources of thrift stores inventory.

The primary method of acquiring clothing is through direct purchase from individuals, used by 75% of thrift stores. This involves buying used clothing from people willing to sell, a practice known in the thrift industry as “curation.” It entails visiting potential suppliers and evaluating each piece individually before purchasing, with buyers or owners often seeking to understand each piece’s history.

The second most common method is consignment, where the thrift store holds another person’s clothing for sale and once sold, shares the profit part going to the store and part to the original owner. This method is used by 56% of the studied thrift stores.

Consignment and direct purchasing from individuals in thrift stores are closely connected to the circular economy, as both practices extend the life cycle of clothing, avoiding new production and premature disposal (Figure 8).



Figure 8: How do the thrift shops approach their customers?

Regarding advertising, 100% of thrift stores use digital marketing strategies on social media platforms to attract customers. Another common practice is partnering with digital influencers who promote thrift stores in exchange for discounts or items. In the sample, only two thrift stores used a website for promotion and only three carried out socio-environmental responsibility actions, showing that there is room to better promote and enhance the visibility of thrift stores in Maringa.

Characterization of customers from the thrift store's perspective

Another objective of the research was to understand how thrift stores view their customers. To this end, owners were asked why they

believe their customers purchase their products. The responses are presented in Figure 9 below.



Figure 9: Why customers buy from thrift stores (from the Thrift store’s perspective).

When asked about this topic, 81% of owners believe that customers shop at their stores, because they have more affordable prices, 69% of them believe that another reason is exclusivity and unique pieces, followed by 63% who believe they sell due to an interest in sustainable fashion and conscious consumption. Additionally, 50% think their sales occur because customers want to support local businesses.

The data from this topic indicates that, even if unconsciously, customers recognize that shopping at thrift stores contributes to environmental sustainability. This further highlights the potential of this business model to support the circular economy within the fashion industry.

Assessment of thrift stores’ understanding of the circular economy

The last set of questions in the survey aimed to assess thrift stores’ understanding of the circular economy. The first question sought to determine whether thrift stores were familiar with the concepts of the circular economy.

The answers showed that 15 out of 16 thrift stores (94%) have already heard about this concept and only 1 (6%) have not, indicating that the term “circular economy” is well-known in this field. When asked how thrift stores contribute to the circular economy, the responses in were obtained.

It is important to mention that this question was an open question in which the interviewees had written some sentences. Their response was interpreted and classified into 6 main ways on how they support circular economy. Figure 10 below summarizes the results.



Figure 10: How thrift stores contribute to the circular economy.

Thrift store 4 stands out, as it was unable to identify how its business contributes to the circular economy, likely because it was also unfamiliar with the concept. Thrift store 3 and 9 presented the highest number of contributions. It's worth noting that Thrift store 3 and 9, among those studied, has the highest sales volume and a larger structure compared to the others (1900 pieces/month and 6000 pieces/month consecutively), which may explain its greater understanding of how its business impacts the surrounding environment.

When asked about the use of environmental indicators, only thrift store 3 reported employing such metrics. The owner highlighted a practice of quantifying the number of denim or jeans pieces sold each month and estimating the volume of water saved by preventing the production of new items. While the owner did not share detailed calculations, this practice underscores the potential for thrift stores to track and communicate their environmental contributions.

Studies on the jeans production process identify four primary stages: Cotton production, spinning, weaving and processing and manufacturing and finishing. Among these, the processing stage alone requires an average of 50 liters of water per kilogram of treated jeans.

According to Semba et al. the average weight of a pair of jeans is approximately 0.7 kg. Taking into account the entire production chain, including cotton cultivation, dyeing and finishing, the total water footprint for producing a single pair of jeans can reach an estimated 7,500 liters.

Given this significant resource demand, the resale of second-hand jeans through thrift stores plays a crucial role in reducing water consumption by eliminating the need for new production. This practice not only conserves natural resources but also aligns with principles of the circular economy, fostering sustainability by extending the lifespan of garments and reducing environmental impacts associated with textile production. The shift toward second-hand clothing can thus be seen as a viable strategy for addressing the ecological challenges posed by the fashion industry.

These practices align with Sustainable Development Goal #6 (SDG 6), which emphasizes ensuring sustainable water management and reducing water scarcity. By extending the lifecycle of jeans, thrift stores help mitigate the substantial water demands of new production, contributing to more responsible resource use and reinforcing the importance of integrating circular economy principles into the fashion industry.

It is evident that indicators, especially environmental ones, are rarely used, and measuring environmental outcomes in thrift stores appears to be an infrequent or unused practice. This highlights a future opportunity to adopt such measures and to communicate the business' environmental impact in a more appealing way to the public and the community at large.

Finally, the owners were asked whether, in their view, customers understand what the circular economy is and whether they mention sustainability as a reason for their purchases. The data is presented in Figures 11 and 12.

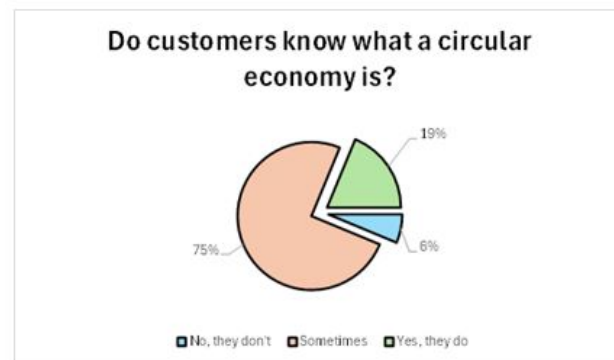


Figure 11: Do customers know what a circular economy is?

It is noticeable that not all thrift store customers know what the circular economy is, indicating that the concept is still not widely recognized, even in an industry with a strong sustainability appeal.

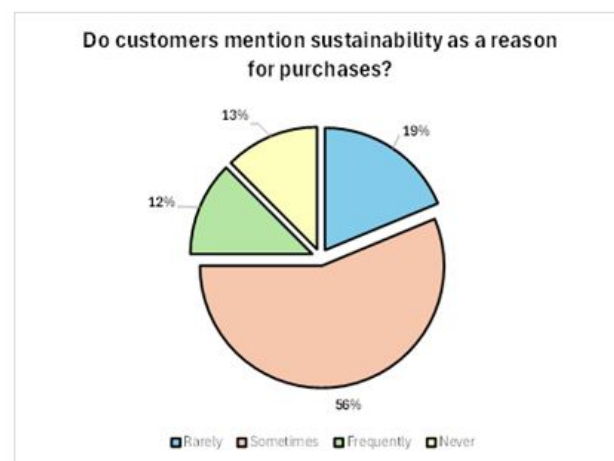


Figure 12: Do customers mention sustainability as a reason for purchases?

However, when asked if customers mention sustainability as a reason for purchasing, it is observed that this argument is frequently used by those who shop there.

Thrift stores and circular economy

The concept of circular economy is well represented in the diagram from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

The analysis of thrift store operations identified several practices that align with the framework proposed by Ellen MacArthur, primarily within the technical cycle. These practices include the resale, reuse and redistribution of clothing, as well as repair and maintenance activities aimed at extending the lifespan of vintage garments. Recycling was also observed in the case of Thrift store 2, which incorporates recycled fabric into its production processes. Additionally, the consignment model adopted by some thrift stores reflects the concept of sharing within the technical cycle.

In contrast, the regeneration practice aligns with the biological cycle, as it focuses on reducing the consumption of renewable resources, such as water and mitigating Greenhouse Gas (GHG)

emissions. These efforts contribute to minimizing environmental impacts while promoting circularity in resource use.

To illustrate these correlations, Figure 13 presents an adaptation of the original diagram, highlighting the intersection between the practices of thrift stores and the principles of circular economy.

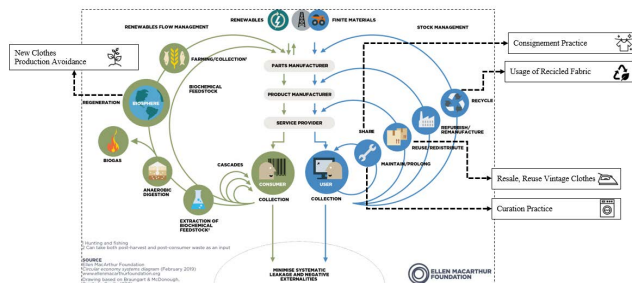


Figure 13: Adapted circular economy butterfly diagram.

Ultimately, thrift stores play a supportive role in advancing the principles of the circular economy by implementing practices such as avoiding new clothing production, utilizing recycled fabrics, reselling vintage clothing and curating pre-owned items. These actions effectively extend the lifespan of garments, reduce waste and diminish the demand for raw materials. Through strategies like consignment and redistribution, thrift stores help bridge gaps in the traditional linear fashion system, fostering a shift toward sustainable consumption and production. By encouraging consumers to participate in these sustainable practices, thrift stores not only reduce environmental impacts but also promote greater awareness of the value of prolonging product life and embracing more responsible consumption patterns.

Conclusion

This qualitative multiple-case study examined how thrift stores in the city of Maringa contribute to the circular economy in the fashion sector, focusing on acquisition practices, environmental impact and customer profiles. The data revealed that thrift stores play a significant role in the circular economy by extending the lifespan of clothing and reducing the consumption of new resources. Among the most common practices, direct purchases from individuals and consignment were highlighted as sustainable acquisition methods that extend product life cycles and minimize textile waste.

Although sustainable practices are present, this study also revealed a low use of environmental impact indicators, representing a future opportunity for these establishments. Implementing environmental performance metrics, such as avoided CO₂ emissions and water savings, could strengthen the communication of thrift stores' positive impact, enhancing their appeal to environmentally conscious consumers.

The above-average longevity of thrift stores in Maringa suggests that this sector, particularly focused on circular economy and conscious consumption, not only survives but may even thrive in the region. This trend could be attributed to the growing consumer interest in sustainable fashion alternatives, potentially enhancing business resilience against challenges faced by other sectors. However, further investigation is needed to confirm these indicators.

While this study examined thrift stores from the perspective of business owners, future research could explore consumer perspectives

to understand motivations, sustainability awareness and purchasing behaviors, which would enrich insights into demand-side dynamics within the circular economy.

This study's methodology, especially the use of a semi-structured questionnaire, offers a practical and adaptable way to explore how thrift stores contribute to the circular economy. By balancing consistent questions with room for individual insights, this approach captures the unique perspectives of business owners while maintaining a structured framework. Importantly, this method can be applied to other regions in Brazil or even globally, providing a way to understand thrift store operations, their customers, and their sustainability practices in diverse cultural and economic contexts.

It is essential to highlight the contributions of thrift stores to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study demonstrates that this business model supports SDGs #6, #8, 10 and #12, fostering a more sustainable future in alignment with the global objectives outlined in the 2030 agenda proposed by United Nations.

This research provides an initial insight into thrift stores' contribution to the circular economy and underscores the importance of effective communication strategies to promote the environmental and social benefits of this business model, serving as a starting point for future studies.

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