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# SECONDHAND FASHION

## Online Used Clothing Stores Good for the Wallet and Planet

by Sandra Yeyati

**T**he online commerce of used clothing is booming. According to *ThredUp.com*, a prominent virtual consignment and thrift store, the secondhand market is projected to double in the next five years, reaching a whopping \$77 billion. “The pandemic and resulting economic downturn boosted this surge,” says Hyejune Park, Ph.D., associate professor of fashion merchandising at Oklahoma State University. “Stuck at home in 2020, people looked into their closets, found items they no longer wore or wanted and went online to sell and buy clothes to save money.”

### Popular Resale Platforms

Younger, tech-savvy shoppers are the principle drivers of this growth, and a host of apps and websites are responding to the demand, including UK-based marketplace *Depop.com*, which caters to cash-strapped Generation Z and millennial shoppers, and *Poshmark.com*, a leading social marketplace boasting 80 million users across the U.S., Canada and Australia.

Several well-known platforms serve vintage and luxury brand consumers worldwide, offering authentication guarantees to reassure buyers about counterfeits. Among them are Santa Monica-based *Tradesy.com*, founded by women for women; Paris-based reseller *VestiaireCollective.com*; and *TheRealReal.com*, out of San Francisco.

Other notable players include brick-and-mortar thrift store Goodwill Industries, which has partnered with resale app *OfferUp.com* to upload their inventories; *eBay.com*, one of the first online,

peer-to-peer marketplaces; and *Etsy.com*, featuring vintage and upcycled fashion by smaller shops.

## Brand-Name Manufacturers and Retailers React

Many fashion brands are considering or have already formed partnerships with established resale platforms to reach this engaged, younger demographic of shoppers. For example, Gucci is partnering with *TheRealReal.com*, while Adidas is working with *ThredUp.com*. In 2021, *Poshmark.com* launched their Brand Closets initiative, inviting branded manufacturers to interact with their users and opening the platform to sell a combination of used and new fashion. “The fact that all this is happening is an indication that we’re witnessing a new wave of e-commerce,” Park says. “I don’t think it’s a temporary boom. From a retail business perspective, this is a huge trend that will go mainstream and continue to grow.”

Other brands are launching resale operations in-house, such as Levi’s *Secondhand.Levi.com* and fast-fashion giant H&M’s *Rewear.hm.com*, claiming to provide a sustainable fashion-buying alternative, but Park cautions, “I’m not confident that secondhand fashion can solve the sustainability issues that fast fashion has created over the past decade. Depending on how brands are participating in their resale operations, it could be a greenwash claim—just another way to make sales and reach more consumers.” Notably, H&M’s Conscious Collection that is marketed as sustainably-made clothing caters to only a small fraction of its customers, suggesting that the company cares less about environmental impacts and more about satisfying a segment of its customer base.

In contrast, Park says, Patagonia’s resale program is an enviable environmental example. “Patagonia began running their Worn Wear resale campaign long before this secondhand shopping boom. They educate consumers about how to take

care of their gear, offer alteration services and encourage the long-term wear and resale of their clothes,” she explains.

## The Secondhand Surge and the Environment

*ThredUp.com*’s marketing materials assert that by extending the life of used clothing, fewer new garments need to be produced, helping to reduce the carbon, waste and water footprints associated with the production of textiles and apparel. In 2021, Manish Chandra, founder and CEO of *PoshMark.com*, stated, “Consumers are prioritizing the impact

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that their purchases have on the environment.”

Park cautions that even though resale platforms tout environmental benefits, consumer behavior will ultimately determine whether the online surge makes a positive environmental impact. In a recent study involving young consumers living in Oklahoma, Park sought to understand why they were choosing to buy and sell secondhand clothing online. Their most prominent motives were saving money and shopping convenience.

“Not many respondents saw this type of consumption as a way to save the environment,” she laments. “If consumers buy secondhand goods to curtail their spending on new clothes or to find better quality garments than fast fashion, then it will be good for the environment, but if they buy and sell used clothes in addition to their regular shopping as another way to shop for marked-down products, then there will be no environmental benefit.”

To protect the planet, Park advises, the goal should be to buy nothing or buy less. “It’s okay to purchase \$10 jeans, but get one pair, not five. Don’t have a one-night-stand relationship with your clothes. Love them, take care of them and wear them until they’re falling apart.”

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