



# Is fast fashion finally out of season? Rental clothing schemes as a sustainable and affordable alternative to fast fashion

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## ABSTRACT

The clothing sector is under increased global scrutiny as the second biggest polluter behind the oil industry. What was once termed the ‘democratisation of fashion’, fast fashion has become a low cost, high speed and resource intensive market. As a result, sustainable consumerism has gained traction, with innovative alternatives such as collaborative consumption and product service systems becoming more popular. However, despite growing concern, sustainable alternatives remain a niche market compared to the scale of global fast fashion. Rental clothing schemes remain under-researched in the UK. These collaborative consumption schemes promote a circular economy through reducing waste and increasing life cycles. This paper examines the determinants of rental clothing adoption by employing semi-structured interviews, specifically accounting for different generations across rural and urban areas. It presents a UK perspective on rental clothing.

The findings suggest that the affordability of rental is dependent on the nature of the items and adoption is driven by style, sustainability desires, and geography of consumers. This paper concludes that to increase the adoption of rental clothing schemes, trust in schemes and increased accessibility are essential to allow them to become mainstream alternatives to fast fashion.

## 1. Introduction

The clothing industry is under increased global scrutiny as the second biggest polluter behind the oil industry (Bliss, 2019; Ripple et al., 2019). Despite this, the industry continues to grow, potentially taking up 26 % of the carbon budget by 2050 (Niinimäki, 2010; Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014; Lundblad and Davies, 2015; WRAP, 2017; Stringer et al., 2020). Fast fashion represents the opposite of circularity, increasing environmental and social impacts (Peters et al., 2021). The low prices, frequent new styles, global supply chains and decreasing quality encourages increased consumption (Allwood et al., 2006). Research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021) argues that \$500 billion is lost annually due to clothing underutilisation and a lack of recycling. The impacts are not just environmental, as recently as 2020 garment workers in Leicester for Boohoo were paid as little as £3.50 an hour (The Circle, 2020). This highlights severe exploitation to meet demand, hindering social development.

The UK clothing industry was worth an estimated £32 billion in 2017 (British Fashion Council, 2018). However, studies suggest consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the environmental and social issues

surrounding fast fashion and are seeking more sustainable and ethical alternatives (Partzsch and Kemper, 2019; Granskog et al., 2020; Genomatica, 2021). As a result, businesses are taking steps to be more sustainable but, as we continue further into a climate emergency, the clothing industry needs new innovative models to reduce its environmental footprint (Armstrong et al., 2015).

A potential alternative are product-service systems; renting is a particularly appealing approach as it has the potential to increase life-cycles and quality as well as consumer satisfaction (Heiskanen and Jalas, 2003; Tukker, 2004). Rental clothing schemes are also part of the circular economy, reducing waste and increasing use (Tukker, 2015). Although studies suggest increased consumer interest in rental clothing schemes, it remains a niche market with limited research (Niinimäki, 2010). As the practice existed for a longer time, especially around occasional rentals such as weddings or graduations, the recent increased popularity of rental clothing has a potential to have a more substantial environmental impact. Successful implementation and scalability are constrained by a lack of stakeholder knowledge (Pal and Gander, 2018) and effective business models, reducing their use, especially in the UK. Given how understudied the fast fashion markets/consumers are, it

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remains critical to understand what factors determine rental clothing adoption as a sustainable alternative.

As such, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: what are the determinants of rental clothing adoption? To answer this question 28 semi-structured interviews are conducted with representatives of Generation Z and Generation X across urban and rural areas.

This paper makes the following four key contributions. First, the utility of rental clothing is related to convenience and trust. Second, we find that geography, even when online shopping is so prevalent, still plays an important role in determining adoption of rental clothing. Third, our UK study offers a lesson to other nations that are planning adoption of rental clothing, particularly emerging economies. Finally, we develop a theoretical framework explaining rental clothing adoption.

The paper is structured as follows: [section 2](#) reviews the literature on fast fashion and collaborative consumption; [section 3](#) outlines the methodological approach; [section 4](#) presents findings; whilst the conclusion is offered in [section 5](#).

## 2. Fast fashion and collaborative consumption

### 2.1. Fast Fashion

The fast fashion industry gained traction in the 1980s, offering consumers frequent novelty, low-cost and trend-led products that relied upon cheap manufacturing and short-lived garment use (Anguelov, 2016; Becker-Leifhold and Heuer, 2018; Niinimäki et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Lipovetsky coins the evolution of fashion as a process of ‘democratisation’ (Rosa, 2014). As the speed from runway to stores increased (Bick et al., 2018), coupled with a downward pressure to focus on competitive prices by sourcing from low-cost countries (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006), exclusive luxuries were available to all (Bick et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). Alongside the rise of neoliberalism, scholars argue the speed of production created an ‘insatiable demand for newness’ (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006), with some businesses offering up to 20 seasons per year (Christopher et al., 2004). Esposito and Pérez (2010, p.85) support this by suggesting neoliberalism and newness created a ‘culture of addiction’, with consumption becoming almost uncontrollable. Fournier (1998) corroborates this and asserts that a relationship between consumer and brand is similar to that between people and, at their most intense level, are linked to the part of the brain behind addiction (Reimann et al., 2012). Niinimäki (2010) attributes this to clothing moving from a utilitarian necessity to fulfilling hedonistic and psychogenic needs.

#### 2.1.1. The impact of fast fashion

Across literature, the social impacts of fast fashion remain a large problem. Estimates suggest 40 million people work in garment assembly, 90 % of whom are in low- and middle-income countries where safety is not a priority (Bick et al., 2018). Although the Environmental Audit Committee (2019) recognised that the fast fashion industry provides employment, they also agree that forced labour continues.

Studies consistently agree that the environmental impacts of the fast fashion industry are detrimental. The fashion industry uses 93 billion cubic metres of water in production activities per year (British Fashion Council, 2019). Furthermore, estimates suggest the sector accounts for 8–10 % of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and 20 % of global waste streams (Quantis, 2017; United Nations, 2018; McKinsey & Company, 2019). Research by WRAP suggests in the UK alone, £140 million worth of clothing goes to landfill every year, which does not include the disposal of unsold items and waste in production (WRAP, 2015). Zara, Gap and H&M have been known to dispose of ‘deadstock’ by burning it to prevent others from reselling their products (Napier and Sanguinetti, 2018). These and other wasteful production methods are more prevalent and include other big fast fashion brands, such as Asos, Top Shop, or Shein. Waste is not the only issue, the processes to produce clothing are also unsustainable due to pollution and the use of natural resources. To

produce one tonne of cotton, 65,000kWh of electricity and more than 250,000 L of water is used, and its growth requires the most insecticides and pesticides in the world (Garg, 2019).

Although this highlights the need for more sustainable practices, the industry consistently relies on short lifecycles to maximise profits (Bulow, 1986), with some clothes being designed to be worn only 10 times (McAfee et al., 2007; McNeill and Moore, 2015). This worsens the environmental impacts for which the fashion industry is condemned, perpetuating the problem of waste and encouraging a throwaway culture (Gupta and Gentry, 2018). Hence, as argued by Black and Eckert (2009), the ‘paradox of fashion’ remains - the economic importance of the fast fashion industry globally has excused it from the criticism of its inherent obsolescence and waste. McNeill and Moore (2015) argue this paradox slows an industry-wide movement toward ethical practices, legitimising unethical fast fashion in the marketplace.

#### 2.1.2. Sustainable consumption and ethical consumerism

UK citizens buy more clothing than any other country in Europe, around 26.7 kg per person per year (Watson et al., 2018; Niinimäki et al., 2020). However, recent studies suggest consumers are becoming aware of the issues surrounding fast fashion (Niinimäki, 2010; Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014; Lundblad and Davies, 2015; Stringer et al., 2020) and are increasingly taking ethical and social issues into account when purchasing (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004; Auger and Devinney, 2007).

Crane and Matten (2010, p.365) define ethical consumption as the “conscious and deliberate choice to make certain consumption choices due to personal and moral beliefs” and as its prevalence increases, retailers are leveraging consumer behaviour (Stringer et al., 2020). There has been a rise in ethical and sustainable fast-fashion brand extensions, such as H&M Conscious and Join Life materials at Zara, but the impact of these requires further investigation and their success can be questioned (Wallwork, 2016; H&M, 2017). This reinforces the issue of greenwashing, as described by Becker-Olsen and Potucek (2013) as, “the practice of falsely promoting an organisation’s environmental efforts or spending more resources to promote the organisation as green than are spent to actually engage in environmentally sound practices”. Greenwashing has the potential to jeopardise the fashion industry’s attempts to introduce more circular initiatives. Not only do certifications of sustainability continue to neglect the accountability and transparency necessary to make impactful change (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022) but companies make big, ambiguous, claims of sustainability but make negligible changes to their processes, and consumers then dismiss truly sustainable options due to difference in price, convenience and value (KPMG, 2019). The persistent low costs stimulate increased consumption and the impacts remain higher than true slow fashion alternatives, reinforcing the belief that fast fashion and ethical consumption are diametrically opposed (Lewis and Potter, 2011; Stringer et al., 2020).

In recent years, there has been a growth in alternatives, such as second-hand platforms to replace personal ownership with utilisation options (Strähle, 2018; Gyde and McNeill, 2021). Whilst these remain small in relative terms, with ethical sustainable fashion market worth \$6.35bn (The Business Research Company, 2020) compared to \$1.78tr global fashion market (Business Wire, 2021), there is evidence to suggest growth in the sharing economy because of increased consumer awareness (Hamari and Ukkonen, 2013; Pal, 2016; Mont et al., 2019; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020). Like second-hand consumption, circular and sharing initiatives, such as rental clothing schemes, also replace personal ownership with increased utilisation of products.

#### 2.1.3. Circular and sharing economy and collaborative consumption

Blomsma et al. (2019) emphasise that the environmental impact of the fashion industry make it ripe for more circular strategies and business models (Franco, 2017; Jia et al., 2020). This includes principles to reduce waste and pollution and keeping products and materials in use for longer, aided through a sharing economy (Urbini et al., 2017;

Centobelli et al., 2020; Khitous et al., 2022). Belk (2014) addresses conceptual contention within the sharing economy, by highlighting that many activities do not constitute true sharing, and instead terms it a “collaborative consumption” movement. Collaborative consumption is a socio-economic model based on swapping, trading or renting products and services to increase use over ownership (Botsman, 2013).

The internet age has made the exchange of goods exponentially easier (Belk, 2014; Guyader, 2018). Arrigo (2021a) highlights social media platforms and community based online services aid the process by easily connecting peers. As a result of these technological advancements, coupled with societal and economic drivers, collaborative consumption is spilling into areas that have previously not been collaborative in nature (Owyang, 2014). These can be differentiated through platform regulated and self-regulating communities (Hofmann et al., 2017). Platform regulated businesses allow increased trust and reduce the perceived risk of using peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms (Benoit et al., 2017; de Rivera et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2018; Perren and Kozinets, 2018). To support this, Kim and Jin (2020) found people preferred business-to-consumer (B2C) platforms compared to P2P. However, collaborative consumption can refer to both B2C and P2P sharing, especially in the case of rental fashion (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Perren et al., 2014).

#### 2.1.4. Product service systems

Product service systems (PSS) are a form of collaborative consumption under the sharing economy concept (Plewnia and Guenther, 2018; Netter et al., 2019). PSS refer to “tangible products and intangible services designed and combined so that they jointly are capable of fulfilling specific customer needs” (Tukker, 2004, pp.246).

Business models involving PSS have seen great success globally, particularly for cars, bikes and tools, leading scholars to investigate their potential in the fashion industry (Annarelli et al., 2016). Although ownerless consumption offers advantages, it does not necessarily mean less environmental impact and consumers are not guaranteed to be enthusiastic about it. Having said this, fashion rental PSS have been studied and consumers value the economic and functional benefits of the system (Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020; Arrigo, 2021b; Johnson and Plepys, 2021). Research by Tukker (2015) and Tunn et al. (2021) suggest that PSS only appeal to niche markets and ways to engage customers in PSS are not fully understood, highlighting the importance of this research. To rectify this, a recent study by Khitous et al. (2022) began investigating customer engagement with PSS in the fashion industry and found engagement to be highest with use-oriented PSS – rental clothing.

#### 2.1.5. Rental clothing

Fashion rental promotes longer lifecycles and efficient use of resources, reducing waste (Tukker, 2015; Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021). Scholars concur that it emphasises use of products over ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2010; Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010), whilst sharing cost and increasing consumer satisfaction (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Armstrong and Lang, 2013).

Small-scale fashion rental has existed for considerable time, but consumers have been slow to adopt it as a mainstream mode of consumption. Having said this, the clothing rental market is growing at a compound annual growth rate of 10.76 % and is expected to reach a global value of \$1.96 billion by 2023 (Daniel, 2019; Research and Markets, 2019). Not only this, its environmental advantages cannot be ignored. For example, the rental company HURR claims that instead of buying new and wearing once, renting a £50 item of clothing would save the equivalent CO<sub>2</sub>e of 176 miles in a car (HURR, 2023). To support this, research by Rent the Runway alongside Green Story and SgT also suggests a 24 % reduction in water used, six percent reduction in energy used and 3 % less carbon emissions compared to buying new (Chan, 2021). Until recently, fashion rental has been relatively understudied (Armstrong et al., 2016; Tu and Hu, 2018; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020; Clube and Tennant, 2020) and short-term rental of fashion has not

been considered a scalable commercial opportunity (Pedersen and Netter, 2015; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021; Park and Joyner-Armstrong, 2017). Despite a growing body of research, rental clothing is often only regarded within the wider scope of sustainable consumption, necessitating more specific research on fashion rental (Jain et al., 2021). In fact, a recent review of the literature regarding renting was the first of its kind (Jain et al., 2021).

#### 2.1.6. Motivators to using rental clothing schemes

To develop the rental model, consumer behaviour must be understood. Hence, there is a plethora of evidence examining consumer motivations and barriers to rental fashion to establish its success (Armstrong et al., 2016; Pedersen and Netter, 2015; Lang, 2018; Borg et al., 2020; Gyde and McNeill, 2021).

Most cited in the literature as a motivator is the ability to wear new styles and a variety of outfits (Xu et al., 2014; McKinney and Shin, 2016; Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018; Lang and Joyner-Armstrong, 2018a; Park and Joyner-Armstrong, 2019; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020). Other research highlights novelty as an important motivator (Cook and Hodges, 2015; Petersen and Riisberg, 2017). This is consistent with hedonistic motivators that exist in fashion consumption (Armstrong et al., 2016; Lang, 2018; Lang et al., 2019) and further corroborates the ability to express creativity and self-identity as a motivator (Lang et al., 2016; McKinney and Shin, 2016; McNeill and Venter, 2019; Lee et al., 2021).

Contrastingly, an important but less common driver is the ability to save money, which is particularly relevant when using rental for occasion-wear, as it allows access to high fashion at low prices (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005; Park and Joyner-Armstrong, 2019; Lang et al., 2020; Won and Kim, 2020). This attaches utilitarian motivations towards fashion rental, contrasting the hedonistic motivations. Other motivators such as burden of ownership, saving space and increasing convenience are sometimes mentioned, increasing contention in the research area and necessitating further research into their prominence (Park and Joyner-Armstrong, 2019; Lang et al., 2020; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020; Shrivastava et al., 2020).

Mukendi and Henninger (2020) established that sustainability played a large role in motivating consumers to participate in rental. To support this, environmental factors, including reducing waste, extending garments life and decreasing reliance on resources are found important (Armstrong et al., 2015; Pal, 2016). However, despite an increase in awareness in recent years, Park and Joyner-Armstrong (2019) reported that actual users of apparel renting do not engage in collaborative consumption to practice sustainable consumption or support the environment, suggesting a need for more synonymous research. Moreover, research by McNeill and Venter (2019) found it to be a weak motivator.

#### 2.1.7. Barriers to rental clothing schemes

Consumers reluctance to adopt rental clothing schemes could be a result of inertia (Catulli, 2012). Having said this, research has established multiple barriers that consumers perceive to cause reluctance, although some are more common than others. Hygiene is highlighted most often (Armstrong et al., 2016; Pedersen and Netter, 2015; Henninger et al., 2019; Lang et al., 2019), with a study by Clube and Tennant (2020) suggesting worries around contamination can end in a complete rejection of the rental model.

Other studies highlight barriers that relate to trust in the rental model, such as the reliability, functional performance and damage insurance (Adam et al., 2018; Lang et al., 2020; Bodenheimer et al., 2022). Concerns around durability, maintenance and performance are also highlighted across the literature, especially when renting through online platforms where consumers are unable to anticipate quality (e.g. Catulli, 2012; Lang, 2018; Henninger et al., 2019). However, this presents contradictions within the literature regarding fashion consumption, as it is equally as difficult to anticipate quality from the very successful fast

fashion websites.

A strong attachment to frequent consumption is also noted across the literature as an issue that stops consumers partaking in collaborative consumption (Armstrong et al., 2016; Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018; Lang et al., 2020), especially due to its lack of convenience and ease (Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020). Likewise, it is well documented that absence of ownership is a problem which adds to the difficulties of renting (Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010). However, as previously mentioned, some consumers view this as a motivator, highlighting the need for more comprehensive research to establish a more synonymous and nuanced picture.

Studies also demonstrate little willingness to pay more for ethically focussed products (McNeill and Venter, 2019; Borg et al., 2020), whilst other research established consumers view rental to be a waste of money over simply buying the product (Lang and Joyner-Armstrong, 2018a; Lang et al., 2019). This creates further confusion as it implies affordability is a barrier and motivator.

Criticisms of rental clothing also highlight the rebound effect (Par-guel et al., 2017; Zamani et al., 2017; Underwood and Fremstad, 2018) - that buying more sustainably leads consumers to buy more (Madureira, 2014). This can lead to increased cleaning, increased delivery costs and consistent frequent consumption, especially if rental were to be used for everyday clothing. As a result, Agrawal et al. (2012) have found that leasing products is not necessarily more environmentally friendly than purchasing.

#### 2.1.8. The implications of age and gender

Although motivations to collaborate in rental clothing have been explored, fewer studies investigate the perceptions of it as an alternative to fast fashion, particularly across wide age ranges (McNeill and Venter, 2019). Research has found young consumers are more concerned with trends than any other age group (Martin and Bush, 2000) and, as a result, are the most avid consumers of fast fashion (Birtwhistle et al., 2016; Greene, 2008; Morgan and Birtwhistle, 2009). However, more recently Hwang and Griffiths (2017) indicated a positive relationship between attitudes towards collaborative consumption and behavioural intention for young consumers in their findings.

Research by Mishra et al. (2020) suggests that, if a young adult has previously been involved in sustainable practices, this has a significant influence on their consumption of luxury rental clothing. However, other research suggests young consumers explored a positive value attitude relationship for utilitarian and hedonistic benefits, not for environmental (McNeill and Venter, 2019). To support this, Liang and Xu (2017) agree that those in their early 20 s have strongest hedonic values, whilst those in their 30 s were most worried about environmental value. This is supported by evidence that suggests millennials are increasingly inclined to sustainability with a rise in their demand for non-ownership consumption (Park and Joyner-Armstrong, 2017). However, Gen Z in America is seen to lead sustainability (McCoy et al., 2021). Furthermore, Möhlmann (2015) studied adult consumers and found that cost savings, service quality and trust, driven by rationality and self-serve benefit, were important when participating in collaborative consumption. This highlights a need for more clarity within research regarding the differences between the perceptions of fast fashion and sustainable fashion across different generations and geographies, given their unique specificities (Jackson et al., 2007).

As well as a larger proportion of the research focussed on the younger generations, research also reveals that females are the biggest purchasers of fast fashion (Young Lee et al., 2013) and were more interested in new trends than males (Beaudoin et al., 2003). Female consumers are more involved in fashion clothing products (O'Cass, 2004). Whilst discussing the gender bias that exists in fashion consumption, it is important to recognise how women are also more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviour compared to men (Dzialo, 2017; Horton, 2018). This relates to how fast fashion can represent the feminisation of responsibility (Horton, 2018).

As a relatively modern phenomenon, the literature on rental clothing remains recent and is growing rapidly. However, there is a clear need to understand rental clothing adoption across different demographics (Martin et al., 2019), but also geographies (Jain et al., 2021), in particular observing the urban versus rural areas (Henninger et al., 2021). In response to such calls, the following section presents how the empirical part is structured to reflect these.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sampling

Purposive sampling is used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information (Campbell et al., 2020). More specifically, typical case sampling was used. It allows comparison between samples and is used to illustrate beliefs towards a phenomenon, in this case rental clothing (Patton, 1990, pp.169–186).

For this research, only females were recruited. From the literature review, it was evident that young females are more avid users of fast fashion (Ming Law et al., 2004; O'Cass, 2004; Lang et al., 2013), hence their inclusion. The literature studied also highlighted minimal research into consumers' age and, to fill a research gap, but also establish comparisons, Gen X participants were recruited to provide differing perceptions and attitudes to Gen Z.

Due to the lack of research within the UK on rental clothing between rural and urban areas, three focus areas were chosen (Henniger et al., 2021). Firstly, with a population of 363,400 (Office for National Statistics, 2022), Cardiff has seen a significant increase in the development of retail since, 2000 (Collins and Flynn, 2015). It was also named the 4th greenest town and city (comparethemarket, 2015). With a population of 9 million (London Datastore, 2020), London was also a suitable choice for this research, renowned as a fashion capital of the world (Godart, 2014). To provide comparison between urban and rural areas, participants were also recruited from rural villages within the Cotswolds, where there is a total population of 139,000, creating an interesting research location when compared to metropolitan areas (Cotswolds Website, 2021). These locations were representative of rural and urban areas, providing a valuable spatial diversity in the sample.

#### 3.2. Data collection

To collect the data interviewees were contacted through multiple Facebook groups in the three focus areas. Three Facebook groups were used; in Cardiff the group had 14,000 members, in London, it had 69,000 members and in the Cotswolds, 33,000 members. A post asking for participants was uploaded in each of the groups. In total 34 volunteers came forward, however, 28 were interviewed due to 6 non-responses after initial contact (Table 1). The final sample falls well within qualitative research guidelines (Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

Using Facebook groups allowed a wider range of participants, increasing diversity of the sample. Once recruited, information was sent to each participant to allow meaningful interviews to take place. Interviews were carried out via Zoom which allowed good quality recordings for transcription.

There were 14 core questions asked, with follow-up questions depending on the answers given, leading to the semi-structured interview approach. The core questions explored fast fashion and second-hand consumption habits of the participants. They also investigated perceptions and experience of rental and what they believed to be barriers and motivators. Lastly, interviewees were asked for their perception of the future of rental and what needed to be done to increase use. Once recorded, interviews were transcribed to enable analysis. All 28 interviews were recorded between 15th and 31st July 2022 and lasted on average 22 min.

**Table 1**  
Summary of participants.

Interview	Age	Occupational Field	Location
XU1	45	Retail	Cardiff
XU2	42	Politics/ Freelance	Cardiff
XU3	53	Unemployed	Cardiff
XU4	42	Emergency Services	Cardiff
XU5	45	Charity	Cardiff
XU6	46	Healthcare	London
XU7	53	Unemployed	London
XU8	47	Unemployed	London
XU9	44	Charity	London
XR1	53	Healthcare	Cotswolds
XR2	50	Accounting	Cotswolds
XR3	49	Healthcare	Cotswolds
XR4	54	Landscaping	Cotswolds
XR5	45	Education	Cotswolds
ZU1	22	Retail	Cardiff
ZU2	22	Student	Cardiff
ZU3	19	Student	Cardiff
ZU4	22	Student	Cardiff
ZU5	21	Personal Assistant	London
ZU6	21	Healthcare	London
ZU7	24	Education	London
ZU8	24	Marketing	London
ZR1	19	Student	Cotswolds
ZR2	19	Student	Cotswolds
ZR3	24	Healthcare	Cotswolds
ZR4	21	Healthcare	Cotswolds
ZR5	22	Student	Cotswolds
ZR6	22	Student	Cotswolds

3.3. Analytical approach

Thematic analysis is regarded as the most popular method of qualitative data analysis (Guest et al., 2012) and involves coding data into clusters of similar entities to identify patterns and relationships between themes (Figgou and Pavlopoulos, 2015). Ryan and Bernard (2000) argue thematic analysis exists within other analysis methods, such as grounded theory. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue it is a method in its own right. This research used inductive thematic analysis as the recognised themes were data driven and were not put into pre-existing coding frames or being used to prove preconceptions (Corbin and Strauss, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Inductive analysis allowed the researcher to create a more ‘bottom-up’ research strategy using open and in-vivo coding that was related to the literature once themes were identified (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Bingham and Witkowsky, 2022).

NVIVO software was employed to enable a more systematic organisation and analysis of data using open coding (Bryman, 2012). To effectively code the transcribed interviews into more cohesive themes, as recommended by Gioia et al. (2013), initially first order concepts were identified through open coding (Table 2; Corbin and Strauss, 1998). As the research progressed, similarities and differences were identified to create the second-order themes that helped to develop theory to explain the phenomena in question (Gioia et al., 2013). At this point, ‘theoretical saturation’ was reached and second-order themes were developed into aggregate dimensions (Chun Tie et al., 2019). These aggregate dimensions culminate the themes across the findings, creating an informed discussion of rental clothing with the literature. How the researcher progressed from raw data to themes is shown in Table 2, demonstrating rigor in qualitative research (Pratt, 2008; Tracy, 2010).

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings from the interviews, alongside a discussion of the results. The themes identified here help to build a theoretical model to capture the adoption of rental clothing. A summary of findings is offered in Table 3.

**Table 2**  
Thematic analysis: codes and themes.

First order codes	Second order codes	Aggregate dimensions / themes
Regular consumption of fast fashion	How often do you consume?	Fashion consumption patterns
Rare consumption of fast fashion		
Cutting down consumption	Important factors in consumption.	
Quality of clothing		
Price of items	Reasoning for buying new clothes.	
Fit of clothes		
Ease of buying	Feelings towards buying new clothes.	
Practicality		
Impulse or want	Rewearing	
Need new clothes, old clothes worn out		
Shopping for an occasion or event	Use of second-hand shops	Use of second hand and perceptions of rental
What shops do you usually shop in?		
Uses second hand shops for new clothes	Use of rental clothing schemes	
Does most shopping online		
Happy to re-wear items of clothing	Initial perceptions of rental clothing scheme.	
Would not re-wear clothes multiple times, especially to events		
Frequent use of second-hand shops i.e charity shops	Perception of the affordability of rental clothing schemes.	Affordability
Use of second-hand online platforms		
Never used second hand shops or platforms	Sustainable clothes are too expensive.	Sustainability
Motivators for using second hand shops		
Used a while ago for wedding or hat etc.	Awareness of impact of fast fashion in general.	
Never used rental clothing schemes		
Consideration for everyday items	Belief of the sustainability of fast fashion.	
Perception that rental is only occasion-wear		
Lack of knowledge	Awareness and consciousness of ethical fast fashion brand extensions.	
Fast fashion is so cheap, rental cannot compare		
Process makes rental expensive		
Cheaper than buying high end clothes outright		
Seen as cheaper than fast fashion		
Affordability is a barrier to sustainable consumption		
Waste and landfill		
Materials and resource use		
Fossil fuels and travel		
Do not know the impacts of fast fashion		
Social impacts - working conditions		
ASOS is better than other brands		
Paying for returns		
Aware it is not sustainable but is only option		
Do not trust them		
Trust and choose them		
Highlights moves in right direction but not enough		
Still choose other aspects over sustainability		
Not noticeable enough, token gesture		

(continued on next page)



**Table 3**  
Summary of findings.

	Gen Z	Gen X	Urban	Rural
Fashion consumption patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More regularly consume fast fashion than Gen X.</li> <li>- Show intention to reduce consumption.</li> <li>- Motivated by quality and price.</li> <li>- Tend to buy new clothes for occasions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More likely to rewear clothes, consume fashion less often.</li> <li>- Motivated by quality and price but also fit and how it made them feel.</li> <li>- More likely to buy new clothes for need.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More likely to shop online than the high street.</li> <li>- Easier to impulse buy clothing items.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less affected by trends.</li> <li>- More likely to shop online over the high street.</li> </ul>
Use of second hand and perceptions of rental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All members had used second-hand clothing platforms.</li> <li>- Preferred online second-hand platforms compared to Gen X.</li> <li>- No prior use of rental.</li> <li>- Perceived stock as occasion wear.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Those who had not shopped second hand were part of Gen X.</li> <li>- More conserved over renting second-hand clothing due to the hassle.</li> <li>- Some evidence of charity shop use rather than online second-hand shops.</li> <li>- Few individuals had used rental, but not recently.</li> <li>- Perceived stock as occasion wear.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Easier to shop second-hand and mainstream fashion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More difficult to shop second-hand due to accessibility and therefore rely on online shopping more heavily.- Whilst some felt shopping was more effort, others suggested it gave them opportunity to consider sustainable options.</li> </ul>
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neither generation felt more strongly than the other about affordability.</li> <li>- Agreed there was potential for it to be cheaper than buying high end items but not in comparison to fast fashion and that it was dependent on the item.</li> <li>- More likely to be cheaper for those more ethically swayed.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attitudes over affordability did not vary greatly by location.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Suggestion that those in rural areas were more affluent, so could afford to shop rental more readily.</li> </ul>
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aware of social and environmental issues surrounding fast fashion.</li> <li>- Some suggestion of scepticism due to greenwashing</li> <li>- Most saw rental as a more sustainable option.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aware of social and environmental issues surrounding fast fashion.</li> <li>- Some suggestion of scepticism due to greenwashing.</li> <li>- Mentioned it was hard to tell if it would be a more sustainable option.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Both locations suggested they did not know enough about sustainability to comment.</li> </ul>	
Attitudes to Rental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivated by fit and look. Quality was not as prominent of a motivator compared to previous studies.</li> <li>- Barriers included keeping track of items and responsibility.</li> <li>- More likely than Gen X to express cost as a barrier but also more likely to recognise the ability to save money.</li> <li>- Both generations wanted to explore styles.</li> <li>- More likely to be motivated by sustainability.</li> <li>- Attached sentimentality to clothing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivated by fit and look. Quality was not as prominent of a motivator compared to previous studies.</li> <li>- More worried about the hassle and time taken compared to Gen Z.</li> <li>- More often highlighted worries over cleanliness.</li> <li>- Wanted the prestige of owning clothes, perceived snobbery to be a barrier.</li> <li>- Both generations wanted to explore styles.</li> <li>- Saw the benefits of sustainability as a secondary bonus.</li> <li>- Attach utilitarian benefits more often.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Barriers and motivators did not differ by location.</li> </ul>	
Generational Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It is thought rental clothing schemes will suit younger generations more.</li> <li>- Gen Z also more open to the idea.</li> <li>- Changing styles and body fit so can benefit from rental.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Slower adoption by older generations mostly due to technology use.</li> <li>- More likely to be able to afford to rent.</li> <li>- Need increased awareness and convenience to increase use by Gen X.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Generational differences did not differ by location.</li> </ul>	
Future of Rental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trust and reputation essential, hence the preference of B2C.</li> <li>- Gen Z preferred P2P due to the sustainability aspect.</li> <li>- Wanted increased types of clothing and more everyday options in rental.</li> <li>- Wanted it to be more obviously cost-effective.</li> <li>- Believed increased awareness and convenience was necessary in the future.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trust and reputation essential, hence the preference of B2C.</li> <li>- Peace of mind was essential.</li> <li>- Believed increased awareness and convenience was necessary in the future.</li> <li>- Increased range and ranges of sizing was important.</li> <li>- Wanted it to be more obviously cost-effective.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accessibility is an important deciding factor even in urban areas.</li> <li>- Need to increase presence of rental shops online and on the high street.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ease of use very important.</li> <li>- Need to increase presence of rental shops online and on the high street.</li> </ul>

Vinted and Depop contrasts research that suggested online second-hand shopping intention was low in young consumers (Xu et al., 2014). With social media infiltrating the younger generations (Granados, 2017), it is possible that online second-hand platforms are better suited to them, or that Gen X are slower to adopt new methods, especially as Gen X favoured charity shops.

No single respondent from Gen Z had partaken in rental clothing schemes and only five Gen X participants had previous experiences with renting clothing. It is important to mention that although many had not used them, some had seen evidence on social media or 'looked into them a few times'. This is not surprising considering the first rental fashion marketplace in the UK opened in 2018 (Conlon, 2020), indicating a need for increased knowledge of the model, to ensure more sustainable options are known to consumers.

Despite the limited experience with rental clothing schemes across both generations, rental clothing schemes were perceived to surround occasion-wear that one 'could not afford outright' or would 'only wear once':

*"I wouldn't necessarily think of it for everyday use. For me, the practicalities of trying to find some way to do that would be difficult."* [ZR3].

Additionally, renting swimwear and underwear was found to be viewed negatively. This is consistent with previous research that found occasion-wear to be the most common choice for fashion rental, with activewear, swimwear and underwear being the least common (Mukendi and Henninger, 2020). Several studies showed that consumers cannot imagine using rental services for everyday clothing (Armstrong et al., 2016; Borg et al., 2020; Arrigo, 2021b). However, if rental schemes offered more everyday clothing, it would encourage consumers to use them more.

#### 4.1.3. Affordability

Although price was an important consideration in fashion consumption, the affordability of rental clothing schemes in comparison to fast fashion, were not found to be perceived more affordable, due to the extra cost of cleaning and deliveries, inferring an inability to compete with the prices of fast fashion:

*"I think it's hard for rental to compete. I don't imagine it would be as cheap as the cheapest possible form of buying clothing...I think there's a huge tranche of people who probably would balk at spending, what the true cost of clothing really should be."* [XU9]

This is supported by research that found Missguided and Boohoo were selling dresses for as low as £4 (Laville, 2019), creating unrealistic expectations of clothing prices and increasing barriers to more circular initiatives. Although rental schemes are not cheaper than fast fashion, they could be affordable in some circumstances, especially for luxury items or occasion-wear. This corroborates previous studies that affordability is a key benefit, yet only in terms of occasion-wear (Armstrong et al., 2015; Cook and Hodges, 2015). Additionally, rental schemes could be considered cheaper, especially for those who were 'more ethically swayed'. This is supported by evidence that shows, a £1,200 dress can be rented for less than 1 % of its price, with other items as low as £23 (Theodosi, 2020), suggesting preconceived ideas of premiumisation are becoming unnecessary barriers to the consumption of rental fashion.

#### 4.1.4. Sustainability

The sustainability theme highlighted the issue of waste or increased landfill as an environmental impact of fast fashion, including fossil fuel use, global supply chains, and water and chemical use:

*"Where do you start? Creating the material, creating the garment, transporting the garment, then when the garment ends up in waste, and then obviously there's the ethical and safety issues in terms of the labour."*

*It's so often bad quality and responding to trends that move very quickly and so people don't wear it very often."* [XU9]

This is consistent with reports as early as 2008 that found the disposability of fast fashion to be problematic (Fisher et al., 2008). It is also important to highlight the social impacts of fast fashion, typically less prominently featuring in similar research (Stringer et al., 2021).

The sustainability credentials of fast fashion brands show a complex understanding. On the one hand lack of trust for the sustainable lines is shown, but some respondents expressed 'no reason not to trust them'. What emerged is that 'greenwashing' issue highlighted the importance of reputation in sustainable clothing:

*"When an organisation that's not wholly interested in [sustainability] tags a bit on the end, it feels like they're trying to pay lip service."* [XU7]

This highlights how trust can affect consumption habits and although consumers are more willing to use sustainable options, it is often viewed as a 'token gesture'. This supports research that suggests brands need to strengthen their promotion efforts (Papadopoulou et al., 2022).

Overall rental clothing is seen as a more sustainable alternative. However, due to the novelty of such schemes, a level of scepticism surrounds their sustainability credentials.

#### 4.1.5. Attitudes towards Rental

The key problem with rental schemes is the fit of clothes, as captured below:

*"I think being unable to try things on, because often, the kind of thing I could imagine wanting to rent would be things like nice dresses and they're very much the sort of thing that really needs to fit well."* [XU8]

This supports research by Mukendi and Henninger (2020) who found sizing to be a barrier. Although research by Bray et al. (2011) and Carrigan and Attalla (2001) found quality to impede ethical consumption, only a very small proportion of the participants in this research felt the same. However, considering the perceived stock of rental being occasion-wear, it is likely higher quality was expected. It is important to highlight that these issues are the same whether online or in-store.

Another key issue regarding rental of items is logistics, specifically the accompanying hassle and responsibility, which reduced convenience and spontaneity, a concern most pronounced among Gen X. Conversely, Gen Z were found to be more worried about keeping track of renting everyday items and remembering to return them:

*"You receive on certain day, but then you have to send it back by the fourth or the seventh day. I'm not good at that kind of stress and remembering to do things like that which takes away the enjoyment and flexibility."* [ZU1]

This suggests organisation is a barrier to rental, especially when purchasing fast fashion is so simple (McNeill and Moore, 2015). This issue was previously highlighted by Armstrong et al. (2016) and Mukendi and Henninger (2020) that long-term planning is a significant barrier. Furthermore, it is also found that concerns about damaging the items and the responsibility that came with renting were important, corroborating research by Bodenheimer et al. (2022).

Although rental schemes were not seen to be cheaper than fast fashion, there was a more nuanced picture when it came to its affordability overall. Since cost is perceived as a specific barrier to rental, especially as rental companies tended to stock expensive items, purchasing and owning is considered more favourable.

*"The type of rental that's available at the moment is all high end, so it's more expensive."* [ZR2]

This is consistent with research by Armstrong et al. (2016), McNeill and Venter (2019) and Borg et al. (2020) that highlight price as a barrier, which is likely to persist until rental clothing schemes become more mainstream.

Overall, cleanliness and hygiene issues were a more common concern in Gen X. Whilst these were found to be typically related to who were the previous users and the quality of cleanliness, these did not suggest a complete rejection of rental:

*“I don’t necessarily think with dresses [cleanliness] would bother me, but I think if it started to get into things like a pair of jeans, even if it was washed and it’s only ever been worn once. I just think in my head that wouldn’t sit right with me, I’d have to know exactly where it had been and how it was cleaned.” [ZU7]*

The finding supports research from [Armstrong et al. \(2016\)](#), who note hygiene as a concern towards rental, especially items with close skin contact. This implies information about cleaning and aftercare needs to be well advertised to extinguish misconceptions.

At the same time, it was found that prior shopping experience of second-hand goods reduced worries about cleanliness, where business practices and policies ensured quality, contradicting previous research that reports cleanliness to be the most prominent barrier ([Adam et al., 2018](#); [Lang et al., 2019](#); [Clube and Tennant, 2020](#)), and showing cleanliness as a more nuanced issue.

Although less common than other barriers, it is found that reluctance to take part in rental schemes is related to lack of ownership and wanting to keep the item. Whilst members of Gen Z attached sentimentality to outfits, members of Gen X were interested in owning clothes, revealing ownership as a potential snobbery barrier for rental schemes:

*“I think snobbery may stop them from doing it (rental). I think at the moment that may be the mindset because not enough people know that the rental schemes are out there, so I think the status of owning an item could stop them from expanding.” [XR1]*

Although not as prominent, these findings are consistent with those of [Adam et al. \(2018\)](#), [Becker-Leifhold and Iran \(2018\)](#), [Arrigo \(2021b\)](#) and [Bodenheimer et al. \(2022\)](#), who quote lack of ownership as a problem in adopting rental schemes.

Contrastingly, it is found that adoption of fashion rental enables a greater exploration of styles, equally important to both generations. This is especially related to the ability to experiment and obtain variety in what one wears. This is supported by prior studies, that also cite the ability to experiment, gain more variety and switch up clothes without guilt as a key motivator ([Lang et al., 2016](#); [McKinney and Shin, 2016](#); [Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018](#); [Camacho-Otero et al., 2019](#); [Lang et al., 2019](#); [McNeill and Venter, 2019](#); [Lee et al., 2021](#)). This emphasises the importance of enjoyment and pleasure towards fashion, inferring perceived hedonic benefits ([Hwang and Griffiths, 2017](#); [Pantano and Stylos, 2020](#)).

Another finding acting as a motivating factor towards rental schemes was the ability for it to fit a need, highlighting utilitarian benefits. This is particularly expressed in the importance of being able to access something only required for a limited time without worrying about lack of use. This is supported by research that found utilitarian benefits, such as frugal shopping, significantly influenced consumers to participate in clothing rental ([Armstrong et al., 2016](#); [Lang, 2018](#)). Furthermore, it motivated Gen X participants considerably more than Gen Z participants, which suggests Gen X place more of a utilitarian view on fashion consumption, rather than for hedonic reasons.

#### 4.1.6. Generational differences

Younger generations were found to be more likely to use rental more. This is partly related to the perception of technology and its lower accessibility to older generations, and partly due to the fact that older generations were more likely to be able to afford to buy instead of rent. In fact, older generations are seen to have ‘established wardrobes’, and therefore would not need to rent to follow trends. Contrastingly, younger people were ‘changing styles’ and ‘changing body shape’, so could benefit from rental more

*“Maybe older generations are more slow adopters, but if you’re in a generation that’s been brought up with the internet and trusting the internet and social media, then probably you are a bit more likely to be interested in peer-to-peer lending and things like that.” [XU8]*

This finding confirms previous studies indicating that perceived rental schemes are best suited to younger consumers ([Armstrong et al., 2015](#)).

#### 4.1.7. Location

Location was found to have an influence on attitudes towards fast fashion and second-hand consumption, therefore influencing attitudes towards rental clothing. This is more pronounced for rural-based participants, where location meant shopping second-hand was more difficult, returning clothes was a lot of effort and that the accessibility of shops provoked more online shopping:

*“The thought of going into shops to try things or the thought of receiving a package of clothes and then having to take them back or go to post office and send them off again is bit too much. So yeah, I don’t go into town half as much because it’s more of an effort.” [XR3]*

This is supported by [Carrigan and Attalla \(2001\)](#), who found effort was a barrier to ethical consumption. However, rural location is not always seen as a disadvantage, in fact it may encourage greater use of online shops, especially for those in more affluent rural areas.

*“I think in a rural area I’m drawn to online shops, but I can look at more sustainable options too. I’m not just drawn into high street shops because they are easy.” [ZR3]*

Conversely, in urban areas it is easier to shop both mainstream and second-hand. This could be a result of the competition that exists in urban locations, where businesses engage in rivalry to gain consumers. The proximity of second-hand shops in such areas suggest that consumers based there have alternatives to fast fashion:

*“I don’t fancy going to town anymore. I’m really privileged because you know, you’ve got all the charity shops, so there’s no need for me to.” [XU2]*

Overall, these findings suggest that location does influence attitudes and the likelihood of participating in fashion rental, filling important gaps in the literature. It implies that to be successful, both online platforms and in-person shops must be made accessible and convenient.

#### 4.1.8. Future of rental

Rental schemes are more likely to attract consumers if they operate in a business-to-consumer arrangement. This is considered a more trustworthy option than peer-to-peer platforms, as it resolves issues around cleanliness, any rental problems – e.g. loss or damage liability, highlighting the importance of standards and protocols:

*“I would do business to consumer; I think it’s just something about the respect of the business. And the fact that maybe it’s a little bit more professionally cleaned, they’ll have standards that they have to hit. Whereas peer-to-peer, you don’t always know the quality you’re getting and so it is less reliable.” [ZU7]*

[Mukendi and Henninger \(2020\)](#) agreed that consumers feel more comfortable renting from a company over a peer, not just because of hygiene, but because of quality and reliability ([Adam et al., 2018](#); [Camacho-Otero et al., 2019](#)). For peer-to-peer platforms to gain traction it is expected they would offer the ability to leave reviews/comments, as a trust-building mechanism. However, it was also found that business-to-consumer rental schemes could lead to development of peer-to-peer versions, once consumers become more comfortable with renting. Whilst peer-to-peer platforms are considered cheaper options, they were also viewed as more sustainable, where businesses would normally withdraw heavily used items to preserve their reputation on quality:

“I think I would prefer peer to peer. I think things would get re-worn more peer to peer as businesses are more worried about their standards so may pull it from being used in circularity.” [ZR1]

For rental clothing to compete with fast fashion three key issues need to be considered by rental schemes: importance of ease, accessibility, and promotion. The latter element is especially critical, as adoption is more likely if consumer knowledge and awareness are improved through big brands and influencers employing effective marketing strategies, some of which could stress the sustainability aspects:

“I think there’s so much power in their hands for improving sustainability. And if rental companies want to come to the forefront, they will probably get a good reception because people want to be sustainable, you just need to put it in front of people.” [ZU7]

This is supported by research that suggested marketing of rental needed to promote sustainability (Pantano and Stylos, 2020). Furthermore, Jain et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of building consumer trust, satisfaction and reducing perceived risk through marketing, whilst Park and Joyner-Armstrong (2019) suggest a focus on ease of use and time saving.

4.2. A framework for rental adoption

This study provides important considerations for the future of rental schemes and consumers’ perceptions of them. Fig. 1 presents a theoretical model explaining adoption of clothing rental schemes.

There are four key factors that influence both fashion consumption patterns and attitude to rental, these are: fashion consciousness, age, sustainability awareness, and affordability. Fashion consciousness encapsulates how consumers view the importance of fit, style and quality, as well as the ability to wear a variety of clothes through renting. This is supported by previous research by Appleford (2021) and Bray et al. (2011) who highlight the importance of fit and quality. Age had an influence on frequency of consumption, but also on attitudes towards rental clothing, regarding cleanliness, cost and lack of ownership. Sustainability awareness also influenced views of the fast fashion industry, provided motivation for rental and provoked interest in shopping second-hand. This is corroborated by Chekima et al. (2016), who

highlight younger populations of consumers are more likely to show purchase intention for green brands. Affordability was a consistent theme across the research, as both a barrier and a motivator to using rental, but also was a factor that motivated consumers to use fast fashion. Further highlighted in the framework are the impact of external factors, such as location. Location not only impacts fashion consumption and rental adoption but it also has an impact on how the future of rental is perceived, especially as a mainstream option of clothing consumption. The theoretical framework also shows the importance of trust and convenience in determining the extent of rental clothing adoption in the future, particularly through positive reviews and whether consumers prefer business-to-consumer or peer-to-peer arrangements. This is supported by a number of previous studies (Armstrong et al., 2016; Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018; Kim and Jin, 2020; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020; Jain et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to better understand what determines rental clothing adoption. The results suggest that fashion consumption remains unsustainable with evidence of an ethical purchasing gap (Stringer et al., 2021). Rental clothing schemes are found more sustainable, as is known for more circular initiatives (Perren and Grauerholz, 2015; Adam et al., 2017). However, this is not without scepticism, made worse by lack of trust in the industry’s sustainability claims (Siera, 2022). Furthermore, whilst rental schemes could never compete with the price of fast fashion, this does not mean it is less affordable than buying high-end items, consistent with research that highlighted that only occasion-wear is more affordable (Cook and Hodges, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2015).

The barriers and motivators identified differ in importance to previous research. Quality and sizing are the most common barriers, with cleanliness, cost and lack of ownership less pertinent ones. This contrasts previous research that notes hygiene as the most prominent barrier to rental (e.g. Armstrong et al., 2015; Henninger et al., 2019; Lang et al., 2019; Peña-Vinces et al., 2020). Difficulty in usage was also highlighted, which is rarely mentioned in literature (Jain et al., 2021). This creates implications for its expansion and further highlights the ease of fast fashion. In terms of motivations, hedonistic factors dominate over utilitarian (Cook and Hodges, 2015; Lang and Joyner-Armstrong, 2018b;

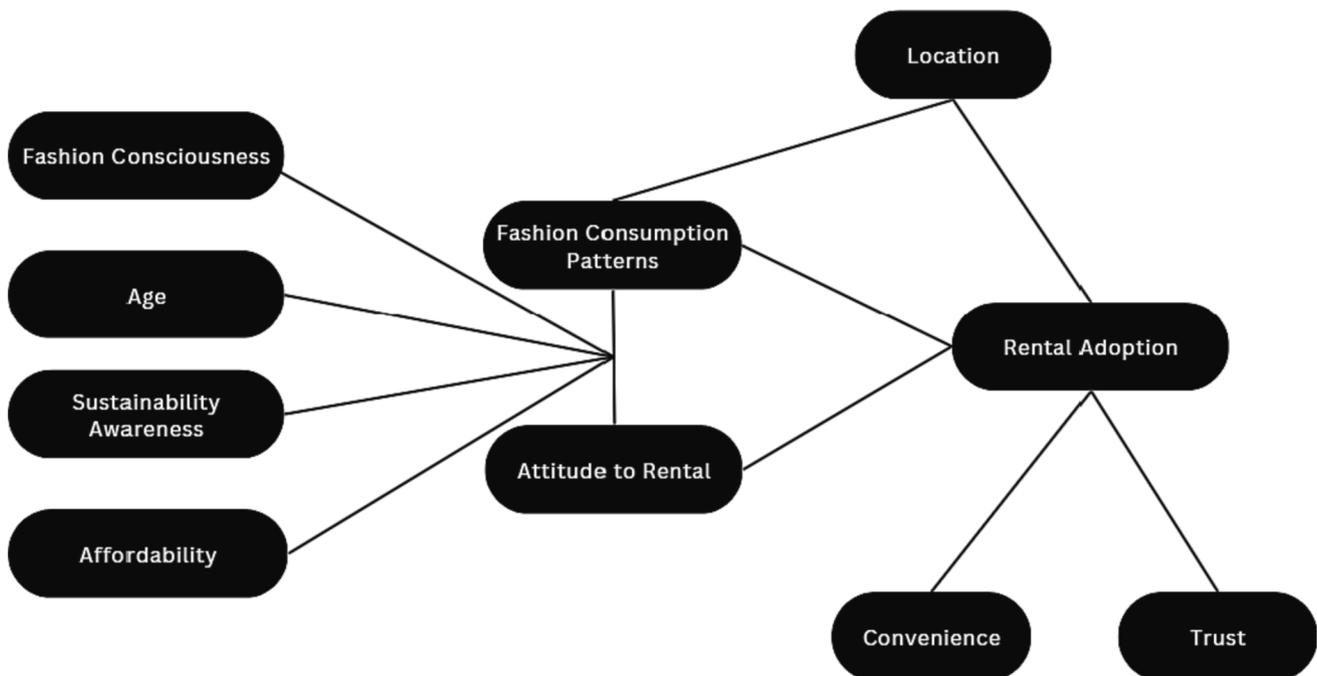


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework explaining rental clothing adoption.

Park and Joyner-Armstrong, 2019), suggesting that prior research stressing sustainability awareness of rental, may have overplayed its importance to consumers.

Additionally, an urban–rural divide was highlighted; the hassle of rental was more prominent for those in rural areas. However, both locations tended to shop online over the high street and the barriers and motivators did not differ by location. This implies that to increase uptake, rental schemes must increase their presence online. Moreover, this research suggests consumers believe rental would suit younger generations more, as agreed by Jain et al. (2021). This is not to say Gen X cannot participate, they simply may be slower to adopt these methods. The importance of trust and reputation across both generations was found to be essential in achieving mainstream rental, as is consistent with previous research, and explains the preference for business-to-consumer sales (Armstrong et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2021; Kim and Jin, 2020). More importantly, increased ranges of sizes and clothing types in rental clothing schemes are important to consumers, which is also better for sustainability as it increases use, as supported by the literature (Armstrong et al., 2015; Gyde and McNeill, 2021; Bodenheimer et al., 2022).

Overall, the future of fashion rental should begin by increasing awareness and knowledge of the ability to rent, mostly through online platforms. It is also essential that returns processes, reviews, cleaning regimes and cost-savings are clarified as benefits of the system through effective marketing strategies. This will aid the adoption of rental schemes, helping to increase affordability, accessibility and trust, advancing the sustainability of the clothing industry.

### 5.1. Research implications

This research is essential in the future of more circular clothing initiatives. Unlike other types of second-hand consumption, the ability to experience new styles and creativity is possible with rental. However, its current offerings lack in affordability and accessibility, compared to other alternatives such as charity shops, creating important implications for theory, policy and business.

### 5.2. Implications for theory

This study is the first one to investigate the perceptions across differing locations in the UK, between specific age ranges. It therefore shows important theoretical implications regarding the effect of age and location. The research demonstrates awareness of sustainability as a more important motivator than before (Lee and Huang, 2020) and cleanliness as a less prominent barrier, further expanding the scope of knowledge on fashion rental. Furthermore, where previously it was suggested rental fashion appealed to younger generations, this research has added more nuance to this discussion, by highlighting the importance of specific marketing and noting that older generations would adopt such practices, just more slowly. Overall, the importance of price, fit and style remains high, supporting theories of the importance of personal innovativeness, fashion consciousness, and price consciousness as motivators (Möhlmann, 2015).

Secondly, this paper proposes a theoretical framework explaining rental clothing adoption, adding to the literatures on marketing, consumer studies, sustainability, and economic geography. The identification of key aspects explaining rental adoption opens up the possibility of future quantitative studies testing the model not just in the UK, but elsewhere too.

### 5.3. Implications for policy

Governments have the potential to play a role in the promotion of rental clothing as a sustainable alternative. Currently, governments have been slow in regulating fast fashion and preventing any unsustainable practices. Whilst the EU environmental agency showed interest in

regulating fast fashion, the UK government is yet to follow suit (Williams, 2022). Linking back to trust, policy must ensure that businesses cannot claim to be sustainable when they are not. This necessitates stronger certifications and regulations to ensure transparency and sustainability. Furthermore, whilst governments can work to improve rental, they can also work to deter fast fashion. For example, labels of durability should be used or increased taxes on fast fashion should be implemented to incentivise slow-fashion initiatives (Coscieme et al., 2022). Ultimately, policy needs to work to dematerialise consumption and is needed to change consumer behaviour (Mishra et al., 2020).

### 5.4. Implications for business

These results demonstrate the importance of increasing knowledge and awareness of rental clothing schemes across rural and urban areas in the UK. Rental clothing businesses should use relevant marketing strategies to promote popularity, such as partnerships with big brands or influencers to appeal to differing audiences, depending on what was most important to specific demographics. Rental businesses must promote the ability to save money when using these schemes, in response to affordability expectations from consumers. Businesses should emphasise cost savings whilst advertising the ability to be more sustainable and wear new styles (Jain et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the importance of promoting information about cleaning protocols, returns policies and damage insurance is crucial to counteract negative perceptions. To do this, businesses must ensure they use review processes to fulfil the importance of reputation and trust, so consumers can make informed purchase decisions. Most importantly, the rental process must be pleasurable due to the hedonistic motivations surrounding fashion consumption. Implementing these strategies will have positive implications for rental businesses in the UK.

### 5.5. Limitations

This research is not free from limitations. Although participants were open with their less sustainable shopping habits, there may be research bias, as a result of an ethical purchasing gap (Park and Lin, 2018). As highlighted in the literature review, consumers overstate ethical intentions, which creates bias across the data (Cowe and Williams, 2000; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Lee et al., 2017), especially more prevalent in survey-based studies (Auger and Devinney, 2007). This was seen with some participants being aware of the environmental issues, as well as admitting they wanted to be more sustainable, but still regularly consuming fast fashion. This could also mean they overstated interest in their perceptions of rental schemes. Unfortunately, whilst care was taken to limit the impact of this bias by employing qualitative methods, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting results presented here, as with similar studies.

Secondly, it is also important to mention that all participants in this research were inexperienced with fashion rental. This could be considered a limitation as perceptions and beliefs have the potential to be incorrect in reality. However, it does invite future opportunity to research a comparison between those that use rental clothing schemes and those that have not or do not. This would also allow a better analysis of the attitude-behaviour gap.

As a purposive sample was used, representation was difficult to achieve; the majority of respondents were white females and whilst valuable insight can be drawn from the results, it is not a holistic interpretation of all females in Gen Z or Gen X, or the whole of the UK, and therefore should not be considered a complete representation.

### 5.6. Future research

Although this research looked at locations and generations, there is an opportunity to look further into the effects of other factors such as ethnicity, occupation and income or to incorporate different genders

into the study. This will enable a more holistic picture of attitudes towards rental clothing schemes. There is also a need to compare rental schemes to other slow fashion alternatives. This can be done by creating more detailed research on peer-to-peer and business-to-consumer, or through researching the sustainability of rental in comparison to other sustainable fashion companies. Such research may help to inform consumers to make better decisions surrounding their fashion consumption and enhance rental in the mainstream clothing industry.

Lastly, it is essential to explore the implications of rental clothing schemes as a mainstream option of consumption. This could include research into how far it can be part of a circular economy, the implications of the rebound effect and investigating at what point sustainable consumption becomes unsustainable. Understanding its limitations within the realm of sustainability and collaborative consumption would highlight implications for businesses and the overall rental model.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Poppy Imogen Herold:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **Daniel Prokop:** Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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