

Sustainable Style Without Stigma: Can Social Reassurance Influence Recommendation Behavior?

Sophia Boyer, Ziyou Jiang, and Jewon Lyu, University of Georgia, USA

Keyword: Gen Z, Secondhand Fashion, Stigma, Social Reassurance, Influencers

Introduction Gen Z consumers are interested in sustainability, but perceive sustainable fashion as old-fashioned, boring, and lacking mainstream alternatives, which limits frequent sustainable purchases (Mahrs & Berthem, 2022). As brand image and fashion aesthetic are more important to Gen Z than sustainable criteria (Carrigan & Attala, 2001), Joshi and Rahman (2015) suggest that secondhand shopping (SHS) may be a more appealing sustainable alternative to buying new clothing. However, concerns about the social image of SHS are prevalent, as used clothing has been stigmatized from association with financially marginalized consumers (Norum & Norton, 2017), and consumers may feel self-conscious about disclosing their SHS habits. Further, Gen Z's shopping behavior is significantly influenced by social media, where they look to influencers to discover new trends and social norms (Hei & Liu, 2021).

To understand the factors that may influence Gen Z consumer's stigma toward the SHS, this study examines the role of SHS related norms (i.e., subjective and personal norms) and individual characteristics (i.e., self-consciousness), as well as the effects of social influence (i.e., social reassurance by influencers) on intention to recommend SHS and intention to purchase.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development Azjen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is used in this study to examine the influence of individual variables and social influence on recommendation behavior. This study focuses on subjective norm and personal norm (of secondhand shopping) and self-consciousness (individual characteristic) as preceding variables of the TPB model and tests social reassurance as a moderating variable. The subjective norm refers to the associated social pressures individuals feel related to certain behavioral decisions, and the TPB posits that an individual's decision-making process is conditioned by external parties, such as friends, family, or social media, that the individual seeks approval of. To combat stigma of SHS, Lo et al. (2019) suggested that creating positive societal attitudes will encourage more consumers to recommend SHS (H1). Similarly, personal norm, which refers to an individual's principles and attitudes that guide their behavior, is directly related to proenvironmental behavior (Bamberg, 2012), so it is hypothesized positive personal norm toward SHS will also increase recommendation behavior (H2). Lo et al. (2019) has found that highly self-conscious consumers are less willing to recommend SHS, and therefore the hypothesis that self-consciousness negatively affects intention to recommend SHS (H3) is developed. Similarly, Chang and Chin (2010) found that positive recommendations increase purchase intention (H4). Finally, because influencer social reassurance acts as a moderating force that guides classification of norms (Amblee & Bui, 2011), it is posited that (a) subjective norm, (b) personal norm, and (c) self-consciousness are moderated through social reassurance on intention to recommend SHS, and the positive effect of subjective norm will be strengthened

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through positive influencer postings, and the negative effect of self-consciousness will be lessened (H5ac). However, because social reassurance is less impactful on an individual's attitude when they have a clear preference (Hummel & Maedche, 2019), the personal norm will be lessened through social reassurance (H5b).

Research Methods Our study used a quantitative survey method to collect data from a sample of Gen Z participants at the Southeastern University who are exposed to social media influencers and are aware of at least one secondhand shopping store/brand. Of the 224 participants, 208 responses were analyzed. The sample respondents were mostly female (85.6%), White Caucasian (70.2%), with a discretionary income of < \$900 (92.3%). Our survey adapted measurement items from existing literature and used a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). A two-step approach is utilized to assess our measurement model and test hypotheses with bootstrap resampling using PLS-SEM. The measurement model demonstrated an acceptable fit (SRMR = 0.085), and reliability was confirmed using factor analysis (factor loading>.708), Cronbach's alpha (ranged from 0.756 to 0.905), and composite reliability (ranged from 0.781 to 0.906). Convergent validity and discriminant validity were also confirmed by assessing AVE for each construct and comparing the square root of the AVE of each construct (Fornell & Larker, 1981).

Results The structural model supported all hypothesized relationships except for H3, self consciousness to intention to recommend. H1 and H2 were confirmed, indicating the positive/negative effects of subjective and personal norms on secondhand fashion. Consumers perceive secondhand shopping as socially acceptable, leading to an increased willingness to recommend, in line with prior research by Lo et al. (2019). Additionally, Gen Z holds a favorable personal norm towards secondhand shopping, consistent with the findings of Silva et al. (2020). Contrary to previous research by Lo et al. (2019), our findings did not support H3, which hypothesized a negative relationship between self-consciousness and intention. A possible explanation for this finding could be that our respondents did not perceive any negative stigma associated with secondhand clothing, as our survey results showed that 99% had purchased a secondhand item before, and therefore our respondents may not perceive or be affected by stigmas toward secondhand fashion, in which case self-consciousness may not be a critical precedent of secondhand shopping recommendation behavior. The effects of intention to recommend SHS on purchase intention (H4) was supported, which aligns with the findings from Chang and Chin (2010) who found positive recommendations increase purchase intention. The moderation analysis found that social reassurance has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between both subjective norm and person norm on intention to recommend SH fashion, supporting H5a and H5b. Positive social reassurance influences the development of a favorable subjective norm towards secondhand shopping but negatively impacts consumers with positive personal norms, which is consistent with Hei and Lui's (2021) findings on the role of influencers in shaping consumer socialization. However, those with strong personal norms may be less susceptible to social reassurance. Interestingly, the effect of social reassurance on the

relationship between self-consciousness and intention to recommend, H5c, was not supported. This, again, may be explained by the lack of negative stigma towards secondhand fashion among our sample group, and after revisiting previous studies, a possible reason for this lack of stigma could be the increased popularity of secondhand fashion. This popularity was noted by Woo and Kim (2020), who observed significant growth in popularity of secondhand stores from 2014 to 2019, as well search terms relating to secondhand shopping shift from being focused on cost and savings to sustainability and trends.

Conclusion This study contributes to the theoretical advancement of secondhand fashion, stigma, and social reassurance by using TPB to examine the relationships which, to our knowledge, have not yet been explored. Our findings suggest negative stigma can be reduced through social influence (subjective norms and social reassurance), while self-consciousness may not be a critical factor affecting Gen Z's secondhand intention.

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