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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From empathy to value: user-generated content inferred emotional intelligence in the context of second-hand clothing purchases online

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Abstract

The paper investigates how emotional intelligence relates to perceived consumer value in the context of purchasing second-hand clothing online. The study uses a dataset (477 randomly selected from 125,145 web scraped with Playwright) of user-generated online reviews about second-hand clothing transactions. The study utilises the Trait Activation Theory to propose novel explanations by examining the nuanced relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived consumer value when purchasing second-hand clothing online. The study's findings indicate that emotional intelligence-embedded online reviews have more pronounced second-hand clothing emotional, green, social, functional, and economic value perceptions. By examining empathy-driven interactions and situational cues, our research highlights the impact of emotional intelligence on the perceived value of second-hand clothing transactions online, contributing to consumer psychology literature and the growth of ethical fashion in the e-commerce context.

Keywords Emotional intelligence · Perceived value · Online second-hand clothing · Trait Activation Theory · Online reviews · Natural Language Processing (NLP) · User-generated content

Introduction

The clothing industry represents a significant portion of the global economy, yet it confronts responsible buying behaviour issues, particularly due to the substantial amount of waste it generates. According to the United Nations, approximately 92 million tonnes of textile waste are produced annually worldwide, with the majority ending up in landfills. One sustainable consumer practice is the purchase of second-hand clothing, which effectively extends the life cycle of garments without compromising consumer needs or the value derived from clothing purchases. The recent statistics align with this responsible buying behaviour-favoured trend. For instance, the global market share for second-hand clothing was 6.1% in 2023, and it is projected to increase to 7.7% by 2025 (Armstrong 2023).

The available research demonstrates that consumer personality characteristics are important in explaining what consumers value (Marbach et al. 2016). Despite the growth of the second-hand clothing market, the influence of consumer emotional intelligence on the perceived second-hand clothing value, particularly purchasing online, has not yet been adequately explored. Given the unique characteristics

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of the second-hand clothing market, emotional intelligence (EI) becomes a particularly relevant yet under-researched factor. The shift to online platforms introduced new layers of complexity. Consumers cannot physically inspect items or physically try garments on before purchase. The value of second-hand clothing often extends beyond the functional utility of price. High-EI consumers are more likely to perceive and deeply appreciate the emotional value of second-hand clothing (Ford and Tamir 2012). This might extend to the environmental impact of their choices. This is crucial for online purchases where intangible benefits might need to be explicitly communicated by the second-hand clothing website.

Trait Activation Theory (TAT) offers a different approach to the individual differences in behaviour. TAT suggests that how individuals behave is not just about ingrained personality traits; instead, it is a dynamic process where these traits interact with specific situational cues (Tett 2021). In other words, certain situations trigger or activate aspects of an individual's personality, leading to their observed behaviour. In the context of our study, TAT explains EI as a dynamic consumer capacity that can be enacted by situational cues in online retail. This perspective aligns with the novel approach to EI that emphasizes the relevance of context as it determines when and how EI has consequences (Pekaar et al. 2020). The unique characteristics of purchasing second-hand clothing online act as powerful situational cues that activate and call upon consumers' EI. For example, the situational cue of being 'pre-loved' or 'sustainable' garment would activate the EI of an environmentally conscious consumer, leading them to perceive higher green value. Therefore, our study argues that the online second-hand clothing environment is the context where EI 'is activated', making it a powerful predictor of how consumers perceive various dimensions of value in their transactions. This TAT approach provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the psychological drivers of value perception in this under-researched consumer domain.

Consumer EI is defined as the combination of the abilities and traits of appraisal and regulation of one's own and others' emotions, as well as the ability to use emotional information in an adaptive way. Traditionally, marketing and consumer psychology studies have centred predominantly on the Big Five and Dark Triad personality traits (Borghi and Ratcharak 2025) as personal consumer characteristics that, when activated by situational cues, have the capacity to predict consumer behaviour. However, the role of EI as a personal resource remains largely underexplored, although it could potentially provide a valuable framework for understanding consumer perceived value from online transactions in a more nuanced way.

This subjective assessment, referring to Baek and Oh (2021), considers functional, emotional, social, economic, and green dimensions, which influence how valuable or worthwhile a purchase feels to the consumer. By addressing the above dimensions, second-hand online clothing marketplaces can cater to diverse consumer needs, enhancing satisfaction and loyalty while promoting sustainable consumption practices.

Despite the clear evidence that EI influences how consumers manage their buying impulses and align with ethical values, there remains a significant gap in the literature in understanding how this specific psychological construct of EI translates into the perception of different dimensions of value (i.e. economic, green, functional, emotional, social) for products within the unique online context of the second-hand clothing market. The existing research does not explore how consumer EI might help assess quality and functional viability when consumers cannot physically touch the items or connect emotionally with items through an online platform. While Marbach et al. (2016) note the importance of personality, EI offers a more nuanced understanding of emotional competencies than broad personality traits.

Research on EI within the realm of consumer behaviour is still in its early stages. EI was initially applied to consumer behaviour by Kidwell et al. (2008) in their research on healthy eating decisions, supporting the notion that EI skills are not fixed and can be improved over time. EI has been shown to have a positive influence on pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes (Robinson et al. 2019; Marchetti et al. 2024). It follows that individuals with high EI would feel a deeper connection to the idea of responsible consumption, recognizing how their purchasing decisions affect the planet. In the second-hand clothing sector, this manifests as an appreciation for reducing waste and supporting eco-friendly practices. Emotionally intelligent shoppers tend to make more thoughtful and deliberate purchasing decisions (Maddi et al. 2013). In the second-hand clothing market, this can mean focusing on quality and longevity rather than succumbing to impulsive buying, ensuring that their purchases align with both practical needs and emotional values. EI can transform the act of purchasing second-hand clothing into a meaningful experience. By bridging practical benefits with emotional and ethical considerations, EI allows consumers to not only save money and reduce waste but also feel a deeper sense of purpose and connection in their choices.

Specifically, previous studies argue that higher EI equips individuals with better self-regulatory mechanisms, allowing them to make more thoughtful purchase decisions. In terms of EI and resistance to impulsive/compulsive buying behaviour, Park and Dhandra (2017) explored the mediating EI role between mindfulness and impulsive buying behaviour. Their findings indicate that EI fully mediates the negative relationship between the two constructs. This suggests that mindfulness enhances EI, while EI helps individuals control their impulsive behaviour. Yet another study by

Maddi et al. (2013) highlights that they did not find that EI protected against compulsive buying behaviour. This highlights the nuances in EI research. In other words, EI has been investigated in the literature as 'a regulator of undesirable behaviour' and as 'a driver of desirable intentions'. These studies lay the foundation by illustrating how EI shapes the consumer decision-making process. Although these studies collectively reinforce the idea that EI is a valuable psychological mechanism for understanding consumer behaviour, the above studies did not look at the relationship between EI and perceived consumer value, which is the focus of our study. Moreover, the second-hand clothing market, particularly online, has distinct characteristics that might interact differently with EI compared to buying new clothing at department stores.

The existing studies largely focus on EI preventing undesirable actions or driving broad ethical stances. They do not deeply explore how EI enables consumers to actively perceive and attribute the specific types of value to a product, especially in the second-hand clothing market. For instance, while Chowdhury (2017) explored the relationship between EI and consumer ethics and found that EI is a significant predictor in shaping consumer ethical choices and their intentions to engage in more sustainable consumption practices, their study did not detail how EI might enhance the perceived green value. Tariq et al. (2021) emphasized that online shopping can be highly addictive, triggered by emotions such as pleasure and excitement; however, their study did not specifically address the perceived customer value of products that our study aims to investigate.

Our study aims to uncover the link between EI and perceived consumer value in the context of purchasing second-hand clothing online. The rationale for the relationship between consumers' EI and the perceived value of second-hand transactions online in our study is based on Trait Activation Theory. Pairing EI with perceived value in the context of online second-hand clothing purchasing, which has not previously been examined in the literature, offers a strong theoretical contribution by highlighting the psychological and social mechanisms that drive perceived consumer value in the second-hand clothing market. Specifically, our study offers a novel and substantial theoretical contribution by being the first to directly examine the link between EI and the perceived value of second-hand clothing in the online second-hand retail context. By grounding our study in TAT, we offer a more dynamic and contextualized understanding of consumer value in the sustainable fashion industry. We address a significant void by moving beyond personality traits to explore how specific competencies of EI shape consumer valuation of second-hand clothing. This is particularly vital for the growing online segment where sensory cues are absent and other forms of value (emotional, social) become more prominent. Understanding the role of EI in valuing these online items can inform strategies to encourage more responsible buying behaviour among consumers, which is critical for environmental sustainability.

To achieve our aim, we utilize user-generated content from consumer reviews on trusted, independent online review platforms such as Trustpilot and Sitejabber, which feature reviews about second-hand clothing retailers. Until now, research into the relationship between consumer emotional intelligence and behavioural responses has primarily relied on surveys and, occasionally, experimental design studies. However, as technology advances and data accessibility increases, new opportunities are emerging for predicting consumer personal characteristics from user-generated content. This area of research is gaining momentum in both psychology and consumer behaviour fields. To date, well-established personality trait models like the Big Five have been the focus of efforts to identify and extract personality traits from textual data (Park et al. 2015). Contrastingly, the prediction of emotional intelligence levels and their correlation with consumers' perceived value from such data remains scant. Leveraging existing scientific work on user-generated content, our study aims to extract insights into consumers' emotional intelligence and its relationship with the perceived value of second-hand clothing transactions online. This approach marks a distinct departure from previous research on this topic, highlighting the innovative aspect of our study. Our findings also contribute to the growing body of AI-enabled research suggesting that LLMs with theory-driven prompts can supplement the exploration of consumer personality and attitude connections with the potential of less risk of measurement-attributed social desirability bias.

Theoretical background

Trait Activation Theory (TAT)

To examine the emotional intelligence and perceived value within the context of second-hand clothing transactions online, we employ Trait Activation Theory. TAT posits that individual differences in behaviour are not solely determined by stable personality traits, but rather by the interaction between those traits and situational cues (Tett 2021). Traits are more likely to manifest when situational stimuli are congruent with the trait's expression (Tett 2021). According to the theory, personality traits are not always active or visible in every context; instead, they become more apparent when the external environment provides stimuli that align with or evoke the expression of those traits (Tett 2021). In other words, the compatibility between a situational cue and a specific trait determines the likelihood of that trait being exhibited. For instance, an extroverted individual may exhibit more sociable and outgoing behaviours

in a context that requires or rewards social interaction, such as a networking event, while displaying less of these traits in an environment that discourages such engagement. This theory underscores the importance of situational factors in shaping behaviour, emphasizing that traits alone do not predict behaviour; the right conditions must also be present to activate them. By highlighting the interaction between personality and context, TAT offers a nuanced perspective on how and why individuals behave differently across various environments (Tett 2021).

Originally, TAT has been most extensively applied in organizational psychology, where numerous studies show that traits manifest in behaviour only when situational cues make them relevant. For example, Haaland and Christiansen (2002) found that assessment centre exercises high in trait activation potential, such as counselling requiring empathy, produced much stronger convergence with self-report personality traits than low activation tasks. TAT has been extended to leadership where Aksoy and Bayazit (2022) showed that achievement striving predicted commitment to difficult goals only when transformational leadership and peer norms (organizational and social cues, respectively) signalled that effort would be valued. Further, Luria et al. (2019) reported that cognitive ability and adjustment predicted leadership potential only in centralized military groups. A pro-diversity climate and firm-level cultural intelligence (cues) were needed for real estate agents' motivational cultural intelligence to predict intercultural sales (Chen et al. 2012). The "dark side" illustration of trait activation is provided by Wang et al. (2025), who demonstrated that error-tolerant cultures activated Machiavellianism, hence promoting moral disengagement and rule-breaking. In a similar vein, Mai et al. (2015) showed that creative personality led to unethical behaviour only when creative tasks (cues) activated the trait. These studies collectively demonstrate how task, organizational, and social cues enable or hinder trait activation.

Recently, TAT has also been adopted in hospitality and tourism research, highlighting its broader utility and link to consumer settings. For example, Chen and Liu (2025) demonstrated that Confucian values predicted environmentally responsible behaviour only when supported by cues such as government interventions or personal resources. Deng et al. (2024) found that resilience and altruism reduced value co-destruction behaviours among tourists, but the effect of altruism weakened under high COVID-19-related perceived risk (cue). Khoi et al. (2020) showed that openness and place attachment increased tourist inspiration, but cues like peaceful life or social recognition weakened this effect.

Despite its potential, TAT is still underutilized in the marketing and consumer psychology domain. Among those scarce studies, Koay and Lok (2024) found that Machiavellianism and psychopathy predicted counterfeit luxury consumption through moral disengagement, with descriptive norms (as cues) strengthening this effect. Bowen et al. (2022) showed that narcissism negatively, and faith in humanity positively, influenced product reuse when psychological (social exclusion) and social (subjective norms) cues provide conditions for expression. Even affective context may serve as the activating cue for trait expression. For example, Flight et al. (2012) demonstrated that positive affect activated impulsive buying tendencies, while negative affect activated compulsive buying tendencies in predicting the urge to buy. Chen et al. (2024a, b) added to this by showing that self-construal predicted intentions to write reviews depending on brand strength and consumption experience as joint trait-relevant cues.

Surprisingly, emotional intelligence has received little attention within the TAT framework. An exception is the study by Pekaar et al. (2020), introducing a novel approach to EI by conceptualizing situational cues as initiators of its manifestation. Drawing on the trait activation principle, they argue that such cues can explain why EI becomes consequential in some contexts but not in others. Among few studies—the first one that linked EI to entrepreneurial intentions via trait-relevant cues such as long-term-oriented culture (Miao et al. 2018), and the other one found that EI enhances teamwork effectiveness when managerial demands provide emotion-laden cues (Farh et al. 2012). However, to date, no consumer studies have examined the effect of EI resulting from trait activation, despite consumer contexts, particularly online platforms, being rich in relational, emotional, and social signals.

TAT application to the second-hand clothing context

By applying TAT, we explain how specific environmental factors in the online second-hand clothing marketplaces can activate EI traits and positively influence perceived consumer value (i.e. emotional, functional, social, economic, and green). This approach not only enhances the consumer experience but also strengthens the connection between circular consumption and consumer behaviour. Online shopping creates a 'sensory gap', and TAT suggests that this can activate EI traits to bridge this gap. Consumers with higher EI can better interpret cues found on the online second-hand clothing platforms and perceive transactions as lower risk due to the inability to try on the items or properly inspect these before purchasing. By demonstrating how EI, which is activated by specific online cues, positively influences perceived value, our research contributes to our increased understanding of the psychological drivers of responsible buying behaviour. This sensory gap increases consumers' reliance on secondary cues such as reviews and communications from sellers. We argue that such environments constitute situational triggers that make emotional intelligence

particularly relevant. Consumers with high EI are more responsive to emotional signals (Mayer et al. 2008), and prior research shows a strong positive association between EI and creativity (Sánchez-Ruiz et al. 2011). This capacity enables them to engage in perspective-taking and visualization to compensate for missing sensory input. When tangible sensory triggers are absent in online settings, other interpretive capacities become more dominant. Thus, consumers' EI serves as a compensatory mechanism, enabling them to imagine product benefits and, thereby, to perceive greater value in second-hand clothing transactions.

In the context of second-hand clothing, the success of online second-hand clothing platforms relies, in part, on their ability to provide situational cues that activate relevant consumer traits, such as EI. EI characteristics, such as empathy, self-awareness, and social skills, are often activated by specific cues in online second-hand shopping environments. For example, individuals with high EI can deliberately engage and prolong emotional states (Salovey et al. 2002), which makes them more responsive to empathy-inducing cues such as an engaging story about a clothing item's previous owner or its eco-friendly benefits. Also, clear communication from sellers, such as detailed product descriptions and transparent pricing, activates trust and social skill aspect of EI, making consumers feel more connected and valued, since emotionally intelligent individuals are better at identifying honest emotions in other people (Salovey et al. 2002). Situational cues such as personalized messages or a visually appealing interface could also prompt consumers to exhibit EI traits more actively, fostering emotional engagement, trust, and satisfaction in the transaction process.

Although TAT has not been extensively elaborated in the consumer behaviour domain, existing research provides a foundation for applying this theory to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and the perceived value of second-hand clothing transactions online. Drawing on TAT, we propose that personal characteristics, such as EI, may vary in their manifestation due to online market situational cues and thus evoke both attitudinal responses differently. The online second-hand market offers a variety of situational cues (e.g. favourable conditions for social interaction, social affirmation, contribution to sharing and circularity, sources of unique finds) that activate the effects of emotional intelligence on perceived value, thereby enhancing the appeal of second-hand clothing transactions.

Linking emotional intelligence and perceived value from purchasing second-hand clothing online

EI research in the consumer behaviour field is relatively new. Existing studies have concentrated on various addictions in consumer behaviour and psychology fields, primarily impulsive and compulsive buying tendencies, where high levels of emotional intelligence act as a protective factor against these maladaptive purchasing tendencies (Park and Dhandra 2017; Tariq et al. 2021), internet addiction, gambling, and excessive consumer spending (Maddi et al. 2013). Other studies focus on the role of EI in explaining consumer pro-environmental and social behaviour (Chowdhury 2017). Kidwell et al.'s (2008) study specifically explored how EI can influence healthier eating choices, establishing a foundation for understanding its broader implications. They argued that EI abilities are not static traits but can be cultivated and refined over time, offering hope for behavioural change and self-improvement. The above-mentioned research highlighted the role of EI in empowering individuals to make more thoughtful and intentional decisions, fostering a sense of autonomy and self-control. By focusing on EI's development, the study opened doors to integrating emotional intelligence into other aspects of consumer decision-making.

High EI allows such consumers to choose the right products and contributes to the circular economy, where resources are kept in use for longer. For example, EI in young adults boosts the positive effect of social and pro-environmental engagement on pro-environmental and pro-social consumption behaviour (Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2019). High-EI consumers are better at controlling their impulsive buying tendencies in the case of social commerce (Zafar et al. 2021). Consequently, high EI would allow individuals to resist the urge for instant gratification associated with buying new clothes and explore the second-hand market with a focus on uniqueness and environmental benefits. High EI is positively related to moral decision-making (Chowdhury 2017), and thus, it would foster empathy for the environmental consequences of fast fashion. Thus, it is important to examine perceived value in the context of second-hand clothing, as it will aid a better understanding of sustainable consumer choices in the growing second-hand clothing market (Fernando et al. 2018).

Perceived consumer value is defined as the evaluation a consumer makes of a product or service based on the benefits, they believe they will receive compared to the cost or effort involved (Zeithaml 1988). This study, in the context of buying second-hand clothes, considers four traditional dimensions of consumer perceived value (i.e. social, economic, emotional, and functional), adding the fifth dimension, green value, as suggested by Baek and Oh (2021).

Consumers see buying second-hand as a way to contribute to a larger cause and build a more responsible future. For example, it is empirically evidenced that emotional intelligence positively relates to consumer ethics (Chowdhury 2017). Furthermore, emotional intelligence is linked to increased self-control, which should facilitate moral and ethical behaviour. For example, emotional intelligence has been negatively associated with impulsive buying tendency

(Park and Dhandra 2017) and positively associated with ethical conduct (Deshpande and Joseph 2009).

Clothing is one of the most important indicators of social value manifested through social status (Şener et al. 2023). Chi (2015) identified social value as the crucial dimension of consumer perceived value of environmentally friendly clothing. In the context of sustainable fashion, renting or buying second-hand clothing online, social value may be associated with the approval from social group members, a feeling of acceptance or a good impression on others (Baek and Oh 2021; Koay et al. 2022). As social value helps consumers to express their identity through uniqueness and belonging to the community, situational cues that highlight the vintage aspect of an item can activate EI traits (e.g. social awareness and empathy). Consumers with higher EI are better attuned to these social signals and derive greater satisfaction from expressing their individuality (Pekaar et al. 2020). In line with TAT, evidence shows that EI predicts outcomes only in contexts rich in emotion-relevant cues. For example, managerial work demands involving frequent emotional signals, conflicts, and negotiations activate EI, as employees must manage emotional information effectively (Farh et al. 2012). This parallels our argument that in online second-hand clothing transactions platforms, where diverse personalities are engaged, some reviews may express anger or frustration while others provide cues such as apologies or fairness signals. Effectively navigating this network of emotional and social cues activates consumers' EI, enabling them to connect with transaction partners or resonate with the story behind a pre-loved item. EI reflects the capacity to integrate social signals into adequate social perception (Salovey et al. 2002). Neuroscientific evidence further supports this, demonstrating association between trait emotional intelligence and neural correlates of audiovisual integration (Kreifelts et al. 2010). These findings indicate that individuals high in EI are more proficient at perceiving and integrating social information for adaptive functioning. Online platforms not only support exchange but also facilitate the extension of social ties, cultivate trust, and foster a sense of belonging in a like-minded community. Social cues on online retail websites facilitate perceptions of socialness, which enhance customer experiences of pleasure and arousal and, in turn, increase perceptions of hedonic and utilitarian value (Wang et al. 2007). EI has been linked to more ethical decision-making (Chowdhury 2017), suggesting that the activation of EI may also encourage consumers to share valuable information about their transactions with others. For example, social network per se acts as a social-level cue and encourages information sharing (Cai et al. 2024). Given their enhanced ability to detect deception (Stewart et al. 2019) and their pro-sociality (Martin-Raugh et al. 2016), high-EI individuals may provide guidance or cautionary accounts. Because high-EI consumers are generally more adept at social interaction, they are also more likely to feel a sense of responsibility towards the community. These ultimately enhance the perceived social value of second-hand clothing transactions online. Thus,

H1 *EI positively and significantly correlates with perceived social value from purchasing second-hand clothing transactions online*.

Green value refers to the consumer's perceived contribution to protecting the environment (Baek and Oh 2021; Koay et al. 2022). According to Koay et al. (2022), the higher the levels of green value, the more likely are consumers to act responsibly. Green value indicates the benefit of a product's positive impact on the environment, often linked to responsible buying behaviour (Seinauskiene et al. 2025; Šalčiuvienė et al. 2024; Hong and Kang 2019). EI is responsive to moral and sustainability cues. For instance, prior research demonstrates that emotional intelligence serves as an antecedent of pro-social knowledge and behaviour (Martin-Raugh et al. 2016). In the online second-hand retail markets, platforms and reviews often include pro-environmental cues, such as references to waste reduction, recycled packaging, or community norms of sustainable consumption. These situational cues create an environment that activates high-EI consumers' empathic and moral capacities, enabling them to interpret the social and environmental implications of their purchase. Explicit environmental factors such as environmental impact calculators can directly activate EI traits (e.g. empathy). This activation enables consumers to connect their purchases to a larger positive impact, leading to heightened perceived green value. Thus,

H2 *EI positively and significantly correlates with perceived green value from purchasing second-hand clothing transactions online*.

Emotional value refers to the feelings or affective states (Sheth et al. 1991) and a consumer's positive feelings towards second-hand clothing (Koay et al. 2022). In the second-hand clothing context, emotional value induces feelings generated by the purchasing process, such as excitement, joy, or nostalgia (Cai et al. 2024; Chen et al. 2024a, b; Ahn and Kwon 2022). The discovery of a vintage piece activates EI traits (e.g. self-awareness). Higher EI allows one to fully appreciate these positive emotions. This fosters a stronger connection between the platform and the sustainable fashion. Online retail platforms frequently provide EI-triggering cues in platform externalities and reviews, including apologies for product flaws, expressions of gratitude, emojis conveying warmth, or emotionally engaging stories about pre-loved items. Other cues may involve references to extra effort in packaging or

persuasive descriptions that emphasize comfort, nostalgia, or style. These cues activate EI by requiring consumers to perceive, regulate, and utilize emotional information in their decision-making, which enables them to anticipate feelings of joy, pride, nostalgia, or relief. In online retail, hedonic value—rooted in fun, playfulness, and "retailtainment"—is closely linked to emotional worth, and prior studies show that hedonic value is driven by pleasure and arousal (Wang et al. 2007). Clothing, as a highly identity-relevant and hedonic product category (by itself as a cue), is especially likely to elicit such responses. Moreover, individuals high in EI have the capacity to sustain desirable emotional states (Salovey et al. 2002), which further strengthens the affective experience of shopping. As a result, consumers with high EI are better able to transform emotion-laden cues into meaningful experiences, thereby enhancing the perceived emotional value of second-hand purchases. Thus,

H3 *EI positively and significantly correlates with perceived emotional value from purchasing second-hand clothing transactions online.*

Economic value has been proven to be an essential part of consumer perceived value analysing consumer behaviour in clothing and collaborative consumption (Xu et al. 2014; Chi 2015; Hamari et al. 2016). The perception of it may vary across different segments (Chi 2015); however, in our paper, it is anticipated that consumers tend to obtain financial benefits by renting or buying second-hand clothing online. While often seen as purely objective (the value of used clothing is lower than new items), economic value often involves subjective satisfaction of 'a bargain' (Seinauskiene et al. 2025). The situational cues of economic value (e.g. lower price) can activate consumer EI traits (e.g. emotional regulation or self-awareness). Consumers with high EI are better equipped to manage the initial apprehension about buying used items, allowing them to focus on financial prudence. As EI predicts wise reasoning (Schneider et al. 2023), this can also lead to higher satisfaction in knowing consumers made a financially viable decision aligned with their budget. Further, EI encompasses the ability to discriminate between honest and dishonest feelings (Salovey et al. 2002); it facilitates the identification of inconsistencies in non-verbal and verbal cues (Wojciechowski et al. 2014) and aids in deception detection (Stewart et al. 2019). In the online second-hand markets, where tangible sensory input is absent, EI is activated by secondary cues in reviews, such as text, pictures, ratings, or emojis. Since high-EI consumers can more effectively identify deceptive intentions of sellers, they are better at choosing credible offers and should feel more confident in their judgments and anticipate greater economic value from second-hand purchases. Thus,

H4 EI positively and significantly correlates with perceived economic value from purchasing second-hand clothing transactions online.

Referring to the functional value, which is the practical or technical advantages gained from a transaction (Sheth et al. 1991), it is anticipated that in the case of buying second-hand clothes online, users appreciate a more convenient way to acquire clothes, i.e. to acquire them in the faster, easier, and simpler way (Baek and Oh 2021). Functional value encompasses durability, functionality, and quality, which are critical for second-hand online shopping where physical inspection is absent. Honest product descriptions, photos from all angles, and condition reports should activate EI traits (e.g. self-regulation). A consumer with higher EI can better process ambiguous information, manage anxiety, and critically evaluate the reliability of seller information. For instance, individuals with more advanced abilities to perceive their own and others' emotions are better at making decisions about whom to trust (Christie et al. 2015). Overcoming functional uncertainty is important and it is the key to the smainstream adoption of second-hand clothing purchasing online, making it a reliable alternative to new items bought online. Prior studies reported that emotional intelligence exerts a significant positive influence on online shoppers' perceptions of utilitarian value (Lim and Kim 2020)

H5 EI positively and significantly correlates with perceived functional value from purchasing second-hand clothing transactions online. The above five hyptheses are summarised in the figure (Fig. 1) that is presented below.

Methodology

This study was designed to examine the link between emotional intelligence and perceived consumer value dimensions. Textual data from online reviews of second-hand clothing retailers were used to achieve the aim of the study. The study is divided into four main stages: (1) data collection and sampling, (2) data preprocessing and ethics, (3) perceived value and EI extraction using Large Language Models (LLMs), and (4) statistical analysis.

Based on the textual data, extracted from consumer-generated online reviews, our study examined whether EI links positively to perceived consumer value dimensions (i.e. economic, functional, emotional, social, and green) on both second-hand clothing and second-hand retailer platforms.

As technology, computational development, and data accessibility advance, so does research into predicting personality traits from individuals' generated text. The Big Five personality traits model has received significant attention for detecting personality from text data across

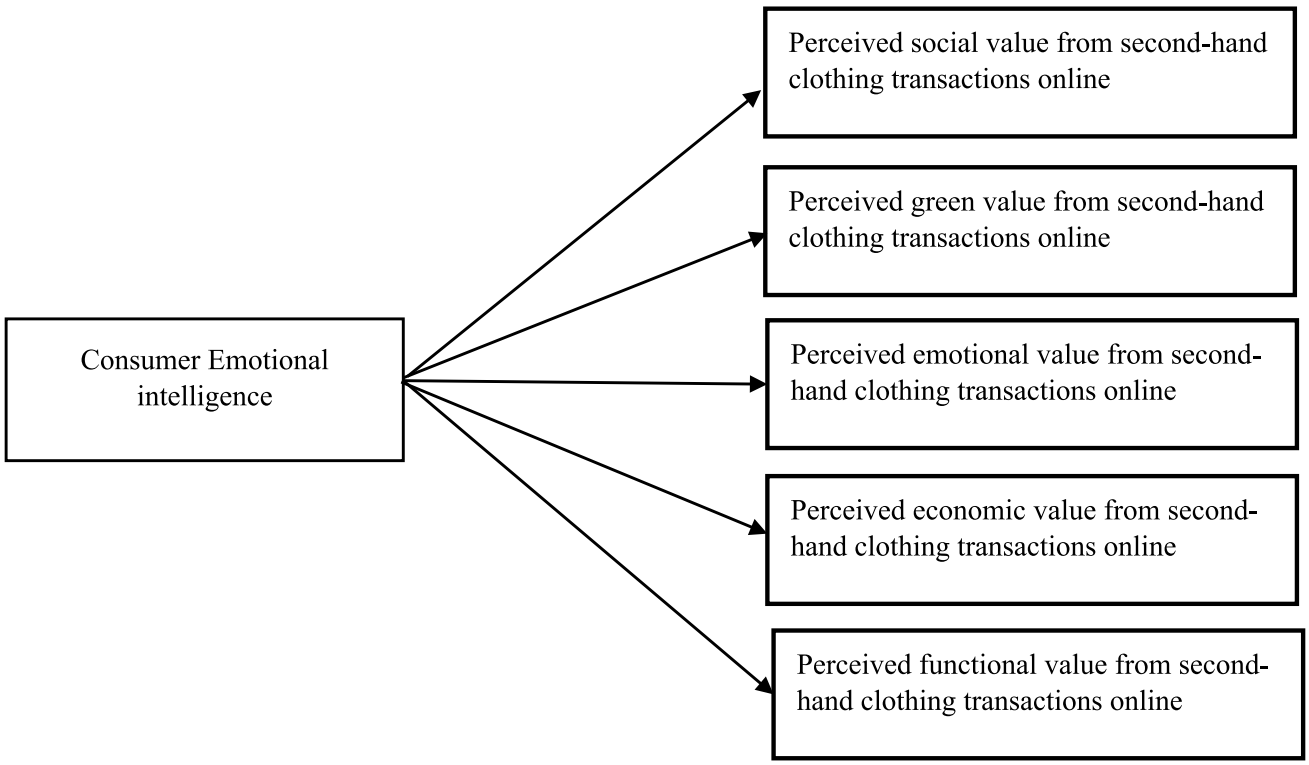

Fig. 1 A conceptual model of this study demonstrating the link between consumer EI and perceived value dimensions

domains (Berggren et al. 2024; Boyd and Pennebaker 2017; Martínez-Huertas et al. 2024; Park et al. 2015). The meta-analysis of Azucar et al. (2018) found that digital footprints extracted from social media can accurately predict Big Five personality traits. In the same vein, Moreno et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis suggests that written language could be used as an indirect personality indicator. Studies suggest that LLMs, such as ChatGPT, can infer individuals' self-reported personality scores from digital footprints even without training, with a correlation of 0.29 (Peters and Matz 2023). EI in studies using the same digital footprints-based inferred approach is beginning to emerge. For example, Karani and Desai (2024) proposed an Emotional Quotient calculated using AI-based deep learning from audiovisual data from a conversation between two people, identifying audiovisual signals as an effective source for automatically assessing EI. Dover and Amichai-Hamburger (2023) used online user-generated text to examine how it correlated with the same users' self-report-based measures (correlation ranged −0.2 to 0.2) and discovered that user-generated text on online platforms can be utilized to infer EI.

In this study, we use consumer-generated text data from independent review platforms from second-hand clothing retailers to infer EI and perceived value dimensions (social, emotional, green, economic, and functional). Then, we determined whether there were any predicted patterns of positive association between extracted EI and perceived value dimensions in the consumer-generated text. The data availability limited the examination of the association with the intentions because this information is either not explicitly revealed in reviews or is absent in most cases.

Data collection and sampling

The foundation of this research is a large corpus of 125,145 user-generated reviews. Using the Playwright automated web-scraping tool, we collected these reviews from two major independent online review platforms: Trustpilot and Sitejabber. The second-hand online retailers were chosen based on their popularity and the availability of a substantial volume of reviews, as indicated by industry reports (Chan 2024; Statista 2024; Escalante 2022). A full list of the retailers is available in Appendix A.1.

From this initial dataset of 125,145 reviews, a final sample of 477 reviews was selected for in-depth analysis. This number was not arbitrary but resulted from a deliberate sampling strategy. The selection was made to ensure the feasibility of the computationally intensive analysis by the LLM while maintaining sufficient data to identify the meaningful patterns. A simple random sample of 477 reviews was drawn from the total corpus. While this represents a fraction of the total data, this sample size was deemed sufficient for our

analytical goal, which was not to achieve statistical generalizability of the entire population of reviews, but rather to achieve theoretical saturation in identifying the relationships between expressions of EI and value dimensions (Lukauskas et al. 2024).

Data preprocessing and ethics

This research adhered to stringent ethical guidelines, prioritizing the anonymity and privacy of the individuals who wrote the reviews. Our study design was non-intrusive, focusing solely on publicly available comments without attempting to identify or track individual contributors. Before analysis, the dataset underwent a crucial preprocessing stage. First, we systematically removed any personally identifiable information to ensure user anonymity. Second, we filtered out spam and irrelevant entries to enhance the quality and relevance of the dataset for the subsequent analysis. These steps were critical for ensuring both the ethical integrity and the analytical validity of our study.

Prompt design and scoring using LLMs

We leveraged state-of-the-art Large Language Models (GPT-4 and GPT-3.5) to systematically code each review for dimensions of perceived value and indicators of Emotional Intelligence (EI). The LLM was guided to act as a trained research assistant, making context-aware judgments based on our theoretical framework.

Prompt design and logic

Instead of relying on simple keyword searches, we developed custom-designed prompts to guide the LLM's analysis. Each prompt instructed the model to identify specific constructs within the review text based on definitions derived from established literature (see Appendix A.3 for the theoretical basis of each variable, which is presented at the end of this paper). The indicators for EI were chosen based on a review of literature identifying textual cues previously linked to these traits (Dover and Amichai-Hamburger 2023).

For example, to extract the 'economic value' that a consumer perceived, a prompt was structured as follows:

Example Prompt for Economic Value:

"Read the following consumer review. Identify whether the consumer mentions economic value, which relates to getting a good price, saving money, or a good deal.

Assign a score from 0 to 1 for the presence of economic value (0 = not mentioned, 0.5 = implied or weak mention, 1 = explicitly and strongly stated).

Provide a brief justification for your score based on the text."

This structured approach ensured that the extraction was consistent and aligned with our research objectives.

Scoring and validation

The prompts were designed to yield a numerical score on a scale from 0 to 1 for each variable. This scale represents the magnitude of the construct within the text, where 0 indicates complete absence, 0.5 indicates an implicit or moderately expressed presence, and 1 indicates an explicit and strong manifestation. This granular scoring allowed us to capture the intensity of consumer perceptions.

The LLM's responses for each review were structured into a JSON format, creating an organized and searchable database. To ensure the credibility of the LLM's coding, the model's output was carefully reviewed by the research team on a subset of the data to confirm that its interpretations were consistent and logical. This verification step was essential for establishing the trustworthiness of our data extraction method.

Measures

To prepare the dataset for rigorous analysis, an intricate preprocessing stage was imperative. This stage focused on ensuring the anonymization of the dataset, scrupulously removing personally identifiable information to adhere to strict ethical standards concerning user privacy. Spam content and irrelevant data entries were systematically filtered out to enhance the quality and relevance of the dataset. Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques were employed to standardize linguistic expressions across the dataset, including typo corrections and normalization of textual variations. Such preprocessing measures were critical in facilitating a more accurate and insightful analytical process.

Emotional Intelligence and Values Extraction using LLMs. The study leveraged the unparalleled analytical power of state-of-the-art Large Language Models (LLMs), specifically GPT-4 and GPT-3.5, to conduct a nuanced exploration into the emotional intelligence and value perceptions embedded within the collected comments. Two primary analytical phases were delineated:

(1) Emotional Intelligence Extraction In this phase, the analysis was oriented towards unearthing dimensions of emotional intelligence manifest in the comments, inclusive of sentiment polarity, emotional diversity (joy, anger, fear, sadness, surprise), and traits indicative of empathy, self-awareness, and social skills. Models were prompted to analyse comments for language indicative of these traits, employing scales and justifications to assess each dimension accurately. We employed various indicators to detect EI. The diverse aspects of emotional intelligence, such as emotion detection, empathy, self-regulation, social skills,

self-awareness, lexical richness, contextual relevance, use of the first-person pronoun, conflict resolution, openness to feedback, questioning, adaptability, and conversation turn-taking indicators were all assessed on a scale from 0 to 1 (for instance, a scale point of 0.5 and 0.7 indicate the magnitude of manifestation). Since user-generated text is not purposefully designed to measure emotional intelligence, it was reasonable to include a wide range of indicators of EI to increase the likelihood of capturing emotional intelligence manifestations from textual data. A detailed description of variables, the used prompts, and numerical values assignment justifications are available in the script in Supplementary material Appendix A.2, which can be found at the end of this paper.

(2) Extraction of Values Concurrently, the study aimed at distilling the values consumers associate with second-hand clothing, guided by categories such as economic, functional, emotional, social, and green values. The models were engaged to identify and evaluate these values within the textual comments, attributing scores and providing rationale for each identified value, based on the expressed consumer perspectives. The text data were extracted by assigning values from a scale of 0 to 1 for each perceived value, which included two components: value of platform and value of clothing (script in Supplementary material Appendix A.2, which can be found at the end of this paper). The theoretical basis for the EI indicators and perceived value variables used is detailed in Supplementary material Appendix A.3, which can be found at the end of this paper.

Statistical analysis

To analyse the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and perceived consumer value, we used Pearson correlation. For this analysis, the various EI indicators extracted by the LLM were averaged into a composite variable representing overall EI. A second composite, "total EI," was also calculated, which incorporated the polarity of detected emotions (for complete variable calculations, see the dataset by Lukauskas et al. 2024). This statistical approach allowed us to determine the direction and strength of the association between the key constructs of our study.

Results

Below, we present the results of our study, which utilized web-scraped and quantified textual data from consumer comments. We calculated two EI variables: *the EI composite variable* that was computed as the average of all EI indicators and *the EI Total (with emotions) variable*—calculated as the average of composite EI and Emotion detection. As regards perceived value dimensions, we derived the overall perceived value scores for all dimensions of perceived value and separately—scores of value dimensions related to purchased second-hand clothes and the platform where the clothes were purchased. The correlation analysis (see Table 1, presented at the end of this paper) demonstrated that both EI variables were significantly and positively associated with all value dimensions, though the strength of these

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients

Variable	*M*	SD	EI composite	EI total (with emotions)
1. Economic (overall) value	0.082	0.183	0.247**	0.372**
1.1. Economic (platform/company) value	0.071	0.205	0.191**	0.280**
1.2. Economic (clothes) value	0.094	0.231	0.197**	0.321**
2. Functional (overall) value	0.176	0.191	0.200**	0.663**
2.1. Functional (platform/company) value	0.341	0.375	0.191**	0.660**
2.2. Functional (clothes) value	0.012	0.080	*0.060*	*0.048*
3. Emotional (overall) value	0.181	0.204	0.288**	0.736**
3.1. Emotional (platform/company) value	0.179	0.314	0.151**	0.433**
3.2. Emotional (clothes) value	0.182	0.318	0.186**	0.461**
4. Social (overall) value	0.007	0.046	0.137**	0.105*
4.1. Social (platform/company) value	0.009	0.071	0.121**	0.102*
4.2. Social (clothes) value	0.005	0.050	*0.070*	*0.039*
5. Green (overall) value	0.023	0.103	0.227**	0.109*
5.1. Green (platform/company) value	0.008	0.076	0.143**	*0.070*
5.2. Green (clothes) value	0.038	0.170	0.209**	0.108*

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

relationships varied. As can be seen from Table 1, the EI Total (with emotions) variable consistently showed stronger correlations, suggesting that it captures a deeper or more accurate measure of EI that is reflected not only by general EI indicators, but also balance between positive and negative emotions.

Consumer perceived emotional value emerged to most strongly correlate with the EI (therefore, H3 is supported). The correlation between emotional value and EI Total (with Emotions) is particularly high ($r = 0.736$, $p < 0.01$), in comparison with the correlation with EI Composite ($r = 0.288$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that emotional intelligence, shaped by consumer emotional response, is a significant indicator of emotional value. This relationship is evident for both emotional value dimensions related to Platform/Company ($r = 0.433$ and 0.151 accordingly) and Clothes ($r = 0.461$ and 0.186 accordingly), reinforcing the importance of EI in emotional value perception while purchasing second-hand clothes online.

Consumer perceived functional value, especially at the Platform/Company level, also showed a strong relationship with functional perceived value (H5 supported). The correlation between functional (Overall) value and EI Total (with Emotions) was $r = 0.663$ ($p < 0.01$) with a nearly identical score for functional Platform/Company value ($r = 0.660$). In contrast, functional (Clothes) value showed no significant relationship with either EI Composite ($r = 0.060$) or EI Total (with Emotions) ($r = 0.048$), suggesting that consumers with higher EI rely more on overall Platform/Company performance than on the specific functionality of the purchased second-hand clothes.

Perceived economic value showed moderate but significant relationships with both EI variables ($r = 0.247$ and 0.372 accordingly, $p < 0.01$; H4 supported). EI variables' correlation with subdimensions of economic value showed the same trend and were of the same (moderate) strength (in the case of economic value (Platform/Company) $r = 0.191$ and 0.280 and in the case of economic value (Clothes)—$r = 0.197$ and 0.321). These results suggest that while consumer perceived economic value is correlated with EI, this correlation is weaker than in the case of emotional and functional values.

The case of perceived green value presented an interesting pattern. The overall green value correlated modestly with EI Composite ($r = 0.227$, $p < 0.01$) and weakly with EI Total (with Emotions) ($r = 0.109$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis H2 is supported. Importantly, green (clothes) value showed significant correlations with both EI variables ($r = 0.209$ and 0.108, respectively), while green (Platform/Company) value was only weakly related to EI Composite ($r = 0.143$) and not significantly to EI Total (with Emotions) ($r = 0.070$). This suggests that consumers with higher EI perceive higher specific, purchased second-hand cloth-related environmental attributes than general platform/company-level sustainability claims.

Social value exhibited the weakest correlation overall. While total social value was significantly correlated with EI variables ($r = 0.137$ and 0.105), the strength of these relationships was low (H1 is supported). Social (Clothes) value showed similar weak correlations, and social (Platform/Company) value is not significantly related to either EI variables.

In summary, the data highlight emotional and functional values being the most critical perceived value dimensions that are reflected by consumer EI, especially the deeper, more affective sense captured by EI with emotions. Economic and green perceived values also play a role, the latter one particularly when sustainability claims are demonstrated on the level of the product purchased. We explain the weaker correlation between social value dimension and EI as follows. Emotionally intelligent consumers in this context are likely to be self-aware and understand how their emotions influence their purchasing decisions. Social perceived value focuses on external validation and approval one seeks through their purchases. For second-hand clothing purchased online, this can involve concerns about negative perceptions as some individuals may associate second-hand clothing with negative connotations such as outdated styles. Emotionally intelligent consumers are likely to be more aware of, and potentially resistant to external pressures (e.g. social validation) to conform through their clothing choices as these types of individuals make purchase decisions based on emotional satisfaction, environmental and ethical considerations, and practical consideration rather than solely on the desire for social approval.

Discussion

The results of the user-generated online review textual analysis using LLMs support our hypotheses that high-EI consumers derive more value from second-hand clothing transactions online. First, consumers with high EI strongly perceive economic value. That is, they might enjoy the thrill of finding unique or vintage items that express their personality style, similarly to previous studies (Šalčiuvienė et al. 2024). Consumers might also enjoy the treasure hunt aspect of sifting through online listings and finding unique items of exceptional quality-price ratio, as indicated in earlier research (Tariq et al. 2021; Šalčiuvienė et al. 2024).

Further, our finding on EI's link with green value is similar to the previous studies that consumers are also conscious of responsible buying behaviour (Chowdhury 2017; Koay et al. 2022) as they might feel good about reducing waste and helping the environment by buying second-hand garments (Šalčiuvienė et al. 2024). Our

finding that a feeling of doing something positive for the environment could be a big part of the value they get from buying second-hand clothing online is in line with previous studies (Seinauskiene et al. 2025; Koay et al. 2022). For example, when an individual buys a used shirt or pair of jeans, he/she gives it a second life. Instead of ending up in a landfill, where it could take years to decompose, it gets to be worn and loved again. This activity is similar to recycling but doing so with clothes. We also conclude that making new clothes takes a lot of resources, including water and energy, which is similar to the Papasolomou et al.'s (2023) finding. By buying second-hand, consumers help to reduce the demand for new clothes, which means less pollution overall. We find that for individuals with high EI, these activities make them feel good about themselves, and they understand the impact of their choices and consciously make sustainable ones. This finding echoes previous studies (e.g. Hong and Kang 2019).

Third, we further conclude that other consumers might be interested in a social connection that buying second-hand offers. Since this finding is new and was not previously reported in the literature, we use TAT to explain our finding with regard to EI's link with social value. This approach provides a new theoretical pathway for a better understanding of how EI drives the perception of social value within the unique market through the interaction of situational cues and EI traits. This highlights the synergy between personality traits and contextual cues in shaping socially significant behaviours. For example, specific cues in online second-hand marketplaces, such as sellers' transparency, eco-conscious branding, or community engagement, activate EI traits such as empathy and social awareness. Consumers might empathize with the sustainable impact of their purchase or feel socially attuned to being part of a community promoting circular fashion. These activated traits make the interaction more meaningful, amplifying the perceived social value. We state that platforms that emphasize shared responsible buying behaviour goals, collaboration, or social validation (e.g. showcasing the environmental impact of purchases or enabling public reviews) provide the necessary triggers for EI to be activated. Based on the TAT theory, we anticipate that more emotionally intelligent consumers are more likely to interpret these cues as reinforcing their perceived social value, leading to a greater appreciation of the purchase's social significance.

Fourth, concerning high EI and emotional value, our finding is in line with previous studies (e.g. Koay et al. 2022; Amin and Tarun 2021). Purchasing online second-hand clothing becomes personally meaningful for high-EI consumers; it brings joy and nostalgic feelings to consumers (Cai et al. 2024; Chen et al. 2024; Ahn and Kwon 2022). High EI enables consumers to fully appreciate these positive feelings, transforming the purchase into a deeply rewarding experience gained from purchasing items. This translates into higher perceived emotional value.

Finally, concerning EI and functional perceived value, our finding confirms this relationship. Again, as this finding was not previously found in the literature, we use TAT theory to explain it. When TAT is used to explain perceived functional value, consumers on the online platforms are presented with various situational cues, such as textual information, shared photos, and online reviews (Cai et al. 2024), consumption experience (Chen et al. 2024) which activate EI. We expect that consumers with high EI could better tolerate anxiety and scepticism allowing for a more objective assessment of presented information about garments' practical utility and reliability. This directly contributes to higher perceived functional value.

Concluding, the use of TAT in our study offers a robust theoretical contribution and is the first to directly examine how consumer EI, activated by specific environmental cues on the online second-hand clothing marketplaces, positively influences consumer perceptions across all key dimensions of perceived value among consumers. This approach clarifies the psychological and social mechanisms that drive perceived value in this unique market context, enhancing our understanding of consumer behaviour in the circular economy and providing actionable insights for online platforms to create more engaging, trustworthy, and satisfying experiences that stimulate consumer EI.

Conclusion

Our first contribution aims to add to the latest stream of research on AI-enabling for research purposes. Our study reveals that LLMs (Large Language Models) with theory-driven prompts can enable consumer EI and their attitude exploration. The findings of the second-hand user-generated reviews study suggest that emotional intelligence-embedded online reviews contain more pronounced second-hand clothing value perceptions. Our final and more specific contribution is that such findings contribute to the growing body of AI-enabled research, suggesting that LLMs with theory-driven prompts can supplement the exploration of personality and consumer attitude connections with the potential to circumvent the measurement attributed to social desirability bias.

Managerial implications

By integrating EI and perceived consumer value, our study proposes strategies for second-hand e-commerce platforms to enhance perceived consumer value by fostering emotionally engaging interactions (e.g. peer reviews, stories, or responsible buying behaviour impact metrics). This can

encourage socially driven purchasing decisions, fostering trust, loyalty, and brand advocacy.

First, managers may implement emotionally intelligent communication strategies by personalizing interactions with customers. For instance, emotional value is fostered by using empathetic messaging in second-hand online product descriptions or highlighting the responsible buying behaviour story of a second-hand item.

Second, by integrating social elements such as a fair rating system along with detailed text and photo peer reviews, second-hand online businesses may tap into consumers' emotional and social intelligence. For example, managers could introduce a standardized rating system (e.g. 'like new', 'excellent', 'fair') with specific details about any flaws for second-hand clothing (e.g. 'discolouration of colour at the back of the skirt'), which would reduce consumer ambiguity, foster a sense of being well-informed, leading to reduced anxiety. Also, introducing seller ratings and successful transactions for each of them, along with an explanation of why they tend to sell online, would increase consumer trust in the online platforms.

Third, managers can curate shopping experiences that resonate with consumer emotions in the context of second-hand clothing. For example, business can showcase limited-edition vintage finds or craft narratives around clothing items' history, which will enhance both emotional and green value.

Fourth, business may highlight consumer sustainability impact by providing impact calculators when purchasing second-hand clothing online as well as offering an economic value for the items. For example, calculators can show consumers how much water, CO_2, and waste they saved when buying a second-hand item. This would activate positive emotions reinforcing both economic and green value.

Limitations

First limitation refers to the dataset bias. Due to a relatively small sample size, the LLM's data might not fully represent the population being studied. For example, if the texts analysed predominantly reflect the language style of a specific demographic, the findings may lack generalizability to other consumer groups.

Second, we solely relied on written consumer texts, which may exclude non-verbal cues (e.g. tone, facial expressions) that are integral to a holistic understanding of emotions and consumer value perception.

Third, the exclusive reliance on text-based inference from a large language model to assess consumer traits is another limitation. Because no self-reported data were used, the findings may not accurately reflect the actual emotional intelligence of consumers and may not capture the nuances and subjective reality of human experiences.

Next, although our study captured the link between EI and perceived value, future research could employ a longitudinal study to further investigate how this translates into sustainable engagement such as the repeat consumer purchasing behaviour over time. Future studies may recruit participants who have just completed the purchase of their second-hand item and measure their EI, perceived value from that specific purchase, satisfaction with the purchase, and their repurchase intentions.

Finally, while our study addresses the overall perceived value of second-hand clothing, further studies could investigate how EI mitigates perceived risk in the online second-hand clothing transactions. Specifically, focusing on how consumers overcome specific risks and how EI predicts reduced perceived risk in the online context.

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Declarations

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