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Retailing and the re-qualification of goods: How second-hand products become valuable

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Abstract

Sustainability has over the last decade attracted considerable attention from both practitioners and scholars. There are now numerous efforts by companies to source, market and sell more sustainable products in more sustainable ways. There is also now an emergent body of work that addresses sustainability issues within retail (Wiese et al. 2012; Ruiz-Real et al. 2019). However, while this field of practice and research has come a long way, it remains to a great extent delimited to the practice and study of conventional forms of sustainable retailing. Research on issues such as on the impact that signage, eco-labels, and in-store marketing can play (Jones et al. 2005b; Guyader et al. 2017), discussions on the importance of product range (Sadowski and Buckingham, 2007), or analysis of how the work of the staff can promote the purchase of more sustainable products (Fuentes and Fredriksson, 2016) dominate the field. While this work has played an important role by drawing attention to and examining these key sustainability efforts, it has tended to ignore more unconventional sustainability approaches.

In this paper we want to address this paucity by exploring a relatively less conventional mode of sustainable retailing: the re-selling of previously discarded goods. While second hand retailing is not a new phenomenon in itself, the way second-hand retailing and shopping is framed and marketed has changed over time (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2015). From being a fringe and alternative phenomenon to acquiring a more mainstream position. Today we see not only the increase in trendy second-hand stores and the new digital platform for second-hand shopping, many conventional retailers are also including a second-hand line or reselling their own products along-side new lines of products. Second-hand is becoming increasingly mainstreamed (Kant Hvass, 2016). This move has also been accompanied by an increasing adoption of conventional marketing practices and goals (Broadbridge & Parsons, 2003). New ways of displaying, thematizing, and pricing second hand products have emerged. And yet little research has been done to understand these new second-hand retail landscapes. While there is an impressive body of work examining the why and how of second-hand consumption, few studies look closer at the marketing work involved in making previously discarded goods valuable again. It is this paucity that we set out to address.

Against this background, our aim is to explore how and under what condition second hand products are transformed from discarded and devalued goods to valuable exchangeable products.

To accomplish this, we draw on the conceptual toolbox of constructivist market studies and in particular the concept of qualification. Very briefly, qualification is the simultaneously determining and enacting of the qualities of products (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010). From this perspective the qualities of goods are not given but instead actively constructed. Or, phrased differently, “the outcome of an active production involving the identification and valuation of good and consumer’s qualities” (Ariztia, 2013, p. 147). Studies have shown that the process of qualification is complex and commonly involves multiple actors and devices: including advertising agencies, sales clerks, social media, packaging and stores can all play key roles in the qualification of goods (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2017). In what follows we will make use of this approach to analyse and show how a series of interlinked practices lead to the re-qualification of second-hand goods using various registers.

Empirically, the analysis draws on an ongoing ethnographic study of ReTuna, a shopping mall based on reuse located in Eskilstuna, Sweden. ReTuna was established in 2015 and is run by a municipality owned waste- and energy company. The owner’s goals are to create profit while also

reducing the amount of incinerated waste and increasing the awareness of sustainable consumption. To fulfill these goals, ReTuna collects donated goods and distributes them to its tenants, who process and re-sell them. While ReTuna sells recirculated goods, it aims to be a traditional mall, with individual outlets, pop-up stores, and a café that offers lunch and snacks. The mall's total area is 5,000 square meters distributed over two floors. On average, 400 visitors dispose of goods at the waste recycling station and 750 people visit the mall each day.

The study makes use of ethnographic methods (Peñaloza 1998; Czarniawska 2007), combining in situ semi-structured interviews and observations at ReTuna. In total, 49 interviews with mall management, store owners/managers, store staff, collection and sorting staff and, other people involved in organizing the mall have been carried out. Three types of observations have been conducted, i.e., six overall mall observations (7,5 hours in total), 26 in-store (participant) observations (64 hours in total), and six (participant) observations in the collection and sorting center (35 hours in total).

Preliminary results indicate that a set of interlinked practices are involved in the re-qualification of goods at the Re-Tuna mall. Goods go from devalued to be become valued again through a re-qualification processes involving the 1) *selecting* (valuing goods and selected which of the donated goods to sell and which to discard), 2) *material re-making* (including the cleaning, washing and steaming of second-hand goods, the refurbishment and renovation of second-hand goods to restore goods' original function but also the redesign of goods), 3) *displaying* and 4) *servicing* of second-hand goods. We will show how second-hand goods are through these series of interlinked practices re-qualified – gaining new qualities that make them valuable to consumers – and under what conditions this process of re-qualification is possible.

The paper contributes to the discussion on marketing in second-hand retail (McColl et al. 2013; Kamleitner et al. 2019; Kim et al. 2021) by discussing successful and failed re-qualification activities of second-hand goods. By learning from practical attempts, it is possible to advance the understanding of how contextual framing (marketing activities) must be interlinked with innovative use of material qualities in re-qualification processes. Practical implications involve a developed understanding of re-qualification activities that can be used by (second-hand) retailers in enhancing product and business development strategies.