

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON HOW
INSTAGRAM MICRO-INFLUENCERS
INFLUENCE GEN-Z FEMALES'
PERCEPTION OF SECOND-HAND
CLOTHING IN LONDON AND TOKYO**

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*A project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the
degree*

MA Fashion Marketing and Global Cultures

Submission Date: 18 Sep 2025

Word count: 16,561 words

Declaration

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this project has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this institution or any other university or other institution of learning. In the writing of this project I have received assistance from a supervisor assigned by the University of the Arts London. I, Miku Sato, certify that this is an original piece of work. I have acknowledged all sources and citations. No section of this MA project has been plagiarised.

The Statement of AI usage

I acknowledge the use of Gemini (<https://gemini.google.com>) on 16 September 2025 to assist with formulating and refining of my dissertation. The prompts used are shown in Appendix NINE. The output from these prompts was used as a catalyst for a critical self-review of my own writing, enabling me to analyse, evaluate, and refine my text for greater academic clarity.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, Emilia J. Boulton for her invaluable guidance throughout this project. I would also like to thank all interview participants for providing me with data on their experiences related to second-hand clothing consumption and for taking the time to answer my questions.

Abstract

Research Context — The second-hand clothing (SHC) market has attracted increasing academic attention due to its rapid growth and its role as a sustainable alternative to fast fashion. Asia, in particular, is expected to drive this expansion, and Japan is no exception. In the context of the global fashion business, strategies that integrate both global and local perspectives are becoming increasingly important. Accordingly, understanding consumer psychology towards SHC in two culturally contrasting yet fashion-significant markets—London and Japan—offers valuable insights for the global SHC industry. This study focuses on the role of Instagram, a key platform in shaping consumer perceptions of SHC.

Purpose — The aim of this research is to explore how Instagram micro-influences the formation of consumer perceptions of SHC, and how these influences differ cross-culturally. The study seeks to provide insights into consumer psychology that may inform localised marketing strategies in the global SHC market.

Design/methodology/approach — To achieve a multifaceted understanding of the relationship between consumers and micro-influencers, a multi-method qualitative approach was employed. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants (four each from London and Tokyo), alongside a 14-day netnographic study of micro-influencer accounts focused on SHC in Western and Japanese contexts.

Findings — Thematic analysis of the interview and netnographic data revealed significant differences between London and Tokyo consumers in relation to influencer impact on SHC perception. In London, SHC was widely regarded as a trend and socially normalised, with stigma diminishing and a recognition of sustainable values evident among all participants. In contrast, Japanese consumers more frequently expressed resistance to SHC, with relatively few Instagram accounts prominently promoting it and an overwhelmingly lower level of engagement compared to London.

Originality and Value — This study makes a novel contribution by qualitatively comparing consumer perceptions of SHC and their cultural underpinnings. The findings highlight that engagement with SHC content is shaped by cultural differences, offering practical implications for cross-cultural communication strategies in the global SHC market.

Keywords — Second-hand clothing, SHC consumption, Cross-cultural study, Consumer perception, Micro-influencers, Netnography, Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Theory of Consumption Values (TCV)

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Chapter One INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and Background

1.1.1 Second-Hand Clothing Market

The second-hand clothing (SHC) market, encompassing pre-owned garments resold through various channels such as hand-me-downs, vintage stores, charity shops, and peer-to-peer platforms, has gained significant global attention. The market is projected to grow from \$40 billion in 2024 to approximately \$70 billion by 2028 (Figure 1.1). This remarkable growth is occurring against a backdrop of increasing environmental consciousness, particularly in the West, and evolving consumption patterns driven by digital retail platforms. Prior research has established that purchasing SHC is an effective solution for reducing textile waste and minimising pollution. Instagram, in particular, has emerged as one of the most powerful tools for promoting SHC consumption and shaping consumer behaviour and perceptions.

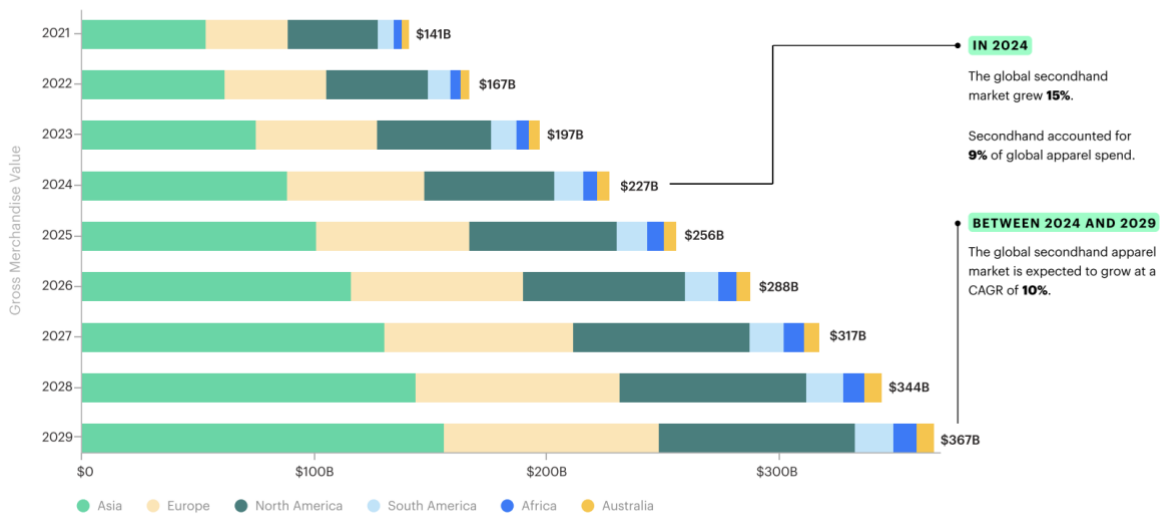


Figure 1.1: Global secondhand apparel market size (ThredUp, 2025)

The ThredUp report (2025) highlights the impressive predicted growth of the second-hand market in Asia. This is corroborated by data from Statista (2025 a), which reveals a notable growth curve for the Japanese second-hand market, positioning it as a significant and promising area for future expansion. However, a comparative analysis of second-hand consumption data by country from Statista (2025 b) shows that the use of second-hand goods in Japan is still limited compared to the UK. This suggests that a majority of Japanese consumers may still hold reservations towards second-hand goods, as indicated by other data from Statista (2025 c).

Consumer perceptions of SHC are complex and multifaceted (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020). Negative associations include resistance to previously owned garments, hygiene concerns, and connotations of poverty (Joy *et al.*, 2012; Xu *et al.*, 2014; Hur, 2020). Conversely, positive perceptions are linked

to sustainable lifestyle choices, a unique aesthetic, and the experience of a 'treasure hunt' (Roux and Korchia, 2006; Perry and Chung, 2016; McNeill and Venter, 2019; Hur, 2020; Oscario, 2023). These perceptions are further complicated by cultural dimensions, as demonstrated by Xu *et al.* (2014), who linked consumer attitudes towards SHC to Hofstede's cultural model (Hofstede, 1983). Despite Asia's identification as a crucial growth market and the predicted development of the second-hand market in Japan, knowledge regarding SHC perceptions in these contexts remains limited. While academic discourse acknowledges variations in SHC consumer behaviour between Western and Eastern markets (Xu *et al.*, 2014; Kim, Jung and Lee, 2021), research that translates these insights into actionable marketing strategies is notably absent. Based on the above, while the Japanese market is promising for the expansion of the SHC industry, current consumers may still have strong resistance towards pre-owned items. It is predicted that this is due to a complex consumer psychology. Thus, a deep understanding of this consumer psychology would provide valuable insights for developing the SHC market.

Gen-Z, as a consumer cohort, is recognised as the most sustainability-conscious generation due to their exposure to environmental issues from a young age (Kim, Jung and Lee, 2021; Ameen, Hosany, and Taheri, 2023). As digital natives, their consumption behaviours exhibit distinct characteristics (Ifadah *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, with their purchasing power steadily increasing, Gen-Z is poised to become the largest and most influential consumer generation in the market (Avidor, 2025). The importance of understanding their behaviour is paramount, particularly in fashion marketing, as fashion represents one of their largest spending categories after groceries (Bedford, 2025). Their consumption is also characterised by a preference for discovering new brands and stores (50%) and a willingness to change habits due to price concerns (73%), highlighting their unique and dynamic purchasing patterns (McKinsey, 2024). This study focuses on female consumers as prior research and statistical data have shown their higher engagement with fashion apparel, and Instagram usage (Cervellon, Carey and Harms, 2012; Oscario, 2023). The focus on females also aligns with a substantial body of related literature, making it easier to compare with and build upon existing knowledge.

The influence of Instagram on fashion marketing is undeniable, and its role in promoting sustainable fashion has been the subject of growing academic inquiry (Goldsmith, 2016; McKeown and Shearer, 2019; Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022). The relationship between Instagram and SHC consumption has been previously explored, with studies suggesting a clear correlation between the platform and consumer behaviour (Oscario, 2022; Page and Hur, 2023). Moreover, existing research on Instagram often points to the greater influence of smaller-scale, more relatable influencers compared to traditional celebrities (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Munsch, 2021). For this reason, this study will focus on micro-influencers, defined as having between 1,000 and 100,000 followers (Conde and Casais, 2023). While the concept of glocalisation emphasises the coexistence of business

globalisation and localisation (Gobo, 2011; Amed, 2025), a single, effective marketing approach for glocalisation has not been established. Past studies have demonstrated that cultural differences significantly impact consumer behaviour, and research exists on adapting advertising and website strategies to national cultures (Singh and Matsuo, 2004; Xu *et al.*, 2014). However, there is a notable lack of literature on how influencer behaviour and consumer responses differ across cultures. Additionally, there is a significant lack of research on SHC consumption in Japan, which, considering the market's attention, makes a comparative study between a Western market (the UK) and an Eastern market (Japan) expected to provide valuable insights for global businesses.

The research gap identified above holds both academic and practical significance. Understanding the divergent perceptions of SHC in London and Tokyo contributes to expanding theoretical frameworks, while also providing vital insights for increasingly important localisation strategies in global fashion marketing (Ho, 2023; Tan, 2024). Observations in Japan suggest that the rise of Instagram has catalysed a dramatic surge in individual SHC consumption (Morita, 2021). This perspective prompted the author's investigation into the distinct approaches to SHC promotion on the platform in London and Tokyo. Preliminary analysis of current Instagram content suggests different communication patterns between English-speaking and Japanese influencers' accounts (see Figure 1.2). Western accounts tend to emphasise sustainability messages and process-oriented content such as sourcing and styling methods. In contrast, Japanese content creators prioritise aesthetic elements, focusing on showcasing purchased products and styling outcomes.

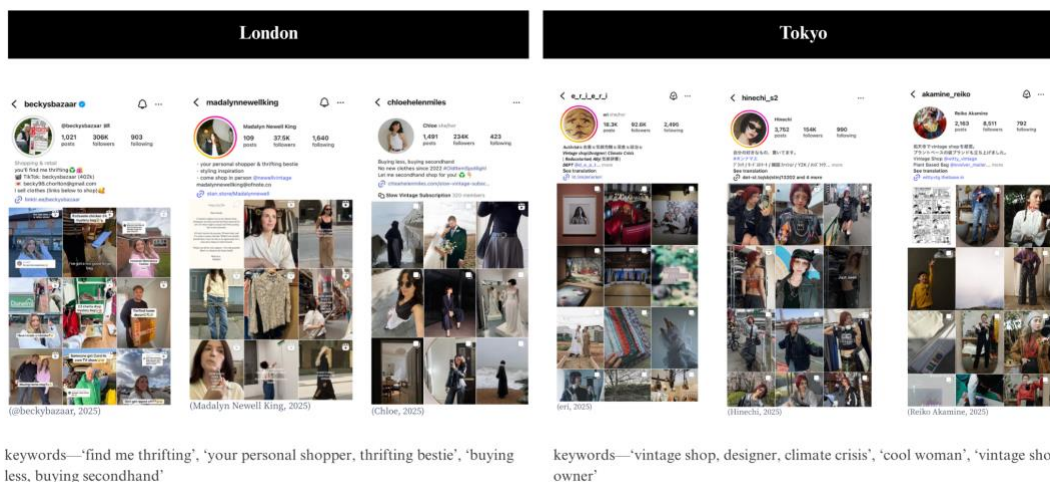


Figure 1.2: SHF-related Instagram account comparison, London vs. Tokyo (Author's own)

In conclusion, this research is timely as it explores the purchasing psychology of Gen-Z—a demographic with growing market influence—within the expanding SHC market. It is also prompted by the promising Japanese market and aims to fill a research gap regarding cultural differences in the context of global marketing. Therefore, this study is not merely an academic exercise but a critical response to a notable void in the literature. By investigating the culturally specific nuances of

Instagram-based SHC communication and its influence on Gen-Z consumers, this study aims to generate novel insights directly applicable to the development of effective cross-cultural marketing strategies in the rapidly evolving global fashion industry.

1.2 Research Question, Aim and Objectives

Building on the context outlined above, this study addressed a notable research gap in existing literature. It aimed to fill this void by exploring how Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC in London and Tokyo. By investigating this specific relationship, the research not only contributes to the academic field but also seeks to provide practical insights for effective communication strategies within the global SHC market. It does so by gaining a deeper understanding of the complex consumer psychology shaped by cultural differences. As part of the preparatory work, a Venn diagram was developed to refine the research questions (Appendix EIGHT). This diagram served to visualise overlaps and gaps within the research domain, thereby clarifying the specific area in which this study is positioned. Based on these considerations, the following research questions, aim, and objectives were established to guide the research process.

Research Question:

How does the influence of Instagram micro-influencers on Gen-Z females' perceptions of second-hand clothing differ between London and Tokyo?

Aim:

This study aims to explore how Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC in London and Tokyo in order to develop managerial insights for effective cross-cultural communication strategies in the global SHC market.

Objectives:

1. To critically review literature about SHC consumption behaviour, social media's role in shaping consumer behaviour, and cross-cultural perspectives on SHC consumption.
2. To explore Gen-Z females' narratives and experiences with SHC in London and Tokyo, examining how their SHC perception is influenced by Instagram content.
3. To investigate how Instagram micro-influencers' content and storytelling about SHC is perceived and interpreted by Gen-Z female consumers in London and Tokyo.
4. To analyse cultural differences and similarities in how Gen-Z females in London and Tokyo relate to micro-influencers' second-hand clothing narratives.
5. To develop managerial insights for second-hand retailers to effectively utilise micro-influencers in cross-cultural communication strategies, promoting SHC perception among Gen-Z females.

1.3 Contribution of the Research

This research holds significance from both a theoretical and a managerial perspective. Theoretically, it contributes to the body of literature on consumer behaviour by providing an in-depth, qualitative exploration of cross-cultural perceptions of SHC, an area with a notable research gap, particularly concerning the role of social media influencers. By comparing two culturally distinct markets—London and Tokyo—it will offer new insights into how cultural dimensions shape the interpretation of and response to SHC narratives. Managerially, this study will provide actionable insights for global second-hand retailers. The findings will help inform localised communication and marketing strategies, enabling them to more effectively utilise micro-influencers on platforms like Instagram to accelerate sustainable fashion consumption among Gen-Z females in different cultural contexts.

1.4 Overview of the Proposed Research Design

This study employed a multi-method qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews and netnography to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon. The use of two distinct methods allowed for the triangulation of data, which enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings. Thematic analysis was applied to the collected data to identify key themes. This combination of methods ensured a robust and comprehensive investigation. This approach was essential for not only answering the research question but also for generating rich, context-specific data that led to a deeper, more empathetic understanding of the Gen-Z consumer in a cross-cultural context.

1.5 Overview of the Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents a critical review of the relevant literature, focusing on three key areas: SHC consumer behaviour, the role of Instagram in shaping consumer perceptions, and cross-cultural perspectives on SHC consumption. This chapter serves to deepen the understanding of the field and provides a theoretical lens for subsequent analysis. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology, starting with the justification of the research philosophy and progressing to the specific methods, data collection procedures, and analysis techniques. Detailing this process is crucial to establish the dependability and rigour of the research, particularly in a qualitative study. Chapter 4 presents the main findings and analysis, organised according to the sub-questions that emerged during the analysis, with each theme illustrated by direct quotes from the data. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the research aim and objectives, articulating both theoretical and managerial contributions of the study. Finally, it outlines the study's limitations and suggests avenues for future research.

Chapter Two LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examined prior literature related to SHC consumption behaviour, the role of social media in shaping consumer attitudes, and cross-cultural perspectives on SHC consumption. Specifically, this chapter is structured into two main parts. Beginning with the definition of terms such as SHC and influencers, and then delving into the fundamental basis of cultural influence on fashion marketing, forms the first part. The second part explores representative theories that explain consumer behaviour in SHC, theories for understanding Instagram's impact on sustainable consumption (including SHC), and prior research related to cultural differences in fashion marketing and SHC consumption. Through this theoretical foundation, this study positioned the usefulness of exploring differences in Instagram micro-influencer impact on Gen-Z females in London and Tokyo.

2.1.1 *Second-hand clothing (SHC)*

To establish a precise understanding of this study, SHC must be distinguished from vintage clothing, as these terms are frequently used interchangeably. Cervellon, Carey and Harms (2012, p. 958) define SHC as "any piece of clothing which has been used before", which includes diverse forms of reuse such as donation, collection, resale, swapping, and hand-me-downs (Xu *et al.*, 2014; Machado *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, vintage clothing, originally a term referring to aged wine, is perceived as valuable due to its rarity stemming from its age. Specifically, it is defined as clothing produced from the 1920s to the 1980s (Cervellon, Carey and Harms, 2012).

The fundamental motivation for this study's focus on SHC lies in promoting SHC consumption as a sustainable alternative to the mass production and mass consumption business model, an approach sufficiently supported by several authors (Farrant, Olsen and Wangel, 2010; Hur, 2020; Page and Hur, 2023; Oscario, 2023). From this perspective, this study examined a broader range of SHC, not limited to vintage fashion, as its widespread availability and diverse offerings present a more practical and impactful pathway to mass sustainable consumption than the more specialised vintage market.

In line with Oscario's (2023) observation that various terms synonymous with SHC (e.g., eco-fashion, thrifting, pre-loved) are used to mitigate its negative stigma (e.g., dirty or old), this study will also encompass these alternative terms in its investigation. This perspective suggests that micro-influencers may strategically utilise these terms to play a role in shaping positive perceptions of SHC among Gen-Z females. Therefore, recognising that these terms refer to SHC depending on the context, this research will include them as part of its scope.

2.1.2 Instagram Influence

Instagram's influence in fashion marketing is unquestionable, as frequently noted in previous literature (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020), and its utilisation is highly anticipated in the realm of sustainable consumption, including the SHC market (Goldsmith, 2016; Ifadah *et al.*, 2023; Oscario, 2023). For example, Oscario (2023)'s research considered that Instagram played a role in eliminating negative impressions of SHC and transforming consumer perceptions into cool trends.

Prior research by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) concluded that non-traditional celebrities hold a stronger influence over young women than traditional celebrities due to their higher perceived credibility and relatability. Building on this insight, the present study focused specifically on Instagram micro-influencers, defined by Conde and Casais (2023) as users with 1,000 to 100,000 followers. By concentrating on a group highly likely to influence our target demographic, Gen-Z females, this focused approach enabled us to gain clearer insights into how influencer credibility and relatability affect the formation of SHC perceptions. It should be noted, however, that the definition of micro-influencers varies across the literature, as Page and Hur (2023) point out. Furthermore, the terminology for "influencers" is diverse, including 'Instafamous,' 'non-traditional celebrity,' and 'opinion leader.' For the purpose of this study, these terms were treated as closely related concepts and are used interchangeably depending on the context.

2.1.3 The Utility of Cross-Cultural Comparison

In the context of global fashion marketing, localisation is an important keyword, and in recent years, local culture relevance has been repeatedly identified as extremely important, particularly for young people in Asia, including Gen-Z and Gen-Alpha (Ho 2024; Napoli, Larsen and Tan, 2024; Tan and Ho, 2025). This increasingly requires marketers to deeply understand cultural nuances and contexts (Napoli, Larsen and Tan, 2024). While academic research on cultural differences in consumer attitudes toward Instagram content is still limited, it is a field where understanding is gradually advancing. As past research by Tse *et al.* (1989) has shown, cultural differences in values have a powerful influence on consumer behaviour, and results have also revealed that cultural differences distinguish attitudes toward Instagram usage (Sheldon *et al.*, 2017).

These existing studies suggest that Instagram influences consumers differently across cultures, even within the context of SHC consumption. This study therefore focuses on London and Tokyo at the city level, given that consumer behaviour and culture can vary significantly depending on the region. However, there is a notable lack of prior research directly comparing London and Tokyo. To address this academic gap, this study expands its scope to review existing literature on cultural comparisons between the West and East Asia, treating London as part of the Western cultural sphere and Tokyo as part of the East Asian sphere. Through this approach, analysing the influence of

Instagram on Gen-Z females in these two distinct cultural contexts offers valuable insights for developing effective cross-cultural communication strategies within the global SHC market.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This section critically examined key theoretical concepts and frameworks for understanding SHC consumption behaviour, Instagram's influence, and cross-cultural differences. These theories served as the foundation supporting this study's analysis and deepened the interpretation and discussion of exploratory research findings.

2.2.1 SHC Consumer Behaviour

In understanding SHC consumer behaviour, the concepts of "perception" and "perceived value" in consumer psychology are central. Zeithaml (1988, p. 14) defines perceived value as "the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given." As this definition suggests, consumer "perception" is a prerequisite for perceived value. Solomon (2017) explains perception as "the way we absorb and interpret information about products and other people from the external world," suggesting that the process by which consumers initially perceive products or services with meaning ultimately constitutes perceived value.

2.2.1.1 Theory of Consumption Values (TCV)

Developing this concept of perceived value, Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991) identified values that directly influence purchasing behaviour as the "Theory of Consumption Values (TCV)." TCV explains consumer choice through five aspects: functional value, social value, emotional value, epistemic value, and conditional value. These five dimensions can be defined as follows in the context of consumer behaviour research:

Functional Value refers to the perceived utility or performance that a product provides through its utilitarian, physical, or practical attributes. For clothing items, this includes characteristics such as warmth, durability, and comfort. In the SHC context, functional value might encompass the practical benefits of acquiring quality garments at lower prices (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005).

Social Value refers to the product's ability to provide perceived positive associations through connection with specific groups or situations. This includes social approval, status, and group identity. For SHC, this might encompass the sense of belonging to specific communities or serving as a symbol demonstrating high environmental consciousness (McNeill and Moore, 2015).

Emotional Value refers to the product's ability to arouse emotional reactions or emotional states. This includes feelings of joy, excitement, comfort, and nostalgia, and is also defined as a form of hedonic consumption (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). In the SHC consumption context, examples

include the joy of discovering unique designs (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005) and the satisfaction derived from contributing to sustainable consumption (Kim, Jung and Lee, 2021).

Epistemic Value refers to the product's ability to stimulate curiosity or desire for knowledge, or to provide something new or different. This includes the joy of discovery in the process of searching for SHC and the exploratory desire to discover new styles, often expressed as "treasure-hunting" (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005; Cervellon, Carey and Harms, 2012).

Conditional Value refers to the product's ability to acquire utility due to specific situations or urgency. For example, this represents a value that emerges only under specific conditions, such as when clothing with a particular theme is needed for an unexpected event.

Although the TCV has been widely applied to understand consumer behaviour, it is also noted that it is often modified according to the characteristics of the product being studied (Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022). For example, Kim, Jung and Lee's (2021) research on circular fashion consumer value perception excluded functional and conditional values, instead adding an environmental value. However, this study decided to apply the original TCV without modification to accurately explore its applicability in the SHC sector, based on the premise that it has been proven as a valid theory.

2.2.1.2 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Furthermore, a theory widely used in understanding consumer behaviour is the "Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)" by Ajzen (1991). TPB explains that three elements—attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control—form purchase intention, which ultimately leads to actual purchasing behaviour. The three core components of TPB can be elaborated as follows:

Attitude toward the behaviour represents an individual's favourable or unfavourable evaluation of performing a specific behaviour. This is formed from beliefs about the consequences of the behaviour and evaluations of those consequences.

Subjective Norms represent the perceived social pressure from significant others such as reference groups, friends and family regarding whether to perform a specific behaviour. This is formed from beliefs about whether these others approve or disapprove of the behaviour and the individual's motivation to comply with those others' opinions.

Perceived Behavioural Control represents the individual's perceived ease or difficulty of performing a specific behaviour. This is formed from beliefs about whether the resources and opportunities necessary to successfully perform the behaviour are available, and the perception of how much control one has over those resources.

As Ray and Nayak (2023) point out, TPB is one of the most frequently used theories for understanding consumer behaviour in SHC and sustainable fashion. However, TPB is often criticised

for assuming that consumers make rational decisions (Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022) and is frequently not employed in qualitative research. A specific example of this criticism is its inability to explain the attitude-behaviour gap (Bray, Johns and Kilburn, 2011), a phenomenon frequently cited in the context of ethical consumption (Niinimäki, 2010; McNeill and Moore, 2015). This gap describes the discrepancy between consumers' positive attitudes towards ethical products and their actual purchasing behaviour. Nevertheless, the author does not support the view that TPB is incapable of explaining the attitude-behaviour gap. On the contrary, the author supports McKeown and Shearer's (2019) explanation that the attitude-behaviour gap arises from a lack of knowledge regarding sustainable fashion, which constitutes a subjective norm. This explanation, positing that a lack of knowledge is a contributing factor to the challenges in promoting sustainable fashion, is also supported by other research (Niinimäki, 2010). Furthermore, in this study, TPB's applicability to measure Instagram's influence on consumers was also considered, making it a suitable and consistent theory to adopt throughout the research.

2.2.1.3 Koay, Cheah and Lom's Integrated model

Koay, Cheah and Lom (2022) integrated these theories to develop a comprehensive model for SHC consumer behaviour. Their research identified that consumption values have a positive influence on purchase intention, providing a useful framework for explaining the complexity of SHC consumption. However, referencing Kim, Jung and Lee's (2021) study, Koay, Cheah and Lom adapted their model by excluding the functional and conditional values from the original five TCV dimensions and adding an environmental value instead. A broad review of existing literature reveals that, to the best of the author's knowledge, a clear and universally accepted systematic model of consumption values specifically for SHC consumption does not yet exist. This is particularly evident given that Kim, Jung and Lee's (2021) research, which was referenced in the aforementioned study, focused on a broader range of "circular fashion," including not only SHC but also upcycled and recycled clothing. In light of this theoretical ambiguity, the present study decided to reference the original, more theoretically robust TCV framework rather than adopting Koay, Cheah and Lom's modified model that excluded the functional and conditional values. However, with regard to environmental value, this study recognised its distinct importance. Multiple researchers have consistently identified environmental value as a specific and significant motivator for SHC consumption (Jagel *et al.*, 2012; Kim, Jung and Lee, 2021; Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022; Ifadah *et al.*, 2023; Sueda and Seo, 2024). Therefore, to reflect its unique relevance in the context of sustainable fashion, environmental value was added to the traditional TCV framework (Figure 2.1). This refined integrated model served as a guiding analytical lens for this study's qualitative primary research. Rather than being a rigid, top-down framework for deductive analysis, this model provides a valuable conceptual map that helped to contextualise and structure the emerging themes discovered through narrative thematic analysis. This approach ensures that the findings are not merely descriptive, but are deeply analytical and

directly linked to a robust theoretical foundation. The insights gleaned from this framework will be instrumental in developing the evidence-based managerial recommendations for second-hand retailers, fulfilling the study's overall aim.

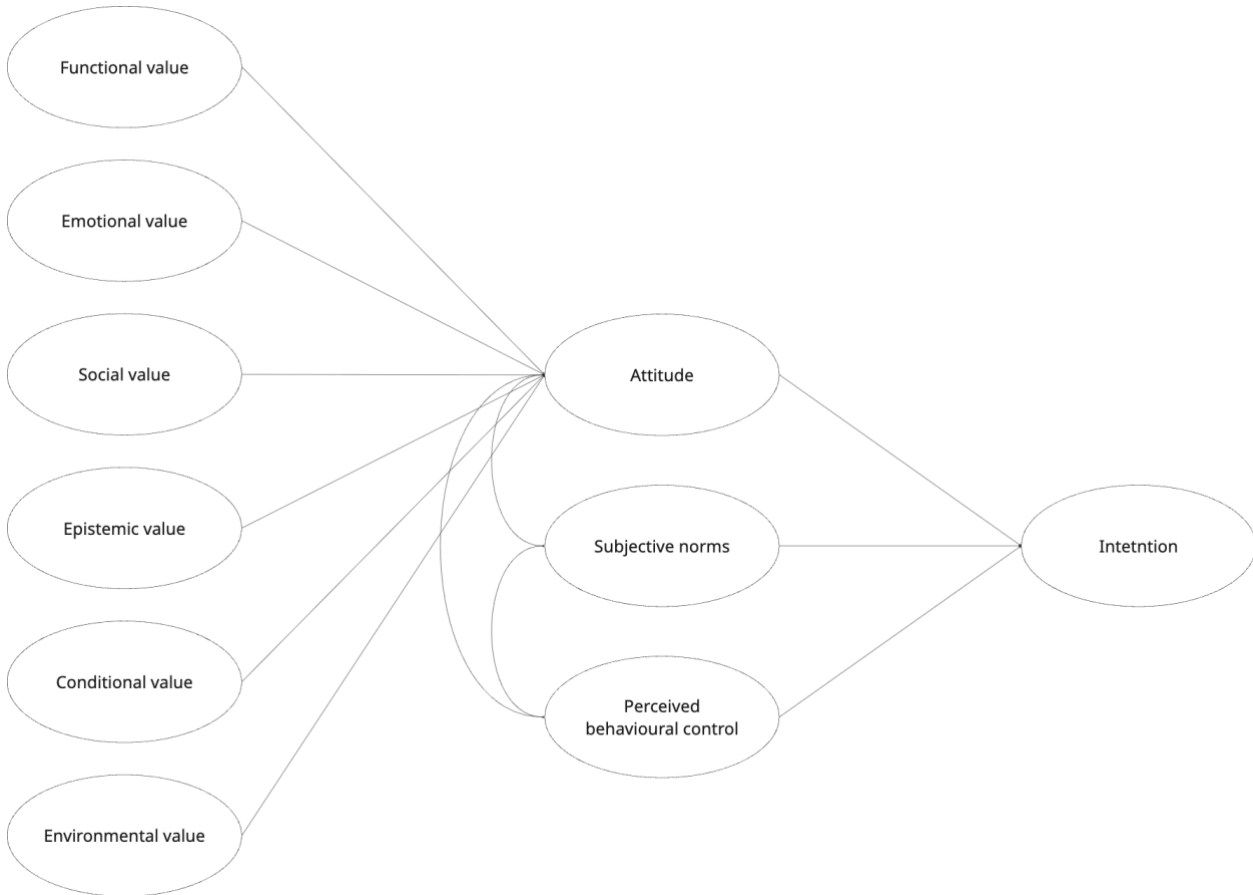


Figure 2.1: The Modified Integrated Model (Adopted from Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022)

2.2.1.4 Focus on perception

This study primarily focuses on perception as the key element shaping perceived value, rather than directly investigating purchase intention. This approach is justified for several reasons. This approach is justified for several reasons. First, perception acts as the foundation of the entire decision-making process. As previously discussed, positive perception of value serves as the starting point that leads to favourable attitudes, intentions, and ultimately behaviour. Therefore, understanding how perceptions are formed is crucial for explaining consumer behaviour. Moreover, focusing on perception is deemed more meaningful for exploring Instagram's influence. While Instagram has consistently been shown to impact consumers' perceived value and attitude formation (Ifadah *et al.*, 2023; Oscario, 2023), understanding its full effect through to actual purchase behaviour often involves numerous other intervening factors, suggesting the need for more extensive investigation (McKeown and Shearer, 2019). Therefore, to maintain a realistic scope for this study while exploring Instagram's influence, the research will concentrate on consumer perception, where the impact is more clearly established.

Furthermore, while the integrated model proposed by Koay, Cheah and Lom (2022) is relatively nascent and its efficacy is not yet widely confirmed, it remains highly pertinent to this study. This model effectively explains the link between consumption values and purchase intention in the context of SHC acquisition, making it compatible with this research's aim to explore Instagram's influence. Given that the current study's scope is not to prove the causal relationship between Instagram's influence on consumer perception and subsequent purchase intention or actual behaviour, this model serves as a valuable theoretical guide for understanding consumer psychology. Additionally, referencing this integrated model in a cross-cultural comparative context offers an opportunity to broaden perspectives on its applicability across diverse cultural settings.

2.2.2 The Role of Instagram in Shaping Consumer Perceptions

2.2.2.1 Social Communication and Social Media Influence

Social media has become an indispensable element in modern fashion marketing. The social phenomenon of "social communication," where consumers dialogue with other consumers about products, brands, and services, has been recognised for its importance since the early days of consumer behaviour research (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). In the fashion context, this phenomenon has been particularly emphasised for its role in trend diffusion and clothing purchases (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). The emergence of social media has dramatically accelerated this social communication, resulting in the importance of "social media influence." Schaefer (2012) defines social media influence as "the ability to promote action through social networks." Instagram is clearly one of the major social networks, and its influence in fashion marketing cannot be ignored. This impact extends to SHC consumption, where the dissemination of information on Instagram has been shown to significantly influence Gen-Z's formation of positive perceptions towards SHC (Ifadah *et al.*, 2023; Oscario, 2023).

Furthermore, the influence of Instagram has been found to be stronger than that of official advertising (Goldsmith, 2016; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Goldsmith (2016) also recommends more active use of social influence in promoting sustainable behaviour. Therefore, the influence of Instagram influencers was suggested to contribute to trend formation and consumer purchase promotion in SHC consumption.

However, existing research in this area is very limited. Consequently, this section will review theories related to how Instagram influences fashion perception and consumption, without being limited to SHC. This will also help confirm whether these established concepts are applicable in the SHC context. The major theories that explain social media influence on fashion are "Opinion Leadership" and "Source Credibility Theory."

2.2.2.2 Opinion Leadership

The concept of opinion leadership emerged from the "Two-Step Flow Model" by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944). This information diffusion process was discovered while exploring the power of informal communication complementing mass media and has become one of the seminal models in consumer research (Goldsmith, 2016).

In the marketing context, this two-step flow is explained as follows (Goldsmith, 2016):

1. Marketers transmit information to market influencers, i.e., opinion leaders
2. Opinion leaders then transmit this information to other consumers within their networks

Thus, opinion leadership serves as a key person playing a crucial role in information diffusion. As Katz and Lazarsfeld (2006) point out, people are more influenced by interpersonal communication than by formal information, such as media information, opinion leaders, therefore, exert tremendous influence on the behaviour of others in their networks.

2.2.2.3 Opinion Leadership Influence on Instagram

The influence and information diffusion steps of opinion leadership, which were developed in the context of mass media, have been confirmed to exhibit similar behaviours on social media. Djafarova and Rushworth's (2017) research confirmed that unofficial influencers have a more effective impact on young women's purchase decisions than traditional celebrities. Considering the enhanced influence of such relatable figures, and acknowledging the importance of investigating micro-influencers due to their high engagement rates as suggested by Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020), this study will specifically focus on the influence of Instagram micro-influencers.

The role of posted content quality in establishing opinion leadership presents conflicting findings across studies. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) highlighted that content quality significantly influences users' decisions to follow, and subsequently, their perception of an individual as "Instafamous," which can be indicative of opinion leadership. In contrast, more recent research presents a different perspective. Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) stated that content quality does not impact an individual's recognition as an opinion leader. This claim is supported by Page and Hur (2023), who observed that no specific posting style had a greater influence on consumer attitudes toward SHC consumption. This underscores the differing perspectives on the direct link between content aesthetics and consumer influence, which necessitates further investigation.

In addition, while Page and Hur's (2023) research is valuable for confirming that influencers promote positive attitude formation towards SHC consumption among consumers, their study primarily analysed comments on influencer posts. Consequently, it did not fully explore the deeper, actual

psychology of followers, thereby identifying a critical research gap that warrants further qualitative inquiry.

2.2.2.4 Source Credibility Theory

Source credibility is the extent to which the target audience views the information source to gain their understanding of a product or service. It is established based on the sender's perceived "trustworthiness," "attractiveness," and "expertise" (Ohanian, 1990). This theory is valuable for understanding how consumers' perceptions of an influencer lead to influence. Building upon this framework, this study will explore whether these three elements, as conceptualised by Ohanian (1990), lead consumers to trust Instagram SHC posts, thereby fostering positive attitudes towards SHC.

2.2.3 Cross-Cultural Perspectives on SHC Consumption

In exploring differences in Instagram micro-influencer influence between London and Tokyo, theories analysing consumer behaviour from cultural perspectives are essential. Past Japan-US cultural comparison research on website expression adopted Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high/low-context cultures framework (Singh and Matsuo, 2004). This study referenced this prior research while adopting the "collectivism-individualism" dimension, which has been frequently employed in fashion consumer behaviour research (Xu *et al.*, 2014; Ogiemwonyi and Jan, 2023; Sueda and Seo, 2024).

Additionally, Hall's (1989) concepts of "high-context culture" and "low-context culture" were adopted, considering their potential influence on the visual aspects and message transmission of Instagram content. Since Singh and Matsuo's (2004) research suggests that high- and low-context cultures influence website visual expression, this study explored the possibility of similar influences appearing in Instagram content expression.

2.2.3.1 Collectivism-Individualism

In Hofstede's (1983; 2001) cultural dimension model, individualistic societies have loose ties between individuals, emphasise individual freedom, and encourage individual decision-making. In contrast, collectivistic societies have strong in-group ties, emphasise conformity to social norms, and encourage group decision-making. In this dimension, the UK records a very high score (89), showing a strong individualistic orientation. Meanwhile, Japan has a more collectivistic orientation with a lower score (46) (Hofstede, 2001). This difference may create different tendencies in influencer relationships, information interpretation methods, and consumer perceptions of SHC consumption between Gen-Z women in London and Tokyo.

2.2.3.2 High- and Low-Context Cultures

According to Hall (1989), communication in high-context culture is implicit, indirect, and deeply embedded in context, while communication in low-context culture is more direct, less implicit, and more information-rich (Singh and Matsuo, 2004). Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon (2011) classify the UK as close to low-context culture and Japan as high-context culture. Singh and Matsuo (2004) explain that Japan, being a high-context culture, accounts for Japanese websites being colourful and aesthetic, with a soft-sell approach. This suggestion provided an important perspective for considering how cultural differences appear in Instagram content expression, particularly in SHC presentation methods.

While Singh and Matsuo's (2004) research identified that cultural differences create variations in website expression methods, it did not sufficiently explore how these differences influence consumer perception or whether these differences are effective. Existing research also reveals unexplored aspects regarding cross-cultural differences in SHC consumption attitudes. For example, Xu *et al.* (2014) claimed that American consumers, where individualism is dominant, place a greater value on uniqueness in SHC consumption. However, research results on Japanese consumers' attitudes toward SHC consumption, despite being a relatively collectivistic culture, emphasised that Japanese consumers purchase SHC, particularly seeking uniqueness (Sueda and Seo, 2024). This contradiction suggests the existence of complex consumer psychology that cannot be explained by the simple application of cultural dimensions alone, thereby underscoring the necessity of this study to offer more nuanced insights into cross-cultural consumer behaviour.

In the context of sustainable fashion, prior research comparing consumers across China, South Korea, and Japan (Min Kong and Ko, 2017) barely addressed cultural differences between these countries. Although it shed light on certain factors and their differences in attitudes toward sustainable fashion, being a quantitative study, the investigation did not extend to consumers' deeper motivations and reasoning processes.

Moreover, Ogiemwonyi and Jan (2023) argue that collectivistic cultures exhibit stronger environmental consciousness, which consequently leads to a more robust motivation for sustainable consumption. However, the specific influence of this finding on SHC consumption in Japan remains largely unexplored. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how Instagram reactions to SHC in Tokyo and London can shed light on this relationship.

Overall, this research domain is notably characterised by a significant dearth of prior studies. Despite the substantial size of Japan's SHC market, it is scarcely an exaggeration to assert that there are virtually no preceding academic studies that deeply explore Japanese consumer psychology in this context. Furthermore, comparative analyses between Japanese and Western consumers in the

realm of SHC are even more elusive, representing a clear and pronounced research gap in the existing academic literature.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter comprehensively examined the relevant literature, theories, and models essential for understanding consumer perception in SHC consumption, the influence of Instagram influencers on perceived value, and cross-cultural differences in consumer psychology regarding SHC.

The review established that perceived value plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perception, a process well-explained by the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). These theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding contemporary consumer behaviour, particularly concerning the influence of digital platforms like Instagram.

While a growing need for sustainability has led to an increase in research on SHC consumer behaviour, the volume of studies remains limited compared to areas such as fast fashion (Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022). This suggests a clear research gap in the field of SHC. A review of existing literature reveals that this gap is particularly pronounced concerning the significant influence of Instagram. Despite Instagram's crucial role in shaping modern fashion consumer behaviour (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020), there's a lack of research on its impact within the SHC context. This highlights a clear research gap that this study aims to address.

Regarding the influence of Instagram influencers, this review confirmed through prior research on opinion leadership theory and source credibility theory that non-traditional influencers—specifically micro-influencers—may exert more effective influence on Gen-Z women. Instagram research has attracted attention as a field of academic development due to its significant influence (Ray and Nayak, 2023), yet the number of studies remains insufficient. Existing research tends to focus on supplier-side perspectives, including influencers and brand companies, while qualitative research examining consumer perception, attitudes, and reactions from the receiver side represents an area requiring further investigation. Given the expectation that Instagram utilisation can promote sustainable consumption, including SHC, and ethical consumption (Goldsmith, 2016; Ray and Nayak, 2023), this study provided important insights.

Furthermore, cross-cultural comparison of consumer psychology emerged as the area most lacking in theoretical development in previous research. This review confirmed that comparative studies between Japan and the UK are virtually non-existent, revealing another notable research gap. Among existing work, theories by Hofstede and Hall, which have been utilised in US-China comparisons and East-West comparisons, demonstrated potential for providing valuable insights into understanding cultural differences in consumer behaviour and perception.

Therefore, this study contributes to filling this clear research gap by exploring how Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z women's perceptions of SHC in London and Tokyo. Multiple literature sources have suggested that cultural comparisons would broaden both academically and practically valuable perspectives (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022), and the results of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for developing cross-cultural communication strategies in the global SHC market.

The theoretical foundation established through this review was directly reflected in this study's research design. The focus on perception formation processes rather than behavioural outcomes necessitated the adoption of a qualitative methodology capable of capturing subtle differences in psychological responses. The identification of research gaps regarding micro-influencer impact mechanisms and cross-cultural perception differences called for an exploratory approach that could examine these phenomena in depth. The following chapter presents a methodology designed to explore the complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon of how Gen-Z women in London and Tokyo respond to Instagram micro-influencer content about SHC, building upon this theoretical framework.

Chapter Three RESEARCH DESIGN

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

To articulate the underlying assumptions behind these choices, the research 'onion' (Figure 3.1), a framework conceptualised by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019), was employed. The research onion provided a systematic way to explain the rationale for each methodological decision, helping researchers to select each methodological choice consistently, unfolding from the outermost philosophical layer to the innermost layer of data collection and analysis.

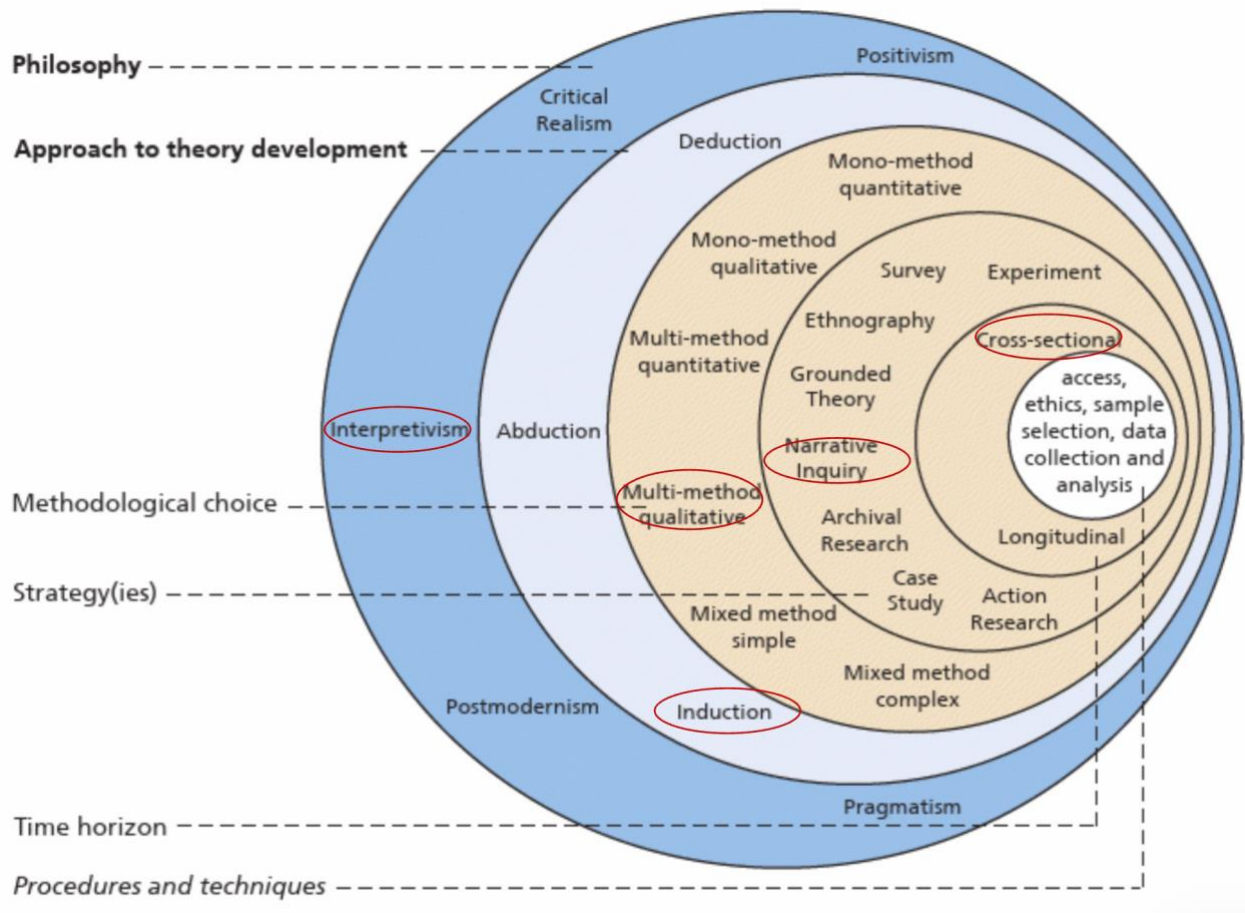


Figure 3.1 The Research Onion (Adopted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023)

3.1 Research Philosophy

The outermost layer of the research onion is the research philosophy. Making this explicit is crucial for ensuring the consistency and integrity of a research project, as the assumptions held by researchers inevitably influence their research questions, processes, and interpretations of the results (Crotty, 1998). To define the study's philosophical position, the concepts of objectivism and subjectivism were considered (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). Regarding ontology, the study's focus on consumer perceptions of SHC required a subjectivist stance, as the researcher acknowledged that consumers' impressions of SHC were formed by personal perceptions and emotions, as represented by concepts like the "extended self" (Belk, 1988). Similarly, an epistemological position of subjectivism was adopted. This was evident as the study was intended

to explore the words spoken by consumers and the visual content on Instagram, rather than investigating numerical data. (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). An axiological position was also subjectivist, as the research was motivated by the researcher's own experiences with Instagram and shopping of SHC in London and Tokyo. This personal value formation was the starting point for the research question. Based on these subjectivist positions, interpretivism was chosen as the most suitable philosophy. This approach, described by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2023, p. 150) as "explicitly subjectivist," was particularly relevant for a study focusing on cultural comparisons and individual perceptions.

3.2 Research Approach

In alignment with this interpretivist philosophy, the next layer of the research onion addressed the approach to theory development, adopting an inductive approach. The premise of this research was that consumer behaviour is not entirely rational, a notion supported by the inconsistent findings in existing literature on SHC consumption motivations (Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022). Therefore, instead of attempting to create a predictive theory, the study aimed to gain a deep understanding of the consumers' psychological and cultural drivers. This exploration of the reasons behind consumer actions was highly consistent with an inductive approach (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023) and represents the most logical choice for the research's exploratory nature.

3.3 Methodological Choice

Following the interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach, this research selected a qualitative research methodology. The nature of the research question was clearly exploratory, aiming to understand the phenomenon of consumer perception formation and the reasons behind it. This exploration of qualitative data was the most appropriate approach for this research, as it is consistent with the interpretivist philosophy (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023).

Furthermore, within the qualitative domain, a multi-method approach was selected. The multi-method qualitative approach, integrating semi-structured interviews with netnography, was chosen to mitigate the limitations of a single-method design and enhance the research's credibility and authenticity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. This approach, which Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2023) identify as highly compatible with exploratory and interpretivist research, was enhanced by a visual component. Specifically, by showing participants some selected Instagram accounts, the interviews elicited richer information and stimulated discussion beyond traditional verbal exchange. Netnography, described by Kozinets (2020) as a method for studying social media's cultural and experiential qualities, was employed as a complementary data collection method. This approach was particularly effective for our objective of understanding the subtle cultural differences on Instagram.

3.4 Strategy

The research strategy serves as a crucial bridge, linking the research philosophy to the chosen research methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The primary focus of this study was not on a collective cultural phenomenon or group behaviour, but instead on the psychological aspects of individual consumers. Therefore, research strategies such as Narrative Inquiry and Phenomenology were considered (Creswell, 2013). While both are suitable for exploring individual experiences, they differ in their central focus. Phenomenology seeks to understand the "what" of a shared experience, whereas Narrative Inquiry centres on the "who," examining the stories individuals construct to make sense of their lives (Creswell, 2013).

Because this study aimed to explore the formation of consumers' perceptions of SHC by understanding their personal histories and subjective journeys, Narrative Inquiry was selected as the most fitting strategy. Its focus on the "how" and "why" behind perceptions directly aligned with the research objectives.

Furthermore, Narrative Inquiry is explicitly interpretivist and is suggested as an appropriate choice when employing qualitative methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). This strategy treats participants' stories and accounts as cohesive, sequenced narratives, with the final interpretation largely dependent on the researcher's perspective (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). Since this study adopted an interpretivist philosophy, this strategy was highly compatible with the project's philosophical underpinnings.

3.5 Time Horizon

A cross-sectional time horizon was employed for this research due to practical time limitations. While a longitudinal study could have provided significant insight into the evolution of perceptions over time (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023), the cross-sectional approach offered distinct advantages. Specifically, it allowed for a clearer comparison of consumer perceptions at one specific point and simplified the process of making cross-cultural comparisons.

3.6 Instrument Development

3.6.1 Semi-Structured Interview Instrument

The development of the interview framework adhered to a structured process, beginning with the deconstruction of the overarching research question. Given that the primary question was not suitable for direct interviewing, it was broken down into several sub-questions designed to probe different facets of the topic as Creswell suggests (2013). These sub-questions were informed by the

key theoretical concepts and frameworks identified in the literature review, ensuring a direct link between the secondary and primary research phases.

To capture the holistic nature of the participants' experiences, questions were designed to encourage a narrative approach, prompting them to share personal stories and their journeys with SHC. The initial draft (Appendix SIX) was refined and improved through feedback from the supervisor to enhance clarity and focus. To ensure the instrument's effectiveness and validity, a pilot interview was conducted with one participant, consistent with Creswell's (2013) recommendation (see Appendix THREE for the transcript). The purpose of this test was to confirm that the questions were clear, easy to understand, and capable of generating the type of data required to address the research objectives. Based on a review of the pilot transcript, minor adjustments were made, leading to the final version of the semi-structured interview framework (Table 3.1).

Research Question	Subquestions	Questions	Intention/notes	Notes	
How does the influence of Instagram micro-influencers on Gen-Z females' perceptions of second-hand clothing differ between London and Tokyo?	General question about fashion consumption behaviour.	How often do you buy clothes?	Consumer behaviour		
		What do you look for when purchasing clothes?	Consumer behaviour		
		Where do you usually buy your clothes? (Online/Offline, specific platform etc.)	Consumer behaviour		
	How do Gen-Z females perceive SHC?	How do Gen-Z females perceive SHC?	Do you buy used clothes?	Consumer behaviour	
			- If so, why?	Consumption values	
			When you first bought used clothes, why did you buy them?	Motivation to buy SHC	
			What is your current impression of used clothes?	Perception	
			- Why?	Perception	
			What was your impression of used clothes before you started buying them?	Perception	
			- Why?	Perception	
Where do you get information about used clothes?			Consumer behaviour, information perception		
Where do you get information about clothes in general?	Consumer behaviour, information perception				
How do Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z's perception of SHC?	How do Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z's perception of SHC?	Do you gather information about clothes on social media?	Social communication		
		- If so, why?	Social communication		
		Could you tell me about some clothing-related accounts you frequently check? (ask share them later)	Source credibility, Social influence		
		- Why do you follow them?	Source credibility, Social influence		
		- Do you look at influencers' profiles and follow them?	Instagram perception		

	How do Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z's perception of SHC?	On Instagram, which accounts do you view most often among brand accounts, celebrities, and influencers? - What role do you expect from each of them - and why?	Source credibility, Opinion leadership Source credibility, Opinion leadership Source credibility, Opinion leadership, perception	
How does the influence of Instagram micro-influencers on Gen-Z females' perceptions of second-hand clothing differ between London and Tokyo?	How do Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z's perception of SHC?	Have you ever bought clothes due to Instagram's influence?	Social influence, purchase behaviour	
		- If so, why?	Social influence, purchase behaviour	
		Have you ever attended any events related to SHC by following them on Instagram? (or fashion in general) e.g.) pop-up shop, sales, workshop, DJ event etc...	Social influence	
		- If so, why?	Social influence, perception	
		Do you view content from overseas (and from which countries, whether it includes non-English content)?	Instagram usage	
How do Gen-Z females perceive influencers' SHC-related content on Instagram?		Have you seen or do you watch content related to used clothes?	Instagram perception	
		- What kind of content or posts?	Instagram perception	
		- Why did that particular content come to mind?	Instagram perception	
		- What did you think after seeing that post?	Instagram perception	
		Please search for "erieri" on Instagram. What are your thoughts?	Instagram perception	
		Please search for "Takuro Kawaguchi" on Instagram. What are your thoughts?	Instagram perception	
		Please search for "Thrift like a girl" on Instagram. What are your thoughts?	Instagram perception	
		Please search for "beckysbazaar" on Instagram. What are your thoughts?	Instagram perception	

Table 3.1: Interview framework (Author's own)

3.6.2 Netnography Matrix Instrument

The netnography matrix served as the primary instrument for collecting observational data from the Instagram platform. Borrowing from traditional ethnography's use of field notes, this instrument functioned as an "immersion journal" as described by Kozinets (2020). The matrix was designed to provide a systematic and chronological record of observations, blending objective data with subjective researcher reflections (Kozinets, 2020). A digital spreadsheet format was chosen to allow for real-time recording, minimising disruption to the observational process. This method provided a complementary layer of data to the interviews, grounding the consumer narratives within their digital context.

The netnography matrix was designed based on Kozinets' (2020) guidelines. It was structured to reflect the iterative process of reconnoitring, recording, researching, and reflecting, with dedicated

fields for chronological records of observations, subjective thoughts, and personal insights. To validate the instrument, a pilot test was performed on a small selection of Instagram accounts before full-scale data collection. This pilot confirmed that the matrix captured all essential information and provided a functional structure for the immersion process. The refined and finalised Netnography Matrix is shown in Table 3.2.

ID	Influencer's basic information	Journal Prompt	Day0 (Sample)	Day1	Day2	Day3	Day4	Day5
I1	ID: @e_r_l_o_r_l Followers: 94K Location: 🇯🇵 JP, Tokyo	Published contents Timestamp Type of contents Like Hashtag Comment Author's journal - What are you doing? - What did I experience? - What happened? - Why did you record this? - Emotion? Feeling? Timestamp Reflective Journal						
I2	ID: @thriftlikeagirl Followers: 66.4K Location: 🇺🇸 US, Wisconsin	Published contents Timestamp Type of contents Like Hashtag Comment Author's journal - What are you doing? - What did I experience? - What happened? - Why did you record this? - Emotion? Feeling? Timestamp Reflective Journal						

Table 3.2: Netnography matrix (Author's own)

3.7 Data Collection, Sampling, and Analysis

3.7.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study adopted a non-probability sampling approach, as its aim was to gain a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences rather than to achieve statistical generalisation. The primary criterion for participant selection was their duration of residence in either London or Tokyo, rather than their geographical origin. This approach is justified by prior research which highlights that the length of time an individual resides in a specific location significantly impacts their cultural perspective (Miglietta & Tartaglia, 2008; Ward *et al.*, 1998). Perceptions of individual identity are formed during a period known as emerging adulthood, from the age of 18 to the late twenties, as suggested by Arnett's research (2000). During this formative stage, cultural and environmental influences are highly significant. In this study, which explores the perceptions of Gen-Z, the importance of this developmental phase was considered. Given that the oldest members of Gen-Z are currently around 28 years old (Ifadah *et al.*, 2023), the approximately ten-year period from age 18 onwards was defined as a critical time for the formation of a consumer's cultural identity. Therefore, an initial ideal condition for participants was set as a minimum of ten years of continuous

residence in their respective city. However, due to practical constraints in participant recruitment, it proved difficult to secure candidates who met this ideal criterion. Consequently, a minimum residency of six years was adopted as a pragmatic compromise, allowing the study to maintain its rigour while remaining feasible. This duration was deemed sufficient to ensure that participants had been deeply immersed in their city's culture and had internalised its values.

Based on these considerations, purposive sampling was chosen to select participants who met the following specific criteria:

- Gen-Z female Instagram users in London (6+ years residency) who have purchased SHC.
- Gen-Z female Instagram users in Tokyo (6+ years residency) who have purchased SHC.

Following Creswell's (2013) guidance to flexibly select participants who can provide rich, insightful data in narrative inquiry, a snowball sampling technique was also employed. This method was used to enhance the reliability of the data by including a broad range of perspectives from Gen-Z, from students to young professionals, thus preventing the data from being overly biased.

In qualitative research, a fixed sample size is less important than selecting appropriate participants who can address the research questions (Hammersley, 2015). Based on the practical guideline of 4 to 12 participants for homogeneous groups (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023) and considering that netnography serves as a complementary data source, this study targeted a total of eight participants, with four from each city. The participant groups are summarised in Table 3.3.

ID	Age	Living place	Years of residence	Born place	Occupation	Average monthly expenditure on clothing
P1	23	Tokyo	23 years	Tokyo, Japan	Talent advertisement agency	£50-100 (¥10,000-20,000)
P2	25	Tokyo	25 years	Tokyo, Japan	Consulting	£50-100 (¥10,000-20,000)
P3	26	Tokyo	11 years	Pennsylvania, US	Master's student	£10-15 (¥2,000-3,000)
P4	28	Tokyo	6 years	Hyogo, Japan	Sales representative at a shoe manufacturer	£150 (¥30)
P5	28	London	8 years	Klaipeda, Lithuania	Master's student, Customer Excellence Manager in retail	£50-200
P6	23	London	6 years	Paris, France	Master's student	£10
P7	25	London	18 years	Belgium	Research assistant at a university	£30-40
P8	25	London	8 years	Wales, UK	Student, Freelance fashion marketer	£100-200

Table 3.3: Participant information sheet (Author's own)

Establishing rapport with participants is a crucial process for obtaining good data (Creswell, 2013, p.147), and to achieve this, the researcher focused on establishing credibility and gaining the interviewee's confidence through an informal ice-breaking conversation. Care was taken not to

reveal the specific hypotheses to prevent any pre-existing biases from influencing their responses (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). The interview framework was used to ensure consistency and data quality. For the participants in London, interviews were conducted in person to better capture non-verbal cues and contextual nuances (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023). These were held at locations convenient for the participants (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2023), such as local cafés or on campus, to alleviate any potential tension and prevent unnecessary travel costs and time for them. Due to time and budgetary constraints, interviews with participants in Tokyo were conducted via online video calls. All participants provided consent for audio recording. Following each interview, transcription was carried out as soon as possible to preserve the nuance and context of the conversation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Transcripts for London participants were created using an iOS voice memo application, which was then manually corrected to retain natural speech patterns and filler words. For Tokyo participants, the free version of Gladia software was used for initial transcription, followed by a careful manual review and correction to ensure accuracy, and then transferred to English using AI and thoroughly reviewed to avoid losing nuanced meaning and context. To protect participant anonymity, any potentially identifiable information was removed from the audio files before they were uploaded for transcription.

To elicit richer narratives from participants, the interview process incorporated a visual element. Specifically, participants were shown selected SHC-related Instagram accounts during the interview and were asked to articulate their impressions and perceptions. This technique encouraged participants to verbalise their direct reactions to specific content, moving beyond reliance on memory or general imagination. This method facilitated the collection of more specific and detailed data regarding the influence of micro-influencers. In selecting these accounts for the interviews, the criteria prioritised their relevance to SHC and their status as a micro-influencer, rather than their geographical location. This approach aligns with the study's objective of revealing the influence of micro-influencers on perceptions of SHC. Furthermore, based on previous research indicating that social media users frequently view content from other countries (Oscario, 2023), the decision was made to select accounts without geographical limitation to accurately reflect the real-world consumption behaviour of the target Gen-Z demographic. Consequently, the accounts used in the interviews are detailed in Table 3.4.

#	ID	Place	Followers	Relevance - SHC
1	erieri	JP, Tokyo	94K	She is a vintage/thrift shop owner.
2	thriftlikeagirl	US	66.4K	The ID name includes "thrift."

Table 3.4: Instagram accounts used in the interview (Author's own)

3.7.2 Netnography

Targeting a selection of Instagram micro-influencers was essential for this research, which aimed to explore their influence on consumers. While the initial intention was to strictly observe accounts based in each city, semi-structured interviews revealed that Gen-Z females in both London and Tokyo frequently engage with content from overseas, including posts in non-native languages. This finding aligned with research by Oscario (2023), which highlights the increasingly global nature of online content consumption. Therefore, to accurately reflect the actual behaviour of the target demographic, the selection of accounts for observation was broadened to include micro-influencers representing the wider UK and Japanese SHC cultures. Specifically, accounts will be chosen based on the following criteria:

- Accounts primarily representing Western (preferably UK, with a focus on London) SHC culture.
- Accounts primarily representing Japanese (preferably Japan, with a focus on Tokyo) SHC culture.

To further refine the selection of accounts for observation, this study adapted Kozinets' (2020) five criteria for netnography: Relevance, Activity, Interactivity, Diversity, and Richness. However, as Kozinets (2020) suggests, these criteria can be modified or augmented to suit specific research objectives. In the context of this study, the primary aim was to investigate and compare the varied perceptions and responses of London and Tokyo consumers to diverse types of micro-influencer accounts. Consequently, 'Interactivity' and 'Richness' were incorporated as observational content criteria within the data collection process itself, rather than serving as initial filters for account selection. The adapted selection criteria for Instagram accounts were as follows:

Relevance:

- Accounts must feature content related to SHC, either through explicit mentions of terms like "vintage" or "thrift" in their bio, highlights, or captions, or by using relevant hashtags such as #thrift, #thrifting, #vintage, and #古着 (*Furugi* — the Japanese term for SHC).
- The follower count must be within the 1K to 100K range to classify them as micro-influencers.
- Accounts specifically mentioned by interview participants were also prioritised.

Activity:

- The account's most recent post must have been made within one week before the observation period began.

Diversity:

- Four accounts were selected from the 1K-50K range, and another four from the 50K-100K range.

Netnography is a qualitative method where smaller, focused datasets are often more effective than big data analysis (Kozinets, 2020). While there is no definitive standard for sample size in netnography, this study adopted a sample size of eight accounts, mirroring the total number of participants in the semi-structured interviews. This approach ensures a balanced comparative framework, with four accounts selected from the West and four from Japan. A final list of eight accounts was selected for netnographic observation, as detailed in Table 3.5.

#	ID	Place	Followers	Relevance - SHC	Relevance - interview	Activity
1	erieri	JP, Tokyo	94K	She is a vintage/thrift shop owner.	Accounts presented by the researcher in the interview	Posted 1 day ago
2	thriftlikeagirl	US	66.4K	The ID name includes "thrift."	Accounts presented by the researcher in the interview	Posted 2 days ago
3	ma.oun	JP, Tokyo	97K	P8 said this account influenced her to start wearing SHC (from the interview)	Participant-mentioned accounts	Posted 1 day ago
4	rubipigeon	FR, Paris	71.8K	In her interview article, linked in her bio, she is described as having a "passion for SH pieces."	Participant-mentioned accounts	Posted 2 days ago
5	aigua	JP, Tokyo	7K	"Vintage style" is mentioned in her bio.	Participant-mentioned accounts	Posted 4 days ago
6	yuk_2001	JP, Tokyo	11K	"古着" (<i>Furugi</i> - the Japanese term for SHC) is mentioned in her bio	Participant-mentioned accounts	Posted 4 days ago
7	vivienwtang	UK, London	18.5K	She has a Depop link in her bio and is doing a vintage pop-up.	Participant-mentioned accounts	Story posted in the last 24 hours
8	ellierosebaker	UK, London	35.3K	"Sustainable fashion" is mentioned in her bio, and she posts vintage haul reels.	Participant-mentioned accounts	Posted 6 days ago

Table 3.5: Instagram accounts for netnography (Author's own)

Data collection for the netnography was guided by the matrix developed in the previous section. The observational process was conducted using the researcher's smartphone, as this is the native device for Instagram consumption. The immersion journal was maintained on a computer to facilitate easy recording and ensure compatibility with other research tools.

In selecting the content for observation and analysis, the researcher focused on information that relates to the research questions, guided by Kozinets' (2020) guidance. This involved not only collecting objective data but also intentionally targeting content that elicited a subjective response

from the researcher, such as a change in emotion or a notable reaction. The observation process involved a systematic, five-step procedure for each piece of content identified:

1. Timestamp: The date and time of the observation were recorded.
2. Description: A detailed description of the activity or content was logged.
3. Content Saving: The content was saved on Instagram for future reference.
4. Screenshot/Screen Record: Visual evidence was captured via screenshots or screen recordings.
5. Reflective Journal: The researcher's immediate impressions, emotional responses, and initial reflections on the content were noted, addressing questions of "why," "what," and "how."

The full immersion journal compiled during the netnographic process is provided in Appendix FOUR. For the purpose of translation, the observed Japanese content was first translated using Instagram's built-in translation feature. If this translation was found to differ from the original Japanese intent, the researcher reviewed and corrected the English translation. Given the constraints of the research schedule, the above process was conducted daily for a period of two weeks, which is the longest duration feasible within the project timeline. This structured approach ensured that the netnographic data was collected consistently and provided a rich, contextual foundation for the analysis, complementing the interview data.

3.8 Data Analysis Procedures

For the analysis of data collected from both semi-structured interviews and netnography, a thematic narrative analysis was employed. Unlike pure thematic analysis or template analysis, which are commonly used in qualitative research but can fragment data through coding (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023), this approach preserved the original context and narrative structure of the collected data. The narrative unit can range from a short narrative about a specific topic to a person's entire life story. This study adopted the definition of a narrative as a "short story" that includes a beginning, middle, and end, comprising a situation, an action, and an outcome (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023, p. 687).

Thematic narrative analysis specifically focuses on the components of a narrative rather than how it was constructed (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). By individually analysing multiple narratives, this method allows for the identification of how differences and similarities in context influenced outcomes and how these outcomes diverge (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). This approach was determined to be the most suitable for this study, as it aligns with the aim of exploring how the influence of Instagram micro-influencers unfolds within specific contexts related to SHC (see Appendix FIVE for the coding table).

3.9 Validity and Reliability

Given the qualitative research design of this study, the traditional concepts of validity and reliability were not directly applicable, as these concepts are rooted in the assumptions of quantitative research concerning measurability, causal relationships, and generalizability (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023).

Therefore, this study adopted alternative measures to evaluate research quality in line with qualitative research standards (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). To enhance credibility, which is the qualitative parallel to internal validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the researcher regularly documented and challenged personal biases throughout the analysis to ensure they did not unnecessarily influence the interpretation. To improve internal reliability, multiple data collection methods were used to triangulate findings and ensure consistency. To maximise transferability, the qualitative equivalent of external validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the entire research process was described in detail, providing a clear audit trail for future researchers.

3.10 Limitations of Research Design

Adopting an interpretivist approach meant that the researcher's subjectivity is an unavoidable component of the study. This inherent characteristic of qualitative research created limitations in terms of generalisability and replicability (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). To minimise these limitations, the study used a qualitative multi-method approach to ensure the richness and complexity of the analytical data and provided a detailed research design to maximise transferability.

The six-year residency requirement for interview participants was adopted as a pragmatic solution to ensure an adequate sample size. Although this duration allowed for participants to be sufficiently influenced by the local culture, as evidenced in their narratives, their perceptions were also acknowledged to be products of their upbringing, country of origin, and other life events. This made it challenging to isolate the influences derived exclusively from either London or Tokyo. Conducting interviews with Tokyo participants online posed a risk of losing subtle nuances and emotional context compared to face-to-face interactions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). Additionally, potential technical issues, such as poor audio quality or delayed connections, were a risk (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). The researcher mitigated these risks by conducting pre-interview audio tests and confirming participant comfort with the chosen platform, Google Meet, which was selected for its ease of use, following the instructions given by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2023). The number of participants in this study was minimal, even for qualitative research standards. Furthermore, by limiting the sample to individuals who had previously purchased SHC, the study's scope was limited to understanding perceptions among consumers, while neglecting the perspective of non-consumers. This represented a key limitation of the study's findings. This study interviewed Japanese participants in Japanese and translated it into English. It allowed accessibility of Japanese

participants, but translating Japanese to English risks losing cultural nuances and context-specific meanings despite rigorous efforts at faithful representation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023).

The data collected through netnography was inherently limited, as individuals who post and comment on the internet represent only a portion of the population and are often those with a strong inclination toward self-promotion (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography's data collection period was also limited to two weeks. While there are no clear guidelines, netnography is often conducted over several months (Loureiro, Serra and Guerreiro, 2018). Therefore, although this study was cross-sectional, this was recognised as a limitation.

While the use of Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) is recommended to increase methodological rigour and transparency in qualitative data analysis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023), this study did not use such a tool. Given the manageable scale of the data and the researcher's lack of familiarity with CAQDAS, a more familiar manual process was chosen as recommended by Saldaña (2009). This decision was recognised as a limitation regarding the potential for enhanced quality in the data analysis.

3.11 Research Ethics

Research ethics must be considered throughout the entire research process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). This study was conducted in accordance with the UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics (University of the Arts London, 2020), ensuring adherence to established guidelines. To ensure that ethical considerations were not merely subjective but were also evaluated from a third-party perspective, a signed ethics approval form was submitted to the supervisor before any data collection commenced. The signed form is included in Appendix ONE.

To ensure the ethical treatment of interview participants, several measures were taken. A consent form (Appendix TWO), detailing potential risks and outlining the voluntary nature of participation, was sent to each participant at least three days before the scheduled interview (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). On the day of the interview, participants were verbally reminded that they could skip any questions they did not wish to answer. For online interviews, only audio was recorded, with video recording intentionally avoided to prevent the unnecessary capture of personal information, similar to the procedures for in-person interviews. This process ensured that informed consent was obtained, and participants' rights were protected throughout the data collection process.

Netnography, as a relatively new method, necessitated a negotiated ethics (Convery and Cox, 2012) approach due to the complexities of the online environment. Traditional ethical frameworks, which are based on human-centred research models requiring informed consent, are difficult to apply directly to online data (Lehner-Mear, 2020). Negotiated ethics involves making ethical judgments that are tailored to the specific context of the research while upholding core ethical principles. While

Kozinets (2020) suggests that netnography is still a form of human-centred research, the consensus in academic literature leans towards adapting ethical guidelines to fit the digital context. A study by Lehner-Mear (2020) concluded that analysing conversation data from online forums was ethically sound because the data was publicly accessible, and participants were contextually aware of its public nature. Despite the ongoing debate, the fundamental ethical principles of doing no harm, handling sensitive data with care, ensuring anonymity where possible, considering researcher safety, and showing respect for research subjects remain paramount. To minimise ethical issues, this study exclusively used public data, which is a point of agreement in the literature (Kozinets, 2020; Lehner-Mear, 2020). Any personally identifiable information beyond the central influencer accounts was anonymised to protect individual privacy.

Chapter Four FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from the primary research, which aimed to answer the overarching research question: "How does the influence of Instagram micro-influencers on Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC differ between London and Tokyo?" The analysis is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with Gen-Z female consumers in both cities, supplemented by findings from the netnographic study of micro-influencers' Instagram content.

The qualitative data from the interviews were analysed using a thematic approach to identify key themes and narratives. The findings from the netnographic thematic analysis were used as a complementary element to strengthen the arguments. This chapter is structured to address the research question by exploring the sub-questions that emerged from the research. Within each sub-question, the differences observed between London and Tokyo are discussed in detail.

1. How do perceptions of SHC differ between London and Tokyo?
2. How does the behaviour of SHC-related Instagram micro-influencers differ between London and Tokyo?
3. How do Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC/fashion-related micro-influencers' content differ between London and Tokyo?

Initially, sub-questions focused exclusively on SHC-related content. However, the analysis revealed that participants often did not consciously differentiate between second-hand and other fashion content when viewing influencers' posts. Therefore, the scope was broadened to analyse how participants perceive influencers' fashion-related content more generally.

4.2. How do perceptions of SHC differ between London and Tokyo?

4.2.1. *Gen-Z females' perception of SHC*

The findings highlight a range of perceptions that can be broadly categorised as positive, negative, and shifting, themes that emerged inductively from the semi-structured interview data. Additionally, narratives regarding sustainability and environmental values, and the SHC community emerged as other significant themes. The positive perceptions identified align with a number of values from the Koay's integrated model (2022), confirming the presence of Functional, Emotional, Social, Epistemic, and Environmental Values apart from Conditional Value (See Appendix SEVEN). The themes that emerged from the analysis are summarised in Figure 4.1.

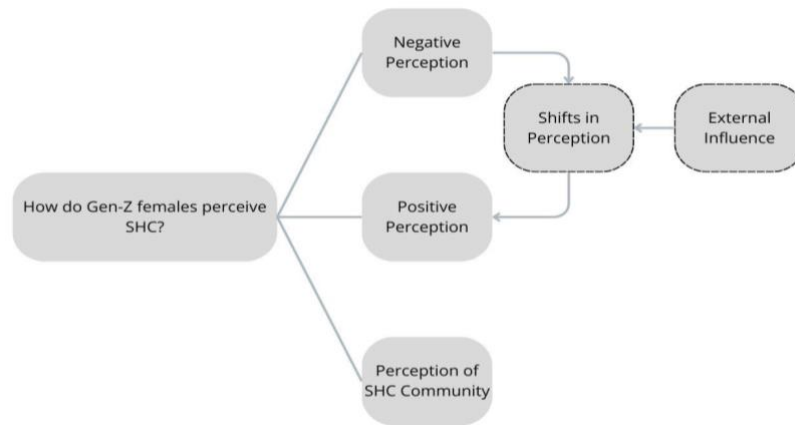


Figure 4.1: Thematic map of Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC (Author's own)

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC, this study explored the narratives surrounding how these perceptions were formed. The thematic analysis of these narratives revealed a crucial and unifying theme—most participants had experienced a transition from a negative to a positive perception of SHC. Of the eight participants, seven initially held negative perceptions towards SHC. However, six of these seven ultimately shifted their views and actively integrated SHC into their consumption habits. They narrated a transformative experience that led them to re-evaluate their opinions on SHC, although the intensity of their initial reservations varied. This finding is crucial as it offers a direct route to understanding the key drivers of consumer perception change, which is central to the overarching research question. While some previous studies have highlighted the strong influence of social media on this transition, our analysis reveals a more nuanced and diverse set of influential factors. These can be categorised into four key themes: Media Influence, Social Influence, Interpersonal Influence, and Cultural Influence.

Participants frequently mentioned the role of social media in shaping their perceptions. One London participant highlighted the indirect influence of social media in raising environmental awareness:

"...it just social media. Like, people that. I think people are more conscious about the climate and like the environment... So that's a good option it'd be to buy secondhand." (P6, London, p. 140)

Three participants also discussed the direct impact of influencers. One London participant explained how influencers contribute to the normalisation of SHC, reducing its perceived stigma:

"...you see a lot of people like, posting their outfits and so on... and then you like, ask on social media, maybe like, "oh, where did you get it?" And they're like, "well, actually, it's like, secondhand" because a person wants to be like, open... with their followers or whatever... a lot of impact comes from social media, because people who are looked up, or you know, people who have a lot of following, et cetera, becoming embraced it and it's like, it's not shameful to do this." (P4, London, p. 112)

This theme encompasses narratives where participants felt SHC had become a trend, where many of their peers were wearing it, or when they received positive comments on their own SHC purchases. This social normalisation was also found to be one of the drivers of acceptance.

"... looking at the Western society, like thrifting became a thing." (P4, London, p. 112)

"... younger generation want to buy more secondhand because it's like cool and trendy to do it." (P6, London, p. 140)

The influence of family and friends played a significant role in the perceptual shift, serving as both a source of positive encouragement and, in some cases, early stigma. Many narratives were positive, such as one London participant who was influenced by her mother's thrifting habits:

"...my mum really likes buying secondhand clothing... she kind of influenced me. And then we started going together." (P6, London, p. 133)

In contrast, one Tokyo participant's narrative highlighted a negative initial influence:

"...an impression that was instilled in me by my mother, but when I was a child... she'll say something like, 'I don't want to wear something that someone else has worn.'" (P1, Tokyo, p. 80)

This suggests that early exposure to negative family attitudes may have instilled a certain degree of stigma that had to be overcome later.

One participant's experience demonstrated the profound impact of cultural context. A London-based participant (P5) noted that despite living in London for over six years, it was her one-year stay in Stockholm that fundamentally altered her values and led to her exclusively purchasing SHC.

"...Stockholm, when I lived there for a year. I think that's when I got into secondhand... it's a very, Swedish culture. That's very minimalistic and very sustainable as a whole..." (P5, London, p. 131)

While this isolated finding is noteworthy, it also suggests a potential area for future research. The scope of this study, however, remains focused on the themes consistently identified across the broader participant group.

4.2.2. Cross-Cultural Difference in SHC Perception: London vs. Tokyo

While the transformative journey from negative to positive perception was a shared experience, the factors driving this shift and the underlying nature of the perceptions differed significantly between the London and Tokyo cohorts.

The most notable distinction lies in the primary barriers to adoption. London participants were aware of a societal stigma associated with SHC, but they found that media and personal influence were powerful enough to counteract it. Conversely, Tokyo participants universally expressed a personal stigma, characterised by strong feelings of psychological discomfort and specific concerns, particularly regarding cleanliness and hygiene. One Tokyo participant's narrative, for instance, highlighted a particularly strong demand for cleanliness.

"I feel like they're pretty carefully selected, and that includes the display, you know. The shops where I do buy used clothes are often places that also have their own brand and then they buy and sell used clothes alongside it. So maybe the fact that the display is a bit cleaner is part of it." (P2, Tokyo, p. 91)

"The design and appearance aspects win out. More than the fact that it's used clothes." (P2, Tokyo, p. 91)

Plus, the sensitivity towards cleanliness is also implied from another participant's narrative:

"In Japan, even at really cheap stores, I feel like a certain level of quality is guaranteed as a product." (P3, Tokyo, p. 105)

While a clean aesthetic and appealing design could reduce this resistance, it did not always lead to consistent consumption. In Tokyo, frequent SHC use was almost exclusively observed among those whose perceptions had been transformed by social media and peer influence.

"The biggest catalyst was my friends. A lot of my friends bought used clothes." (P3, Tokyo, p. 99)

"I got into secondhand clothes pretty early on. There was this influencer... I really liked how she wore a lot of vintage clothes, and that's how I got into them. After that, most of my life, I've just worn secondhand clothes." (P7, Tokyo, p. 142)

A stark difference emerged in how participants conceptualised SHC in relation to mainstream trends. All London participants unanimously viewed SHC as a mainstream and normalised trend. In contrast, only one Tokyo participant described it as a trend. This suggests that while SHC is broadly accepted in London, it remains a subcultural interest in Tokyo.

A significant distinction was found in the connection between SHC and sustainable and environmental values. All London participants cited sustainability and environmental friendliness as key motivations for their SHC consumption. Conversely, only one Tokyo participant mentioned this as a SHC consumption driver. This highlights a considerable difference in how the two cohorts link SHC purchases to broader environmental consciousness.

Furthermore, a defining characteristic of London participants' narratives was their unprompted reference to fast fashion. Despite not being asked directly about it, all London participants spontaneously contrasted their SHC purchases with the unsustainable practices of fast fashion. This suggests that for London consumers, there is a widespread awareness that fast fashion is not sustainable, and that new clothing purchases can be associated with guilt, as one participant noted: "if I do buy new clothes, I always feel guilty." (P5, London, p. 126). SHC is therefore perceived as a guilt-free alternative.

This finding is further supported by a Tokyo participant who had also lived abroad, confirming the cultural difference in this perspective.

"I have the impression that the kind of people who see buying used clothes as eco-friendly and sustainable are more common in the West. When I look at events and influencers, the people who like used clothes in Japan seem to prioritise fashion over sustainability." (P3, Tokyo, p. 107)

The literature review initially suggested that the influence of collectivism (Hofstede, 2001) might diminish the perceived value of uniqueness in Tokyo. However, our findings revealed that Tokyo participants placed a high value on uniqueness, aligning with the results of Sueda and Seo (2024). Instead of reducing the desire for unique items, the collectivist culture appeared to create a preconception about those who engage in a consumption behaviour that deviates from the norm. This finding, which was only evident in the Tokyo interviews, suggests that while uniqueness is valued, social pressure to conform to group norms can create a form of social categorisation that separates SHC users from the mainstream. This subtle bias highlights a key cultural difference in how SHC is perceived.

"Those people are so dedicated and knowledgeable... a really deep field. But I still feel like I don't really like it." (P2, Tokyo, p. 92)

"Japanese people tend to like to be the same as everyone else. So maybe the people who like used clothes in Japan are doing the opposite. Like, "I'm different from everyone else." Isn't that the stereotype of people who like used clothes?" (P3, Tokyo, p. 107)

4.2.3. Conclusion on SHC Perceptions

The analysis of Gen-Z females' perceptions of second-hand clothing in London and Tokyo reveals marked cultural differences across three interconnected dimensions. In London, second-hand clothing has become a normalised trend, closely tied to sustainability and environmental values, whereas in Tokyo it remains a niche interest associated with a specific identity, and the link to sustainability is comparatively limited. Moreover, while Tokyo consumers are often subject to particular preconceptions surrounding second-hand clothing, such assumptions are largely absent

in the London context. Finally, the value proposition differs notably between the two cities: consumers in London place greater emphasis on the acquisition process, whereas those in Tokyo attach significance to the intrinsic qualities of the item itself and the emotional connection it evokes.

4.3 How does the behaviour of SHC-related Instagram micro-influencers differ between London and Tokyo?

The netnographic data revealed distinct behaviours and storytelling approaches by micro-influencers regarding SHC. The findings were categorised into three themes: SHC-mention and Implication, SHC Storytelling, and Influencer's Influence and Engagement (Figure 4.2). The full thematic comparison table is provided in Appendix SEVEN.

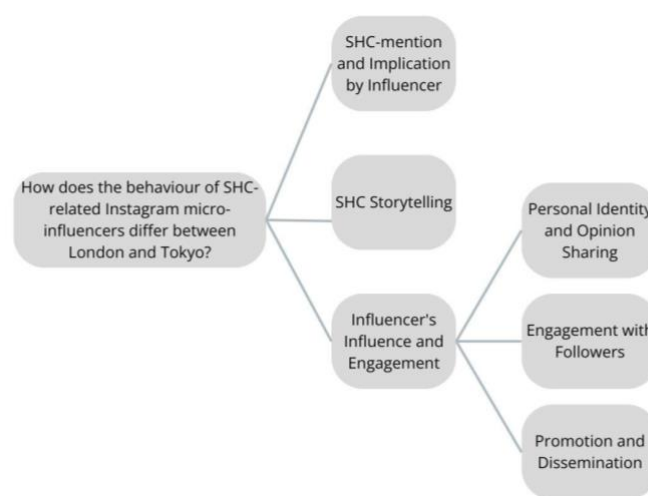


Figure 4.2: Thematic map of Gen-Z Females' perceptions of SHC-related micro-influencers on Instagram (Author's own)

A clear distinction was observed in the formats of content. Content focusing on "thrft hauls" (showcasing SHC purchases) and the "thrfting process" (the act of searching for SHC items) was exclusive to Western influencers. While Japanese influencers posted content featuring themselves wearing SHC, they did not create content that explicitly showcased the act of thrfting itself. Furthermore, in their Reel videos, a dominant format for Western influencers was a "talking to the camera" style, which was rarely seen in content from Japan.

Differences were also apparent in the use of hashtags and terminology. Japanese influencers, for example, were observed using unique hashtags that referred to specific vintage communities, such as "#古着好きと繋がりたい" (*Furugi-zuki to tsunagaritai* — literally, "I want to connect with SHC-lover"). Additionally, the use of hashtags indicating the vintage era of items suggests that for Japanese consumers, SHC is perceived not merely as "used goods" but as collectable or curated items. In contrast, Western influencers used terminology more closely aligned with "thrft," focusing on the act of finding bargains.

The stylistic approach to storytelling was found to differ markedly between the two cultural contexts. Western influencers proactively articulated their personal thoughts and opinions on specific SHC items, using these narratives to convey the items' appeal. The engagement in the comment sections, often filled with comments agreeing with these personal views, suggests that this form of opinion-sharing fosters a sense of community and shared value among their followers. In stark contrast, explicit personal opinions on SHC were rarely expressed by Japanese influencers. Furthermore, a shared observation across both cultures was the general absence of content that explicitly narrated the broader benefits of SHC, such as its contribution to environmental sustainability. The only notable exception to this was a single Western account that shared a meme advocating for SHC from an environmental standpoint, which represents the sole instance of a clear articulation of this value.

Western influencers often posted personal opinions on SHC but were more reserved on other personal topics. In contrast, Japanese influencers rarely shared opinions on SHC but frequently shared personal thoughts on a wide range of topics (e.g., travel, daily learnings), suggesting a more multi-faceted approach. Engagement via comments was significantly higher on Western influencers' accounts, possibly due to a cultural reluctance to comment in Japan. Humour was also only found in Western influencer content.

4.4 How do Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC/fashion-related micro-influencers' content differ between London and Tokyo?

The analysis of both interview and netnography data revealed a hierarchical perception of influencer content (Appendix SEVEN). Perceptions began with a surface-level evaluation of Content Qualities, followed by an assessment of the Influencer's Persona, which then informed the subjective Viewer's Reaction. An independent theme of Cultural Perception was also identified. The findings are based on both SHC-related and broader fashion-related content. The Viewer's Reaction was further divided into Positive/Negative Emotional Engagement, Positive/Negative Behavioural Engagement, and Indifferent Engagement (Figure 4.3).

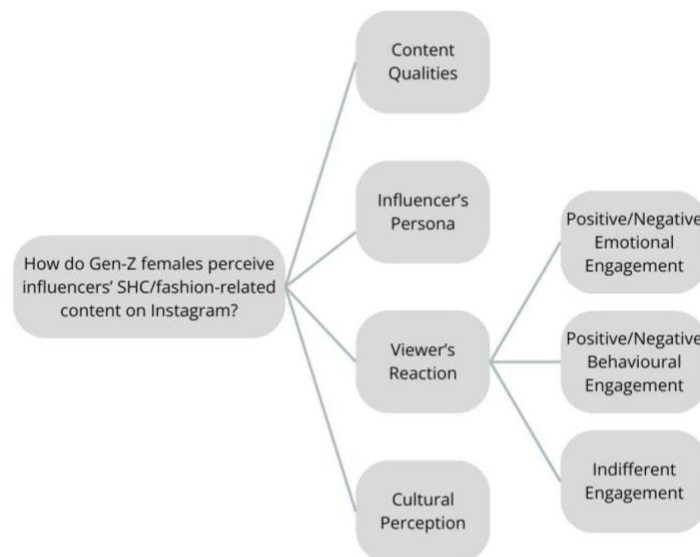


Figure 4.3: Thematic map of SHC-related micro-influencers' behaviour on Instagram (Author's own)

4.4.1 Content Qualities

In London, all participants stated they trusted individual influencers as their primary information source. In Tokyo, several participants preferred official brand or store accounts, suggesting a cultural tendency to place higher trust in business accounts over individuals.

London participants noted the aesthetic appeal of Japanese influencer accounts, but Tokyo participants did not make similar comments. The netnography revealed that only Tokyo influencers' content showed a strong emphasis on over-editing and perfectionism, which can sometimes undermine authenticity. This suggests that Tokyo participants may be more accustomed to highly edited content or that there is a cultural preference for visual beauty in Japan. This aligns with Singh and Matsuo's (2004) finding that high-context cultures like Japan often use aesthetics and a "soft-sell" approach on their websites.

Western micro-influencers displayed an explicit SHC vibe, whereas a subtle vibe was seen in Tokyo influencers' content. Japanese micro-influencers rarely mentioned SHC, with mentions limited to hashtags. This was reflected in the interviews: only one London participant said they did not check if a garment was second-hand, while three Tokyo participants said they did not check. The interviews also noted that London participants observed a "content diversion" in Japanese influencers' accounts, who posted about various topics beyond fashion, such as travel and daily life.

The netnography showed that Western content favoured Reel videos, especially "Talk Reels" where the influencer speaks directly. In Tokyo, photo posts were more frequent. This correlates with the interview findings that London participants valued originality and creativity, while Tokyo participants valued time efficacy, preferring to get useful information quickly. This suggests that Japan's high-

context culture, which favours subtle expressions, influences its visual content, a result consistent with Singh and Matsuo (2004).

4.4.2 Influencer's Persona

The authenticity of influencers was found to be a more salient concern among London participants, as evidenced by their interview narratives. While a sense of authenticity was a perceived value in the netnographic analysis of both Western and Japanese accounts, the specific criteria for its perception differed. In London, authenticity was associated with the absence of excessive editing and the presence of natural-looking content. Conversely, in Tokyo, the act of an influencer sharing personal opinions on topics unrelated to fashion was a more frequent determinant of perceived authenticity.

"So that kind of more everyday, authentic content is what I'd prefer to see, I think." (P8, London, p. 151)

"Her comments on food were personal and interesting." (Author, Netnography Immersion Journal, p. 166)

This was the most significant difference. London participants deeply discussed the influencer's persona, including their authenticity and relatability. In contrast, Tokyo participants rarely commented on the influencer's personality, instead perceiving them in terms of their attributes (e.g., "environmentally-focused person"). This tendency was also observed in fashion-related content, where London participants were more interested in the influencer's personality and their emotional engagement, while Tokyo participants were more focused on the content itself. A difference in emotional response was also noted. While Tokyo participants viewed influencers as aspirational figures, London participants often critically questioned this, showing resistance to the idea of a "toxic" or "unhealthy" obsession.

"I think the personality of the person. Or the persona that they have. And if they're... like relatable or down to earth, that's kind of what I look out for." (P6, London, p. 135)

"Because they're closer, it's easier to use their clothes for reference... their travel destinations, too, I think, "Oh, this place is nice." I really want to see them." (P7, Tokyo, p. 144)

"Which is probably unhealthy for me, because I'm looking at her and I'm like, "wow." But I do get inspiration from the way she dresses, I think." (P5, London, p. 129)

4.4.3 Viewer's Reaction

In both cities, influencer content served as a source of fashion inspiration. A unique finding in Tokyo was the mention of "骨格診断" (*Kokkaku Shindan* — body shape analysis), which suggests a cultural

tendency to categorise fashion, possibly linked to Japan's collectivist culture. London participants also highlighted the entertainment value of the content. Netnography, however, showed that entertainment was present in both cultures, but in Tokyo, it was often through shared content from Western accounts, suggesting that the norm of creating entertainment-focused content is more prevalent in the West.

Interview data revealed that Tokyo participants expressed a negative attitude towards the high level of self-expression and assertiveness in Western micro-influencers' content. This observation was corroborated by the netnographic analysis, which showed that a high volume of information and strong assertions in content from micro-influencers tended to elicit negative emotional reactions from Japanese observers. This finding aligns with the emphasis on time efficacy noted in the interviews with Japanese consumers. Furthermore, this resistance to assertiveness is consistent with the characteristics of a high-context culture (Hall, 1989) and appears to be a distinctive reaction of Japanese culture, which is also influenced by the collectivist value of prioritising group harmony (Hofstede, 2001).

The interviews found that London participants expressed a stronger resistance to commercialisation and the fast fashion system. Interestingly, the netnography revealed this resistance in content from both cultures, suggesting that the difference lies in consumer perception rather than content creation.

A clear difference was observed in the influential power on purchase motivation. London participants were more likely to report that influencers directly motivated their SHC purchases, a finding that extended to all fashion-related content. This could be because Western influencers' content is more specific and promotional; it's also common to see the embedded purchase link, or mentions of the SHC peer-to-peer online marketplace, Vinted, while Japanese influencers' content is more diverse and less direct.

4.4.4 Cultural Perception

A London participant noted that the act of "thrifting" was a trend introduced from the West, and that social media facilitated a form of "Westernisation." The netnography also confirmed Western-specific content norms, such as meme culture and "car-talk reels," which were not seen in Japanese influencer content.

4.5 Conclusion of Findings

In conclusion, the primary research reveals both commonalities and significant differences in how Gen-Z females in London and Tokyo perceive SHC and micro-influencer content. A core commonality is the shared trajectory of a Negative Perception shifting to a Positive Perception through external influences. Both groups initially held negative views, but the nature of this negativity

differed: London participants noted a societal stigma, while Tokyo participants cited personal and tangible concerns like hygiene. This shows that while the barrier to consumption is the same, its manifestation is culturally specific.

The mechanisms for overcoming this barrier were also distinct. In London, the shift was largely driven by a growing societal consensus that SHC is a trend and a sustainable alternative. Instagram played a pivotal role in normalising SHC by fostering this trend perception. In Tokyo, this societal consensus is not yet widespread, and the shift in perception was not as evident, with only a few participants actively consuming SHC.

The analysis of content perception further revealed deep-seated cultural differences. This aligns with the frameworks of High-Context vs. Low-Context and Individualism vs. Collectivism. Tokyo participants, from a high-context culture, showed resistance to explicit, high-information content, prioritising subtlety and time efficacy. They placed higher trust in brands than in individuals and focused on the practical utility of the content rather than its entertainment value or the influencer's persona. In contrast, London participants, from a low-context culture, engaged directly with the influencer's persona and sought entertainment in their content, which directly translated to higher engagement and purchase motivation.

The findings suggest that while Instagram holds potential to influence positive SHC perceptions in both cultures, the strategies for leveraging micro-influencers must be culturally tailored. The explicit, direct, and persona-driven approach effective in London may be less impactful in Tokyo, where a more subtle, aesthetic-focused, and utility-driven approach to content may be more successful.

Chapter Five DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Discussion

This chapter discusses how the key findings from this study relate to the existing literature. It will examine similarities, differences, and the new insights of this research into previously unexplored areas. This chapter is structured according to the main themes addressed in the literature review.

5.1.1 SHC Consumer Behaviour

The findings of this study regarding the perceived value of SHC are consistent with the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991) and the integrated model proposed by Koay, Cheah and Lom (2022). The perceived values of SHC identified in these models were confirmed in both London and Tokyo markets, which is a significant finding suggesting that the TCV model is applicable in the context of SHC. It was also revealed that there were no significant differences in the values consumers in both regions perceived in SHC. However, a limitation of this study is that the conditional value, as asserted in the integrated model, was not mentioned in this research. Furthermore, while the environmental value emphasised in the integrated model and other research was actively mentioned by all participants in London, confirming it as a key motivation for SHC consumption, this was not the case in Tokyo. This finding contradicts Ogiemwonyi and Jan's (2023) assertion that environmental concerns are stronger in collectivistic cultures, suggesting that in Tokyo, SHC and environmental value are not yet strongly linked in consumers' minds.

This study's findings are also consistent with the TPB framework. Specifically, the observation that positive perceived value influences a positive attitude aligns with prior research (Koay, Cheah and Lom, 2022). However, a comparison of the results from London and Tokyo revealed that while there were no major differences in perceived values—other than environmental value—SHC-related content on social media more strongly prompted purchasing and store visiting behaviours in London. This discrepancy suggests that elements of the TPB other than attitude, such as subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, may be at play. For instance, London participants mentioned that the social acceptance and trending status of SHC have been normalised, whereas Tokyo participants did not mention this, suggesting that the presence or absence of subjective norms could explain the difference in behavioural prompts. From the perspective of perceived behavioural control, London participants spoke of good accessibility to SHC, while Tokyo participants mentioned a lack of information, suggesting that the availability of information and physical accessibility also influence the intention to consume SHC. In conclusion, by applying TCV and TPB in the context of SHC and cross-cultural studies, this research confirms their applicability across a wider range of cultures.

5.1.2 Instagram's Role in Influencing Perception Formation

The finding that Instagram functions as a source of fashion inspiration was equally confirmed in both cultures, aligning with the research of Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020). However, in the context of SHC, Instagram's role in trend diffusion was strongly confirmed only in London, and limited in Tokyo. Furthermore, while previous research on Instagram's significant influence on forming a positive perception of SHC was consistent with the London findings, this was limited in Tokyo. This highlights the need for further exploration into the nuances of consumer behaviour in different cultures, as much of the existing literature is based on London. Interestingly, responses to advertising also differed between cultures. In London, participants expressed a dislike for ads, consistent with Goldsmith's (2016) finding that personal posts from influencers are more trusted. In Tokyo, however, examples of purchasing items from ads or using them for shopping inspiration were seen.

The concept of opinion leadership, first proposed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (2006), was observed in the behaviour of consumers in both London and Tokyo. However, the limited nature of influencers' impact in Tokyo may be a result of the tendency of Tokyo consumers to engage less in interpersonal communication on Instagram. While the values of originality and uniqueness, characteristic of opinion leadership, were recognised in London, authenticity was more highly valued in fostering engagement with influencers. In Tokyo, the originality or uniqueness of opinion leaders was not recognised, marking a difference from previous literature (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008; Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Regarding content quality, it was perceived as equally important in both London and Tokyo, aligning with Djafarova and Rushworth's (2017) assertion. However, it was also noted that aesthetic appeal alone did not necessarily lead to engagement. It was suggested that influencers in Tokyo, influenced by high-context culture, may consciously create content with a more subtle and aesthetic feel. However, this did not necessarily lead to a positive emotional or behavioural engagement among Tokyo participants. Furthermore, this study's confirmation of positive attitude formation towards SHC consumption via influencers in London supports Hur's (2023) research. Although only one instance was confirmed in Tokyo, it suggests that with a different approach, influencers in Tokyo could also potentially increase their impact.

Contrary to Ohanian's (1990) theory, this study's results suggest that an influencer's attractiveness played little role in source credibility. Instead, trustworthiness and expertise contributed to the formation of trust in influencers in both London and Tokyo, consistent with previous research.

5.1.3 Cultural Difference

The consistency between the characteristics of visual expression on Instagram and Singh and Matsuo's (2004) research suggests that the high/low-context culture framework can be applied to analyse Instagram content visuals.

Regarding the influencer relationship, a stronger sense of relatability and engagement with influencers was confirmed in London's individualistic culture. Conversely, in Tokyo's collectivistic culture, some consumers trusted shop or brand accounts more than individual influencers, revealing that cultural differences also influence the type of accounts people are likely to engage with. This difference was also evident in how information was interpreted. In London, there was no resistance to a personal influencer's explicit views; rather, it often evoked a sense of personal resonance. In Japan, however, participants expressed a strong aversion to explicit claims. Furthermore, in Tokyo, participants tended to generalise people who wear SHC into a single group, which is a manifestation of collectivistic culture. P3's comment, "maybe the people who like used clothes in Japan are doing the opposite. Like, 'I'm different from everyone else,'" (p. 107) suggests that in a collectivistic culture like Japan, wearing SHC, which is often valued for its uniqueness, may be seen as a symbol of deliberate departure from the group, thus indicating a deeper area of exploration.

5.1.4 Discussion of Key Findings and Research Contribution

This study aimed to bridge a significant gap in the existing literature by exploring how Instagram micro-influencers influence Gen-Z females' perceptions of SHC in London and Tokyo, and in doing so, to develop managerial insights for effective cross-cultural communication strategies in the global SHC market. The literature review confirmed a lack of research on Instagram's role in SHC perception formation across cultures like London and Japan. However, previous studies on websites (Singh and Matsuo, 2004) and in other regions (Xu *et al.*, 2014) suggested that cultural differences could impact the influence of influencers and the formation of consumer perceptions.

The findings of this study confirm that it has achieved its objectives. First, it established that Instagram contributes to the formation of positive attitudes towards SHC, which is consistent with prior research (Hur, 2023). Furthermore, the study revealed significant cultural differences between London and Tokyo in both SHC perception and the influence of influencers. Perceptions and interpretations of micro-influencers' SHC-related content also differed significantly across cultures. Specifically, the strength of relatability and the associated engagement with the influencer's persona varied greatly, with influencers having a stronger impact in London, while their influence was more limited in Tokyo. Additionally, London participants often recognised an entertainment value in influencer content, a perspective not found in Tokyo.

A comparison of similarities and differences with prior literature revealed that while many conclusions from previous studies align with the findings from London consumers, they often do not align with those from Tokyo. From these findings, it can be concluded that content strategies aimed at forming positive attitudes toward SHC must be different for London and Tokyo. It also became clear that previous literature, which is predominantly based on Western contexts, is not always applicable to

the Japanese market. This study, therefore, provides a crucial insight, reaffirming that a deep understanding of cultural context is essential for global marketing strategy development.

This study contributes to the academic field by shedding light on previously unexplored cultural differences in SHC perception and the varying influence of influencers. Furthermore, the detailed illustration of the transition from SHC resistance to acceptance is a novel finding, as it is a topic rarely addressed in prior literature. The finding that many discoveries from the research on Tokyo consumers do not align with prior research highlights the limitations of simply applying findings from one culture to another. It underscores the importance of conducting research through a cultural lens. This research also holds significant value within the broader context of sustainability. SHC is an item whose consumption is expected to be promoted for its environmental benefits. However, as this study revealed, consumer perceptions of SHC are complex and still not fully understood. By providing a higher-resolution understanding of these perceptions, this study contributes to advancing SHC consumption, which is a key part of sustainable consumption.

This study provides crucial managerial insights. It reveals that while Instagram is important for forming positive attitudes toward SHC in the global market, content strategies must be finely tuned for different cultures like London and Tokyo. For instance, London's consumers tend to prefer highly engaging, entertainment-focused reel videos. In Tokyo, a more practical content strategy is recommended, combining photos with an emphasis on time efficacy to deliver beneficial information efficiently. From a cultural perspective, content in Tokyo should be aesthetically pleasing but avoid a "fake" feel. Moreover, due to a stronger trust in shop accounts over individual influencers among Tokyo consumers, strengthening official brand accounts is a valid strategy. Finally, to further promote SHC consumption in Tokyo, it's crucial to actively communicate its environmental value to deepen consumer understanding, a link that is not yet well-established in the market.

5.2 Final Conclusion

This study is original in that it is the first to compare the influence of Instagram micro-influencers on SHC perception in London and Tokyo. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of consumer perception regarding SHC in the academic field. Furthermore, by combining semi-structured interviews with netnography, this research utilised methodological triangulation to gain a multi-faceted view of consumers' complex psychological descriptions (visible only through interviews) and the psychological responses of followers and observers (visible only through Instagram observation). This approach led to high-quality data and compelling research results.

This study, however, has several limitations. First, the research scope excluded the possibility of other platforms influencing consumer perception. Additionally, within Instagram, the influence of accounts other than influencers—such as shop or brand official accounts—was not investigated. Regarding the interviews, due to time and accessibility constraints, participants were required to

have lived in their respective cities for at least six years. While this was intended to help explore local cultural influences, it also presented a limitation. For instance, some London participants, despite living there for over 18 years, had roots in Turkey or France and mentioned these cultural backgrounds, which made it difficult to isolate the influence of London's culture. Similarly, Tokyo participants who had moved to other regions also mentioned different cultural influences. This reflects the reality that in large cities like London and Tokyo, being influenced by other cultures is somewhat unavoidable. From an interpretivist perspective, this was interpreted as a valuable diversity of data. Furthermore, as participants were unlikely to remember the exact follower counts of the accounts they mentioned during the interviews, it was difficult to determine if these examples were from micro-influencers or not. While netnography was used to mitigate this, this limitation remains. Moreover, during the interviews, participants commented on accounts from the US and Japan, and multiple participants expressed awareness that an account was American. This indicates that geographical perception strongly influences consumer psychology. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the inclusion of influencers from other regions is a limitation of this study. In the future, more accurate validation could be achieved by focusing on accounts specifically from London and Tokyo. In netnography, the observer's subjective viewpoint plays a significant role, which can lead to interpretative differences and biases. This is a limitation, particularly since the observer was Japanese, and their existing biases about Japanese content may have strongly influenced the interpretations.

Many of these limitations also suggest promising areas for future research. For example, it would be beneficial to investigate whether results would change by surveying participants who have only lived in London or Tokyo, thus excluding influences from other cultures. While this was a cross-sectional study, a longitudinal study could explore how cultural influence changes with years of residence and how long-term engagement with a specific account influences perception. The study also suggested that other platforms, such as C2C marketplaces like Vinted and Mercari, and media mixes like podcasts, may also influence consumer perception. Exploring this is a potential area for new insights. The finding that Tokyo consumers trust shop accounts more than individual influencers suggests that further exploration of this cultural difference could be a significant contribution. Additionally, the fact that many of the accounts mentioned by participants were macro-influencers indicates that researching the influence of macro-influencers could also contribute to academic discovery. Finally, given the lack of a systematic model or classification for how Instagram content influences consumer perception, quantitative research to systematically classify consumer perceptions would be valuable.

This study explored how Instagram micro-influencers affect the perception of SHC among Gen-Z women in London and Tokyo. While both cultures shared a common structure of transitioning from negative to positive perceptions, the factors driving this shift and the engagement with influencers on Instagram showed significant cultural differences. In London, social trends and sustainability were key drivers in overcoming resistance, with Instagram playing a crucial role in normalising SHC. In

Tokyo, however, SHC consumption was not yet as normalised, and a preference for practicality over entertainment was observed. The findings demonstrate the limitations of applying Western-centric research to other markets and offer essential practical and academic insights for building effective cross-cultural communication strategies in the global SHC market. By providing a clearer understanding of complex consumer perceptions, this research takes a significant step towards promoting sustainable fashion consumption.

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