
Ethical Value Perception of a Secondhand Fashion Value Chain in Thailand

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Abstract

The secondhand fashion has emerged as an alternative source of the ethical fashion consumption. This fashion concept is associated with the conscious consumption, which minimizes environmental impacts and maximizes fairness for people throughout the whole value chain. Although a group of fashion consumers who are conscious of negative impacts fashion cause is continuously growing in Thailand, the understanding of the ethical fashion practices in the secondhand fashion industry in the country is a lack of transparency, from material sources to the consumption end. The purpose of this study is to explore the value chain of a secondhand fashion segment in Thailand and to understand the perceived ethical value of its stakeholders. In-depth interview with pre-defined questions was used to collect data from three different sample groups, i.e., wholesalers, retailers and end-consumers. The Ethical Fashion framework of the Ethical Fashion Forum was applied to analyze and gain the five value insights, i.e., emotional, epistemic, social, environmental, and economic value. The study suggested that the conscious consumers emphasize sincere information of secondhand fashion items from retailers rather than the transparency of their original sources or energy consumption data. The wholesalers and retailers are not eager to promote their ethical practices whereas the conscious consumers expect and support the secondhand fashion seller platforms that can project environmental and social movement on ethical values. This study helps to rethink and redesign the secondhand fashion value chain in Thailand to achieve a better equitable and sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Ethical Fashion, Secondhand Clothes, Sustainability, Perceived Ethical Values, Re-use Based Value Chain

1. Introduction

Clothing and textile industry's supply chain is the world's third largest polluter after food and construction (World Economic Forum, 2021). United Nations Climate Change (2019) reports that fashion industry contributes 10 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions during the intensive production: fabric and yarn preparation, fiber production, dyeing, etc. Nowadays fast fashion is popular and is consumed widely because of the design, manufacturing and marketing method that focused on rapid production in high volumes with lower price. The collections change swiftly which cause the trendy clothes reduce to minimum as "single-use" in the long run [1]. Its impacts not only give effect on environment but also on garment workers: health, unfair wages and even physical abuse. The awareness of fashion industry and consumers are raised by social and environmental issues, alternative ways of consumption are proposed to reduce the mentioned issues. Consumption of secondhand fashion is a solution that can reduce production which can reduce carbon footprint and avoid landfill, for each fashion items can be functionally circulated longer. Even though consumers think that consuming secondhand fashion seems to be more sustainable choice [2], its ethics is not yet to be widely revealed to consumers.

Meanwhile in Thailand, secondhand clothing has mysterious issues behind. It is believed to be stolen or taken from dead. The reason that some people assume as such is that the source of secondhand fashion items have been rarely revealed to inform consumers clearly. Also, secondhand fashion retailers have power to set prices and make decision on offering discount for those consumers who bargain because they know the market price while the consumers who don't know about the price would pay more [3]. In environmental aspect, secondhand fashion items require a lot of water to wash the clothes before selling and chemical substances are used to clean the used clothes. Thus, if secondhand fashion will become a better choice of ethical consumption, its ecology should be transparent and accessible for consumers.

This research aims to investigate the value chain and perceived ethical value of the secondhand fashion segment that is eco-conscious in Thailand. The starting process to consumption end and ethical values in the context of secondhand fashion will be revealed through each stakeholder in secondhand fashion industry: conscious consumers, retailers, and wholesalers. The outcome of this study will help to understand Thailand's context of the secondhand fashion segment for the purpose of future sustainable and equitable improvement.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Ethical Fashion

"Ethic" has overlapped perception as the word 'moral' which is perceived as judgement or correctness. On the other hand, a moral concept is an idea or opinion that's driven by a desire to be good while an ethical code is "a set of rules that defines allowable actions or correct behavior"[4]. Ethic is implemented in almost every aspect of practice even the consumption. Ethical consumption is referred as the consumer behavior that is influenced by ethical criteria [5]. The concept involves caring individual and the others in term of fairness and the general welfare of the society [6].

Ethical fashion are defined as "fashion with conscience"[7]. Between right and wrong and ethical clothing and unethical clothing are compared, it could be "precarious pedestal" when describing ethical fashion because it is dynamic. However, fashion ethics is often used in dimensions of "manufacturing, consumption, fashion design and trending"[8]. Another definition of ethical fashion is "an approach to the design, sourcing and manufacture of clothing which maximizes benefits to people and communities while minimizing impact on the environment"[9]. However, the lack of discussion especially in fashion

media mislead the understanding of the terminology of these terms: “Environmental, ecological, green, sustainable, ethical, recycled, organic, and inclusive (universal) fashion”[8]. To sum up, ethical fashion is set of criteria that concern about fairness and consciousness for environmental impacts and people who are involved from start to the end of the process: design, manufacture and consumption.

Fashion is one of the powerful tools to visualize the social movement of the past and of present [10]. Nowadays, real furs have been stopped using in brands from Gucci to Michael Kors due to the protest by animal rights activists [11]. Originally, anti-fur campaigns were developed in 1980s and 1990s, started from London, and the political statement of anti-animal abuse in fashion material is continuing as can be seen in artifact fur or faux fur instead of animal fur. In the late twentieth century, anti-sweatshop is part of ethical fashion movement. The anti-sweatshop protest in Washington, DC in 2002 was against of exploitation of workers in poor countries by companies that based in wealthy countries that search for cheaper labor [12]. This affair would be difficult to do at an international scale to gain stronger labor movement and commitment from brands due to the law restriction in each country [13]. The term “Ethical fashion” was more widely spread in 2013 after the collapse of clothing factory, Rana Plaza, in Bangladesh. People started to question about working conditions, health and safety of labors, as well as forced labor issue. The #WhoMadeMyClothes hashtag was launched and used by celebrities on Twitter to ask for the responsibility from brand to the social issues mentioned. Thus, the ethical fashion activist movement represent political or fashion statements to drive the attributions of fair trade, animal cruelty free, eco-friendly and charity.

1.1.2 Reused-Based Clothing Value Chain

‘Reuse’ is one of the ways to close the loop of value chain. The term ‘reuse’ is defined by Morley et al. [14] as “the process of restoring basic functionality”. The used clothes can be categorized into formal trade and informal exchange. The formal trade is considered as market-base in form of secondhand shops, reselling platform on the internet etc. While the informal exchange happens in private activities such as hand-me downs and swapping between friends and families [15]. Compared to the traditional value chain that is controllable, reverse value chain involves unpredictable external factors.

1.1.3 Secondhand Fashion in Thailand

The situation of the secondhand clothing market and value chain in Thailand have not yet been clearly recorded. It has been commonly acknowledged that the main sources of the secondhand fashion product in Thailand are at Rong Kluea Market in Aranyaprathet District, Sa Kaeow Province which is the land border to Cambodia and Khlong Ngae Market in Hat Yai District, Songkla Province in the Southern Thailand. The sources of pre-owned fashion products such as bag, shoes and clothes are from all over the world, the starting point of these secondhand clothing products in Thailand is believed that they were once used to be donation from the developed countries to Cambodia during Civil War period. Later when the volume donated attired were overdemanding causes the unwanted clothes, the trading gets involved. In 2016, according to UN Commercial Trade in 2017, the variety of country that import secondhand clothing is significantly shown. The source is shift mainly comes from Cambodia 25% and new sources come from other Asian countries, Europe and Africa: Iran, Latvia, Mauritania, Malta and Pakistan appear around 10% each [3].

The most popular secondhand fashion items are subjectively clothes, shoes and bags. The sources of import regarding to countries work as labels to guarantee quality and unique style of secondhand fashion items for consumers [3]. The other way around, the country names do not always can guarantee the grading of each item. According to Sanglit S.[16], ‘Japanese things’ is compared to a brand that gives

positive brand image to Thai consumers perception. As the result, secondhand fashion retailers mainly choose to import products from Japan rather than from other countries while Somboon A. [17] noted that the quality secondhand fashion products are usually come from Western and Europe. The value of secondhand fashion products could be subjective and depended on different contexts in which the consumers live. The study of spatial dimension and consumption sign of vintage and secondhand clothing in Chiang Mai [18] found different perspective in vintage band t-shirts case: Thai consumers would give priority to fabric texture and year of manufacture while foreigner consumers would prioritize label tag and screen printing on the t-shirts. These different values could give implication of the different situation when the same secondhand fashion item is perceived by consumers from different countries. Also, these factors could affect price setting of secondhand fashion products. In summary, secondhand fashion from supply sides is not systematically informed and not informative enough, so the result of these factors inevitably create impact on perceived value of consumer toward secondhand fashion.

2. Methodology

Primary and Secondary research methods are employed to gain a deep understanding of the value chain in Thailand. Qualitative method is used to gain data directly from the subject by observing ethical fashion movement in social network and in-depth interviewing of the three sample groups in secondhand fashion: 10 conscious consumers (age 20-35), 3 retailers and 1 wholesaler. Purposive and snowball sampling technique were employed to specify the group of participants that are conscious and have knowledge on environmental and social impacts.

2.1 Research Design

Initially, to understand the phenomenon under the topic of secondhand fashion with social and environmental consciousness, selective observation was conducted. The fashion movement relating issues were reviewed from topics in social networks such as Twitter hashtags, Facebook webpages and resale platforms on Instagram. The scope of social media observation in this study is under the realm of Thailand's context where groups of people who live in Thailand discuss, argue and public relation on impacts of unethical fashion and alternative ethical consumption in fashion.

To screen the ethical conscious market, the researcher visited both virtual and physical secondhand fashion stores in Bangkok to observe features and prices of secondhand products. As reviewed, secondhand fashion characteristics in segments of the charity shops and flea market tend to hold the value of frugality (20 - 200 baht). Once the product quality control is random, hygienic and functional issues are raised for quality-sensitive users [19]. The frugality is not related to eco-friendly or social concerns, but it is directly linked to value and price consciousness [20].

On the other hand, the motivation of vintage consumption (defined as items from the 1920s to the 1980s) is the uniqueness of cultural material and treasure hunting whereas secondhand fashion purchasing (defined as contemporary and modern used cloths) is driven by economic reasons. The environmental-friendly factor plays an indirect role [20]. To reduce variables of difference in perceived values toward secondhand fashion, the study emphasized the segment of good bargains with eco-conscious value with the group of consumers that are not price sensitive and do not limit to the option of low price when consuming secondhand fashion items and neither the vintage collector nor luxurious brand consumers.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

All Interview sessions were audio recorded, transcribed and translated to English where necessary before interpretation. Two main methods were established to analyze two sets of data regarding two main parts which are the value chain data and perception of ethical values. First, the process of source of items to consumption end would be categorized to table. To gain perceived ethical values on secondhand fashion, the transcripts were coded and categorized into five themes i.e., emotional, epistemic, social, environmental, and economic value. Under each aspect, the data was summarized into important points.

3.Result

This section will reveal the value chain and perceived ethical value of secondhand fashion to enhance the understanding of environmentally and socially responsible practices in Thailand.

3.1 Value Chain in Practices

3.1.1 User Centric Value Chain

Due to the observation of social movement relate to fashion issues and in-dept interview, consuming used cloths is considered one of the methods to indirectly reduce environmental and social impacts from firsthand ones. Apart from purchasing clothes from retails, the interviews revealed that an individual has three levels of clothing giving. First, individuals exchange their used clothes in an informal way with their family and friends such as giving and receiving hand me downs, borrowing within family and swapping between peer to peer. Second, individuals trade their used clothes and gain financial benefit from the values of the pieces through the act of reselling in consigned store and on internet platforms. Third, individuals donate their used clothes to local communities or charity organization because they can no longer use the clothes. Used clothing from different condition was sorted to different subjects. The participants revealed that they aim to resell their good condition clothes via internet platforms, but they lack the motivation and time to create a good-looking display (take pictures, write captions, set the prices), reply to customers and deliver parcels. Consequently, they resell their pieces to consigned retail stores even though they are doubtful with the appraised value of their used clothes.

When some of the pieces were rejected because they don't meet the consignment criteria, consumers would collect and pass on to their neighbors, unprivileged communities or charity organization. However, some participants found that it is a difficulty to resell the unwanted clothes with any method mentioned, their first and only choice is to donate to a community or charity organization whereas some participants were willing to do so, but they ended up keeping them in wardrobes.

3.1.2 Secondhand Fashion Retail and wholesale Value Chain

The secondhand fashion retails offer different values due to their supply chain of secondhand clothing and support activities. From the interviews, retail A is a branch company under headquarter in Japan running both retail and wholesale services. Retail B is an online retail platform under individuals. Both A and B considered themselves as a retailer and consignment store while retail C considers themselves as online retail only. While B's sources of products come from local individual resellers who want to circulate their wardrobes, retail A receives their 50% of products mainly from Japan and the rest 50% is from local resellers who want to pass on their used fashion item in haste. In contrast, as an online secondhand store by individual, retail C's products are hunted from various sources from secondhand fashion wholesale to flea market.

For sorting criteria, retail A accepts almost any kind of secondhand fashion items except unfunctional items, intimate wear and illegal materials such as reserved wild animal leathers and counterfeit brand. They also rank the consigned items through the items' condition, but the appraise value criteria is not mentioned. Retail B's supply chain is shorter, their sources of product come from individual resellers only. Sorting criteria of B is strict to the copy right and item's condition (function and hygiene). The consigned pieces should be cleaned by the resellers before handing to the retail. If it is not meet the criteria, retail B would send them back to the owners as rejection. Meanwhile the retail A cleans the consigned items by wiping and dusting off to remain the history of the fashion items. Retail C selected the used products regard of style, design and quality to maintain their mood and tone of the store. Washing by washing machine and some minor refurbishment appeared on retail C's reprocess.

Supporting activities appear in Retail A and B cases with concerns of value transfer. Retail A points up circular economy where functional value transferred to improve wellbeing of others. The employees are trained and invited to the company annual trip to visit community in rural area and donate pre-owned goods including secondhand clothes. The purposes of this activity are to "reinforce the company's core value and raise awareness the employees that the used objects can create many dimensions of value to recipients", said Retail A. Also, retail C share their deadstock to their inner cycle first and donate the rest to a temple for community's benefits .On the other hand, retail B emphasizes the value of sustainable lifestyle. Collaborating with other eco-conscious organization is part of their public relation to promote sustainable way of living by providing knowledge of how to reduce environmental impacts caused by fashion consumption.

3.2 Perceived Ethical Value

The study classifies perceived ethical value of secondhand fashion base on five dimensional aspects: emotional, social, epistemic, environmental and economic value. Each value is elaborated by sub-themes gained from the interviews of conscious consumers, retailers and wholesalers.

3.2.1 Emotional Value

Theme 1: Environmental awareness

The participants' concerns of global warming phenomenon drive them to engage in secondhand clothing consumption. They attempted to buy secondhand clothes as an anti-consumption or slow consumption which make them appreciated for each piece that they had and want to purchase. The consumers feel responsive to reduce carbon footprint from fashion consumption.

Theme 2: Social responsibility

The conscious consumers are attracted by secondhand cloth shop that show commitment against animal abuse and unfair work condition. They feel guilty when imagining that they are part of exploitation on workers like what is happening in fast fashion model. Consequently, they are passionate in social movement on human right issues. Feeling sympathetic for poor garment workers in the news, so the conscious customers avoid being part of the vicious cycle. They feel good for themself and less guilty when buying secondhand clothes, comparing to unethical clothing brands (fast fashion).

3.2.2 Social Value

Theme 3: Active for well-being of others

Apart from exploited workers issues in emotional value, all the participants are care for local community surround them. Part of them choose to pass on their collection of good condition used clothes to their hometown in countryside where some clothing is needed. Some of participants would rather donate to reliable charity organization for further advantages for society.

Theme 4: Ethical judgement

Secondhand counterfeit is not acceptable for all stakeholders due to ethical consciousness and the implication of social impact. They are seriously against counterfeits due to copy right infringes common norms, whether it is firsthand or secondhand. Most of them accept secondhand fashion products originated from fast fashion brands rather than counterfeit items.

3.2.3 Epistemic Value

Theme 5: Sustainable fashion knowledge to the public

Most of the pro-environmental participants were willing to know more about environmental impact from their fashion consumption and how to reduce the negative impacts in individual level. They lack time and motivation to research, so they want organizations or retails to enlighten them. However, a few of them mentioned their doubt toward average number of energy consumption or saving data.

Theme 6: Supply-side transparency and sincere information

Most of conscious consumers are curious and want to know more about the source and reprocess of secondhand clothing while a few of them are uncomfortable to access the whole process. Necessary information includes secondhand clothing journey (collecting and cleaning) and work condition of those who involved in the process

3.2.4 Environmental Value

Theme 7: Environmental impacts minimization practices

The pro-environmentally friendly consumers adapted their sustainable knowledge in daily life. For example, they avoid using plastic packaging if possible and reuse their fashion items if they could before transferring to others to extend the pieces' lifespan.

Theme 8: The unwanted piece management

Sorting the used clothes before generating to each stakeholder is necessary. The participants found that it is important to separate their unwanted pieces regard of condition and value to reduce clothing waste to the recipients.

3.2.5 Economic Value

Theme 9: Circular economy

Once the secondhand clothes of pre-owners and recipients needs meet, the items themselves can continuously create economic values, sharing, reusing, refurbishing and recycling.

Theme 10: Financial benefits

Secondhand clothes provide financial gain and budget to the stakeholders. The participants can generate money when their used clothes are consigned or resold, which can create next purchase of individuals. In the other hand, some participants can purchase secondhand fashion of their kinds in lower price. This is also could create more chance for garment relating job opportunity in secondhand fashion segment.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This research reveals a value chain of secondhand fashion and its perceived ethical value in five multi dimensions of emotional, social, epistemic, environmental and economic values illustrated in Figure 1. Ten important sub themes were identified from this study.

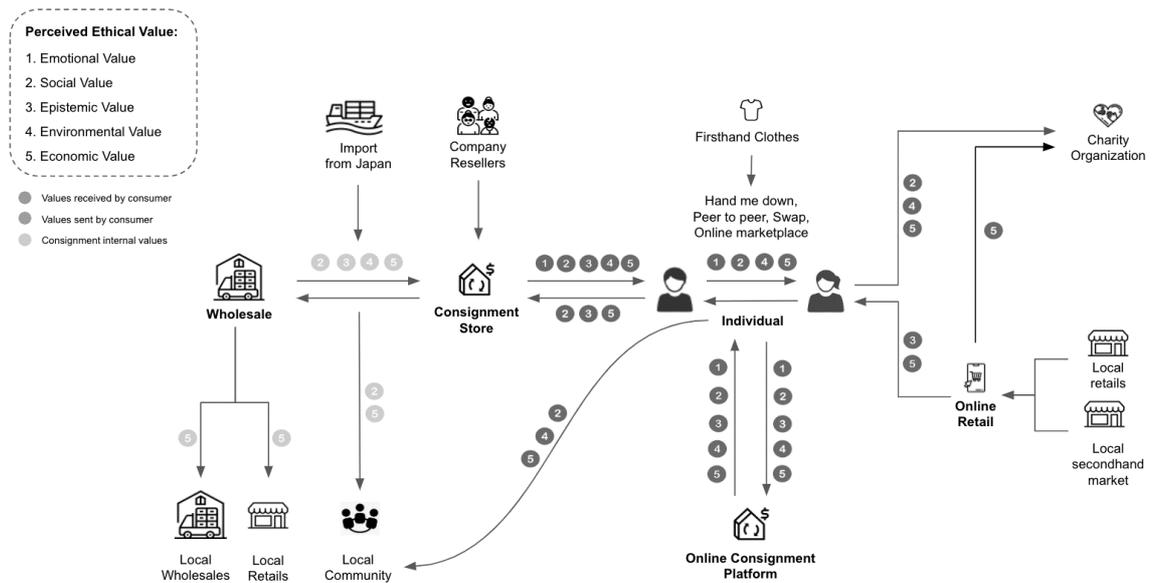


Figure 1 Model of perceived ethical value of the secondhand fashion value chain

Based on the findings, emotional values are positive factors that drive secondhand fashion consumption. End consumers tend to support or purchase from retailers that show the same stance as they do. Conscious customers prefer the retailers that has more ethical values chain where people involved in the process are fairly treat and create less carbon footprint. In general, the supply system of secondhand is unknown for customers. The retailers could set an ethical standard for secondhand fashion by informing more about sorting, collecting and reprocessing activities clearly to provide trust on environmental and social dimensions to consumers. The concerns of work condition should be revealed to point out the existing problems happening to improve working system if any and to respect human rights and ethical conscious of all stakeholders.

Moreover, epistemic and environmental value plays a positive role on environmentally friendly consumers, for they have a good intention to adapt sustainable practices further. The retailers or organizations engaging to sustainable commitment could educate their customer to minimize environmental harms via social media; for instance, how to take care or refurbish their used fashion produced by themselves. This method not only provide knowledge for individual improvement but also be beneficial for the retailers' marketing opportunity [21] . Apart from supply-side transparency, sincere information of secondhand products is a must, especially on size and virtually on condition.

However, individual practices are not enough to develop ethical practices in secondhand fashion segment, government legislation should be involved. Government legislation specifically on waste management would positively influence on reverse logistic of secondhand fashion [22]. Even though end-customers want to revalue their discard clothes, they found that there is nowhere to go for their unethical piece rejection from consignments such as the worn out, duplicate infringement and preserved animal materials. In this case, the consigned retailers should suggest them of where to pass on the discarded pieces properly due to its values. As a result, secondhand clothing retail could transfer waste between organizational collaboration. Particularly, government needs to have guidelines for fashion waste management about proper disposal for different types of items. Crave for well-being of others of social value and economic values would be fulfilled once all values are improved as holistic system. The segment of ethical secondhand fashion would be sustainable and equitable with complete close loop.

Implication of this research shows that cultural background context plays important role on value perception due to demographics and nature of supply chain. Differences in viewpoint toward ethical fashion appeared between countries as their perspective on advertisements with environmental messages and fair-trade consumption [20]. Some global ethical context is not fit for local context, organizations should adapt before applying ethical concept of secondhand fashion regard of perceived value. The proposed model of perceived ethical value of the secondhand fashion value chain in Thailand can be beneficial for secondhand clothing business aiming to commit to sustainable and ethical practices regarding key consumer targets in Thailand.

Limitations were acknowledged from this study. Firstly, eco-conscious market of secondhand fashion in Thailand is niche and specific only in small group. Secondly, attitude and behavior gap on ethical fashion may occurred due to the limited condition of each stakeholder. Based on the mentioned model, bigger sampling size in secondhand fashion, different cultural background context or orientation of value chain is recommended for future study.

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