Sustainable Sorting: A Human-Centric Approach to Second-Hand Clothing Decisions

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African countries are amongst the highest importers of second-hand clothes. Nearly seventy percent of all Western Secondhand Clothes (SHC) donations go to African countries (Kermeliotis & Curnow, 2013). However, this “charitable donation” of clothing has lasting socio-economic impacts that include extreme pressure on domestic industries, loss of jobs, and the exploitation of entrepreneurial potential in developing countries. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe and improve efficiency in the second-hand clothing industry by identifying the information, through data collection and analysis, that is needed to inform the options for where a garment ends up after it is donated. The objective is to understand the decision-makers in the second-hand clothing importing industry for the purchase and distribution of second-hand clothes. My core objectives are to identify and understand information bottlenecks that result in inefficient disposal-related decision-making for consumers and manufacturers.

Ultimately, this research will identify critical themes for understanding the experience of sorters and importers within the chain to inform suggestions for the future design of a digital garment profile: the garment-level attributes and details needed to guide post-donation decisions.

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Image 1. This research mapped how second-hand clothes travel within the societal organization, sorting and tracking methods during the fabric life cycle, and transportation.
Excess clothing no longer deemed valuable by consumer

Consumer decides to donate/discard

Item is collected (doorstep, waste sorting, clothing bank, charity, etc.)

Second-hand clothing (SCH) is sorted and graded

Is the item fit for export?

Yes

Opt for redistribution in local markets, recycle, or send to landfills/incinerators

No

Are there local regulations for import?

Yes

Act according to local procedures

No

Repair or restyle the item

Are the items suitable for resell?

Yes

Items are released from the customs

No

Can the items be repaired or restyled?

Yes

Items are sorted and graded

No

Can the items be recycled?

Yes

Items are recycled based on local capacity and infrastructure

No

Items are sold to low-end clothing retailers

Act according to local procedures

Items are sent to landfills or incinerators

Can the items be recycled?

Yes

Items are recycled based on local capacity and infrastructure

No

Items are sold to high-end retailers

Consumer buys SCH

*Potential Export Destinations
- Uganda
- Tanzania
- Congo Brazaville
- DRC
- Somalia
- Zambia
- Lesotho

Seller ships SCH bales from the country of origin

The goods are received in the destination port

Are the goods cleared by customs?

Yes

Do the goods need repairs?

Yes

The goods are sent to a central warehouse via trucks and / or railway

No

Act according to local procedures

The containers are opened and the goods are sold to large wholesalers in bales

The clothes are sent to tailors and finishers

The goods are repaired and ironed

Can the items be recycled?

Yes

The goods are repaired and ironed

No

The goods are sold to low-end clothing retailers

Can the items be recycled?

Yes

The clothes are sent to tailors and finishers

No

The goods are repaired and ironed

The goods are sold to high-end retailers

Can the items be recycled?

Yes

The goods are repaired and ironed

No

The goods are sold to low-end clothing retailers

The Goods are sold to large, high-end retailers

Wholesalers sell the products directly or through brokers to sub-retailers (smaller shops or stalls)

SCH is sold to consumers

The Goods are sold to smaller wholesalers

The Goods are sold to large, high-end retailers

Can the items in demand in export destinations?

Yes

The goods are sold and shipped to export destinations*

No

SCH is sold to consumers

*Potential Export Destinations
- Uganda
- Tanzania
- Congo Brazaville
- DRC
- Somalia
- Zambia
- Lesotho

The goods are offloaded and sorted

Are the items high-end (top brand, etc.)?

Yes

The Goods are sold to large, high-end retailers

No

The Goods are sold to smaller wholesalers

Can the items be recycled?

Yes

The clothes are sent to tailors and finishers

No

The goods are repaired and ironed

Act according to local procedures
This research mapped out what happens to clothing after it's donated and what are the various post-donation options. Feasibility, Fabric Classification, polyester, fiber, cotton etc, Recycling, Reuse types, Donation.