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Consumer perceptions towards second-hand undergarments in Zimbabwe: a case of Harare urban dwellers

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The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions towards second-hand undergarment clothing products and their trade in Zimbabwe. Data were collected from the interviews done with 30 subjects in the age range from 18 to 40, living in Harare. Results showed that affordability, quality and design variety are the factors that affect second-hand undergarment trade. It was also found that women are the major consumers of these second-hand undergarments. The young aged stated that they purchase these second-hand undergarments as they find them as more fashionable items. According to this study there are perceived health risks associated with these second-hand undergarments though the respondents could not directly link them to certain diseases or ailments. Another finding was the lack of innovation and versatility by clothing manufactures in their product design process resulting in old-fashioned designs on the undergarments.

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Introduction

This study sought to explore and establish consumer perceptions towards second-hand undergarment trade. Second-hand clothes (SHC) are referred to as clothing items that have already been used by one person prior to the present user and for undergarments these include used panties, socks, skirts, and household linens such as pillowcases, towels, beddings, and curtains (Didymus, 2012). United States of America is said to be the world's largest exporter of SHC followed by Germany, the United Kingdom, and Netherlands, and the largest importers of second-hand clothing are Sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia, and Eastern Europe (Wallander, 2011). Historically SHC were sent to African countries for the poor rural communities as donations, but the recipients realised that they could earn some income through selling these and this resulted in the trade of the SHC. Second-hand clothing products first came to Zimbabwe in the 1980s in the form of charity, as they were distributed freely to the urban and rural poor as part of a poverty alleviation programme (Field, 2000). In 1992 the government of Zimbabwe liberalised the textile and clothing sectors which had enjoyed so much protection and preferential access to trade with the EU and South Africa (Tekere, 2001). Removal of the import licenses previously required in textiles and clothing resulted in the domestic market being flooded with SHC 'zitye' for sale as wages were falling and also loss of employment after the Economic Structural Adjustment Program,

thus consumers were forced to purchase the cheapest products available (Tekere, 2001). As of late most Zimbabweans have been hard hit by the economic woes facing the country in general and have resorted to purchasing SHC as they cannot afford the new products. The imported second-hand clothing is offered for sale in flea markets that are dotted in the high- and low-density suburbs of almost all urban centres where they sell cheaply. In Harare, for example, the biggest flea market, Mupedzanhamo, is patronised by more than 4000 people daily (*Herald*, 20 July 2009). Northern suburbs in Harare which is the area for the affluent have also caught on the craze with Borrowdale's Sam Levy Village flea market as well as Avondale flea market having sections selling second-hand clothing items.

Town Municipals around Zimbabwe have gone a step further in allocating space for this trade during weekends as they have realised either they have running battles with the traders or simply make it a source of revenue for the cities by making these traders pay for trading space. Harare City Council has allocated parking space to second-hand clothing traders along the streets such as Park Street during weekends, Gweru City Council closes the main street every weekend for traders in various SHC and Bulawayo City Council allocates the walking space around town house to these traders also during weekends. The recognition of the health risks posed by second-hand clothing prompted the Rwanda Bureau Standard to ban second-hand undergarment trade in

Rwanda (Kamana, 2013). Zambia has allowed trade in second-hand clothing items, but specifically banned the trade in second-hand undergarments in 2006 due to health reasons but still the trade is very popular as local people find them more affordable and have better quality as compared to locally manufactured products (Phiri, 2015). In 2003 the Tanzanian government banned the importing of second-hand underwear though they have allowed trade to continue in other types of SHC. This was necessitated by the Tanzanian Bureau of Standards which suspected that users were being exposed to the probable pathogens which could result in users developing skin diseases (BBC, 2003). Due to these envisaged health risks, the city council of Bulawayo in Zimbabwe through its health department also resolved to ban the sale, specifically of second-hand undergarments on 15 June 2013.

'The sale of second hand undergarments, bras, panties, petticoats etc, is no longer permitted within the city of Bulawayo', the notice reads.

These are some of the indicators that the trade in second-hand clothing is flourishing against the collapse of our textile industry (Mpofu, 2013). Many clothing retail giants such as the Edgars, Truworths, and Topics are facing a stiff competition from the sale of the second-hand clothing which comes at a very cheap price as compared to their products.

Trade and importation of SHC are banned in many countries in an effort to protect their local textile and clothing industries and also due to health concerns, but these bans and regulations are difficult to enforce (Field, 2000). At the 16th East African Community heads of state summit held in 2015, one of the agreements amongst the heads of states was that Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania should stop importing second-hand clothing to their countries. The ban is believed to be the only way to compel consumers to buy locally produced clothes, giving textile manufacturers a chance to reclaim the market they lost to cheap imports from abroad (Kubania, 2015). This is also further worsened by the fact that most country boundaries are porous, thus facilitating illegal importation of goods (Hansen, 2010). In Zimbabwe the trading of second-hand undergarments was banned in 2012 by the then minister of finance Mr Tendai Biti using section 193 of the Customs and Exercise Act (23:02) but surprisingly enough, the items still find their way into the country especially through the Mozambican border, for example, a case reported in the *Dailynews* of 19 October 2014 (Mbiba, 2014),

ZIMRA impounds 46 kgs of second hand knickers.

At its peak around 1996, the clothing sector in Zimbabwe used to employ approximately 35,000 employees

but the figures have fallen to about 5000 (Tekere, 2001). The Southern African Development Community agreements on free trade between the countries has also had an impact in the flourishing of second-hand clothing trade as well as the fall of standard of living which has caused a boom in second-hand clothing trade (Mpofu, 2013). Thus, the second-hand clothing flea market has become a common sight almost everywhere in Zimbabwe.

The research was guided by the following objectives: to establish the consumption rates of second-hand undergarment clothing; to investigate factors influencing people's perceptions on purchase of second-hand undergarment clothing; to establish cultural beliefs of consumers regarding purchase of second-hand undergarment clothing; and to recommend the best practice on use and handling of second-hand undergarment clothing.

Literature review

Effect of second-hand clothing on Africa

A number of authors (Frazer, 2008; Kandiero, 2005; Majtenyi, 2010; Slotterback, 2007; Webster, 2003) have attributed the collapse of the clothing industries in various African countries to the trade in SHC as they are a cheaper option though Brooks and Simon (2012) believe that there are a number of other factors like trade liberalisation, economic challenges, and cheaper new imports from Asia which are also at play. Slotterback (2007) states that prior to the trade in second-hand clothing, the Nigerian textile industry had been growing tremendously and when the government realised the negative effects on their local textile and apparel industry, they banned the importation of these SHC. But still the trade is happening as the importers smuggle the bales of SHC into Nigeria (Slotterback, 2007). Kandiero (2005) attributes the closure of clothing companies in Malawi to the influx of these cheap SHC. The cost factor of these SHC is enormously important to people in third-world countries as the people face prolonged economic decline, poverty, and deteriorating purchasing power (Hansen, 2000). The trade in SHC has brought two major problems in Africa, the first being economic dependency between Africa and the rest of the world and the second being it has undermined African clothing companies' manufacturing capacity (Ericson & Brooks, 2015).

Trade of SHC

Charity organisations are the largest source of garments that make up the international trade in second-hand

clothing (Hansen, 2000). In the developed countries people can buy more fashionable items as they can afford these goods which directly translates to more clothes (still in good condition) to be donated. Thrift shops in the Western countries end up having excess stock which they resell at bulk prices to commercial second-hand dealers who then export (Hansen, 2000). Some of the commercial recyclers of SHC in developed countries argue that they are providing clothing to some of the world's poorest as they can buy these clothes cheaply (Ericsson & Brooks, 2015). These exporters of SHC only see the potential of reuse of the items as compared to sending the garments to landfill in their respective nations. In other words this therefore means these countries are failing to deal with their waste and rather look for an alternative and smarter way of disposing the garments. Brooks (2012) acknowledges that only 20–30% of the donated clothes are resold in the UK, which is also similar to Canada and the United States. The remaining 70% is therefore exported and retailed in the developing economies. According to Hansen (2010) the trade in second-hand clothing trade in third world has expanded due to the liberalisation of their economies. The traders involved in these informal businesses across the world have managed to establish strong links to make the business a success. Velia, Valodia, and Amisi (2006) report that South Africa has put restrictions on the trade of second-hand clothing as someone has to get a permit to be allowed to import certain quantities only. This is the same situation with Zimbabwe which also has crafted prohibitive tax levels specifically on SHC. In both countries the used clothing traded there is being illegally smuggled from the neighbouring Mozambique which legalised the trade, thus dealers find it easy to use Maputo harbour as compared to Durban harbour in South Africa which has a lot of checks and controls (Velia et al., 2006).

Potential risks of SHC

Most researches carried so far have dealt with the impact which second-hand clothing trade has had on the performance of various economies. Much information deals with the whole body of second-hand clothing trade especially in developing economies and how the developed nations dispose these clothing items. Generally, these clothing items which end up being sold are often thrown away as unwanted products or simply given away for charity purposes. Various African countries have condemned the trade in second-hand undergarments as the act of sharing these undergarments is viewed as taboo or risky with regards to disease spreading. Bloomfield documented the ability of various

types of clothing items to retain bacteria, fungi, and viruses for varying lengths of time (Bloomfield, Exner, Signorelli, Nath, & Scott, 2011). Certain diseases that may be transmitted via contact such as *candidiasis*, hepatitis A, B, and C as well as skin infections such as scabies and ringworm can be transmitted through these popular clothing items (NAN, 2012; Sharifzada, 2011). Most of the parasites of concern are so tiny that they cannot be seen by naked eye. For this reason it was stated that it is important that all items are treated as potentially contaminated and washed before use. Agbulu, Gberikon, and Ajine (2015) recommend total avoidance of second-hand undergarments and avoidance of children's wear especially for infants since they are prone to infections but in the case where there is partial avoidance due to the standard of living of consumers, consumers should wash SHC with strong detergents. One of the primary uses of undergarments is to absorb body- and skin-excreted fluids that will be in the form of sweats and bodily discharges. These discharges may contain millions of disease causing microbes such as yeasts, parasites, moulds, fungi, bacteria, and virus. These garments can, thus, serve as a possible reservoir for organ and skin infections, when conditions become favourable.

According to Bazzi (2012), professors of microbiology, virology, and parasitology found that these second-hand undergarments should not be used due to their susceptibility in transferring infectious diseases. Further on Bazzi (2012) states that second-hand underwear clothing and shoes should not be used and if there is need for use then they should be washed at a temperature of more than 70°C to avoid the contact of parasitic and fungal diseases.

Muthiani, Matiru, and Bii (2010) through their work advise that consumers should wash second-hand clothing with disinfectants and strong detergents so as to reduce the microbial load of the clothes thus preventing infections. They also conclude that consumers should approach second-hand undergarments with caution since their study demonstrated that they have high bacteria counts. They also warn that pathogenic fungi are also found on these SHC and these clothes serve as potential vectors of skin infection.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Harare and the interview respondents were chosen from the two second-hand flea markets, namely Mupedzanhamo and Avondale. A pilot study was done with some traders involved in the trade of SHC so as to test the relevance of the questions and how minor changes were adopted. In this study it was envisaged that using interviews was the best way

of getting as much information from the respondents as possible. Given the nature of the cultural sensitivity of the research area, assistance to gain cooperation from the respondents was sought from the traders who already had a relationship with the respondents. According to Boyce and Neale (2006) an in-depth interview is a qualitative research method which involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular subject matter. Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2011) identifies in-depth interviews as the most appropriate method of data gathering especially when one wants to ask open-ended questions which can bring out more depth on knowledge of subject area under study. Due to the cultural and moral upbringing of most Zimbabweans discussing about one's undergarments in public is considered to be taboo, therefore this posed a difficult situation during the selection of respondents for the interview thereby calling for purposive sampling. The problems of failing to get respondents affected the sample size as most people would not want to give any useful information given the cultural and moral beliefs behind as elaborated before. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) state that purposive sampling is used in selecting certain cases based on a specific purpose. Some of these interviewees only accepted to have an interview after the second-hand trader had intervened to explain the nature of the questions and also to help the respondents' to be comfortable in giving information freely. It was also realised that some of these traders are well known and they have established a certain clientele amongst residents whom they confirmed that they notify if they receive new consignments with goods which they think they would like. This in a way assures that the traders always have customers and also they give them the opportunity to select the best garments before they are quickly bought by other customers. The traders employ 'firemans' who are responsible for enticing customers to come and buy from their stalls. Most of these respondents were targeted after they had made a purchase or after visiting the traders' stall within the flea market. This helped to reduce cases where one would try to ask someone who does not even have an interest of the subject matter under research as this was going to waste much valuable time. All the respondents were asked the similar questions though in some cases questions were modified to address issues which would have arose during the interview process (Table 1).

Findings and discussion

A total of 30 interviews were conducted in Harare. Ten interviews were carried out in the Avondale area (low density) and the other 20 were carried out at

Mupedzanhamo area (high density) in Mbare. From the pilot study done with the traders it was stated that rarely would one find men buying second-hand undergarments and this was also supported by the number of male customers who made their way to the stalls selling these seconds. The simple explanation given was that the common African set-up is that men go to work usually and they give their wives the money to buy clothes so it is the woman's responsibility to choose the clothing items. Another reason was that women also have a wider range of undergarments as compared to men and one trader particularly emphasised that if they were to bring a bale of men's second-hand undergarments they will take at least three months to finish selling a bale as compared to the ladies' which will take a few weeks.

Affordability

The price of these second-hand undergarments was stated as one of the key drivers for the trade to blossom and this attracts customers from all walks of life as they can afford the cheap prices. All the respondents mentioned price as a motivating factor in this business and one interviewee mentioned that a pair of knickers will cost you one American dollar (USD \$1) whilst the same product will fetch at least five American dollars (USD \$5) in the fashion stores in town. The price of these undergarments is so low such that the students who were interviewed mentioned that from the daily savings of their pocket money at school they could afford buying these garments with a wide range of designs. Previous research done in Zimbabwe by Field (2000) also cited affordability of SHC as of particular importance to customers due to the harsh economic environment. According to Isla (2013), the reason why people buy these SHC is to save money, followed by the desire to be fashionable, the ability to afford luxury brands, and to experience fun and satisfaction in something unique and not mass produced. Guiot and Roux (2010) emphasised the importance of economic advantages sought for by the second-hand clothing customers as they are more motivated by the desire to pay less, hunt for bargains, and are more gratified in having paid a bargain price. Another trend which was identified as having an influence in the demand of second-hand undergarments in Harare is that of pool parties. Two of the student respondents mentioned that these bikini bras are the trendy styles at these teen parties therefore even though they are second hands they provide better style and affordability for these girls. At these second-hand flea market stalls there is a lot of price bargaining which happens between a potential customer and the trader thus allowing a more negotiated price as compared to conventional shops.

Table 1. Socio demographic characteristics of the interview respondents.

Variable	Number	(%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	28	67
Male	2	33
<i>Age</i>		
18–25	9	30
25–30	10	33
35–40	11	37
<i>Occupation</i>		
Employed	6	20
Unemployed	16	53
Student	8	27

According to some of the respondents this flexibility proves to be very good, especially given that their disposable income is shrinking but they still want the garments.

Quality and design

Seventy per cent of the respondents mentioned that the quality of the second-hand undergarments was another factor as they mentioned some women's lingerie brands like Wonderbra which they can easily get at these second-hand flea markets but are not easily found or are very expensive in the conventional shops. The quality of SHC was found not to be an important criterion by Field (2000) but this is in contrast especially for the undergarments given that by the time the research was done the trade in second-hand undergarments in Zimbabwe was not yet as big as it is now. Many respondents mentioned that after buying these seconds they can even last longer than the new ones because they are of good quality. Twenty-three of the respondents also mentioned that there is lack of innovation on design part of the locally produced undergarments. Some of the respondents mentioned that the padded bras in local shops are very expensive and also there is very limited variety to cater for different choices therefore the second-hand market provided them with a wider range to choose from. Two respondents were women during their lactation periods and they mentioned issue of comfort and convenience as key to them and they said they face problems to get the sizes they would prefer in the conventional shops but at these seconds market they can easily get whatever sizes they want. They also mentioned that the other cheaper option will be from the Chinese shops in town but still these shops also do not stock their sizes though they can have cheaper prices also.

Culture, morality, and societal status

Generally for one to talk about their undergarments is not acceptable as its referred to as one's secret what

they wear underneath. The younger generation of the girls interviewed seemed to ignore this notion as they also mentioned they did not have any problems even sharing their undergarments as long as they are clean. This was different from the older group of respondents who are aged 22 and above. Some of them mentioned that sharing these undergarments somehow affects them in their self-esteem but due to poverty they had no option but to buy these seconds. Amongst the respondents 20% did mention that they find it very difficult and feel uneasy to hold up a garment in such heavily congested areas of flea markets whilst looking for the right size or simply inspecting the garments for purchase as they would not want someone to know what size or what they have bought. One respondent even mentioned that they simply make their purchase but will ask the trader to send their purchased garments to their homes or they would come later to pick them after being carefully wrapped up. She explained that they do this to make sure that they are not seen by some people who may know them especially the males. She went on to mention that this reflects on her husband as someone who cannot take care of his family though everyone seems to accept that these SHC have provided a relief to many families. These older respondents also mentioned the fact that it is also seen as rather unAfrican to talk about their undergarments. Some respondents mentioned that growing up they were taught not to share or talk about their undergarments as this was one's secret. But they did mention that due to challenges facing the economy at large they had to forego these values and adjust to the situation. One respondent who is employed mentioned that it is every woman's wish to be presentable so for her case she stated that for the bras she buys these trendy designs from the seconds but for other type of undergarments it is a big no as she mentioned possible disease infection. Generally for the respondents who were aged 22 and above they seemed to concur that buying these seconds is unacceptable according to their culture and somehow downgrades them and affects their self-esteem to some extent.

Health

All the 30 interviewed respondents seem to acknowledge that second-hand undergarments do pose a health risk. Some of the respondents did mention that soon after making a purchase they make sure they wash the garments thoroughly with strong detergents. Sixty per cent of the respondents mentioned that they do believe second-hand undergarments can aid the spread of various skin related diseases such as rash and ringworm. The general risk of infection was supported by those in the age groups of 22 years and above whilst

the younger respondents seemed to care less for the risks related to health. Two respondents mentioned that there is need to assess the nature or type of diseases that can be transmitted as they believe these undergarments do come into contact with body secretions which can carry various infections. One respondent did mention that some of these health issues emanate from handling, as these garments are just bundled into one big sack and simply heaped into a mountain at the flea markets.

Conclusion and recommendations

With the economic meltdown facing the country as a whole, the trade in these second-hand undergarment clothes has brought relief to those in the trade and the consumers as the former can support their families and the later can easily and cheaply get fashionable items of good-quality standards. Banning of this trade has a major impact on these young people who are earning livelihoods through this trade, for example, 'firemans' as this is an alternative form of employment for them as they can easily end up being involved in criminal activities. These 'fireman's earn a living from this shouting business and the better they can entice people to come to buy, the better their rewards will be at the end of the day. In a way this helps these youths to be self-sufficient as it teaches them vital survival skills in turbulent times. There is also a lot of middleman trading in this business meaning that some families are actually surviving due to the success of the trade. As revealed by this study, irrespective of the economic benefits to traders in the business, consumers are pointing out the possible risks associated with consumption of second-hand undergarments. However, the consumers willingly ignore the risks as they are attracted with irresistible factors such as affordability, size, trendy designs, price, and durability among other factors. Morally the exchange of undergarments is culturally not acceptable in Zimbabwe as cited by the elderly respondents. According to the previous studies on the use of second-hand undergarments (Agbulu et al., 2015; Bazzi, 2012; Bloomfield et al., 2011; Muthiani et al., 2010; Sharifzada, 2011), there is evidence that there are certain health risks associated with these products which call for certain action before they can be used if ever there is need. As revealed by this study, the consumers seem to be aware of the health risks and they simply launder the undergarments before use. The question which arises is how one can be sure that they have totally eliminated all the health risks, given that they do not have technologies to test the undergarments for contamination at their homes. It is more of just a trial-and-error method of simple laundering as

mentioned by the respondents which can be another problem for those who cannot afford effective detergents as they are poor. Developing economies should simply follow the example set by Rwanda (Kamana, 2013) in banning the trade in second-hand undergarments so that these health risks are eliminated and this can result in growth of their local textile and apparel industries.

Zimbabwe just like any other African nation is also facing challenges like obsolete equipment in the textile and clothing industries. This has resulted in high operating costs thereby affecting price of the products produced. In Zimbabwe the local clothing manufacturing sector faces other problems such as power shortages, high labour costs, and in some cases mismanagement. Therefore, there is need to protect the industry from the unregulated imports such that the local clothing companies can become viable and return to the production levels of early 1980s.

Clothing companies should engage government in policy formulation and technology investment so that they improve their production methods be competitive on the global market. These companies should also invest in research and development as it was identified as one area which the locally designed products lack. They need to be up to date with fashion trends so that they can match the recent innovations so that they do not stick to the old design styles that have become outdated. Whilst the trade has all these hazards it is clear that it is filling a gap within the clothing sector as it caters for all the income levels and provides fashionable undergarments. This further strengthens the need for a thorough scientific research to ascertain the health risks associated with these second-hand undergarments as it involves a huge chunk of the population as we have seen in this research. There is also a need to do another study on how this second-hand clothing business benefits the trader's their skills and practices.

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