

Collaborative Fashion Consumption Practices through Formal Swapping Events in the City of Bengaluru, India

Shinju Mahajan and Jitender Singh

Abstract

Environmentalists from all over the world are placing their interest in the textile sector, which is known to be the second-most polluting industry in the world. Many initiatives and studies have been conducted to reduce textile waste, with a focus on raising public awareness about the need to alter the general public's consumption habits. The guiding principle for environmental preservation is to consume meaningfully and conservatively. Young adults are embracing ideas like upcycling and thrift shops. 'Swapping Fashion' is another trending initiative that is being accepted by young Indian consumers. The millennials, who are well-informed about the negative repercussions of overproduction and overconsumption of fashion, have made swapping fashion products like clothing, bags, shoes, and accessories into a new fad. Thus, through this study, the researcher has tried to map this fad and comprehend how swap events and operations in the cosmopolitan city of Bengaluru, in the state of Karnataka, India, operate. The research also aims to map the difficulties being faced by the organisers, obtain insight into participant intentions and behaviour, and assess the overall experience of the focused group who believe in the concept of clothes swapping. The study further aims to determine the extent of scalability of fashion swapping events. A mixed-method methodology has been used to collect the data, which included focus group interviews with five swap event organisers to assess the challenges, funding, and scale of these events. 50 participants were contacted using the snowball sampling technique to obtain feedback on their experiences at the swap events. Additionally, 80 respondents were contacted through judgmental sampling, who had awareness of and were conscious consumers of sustainable fashion but had not participated in any swapping events earlier. Data analysis reveals that "swapping fashion" is a novel idea that is only accepted by a small group of like-minded individuals. Social media is used as the primary enabler to create awareness of the events. To scale up the concept, the study proposes a framework for the collection of the merchandise, sale of the merchandise, and disposal of the leftover inventory.

Keywords: Sustainability, collaborative fashion consumption, swapping of fashion, mindful consumption, swap events, scalability

Introduction

The fashion business is plagued with unfavourable externalities on the social and environmental fronts. The fashion commerce has many problems, including environmental deterioration, the use of dangerous chemicals, poor salaries, violations of workers' rights, and child labour (Fletcher, 2008). Additionally, the growing fast fashion industry further contributes to a lot of waste generation that adversely affects the planet. Fast fashion is a profitable and widely used business strategy where fashion merchants produce inexpensive, disposable goods at significantly lower costs than their designer counterparts and have numerous seasons rather than the conventional two collections each year (Birtwistle and Moore, 2007). As a result, the rate of fashion obsolescence has accelerated, which is bad for long-term sustainability.

As the cost of clothing has decreased, there has been an increase in the consumption of fashion, resulting in 'cheap chic' items that are worn only once or twice before being thrown away. Consumption is both an economic and a social activity. Consumption grants identity, a viewpoint on oneself, prestige, and peer respect. Consumer choices often serve as a reflection of one's self-perception and the desired image they aspire to communicate to others. This predicament is best exemplified by the apparel and fashion business (Crommentuijn-Marsh, 2010). Reports suggest that there are countries where consumers have not used 30 percent of the clothing that they have bought (Greenpeace, 2015). Overconsumption and mindless consumption, primarily because of fast fashion, are the primary contributors to making fashion unsustainable.

Efforts are being made by companies and experts to deliberate on processes and systems for making clothing production sustainable. There are also campaigns and promotions that are spreading awareness among the masses about reducing consumption patterns and that slow fashion is "fashionable". Apart from lowering consumption, concepts like upcycling and reusing fashion goods can help cut down on waste by reducing the requirement for new items (Antanavičiūtė, A. and Dobilaitė, 2015).

The concepts of "sharing economy" and "collaborative consumerism" have gathered increased recognition in different industries, although not being novel terms. The development of information and communication technology has made it easier to share goods and services. These procedures have been implemented on a scale that

was previously unthinkable (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Belk, 2014). The system of Collaborative Fashion Consumption (CFC) offers a viable option for businesses in the fashion sector seeking new sustainable business models to advance efficiency and sufficiency. Iran and Schrader (2017) define CFC as a consumption pattern “in which consumers have access to already existing garments instead of purchasing new fashion products, either through alternative opportunities to acquire individual ownership (gifting, swapping, or second-hand) or through usage options for fashion products owned by others (sharing, lending, renting, or leasing).” The sharing economy and collaborative consumption are frequently researched together (Belk, 2014). According to Felson and Speath (1978), collaborative consumption is defined as “the event in which one or more persons consume economic products or services while engaged in cooperative activities with one or more others”. In a collaborative consumption process, the consumer works together to obtain and share the resource in exchange for a fee or other compensation. The alternative viewpoint considers giving and receiving as forms of non-monetary compensation, such as bartering, trading, and swapping. For consumer goods that have a regular inactive capability, it is beneficial to utilize collaborative consumption, which refers to the practice of accessing goods and services for a limited duration rather than permanently owning them (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen, 2016).

In countries like Singapore and Australia, CFC is a well-known and well-accepted concept among the masses. Peer-to-peer (P2P) and business-to-consumer (B2C) are the two major categories into which the various forms of CFC (such as gifting, exchanging, or second-hand, sharing, lending, renting, or leasing) can be divided (Iran and Schrader, 2017). Swapping events, for instance, might be planned by an organisation (B2C) or by the customers themselves (P2P). Consumers accept and use CFC in a variety of B2C and P2P forms in different ways. When it comes to consumer approval, factors like ownership and trust are important (Catulli, 2012). Some shoppers prefer trading clothes since they gain ownership when they do so. Others favour renting because businesses can ensure the goods’ quality and cleanliness.

Existing research provides some insights into the CFC’s sustainability benefits. While some studies, such as Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012), are upbeat and assert that CFC has the potential to enhance sustainable consumption of fashion, others point out the danger of CFC’s rebound effects (Frenken and Schor, 2017). The lack of agreement among academics and researchers emphasises the need for a close reading of the literature to look for connections between sustainability and the use of alternate methods of fashion consumption.

The growth of slow fashion brands, as well as pre-owned re-commerce platforms, is proof of the increasing number of conscious shoppers in India. According to Vogue India, in response to growing environmental concerns and the negative effects of fashion on the environment, the “swap, don’t shop” concept, formerly the exclusive realm of vintage and thrift store devotees, is quickly becoming a popular way of life. In fact, by 2033, it’s predicted that used apparel will account for one-third of people’s closets (Raniwala, 2019).

The purchasing of pre-owned goods is an emerging phenomenon that can be observed in various cultural and interpersonal contexts, demonstrating the presence of diverse consumer behaviors. Zaman, et al. (2019) suggest that online consignment shops for clothing can assist in promoting environmentally conscious practices through utilization of less wasteful products. There is undoubtedly a relation between consumer attitudes towards consignment shops and their approach to purchasing used clothing. Buying second-hand items is not just a use of resources or avoiding the waste of money; it is a practice of humanity for sustaining society and serving the needy (Seo and Kim, 2019).

Inspiring a shift in consumers’ attitudes and perceptions towards used clothing has the potential to encourage the adoption of a collaborative consumption style. Consumer product knowledge plays a crucial role in cultivating trust and nurturing the inclination to embrace sustainability practices (Sharma and Kushwaha, 2019). Consumers favour direct methods of acquiring used clothing (direct exchange, purchasing from consignment shops, and interchange through swapping). Furthermore, consumers prefer to get their used clothing from their friends and family over buying or getting it from strangers since they feel more comfortable putting their trust in people they know (Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018).

As per a study by McNeill and Venter (2019), purchasing used designer clothing was observed as a way to support a social persona, a fashion self-concept, and a style identity. The younger generation of consumers expressed the potential of garment rental model as a means to reduce the perceived risks associated with fashion experimentation. They highlighted concerns about societal norms and the impact of their fashion purchases. Community implications were considered as the key factor that predicts consumer engagement in collaborative consumption.

According to a study by Choudhary, et al. (2022), the general awareness about the environment and social care, beliefs about sustainable fashion and prior socially responsible consumer activity influence attitudes towards collaborative consumption in the apparel business. Collaborative consumption promotes the utilization of used

clothing and encourages its users to embrace pre-owned garments. Consumers are nonetheless sceptical about the new concept of consuming second-hand apparel. The previous usage of sustainable goods by individuals significantly influences their perception of collective consumption. Adopting collaborative consumption is often driven by green principles and the acceptance of used items is heavily impacted by consumer's environmental values. Therefore, it is crucial to consider these green values while planning any business model related to collaborative consumption. The study further indicates the respondents' preference for the premium segment, followed by the casual sector for collective consumption of apparel. The luxury category is particularly popular among women aged 18-25 and men aged 26-30. Retail outlets are the preferred venue for purchasing apparel through collective consumption, as indicated by the respondents. Both traditional and multi-brand stores have the potential to dedicate a department specifically for gently used clothing. In terms of collaborative fashion consumption, the respondents prefer traditional methods such as renting, swapping, sharing, bartering, and gifting (in order of preference). The findings of the study also highlight that renting clothing is a favored method of group consumption (ibid.).

Clothes swapping are pop-up events that provide an opportunity for fashion enthusiasts to acquire gently used clothing and accessories by exchanging items from their own wardrobe, in order to encourage sustainable consumption. While the idea of organizing swap events is gaining recognition in India, it is true that not all communities are fully prepared for such a concept. This research, therefore, focuses on the concept of CFC in India with a focus on the "swapping of fashion through formal events". As a newly adopted concept, swapping events in India are currently being held within focused groups primarily among millennials in select cities. Through this study, the researchers have attempted to map the rising trend of swap events and examine the operations associated with them in the cosmopolitan city of Bengaluru, located in the state of Karnataka, India. Bengaluru was one of the pioneering cities to embrace the concept of swap events, making it an ideal location to explore and analyze the dynamics of these events. By examining the practices and experiences in Bengaluru, the researchers aim to gain insights into the functioning and impact of swap events in an Indian context.

In addition to mapping the operations of swap events in Bengaluru, the research also aims to identify the challenges faced by organizers. It seeks to gain an understanding of the intentions and behaviors of participants as well as evaluate the overall experiences of the focused group, which actively supports the concept of fashion swaps. By examining these aspects, the research endeavors to shed light on the potential hurdles faced by organizers and the motivations driving participants.

Furthermore, the research aims to assess the scalability of the study. This involves examining the feasibility of replicating and expanding the concept of swap events to other cities or communities in India. By evaluating the extent to which the findings and insights from Bengaluru can be applied to a broader context, the research aims to determine the potential for scaling up swap events as a popular and sustainable fashion consumption practice across the country.

Methodology

Through the literature review, the researcher focuses on understanding how the ecosystem of swapping and exchanging is currently operating in other countries and the city of Bengaluru. The identified research questions are:

Which communities are accepting “swapping” as a concept, and what is the extent of their acceptance?

What are the experiences of the organizers in organizing these events, the challenges faced and the promotional strategy adopted?

How can the operating models be scaled up to spread awareness of such communities, attracting more people to join the campaign?

A mixed-methods approach has been used to collect the data, which includes focus group interviews with the five swap event organisers. Fifty participants, primarily women (thirty-eight females between 23 and 45 years old and twelve males between 29 and 48 years old), were contacted using the snowball sampling technique to obtain feedback on their experiences at swap events. These formed Group A, while the respondents in Group B comprised consumers who had not participated in any of the swapping events but were aware of terms like sustainability, slow fashion, and eco-friendly. The sample size consisted of eighty females and males (21 males and 26 females in the age group of 20–35 years and 19 males and 14 females in the age group of 36–60 years). All the respondents were well educated, with disposable annual incomes in the range of Rs 15–30 lakh per annum. Survey questions were distributed to these eighty subjects who formed Group B to gauge their acceptance of the concept of fashion swapping. A judgmental sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents from Bengaluru who were contacted telephonically or through emails.

Five organizers were contacted to understand the strategy they adopt for organising these events and the challenges they face. Further, the possibility of scalability of the concept was discussed to understand if the Indian population is ready to adopt

the concept of CFC. Bengaluru was chosen as the city for conducting the research since it was among the first cities in India to become receptive to the idea. There are communities in Bengaluru that organize tailored “exchange and shop” occasions to encourage conscious consumption.

Results and Discussion

This data was analyzed, and conclusions were drawn to understand why “swapping” as a concept is not widely prevalent in the Indian population. Operating systems were devised based on discussions for scaling these events to reach out to more like-minded people who accept this concept.

The concept of ‘sustainable fashion’

From among the respondents in Groups A and B, “sustainability” as a concept means different things to different people. As the word derives its significance from “sustainable”, any clothing or a product of fashion that is used for a longer period is sustainable. According to 80 percent of the subjects surveyed, fashion products made out of organic, eco-friendly, biodegradable, or “green” materials are sustainable. Everyone agreed with the concept of recycling, reusing, and reducing as sustainable. The concept of sustainable consumption was understood by 42 percent of people, according to whom products, if consumed or shopped mindfully, are sustainable. 87 percent of people agreed that “living happier with minimalism” was a concept for sustainable living.

In support of the same, the existing literature shows that the sustainable fashion lexicon contains a wide range of phrases that are sometimes used indiscriminately, confusing both researchers and customers. These terms include “environmental”, “ecological”, “green”, “sustainable”, “ethical” “recycled” and “organic” (Thomas, 2008). According to Sanne (2005), sustainable production refers to the ability to “live well with less” and the use of materials that may be fully reused, composted, or recycled in the creation of commodities. Studies on decreased consumption have also been conducted within movements like non-materialism, asceticism, voluntary simplicity, limited consumption, and downshifting (Cherrier, 2009; Black and Cherrier, 2010). Sustainably consuming clothing is a contentious, if not absurd, idea. Very little can be known about fashion customers’ sustainable consumption habits or their conceptions of what constitutes sustainable fashion.

Acceptance of swapping fashion

The survey with the Group B respondents showed that “second-hand” goods were unacceptable to 76 percent of the surveyed population in the age group of 36 years and above who had never attended a swapping event. According to them, upcycling self-owned products is the way to increase the longevity of a product by re-shaping and re-constructing it, but using second-hand products is not acceptable. While 48 percent of the population in the age group of 20–35 years agreed to use second-hand goods that are heirlooms or branded and are in good condition.

This suggests that, though the respondents are aware of the significance of sustainability in fashion, swapping or using used goods is largely unacceptable to them. Interestingly, as a society, Indians consciously practise sustainability to a great extent by passing on their used garments or accessories to family members, house helps, etc. after the self-usage is exhausted for reasons like outgrowing the product or losing its visual appeal. However, consumers are not willing to participate in swapping events to buy or exchange clothing or personal products used by strangers. Even though these products are in good condition and are cleaned and dry-cleaned before being put up for swap, the idea of using second-hand products is unacceptable to 88 percent of the respondents.

The study also suggests that all the men in the age group of 36 years and older disagree with the concept of buying swapped products, while 17 percent of the women in the same age group were open to the idea of an exchange of branded or luxury products. Likewise, 32 percent of men in the age group of 20 years and older were open to the idea of attending swap events with the idea of owning a fashion or luxury brand, and 68 percent of females in the same age group showed their consent for such events subject to the condition of the available products.

Among the respondents in Group A, 91 percent of the females who had attended swapping events in the past either as a swapper or a shopper agreed to various reasons for buying from these events. Figure 1 suggests what motivates people to buy at swap events. 95 percent of respondents like swapping as this helps them contribute to the cause of sustainability; 42 percent of the respondents do it for economic benefits. Only 25 percent feel they do it to refresh their wardrobes, and 8 percent agree that they do it because their friends or family do it. Of these, 97 percent of respondents have shown a positive inclination to attend these events in the future.

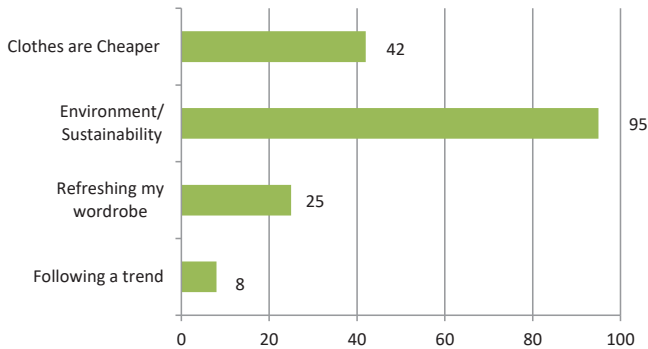


Figure 1: Factors motivating to participate in swap events

Promotional strategy

82 percent of the respondents got informed of the ‘Swap of Fashion’ event through social media, while 18 percent got it from word of mouth. When the organizers were asked about platforms to be used for the scalability of the event, social media, particularly Instagram followed by Twitter, emerged as significant platforms for promoting the events and spreading awareness among people so that like-minded communities may be reached and the number of participants—the swappers and the shoppers—can be significantly increased. According to the organisers, narratives go a long way towards selling the campaigns and getting people to follow their cause.

Organizing swap events

Swap events, unlike other exhibitions, are not very common, and participation is limited for reasons discussed earlier. These are typically held once every two to three months by some organizers as physical events or online. Each event has between 20 and 100 participants. The organizers plan the promotional strategy well in advance, and their stories are well-designed and narrated through Instagram pages. The mode of operation differs for each organizer. The event date and venue are declared on the social media page. Generally, these events are held in upmarket co-working spaces. There is a registration fee for such an event, and only people who register can submit their clothes for swapping. This registration fee covers the venue and management costs. Participants are given clear instructions outlining what is acceptable. The participants are responsible for dropping off the merchandise before a predefined date with the organisers. The organisers inspect the received goods based on the parameters, and qualified products are then shot aesthetically and posted on social media with the sole purpose of showcasing the merchandise on sale, thereby creating a following. All such

selected items are assigned points, giving value to each product. The participants are informed about the items that get accepted and the points they have earned. The items not accepted are kept in the donation area or returned to the participant. All approved items are displayed with points listed on them. A participant can then redeem their points and pick any item. If they are short of points, they can pay in cash for the balance. The event is also open to non-participants, who can buy in cash at a 20-30 percent premium. This is done to give preference to swappers. Record-keeping of the inventory and participants is maintained by the organizers. The work flow of a swap event in physical mode and online mode are depicted at Figure 2 and Figure 3 respectively.

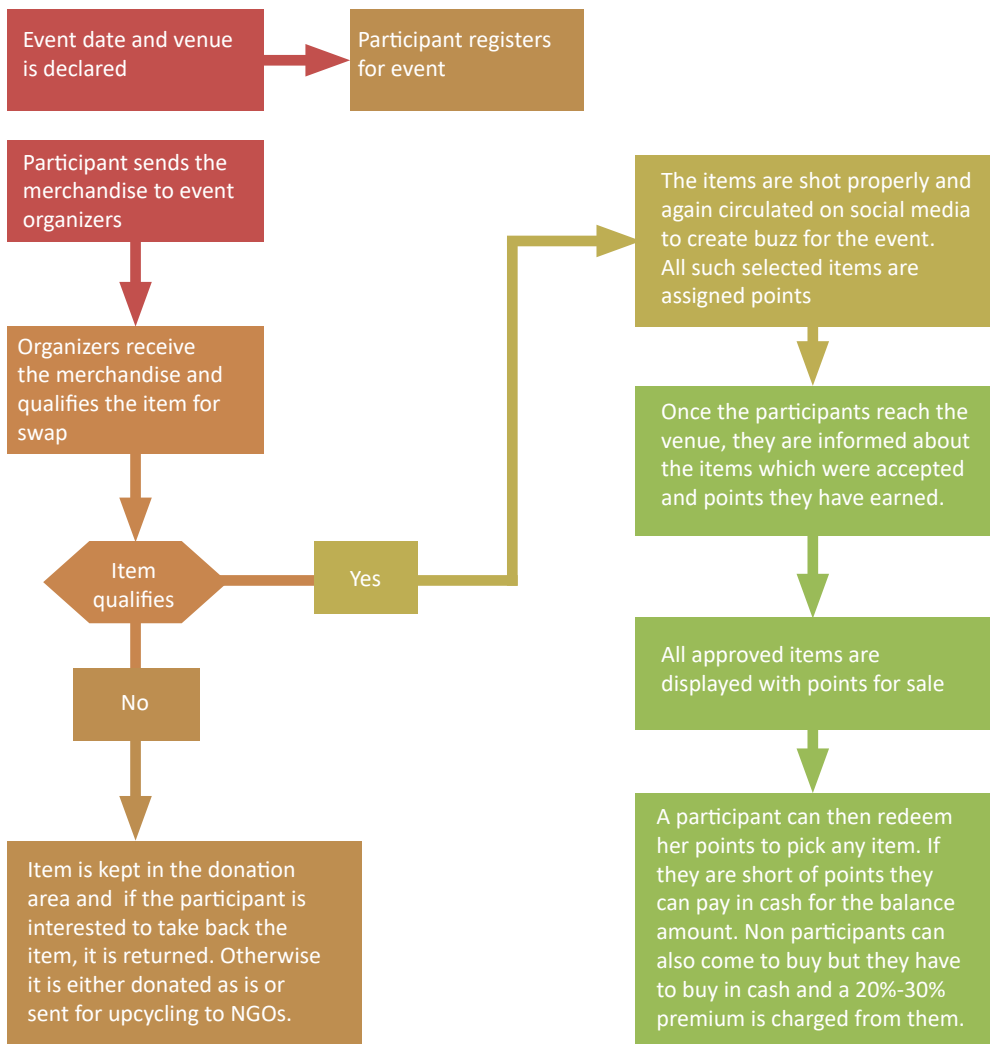


Figure 2: Work flow for organizing a physical event

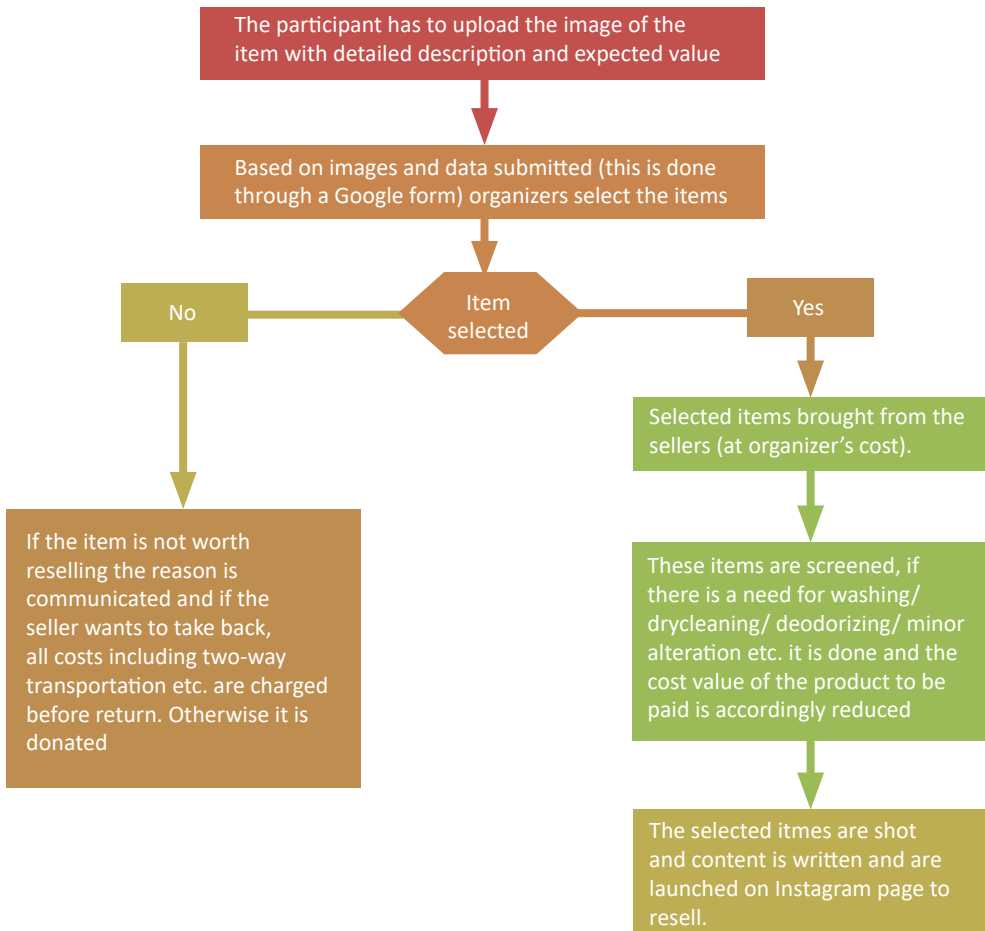


Figure 3: Work flow depicting steps for organizing an online event

Concerns in operating models

Observations show that around 90 percent of females are more willing to participate in swap events. Among the participants, 44 percent of the Group A respondents had trouble with the pick-and-drop of items, while 28 percent found the selection process not very clearly defined. 22 percent did not have clarity on the valuation of the items. 8 percent and 9 percent of respondents think that dermatological issues with previous owners and privacy issues crossed their minds, respectively.

Most event organizers are individuals who do it out of concern for sustainability and are forced to set participation limits because they lack the resources to handle larger operations. Financial rewards are not the main motivators for either the organizers or the participants. The organizers have to deal with issues including collecting more

merchandise than they can sell, channeling the unspent points, and record-keeping. There is frequently a mismatch in the categories to encourage better conversions with less available inventory for swapping. Space and maintenance are needed for stocking products before an event or in between events. The organizers also deal with inquiries from people who aren't just interested in sustainability but are also concerned about skin issues, privacy, and the cost and value offered.

With these organizers, inventory management is the main concern. They frequently obtain items that are not eligible for swap and build up subpar inventory. Following that, they must arrange for the disposal of such stockpiles. Additionally, they spend a lot of effort gathering, examining, and assigning value to the qualified items. As a result, the entire process takes time. Participants might leave events dissatisfied because they were unable to discover things that suited their tastes or were the right size. Although they have the choice to spend their points in the following event, this presents a new challenge: keeping track of the players' unused points. Other difficulties include choosing the ideal location for optimum participation and raising awareness of the events.

Building a framework for scalability

The respondents have shown keen interest in participating in bigger events, and even the organizers feel there is scope to expand this initiative at a national level. But there are some challenges and issues that need to be addressed properly. The broader issues of privacy and suggestions to resolve these challenges are as follows:

- The selection process needs to be well defined for branded as well as non-branded items. It needs to take into account factors like the brand, the product's current age, usage volume, general condition, swapper history (an algorithm to determine trustworthiness), rejection points, and the swapper's obligation to pay the cost of rejection in advance. Product information, fit, and images should be conveyed very clearly so that the difference between real merchandise and expectations is minimized.
- The valuation process needs to be transparent based on the merchandise history, the brand, the MRP (fresh buying price), the current age of the product, usage frequency, general condition, and swapper history.
- Hygiene issues are of concern to all participants. The organizers should impose necessary finishing treatments for the inventory based on the type, composition, and wash care, with the swapper bearing the cost of those treatments. Voluntary disclosure of derma issues by swappers may be considered.

- Privacy issues are of great concern to the participants. These can be categorized into
 - Individual Privacy: Swappers may not like to know each other in either case. Also, swapping and using preowned clothing may be a concern for many.
 - Social Status Issue: Swappers may have concerns about the previous or new owner due to the social status of either party.

To resolve these issues, swapping should be made aspirational, and positive recognition and reward should be built into the system. There should be a strict policy of non-disclosures by swappers if they get to know the new owners in any way, with well-laid-down rules for non-conformance.

- Logistics—the flow of the goods and their management—need to be controlled like any other large-scale e-commerce operation. However, swappers should be responsible for recovering the cost of transport. On rejection of the merchandise, the reverse logistics cost should be kept higher to discourage participants or swappers from sending low-quality products. Further, the policy should promote the donation or upcycling of rejected items to encourage people to opt out of returns due to rejections. The visibility of action taken on rejection should be available for the swapper to see and trust the donation or upcycle initiative. Points earned should have an expiration date; this will additionally solve the problem of unsold inventory.
- The large-scale operation is only possible through an app or portal, and it needs to be enabled with AI/ML, blockchain, etc. as with any other marketplace or e-commerce venture. Influencers, celebrities, and other prominent public figures may be channeled into the initiative to increase the aspiration quotient as well as general awareness.

Conclusion

As mankind has witnessed its lifetime's worst pandemic, many people are beginning to voice growing concerns about the effects of mindless spending on the world and are becoming more conscious of their social obligations. Even though several academics have studied ideas like the "sharing economy" and "collaborative consumerism" (e.g., Belk, 2014; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015), there is still a lack of information and thorough research. Alternative practices in the field of fashion have taken the form of collaborative consumption platforms, including swapping websites, fashion libraries,

second-hand internet stores, and gatherings between friends. The CFC notion has received very little explicit attention from researchers.

One promising approach to addressing the contradictions between sustainability and fashion involves learning from a specific group of vocal and involved consumers. These people actively work to close any potential gaps that sustainable fashion may present. Through this study, the researcher hopes to provide a deeper understanding of what prevents “swapping of fashion” from being a commonplace method of consumption. Utilizing the findings of this study, organizers can gain a deeper understanding of the issues that worry their customers and develop methods to address them. Additionally, crucial considerations and pertinent information are given for organizers wishing to use the concept of CFC in their business model.

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