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Influencing Motivations: Exploring how Social Media Influencers and Voucher Schemes may be Fuelling a Pre-owned Denim Revolution.

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The argument for circular business models and the need to consume less are compelling. Mass production leads to waste, it's considered unsustainable, and even new clothing enter landfill. From 2000-2015, garment production doubled, while the number of times clothes are worn before disposal dropped to 36% (Ellen Macarthur Foundation 2017).

To extend lifespans, garments need to be physically and emotionally durable which ensures the full economic and environmental value is captured and kept in circulation. (Ellen Macarthur Foundation, 2023). This study explores the impact of social media influencers on the pre-loved clothing sector and specifically the retailing of reused denim by brands.

Influencers are demystifying the concept of second-hand clothing to a younger generation by exhibiting their own purchases of pre-owned luxury products and demonstrating how to dress them (Confidential Couture 2024), whilst sustainable denim brands including Nudie and MUD jeans ask consumers to return unwanted denim from the brand in exchange for a discount voucher. Returned items are repaired where practicable or recycled to blend with organic cotton to produce new jeans (Nudie Jeans and MUD Jeans, 2024).

The second-hand market grew globally by 28% (ThredUp, 2023) allowing brands to leverage this interest by selling second-hand items directly, overcoming stigma and convenience issues (Taylor et al., 2023). Influencers have an impactful influence on consumer spending on new products, (Biechert, M., et al., 2023) but also pre-owned clothing where terms including curated vintage, preloved and historical clothing are being used to elevate their perceived value?

Economic motivations are considered to be one of the key drivers of second-hand clothing purchases (Halicki, Daborek & Meylan, August 2024). Indeed, the incentive of a discount voucher appears to be the main driver for consumers to return their unwanted clothing to brands for reuse or recycling. 49% respondents surveyed by WRAP were incentivised by a voucher (2021). However, 15-20% of respondents stated they purchased new clothing when they donated garments (WRAP, 2021). Vouchers are enticing in persuading individuals to donate clothing, but consequentially to consume. This could have an adverse impact on the environment. Are consumers interested in the environmental motivations when purchasing reused denim or is it an economic or fashion driven decision?

Fletcher and Grose (2012) suggest reuse and recycling do not require radical alteration of shopping habits or for companies to change production goals. Take back schemes for reuse provide short-term strategies that build confidence to become more sustainable and could help change buying habits.

This research analyses the importance of influencers in elevating brand awareness, value and credibility of the pre-owned denim products. Is this sector seen as a fad to social media influencers seeing promoting vouchers as a short-term opportunity to gain financially and raise their own brand awareness? Or is there a longer term 'genuine' interest in sustainability which can be utilised to raise brand awareness of companies who are sustainable lead and utilise upcycling of returned clothing as part of their broader environmental aims?