Shifting perspectives: Ethics of secondhand clothing in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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ABSTRACT: There has been a long-standing stigma among Mongolians surrounding the wearing of used clothes, particularly among the older generation. Traditionally, many have disposed of their garments by burning them or cutting off the collars before giving them away. Even when clothes are donated, it is preferred to do so within the same kinship to avoid perceived spiritual implications, as Mongolians believe that clothes retain the energy or spirit of their previous owners. Recently, the introduction of thrift shops in Ulaanbaatar became a trending practice of secondhand clothing consumption among the younger generation. As young generations adopt secondhand clothing consumption with enthusiasm, the existing stigma associated with *komiss* shops is revisited and contested. *Komiss* shops, wholesale vendors of secondhand clothing since the 1990s, primarily catered to the less affluent. When the same idea of selling used clothes was reintroduced with the concept of 'thrift shops', *komiss* clothes are now considered to be trendy and ethical among young Mongolians. This article

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introduces the secondhand clothing market in Mongolia, focusing on *komiss* and thrift shops. It explores the shifting perception and motivation towards secondhand clothes consumption. [secondhand clothing, thrift shop, ethical consumption, sustainability, Mongolia]

INTRODUCTION

My first experience shopping for secondhand clothes at a thrift store was in 2018 when I was living in Hungary. It was quite a 'western' experience for me. Before that, the idea of paying money to buy old clothes that someone else had worn would never have crossed my mind. It might be a subjective thing to say, but secondhand clothes were not as widely normalized as they are today in Mongolia. Eventually, I became a regular at the nearest thrift and vintage shops, digging for unique and affordable pieces. When I came back to Ulaanbaatar in 2020, my friend and I decided to open a small thrift shop in Ulaanbaatar, as a few years ago, there were no 'western-style' thrift shops in Mongolia. However, secondhand clothes wholesale existed for decades with the name '*komiss* goods' (*komissiin baraa*), and it was stigmatized until the emergence of thrift shops. Since 2020, thrift shops have proliferated in Mongolia and rebranded *komiss* shops and secondhand clothes as sustainable consumption. Not only was it sustainable, but thrift shopping, and komiss shopping altogether, became fashionable, cool and trendy practices among the younger generation. Observing the generational shift in the perception of secondhand clothes, I carried my interest into fieldwork after shutting down the shop.

Mongolians are familiar with these phrases regarding secondhand clothes: 'If you wear a stranger's old clothes, you'll take in their suffering (*khunii zovlong avna*)', or 'you will get polluted or contaminated (*buzartana*)'. These sayings reveal the underlying perception that clothes can become the transmitter of one's bad luck, suffering or misfortune to others. Buying old clothes from *komiss* shops used to be taboo. The term *komiss* in the context of *komissiin baraa* (commission goods) in Mongolia is likely derived from the Russian word комиссия, which translates to 'commission' in English. *Komissiin baraa* is also associated with donated clothes and charity goods.

There are traditional cosmological and religious beliefs that teach how to wear and handle clothes. Mongolians believe in having forms of fortune that are *sülde* (might, life force, inspiration) and *hiimori* (vitality) (Humphrey and Ujeed, 2012). These *sülde and hiimori* determine the general vitality and well-being of the person. However, they can also depreciate and leave the host due to external contamination (*buzar*), contact with negative energy through everyday utensils and clothes, immoral acts, or violating a taboo (Humphrey & Ujeed, 2012)

These beliefs had long been a traditional custom of nomadic Mongols and drew a line between what is acceptable and what is not when it comes to the respect and handling of one's clothing. Particularly, the hat, belt and collar of the *deel*[1] are the most respected pieces of clothing, traditionally. Leaving them on the ground and treating them carelessly is often frowned upon. According to the traditional custom and cultural morality of nomads (Khookhdoi, 2006) the hat symbolizes one's *khiimori* (spirit), thus swapping hats with another person is akin to swapping their *khiimori*. The hat and belt's symbolic embodiment of one's *khiimori* is especially significant to men. The concept of vitality and *khiimori* is often discussed in terms of men, because as a head of the family, a man's *khiimori* embodies the overall *khiimori* of the whole family. In general, when getting rid of worn-out *deel*, it's advised to remove the collar. It's also believed that the collar also accommodates *khiimori* of the owner. Throwing away a hat, collar or *deel* belt symbolizes casting off one's spirit.

Furthermore, *komiss* shops are a type of small-scale, private trade (*naimaa*). The term *naimaa* is often used in Mongolia to describe the buying of goods in bulk from markets or wholesale outlets and then selling them for a profit. *Naimaa* has a negative connotation due to its historical associations with the exploitative trade practices of Chinese merchants (*naimaachid*) and the immoral nature of immediate gains (Wheeler, 2004). Hence, there existed a societal mistrust in *komiss* shops as a *naimaa*, selling foreign old clothes. Despite the doubt related to *komiss* vendors and the fear of receiving a bad spirit or previous owner's suffering, *komiss* clothes did cater to those homeless and impoverished.

[1] Traditional costume - loose robe with a high collar and a distinctive, overlapping front flap that fastens on the right side

In contrast to *komiss* shops, clothes from burgeoning thrift shops are trendy, preferable and ethical among young Mongolians. New terms such as *thriftchin* and *komisschin* have emerged to describe thrift and *komiss* shoppers, respectively.[2] Thrift shops now serve as social and cultural spaces where customers gather to socialize and find a sense of belonging. By offering affordability and sustainability, thrift shops allow the young generation to connect with thrift and vintage culture communities where they can express their individuality and identity. Simultaneously, thrift shops have contested the prevailing stigma surrounding *komiss* shopping and shifting the accustomed fear of contamination from secondhand clothes. This paper explores the evolving landscape and attitudes towards secondhand clothing sales in Ulaanbaatar. The primary fieldwork was conducted from April to June 2023. The methodological approach consisted of semi-structured interviews and field notes. I interviewed a total of nine participants: three *komiss* and thrift shoppers, four *komiss* owners and two thrift shop owners. My observational data also incorporated my own experience running a thrift shop from September 2021 to December 2022.

THRIFT AS AN ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

The concept of thrift inherently comprises the ethical aspect of human action. In consideration of comprehensive studies on thrift and frugality, Podkalicka and Potts (2014) offered a general theory for thrift to overarch the individual theories suggested by psychologists, economists and sociologists. The different dimensions of thrift can be variously understood as referring to the ethical choices, practical decisions, or sacrifices one makes for thrift (ibid.). Thrift practice has multi dimensions – such as buying cheap, reusing, repairing, mending, making at home, etc. While some of these dimensions are so mundane that we don't see them as thrift, others can be purposefully performed to act as social or commercial activism (Podkalicka and Potts, 2014). The focal point of this paper is about the practice of thrift shopping, commonly referred to as 'thrifting'.

According to Podkalicka and Potts (2014), thrift behaviour emerges in two circumstances. In poverty conditions, to be thrifty is a necessity, and on the other hand, thriftiness is a moral decision in availability. Before the global clothing industry evolved into a

[2] Th suffix *-chin* creates a noun added to the verb

fast-fashion circuit that produced an excessive amount of clothing accessible at low prices, thriftiness regarding clothes was a normal practice. People commonly mended, repaired and reused their clothing. For Mongolians, old clothes were circulated within the family, among siblings and relatives.

The lifecycle of clothes was long, often ending as patches or knitted ropes for the livestock in pastoral homes. Overall, thriftiness and resourcefulness were social norms, driven by material scarcity and the constant movement that prevented accumulating unnecessary possessions. Accordingly, the perception of old clothes is shaped by the necessity of thriftiness and the cosmological and religious belief of symbolic agency in one's clothing. While it is common to reuse old clothes within the family or immediate community, there was a caution about reusing clothes from strangers or unknown sources.

Notwithstanding, thrift behaviour amid plenty is different because it carries a signal, presumably one intended to be observed, about the moral qualities (and not just economic qualities) of the thrifty agent or household (Podkalicka and Potts, 2014). When the conditioning does not necessitate resourcefulness, being thrifty is a personal choice subject to expressing one's association. Thrift shopping as consumption communicates one's ethical identity. Consumption is a means by which people may express their moral obligations (Hall, 2011). Hall (2011) suggested that consumption is an outlet to demonstrate ethical commitment and ethical choice is drawn between avoidance of waste and caring for the environment. The current emergence of thrift shopping practices among young Mongolians is framed by the narrative of ethical consumption causes and the normalization of secondhand clothes. Those who wear thrifted clothes are now considered to be the 'cool' ones, denoting not only ethical responsibility but also a fashion sense that is expressed by their unique styling with used clothes.

SECONDHAND CONSUMPTION AND THRIFT SHOPS

Over the past 50 years, secondhand consumption has evolved from a stigmatized practice to a celebrated form of ethical consumerism (Franklin, 2011). Various secondhand markets, such as thrift stores, flea markets and garage sales, have significantly influenced the popularity and acceptance of secondhand clothing (Le Zotte, 2023; Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013). The emergence of thrift stores is marked around the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States, through religious organizations like The Salvation Army and Goodwill, evolving the motive for buying secondhand from 'desperate need' to 'charitable generosity' (Franklin, 2011; Le Zotte, 2023). These charitable thrift stores collected donations, repaired, and redistributed used stuff as a social service, providing low-paying jobs and offering cheap bargains for the buyers (Le Zotte, 2023).

Over time, secondhand markets diversified and multiplied in form and meaning. Flea markets emerged in Europe, mostly in rural cities, and garage sales were popularized in the American suburbs, selling unwanted items throughout the 1950s to 1970s (Gregson & Crewe, 2003; Le Zotte, 2023). During this period, the cultural meanings of secondhand clothing took on political importance, including anti-capitalist and environmentalist implications. Wearing 'vintage', 'retro' and secondhand clothing styles became a way of rejecting modernity, a means to express authenticity and individuality versus the mainstream mass, and an act of rebellious consumption (Franklin, 2011; Jenss, 2005; Le Zotte, 2023; Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013).

The definition of vintage fashion lacks a universal agreement but typically refers to clothing and accessories that are at least 20 years old, with items from the 1920s to the 1980s often considered vintage (Carey et al., 2018). Vintage fashion involves recognizing and appreciating the specifics of a garment, such as the year or period when it was produced or worn. Quality, timelessness, craftsmanship and historical significance are key elements of vintage clothing, often including designer pieces. The vintage marketplace is diverse across cultures, from exclusive boutiques to affordable markets. Also, 'vintage' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'retro' or 'antique', and the boundaries between these terms can be blurry (Carey et al., 2018). While thrift shopping centres on affordability and sustainability, vintage fashion emphasizes the distinct quality and historical importance of older items, appealing to those who appreciate the craftsmanship and stories behind each piece (Bowser et al., 2015).

Le Zotte (2023) notes that 'retro' fashion is newly produced clothes mimicking outdated styles, denoting the reperformance of the past through consumption (Jenss, 2005). 'Retro' clothes are produced in modern times to imitate the styles of previous decades or centuries, whereas 'vintage' clothes were actually made and worn decades ago. Thus each term requires its own context and theoretical approach (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2015).

Nonetheless, the consumer motivations to wear a 'vintage' and 'retro' look overlap with the desire for uniqueness, authenticity, individuality, aesthetic preference of nostalgia and differentiation from mass-produced looks (Carey et al., 2018; Jenss, 2005).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, secondhand clothing and styling continued to play an important role within subcultures, arts and cultural movements. Secondhand clothing had been 'reemerging with fresh details for new generations' (Le Zotte, 2023). The 2000s saw a significant boost in secondhand acquisition through online platforms such as eBay and Etsy. In 2021 and 2022, secondhand sales skyrocketed, propelled by Gen Z-driven preferences for used and remade clothing, which accelerated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Le Zotte, 2023). In 2023, the secondhand clothing trade market reached a colossal global scale of USD 152 billion (Dharmadhikari 2024). Some acknowledge that thrift shopping and secondhand clothing are still a function of capitalist consumerism (Kuppinger, 2023) and used as a language of environmentalism serving the global market (Brooks, 2015; Franklin, 2011). However secondhand clothing and consumption is a rich realm that has multiple facets. As Le Zotte (2023) underlined, it reemerges with new meanings for new generations. 'Secondhand' provides the potential for critique and resistance, at the same time the secondhand market can be shaped by the very same motivations that shape consumer culture (Gregson & Crewe, 2003).

As the secondhand clothing practice increased globally, a growing number of researchers have been studying thrift shops in local contexts in the last two decades (Clark, 2005; Kuppinger, 2023; Larsen, 2019; Na'amneh & Al Husban, 2012; Podkalicka & Meese, 2012). Kuppinger (2023) advocates the overlooked significance of thrift shops that connect individuals to global sustainability efforts, with the example of Fairkauf in Stuttgart, Germany. Thrift shops are crucial for diverting materials from landfills and creating transformative potential towards resistant consumption. Others suggest thrift shops like Salvos Stores in Melbourne are cultural sites that influence consumption, recycling practices and community development (Podkalicka & Meese, 2012). For *al-balih* shops in Irbid, Jordan, customers from different socioeconomic segments seek different symbolic values to express identity, acquire quality clothes and be connected with Western culture (Na'amneh & Al Husban, 2012). Larsen (2019) shared the insights of the valuation processes of California thrift stores, where donated clothes go through stages of categorization and valuation, becoming a cultural commodity from discard. In Hong

Kong, the global fashion trend for secondhand and vintage clothing emerged in the 1990s, challenging local cultural norms and taboos (Clark, 2005). Formerly stigmatized secondhand clothes became fashionable and cool, especially among the younger generation (Clark, 2005). This paper contributes to existing literature with the local context of thrift shops in Ulaanbaatar, discussing how the emergence of secondhand clothing practice is challenging social stigma and traditional beliefs related to used clothes.

SECONDHAND CLOTHING IN MONGOLIA

Secondhand clothing has become increasingly 'fashionable' among young Mongols in recent years. This trend of embracing secondhand clothing was significantly influenced by the opening of Toirog, a thrift shop that claims to be the first to redistribute used clothes within the Mongolian market. The consumption of secondhand clothes from *komiss* shops, though with lingering stigma, existed before the rise of thrift shops. The research findings suggest that while these two types of used clothes sale models differ in certain aspects, the latter model of thrift shop has been shaping ethically refreshed implications for both.

KOMISS SHOPS

The preceding practice of *komiss* clothes are bulk imported mainly from China, Korea, Japan and The United States. In Ulaanbaatar, *komiss* shops are centralized in black markets, such as Narantuul, Kharkhorin, ger districts,[3] and suburban areas. Provincial centres (*aimgiin tuv*) also have some established *komiss* shops, and one of the participants emphasized Dornod Aimag's *komiss* called "Amitami" which has a variety of good quality and unique pieces. Narantuul bazaar is the biggest hub of *komiss* vendors since its establishment in 1999. *Komiss* vendors buy the clothes in bulk bales with each type of garment. One package (referred to as a 'press') weighs 100 kg and costs MNT 1,000,000 (Mongolian tugrik). The frequency of unpacking of the batch depends on the turnover or is renewed seasonally. Once unpacked, the price range of each piece starts from

[3] Settlements on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, where over 60% of the population lives in traditional gers and houses

MNT 5,000 to MNT 30,000. *Komiss* shops are an integral part of the global trade in secondhand clothes, localized as *naimaa* in Mongolia.

Figure 1. Inside the shop "Soko komiss"

In *komiss* shops, clothes are piled upon or hung tightly for maximum display in a minimum space and barely classified. Clothes are flat priced by type; no price tags are attached. Stocks are either generally categorized as men's, women's and kids' clothes, or no categorization at all. Without any order, there's no anticipation of what kind of clothes you might find. Thus, it takes time and effort to recognize good quality in the clothing.

Customers buy clothes from *komiss* for two main reasons. First, *komiss* clothes are highly affordable. Kids' clothes start from MNT 3,000, others from MNT 5,000 and average price are around MNT 20,000 (around USD 5.70). *Komiss* vendors have been lamenting about the economic decline of the country and customers, justifying the consumption of *komiss* clothes. Shop owners have observed that people purchase *komiss*

clothes for labour, land work or countryside wear and tear. Rather than buying brand new clothes for labour or one-time occasions, people opt for used clothes at dirt-cheap prices, knowing they can easily dispose of them afterward. Secondly, *komiss* clothes are worn, but perceived to have good quality and are durable for their value. Shop owners referred to feedback from regular customers that they had worn the purchase for two or three years, which lasted longer than some low-quality new clothes. Also, not all clothes from the bale are secondhand, some clothes are new with factory tags. Some hunt for such new clothes for the *komiss* price, and if they're lucky and dedicated to the quest, they find hardly worn original brand clothes. The materiality and absence of fabric dye bleeding of *komiss* clothes were mentioned to highlight the quality of used clothes compared to fast-fashion garments.

Not every piece of clothing is in decent condition or brand new. Typically, only about two or three out of every ten pieces meet the qualities that customers find after sifting through numerous piles. While customers may perceive *komiss* clothes as generally high quality, they often overlook the many other items that don't meet their criteria during their 'scavenger hunt'. Consequently, many unsold used clothes from *komiss* end up in landfills. *Komiss* vendors at Narantuul bazaar collect and pack these unsold clothes, sending them to Tsagaan Davaa landfill.

The cleanliness of *komiss* clothes is questionable. According to shop owners, bulk imported secondhand clothes are sanitized with chemicals before being bundled, and vendors only steam press them before displaying them for sale. These clothes often carry a distinct odour from the chemicals and may arrive with surface dust or be partly dirty due to transportation conditions and duration. Beyond concerns about fabric cleanliness, some believe that used clothes lack energetic purity, echoing the cosmological belief that clothes can absorb and transmit one's spirit, potentially carrying negative influences.

Due to the taboo surrounding secondhand clothes, some *komiss* shop owners perform rituals to cleanse any lingering energy traces from the previous owners of the garments.

> Our children purify every one of the clothes with burning juniper and saying mantras. It is to prevent negative impressions from people. It's relieving to think that we're not selling clothes with negative energy. I also openly tell people not to be suspicious because all the clothes are

> purified and energetically cleaned with a spell. (Participant who works for her daughter's *komiss* shop, *Soko komiss*)

While these cleansing rituals for *komiss* clothes acknowledge and perpetuate the suspicion against used garments, some *komiss* owners deny that the clothes they sell are secondhand. During my visit to the *komiss* section at Narantuul bazaar, I inspected the clothes and casually asked about their previous use to start a conversation. To my surprise, despite the evident condition of the garments, a couple of vendors claimed that the clothes were new. It shows that vendors are cautious about using terms like 'old clothes' or '*komiss*' because some customers shy away upon learning that the clothes are not new. Additionally, there are a few *komiss* shops with names such as 'Japan clothes' or 'Korean goods wholesale', which do not directly suggest that they sell secondhand items.

Komiss shops lack an online presence and do not advertise their activities on social media as much as thrift shops do. While shop owners have confirmed an increase in younger generations shopping at *komiss*, they are generally unfamiliar with thrift shops and their related messages, such as sustainability and ethical consumption.

> Earlier in 2008–2015, when I used to work at the counter, mostly middle-aged women or men shopped for clothes here. Now customers are much younger. Young kids, people of my age, and stylish girls. For their style, these youths look very fashionable. (Participant E, age 25, works for his parent's *komiss* shop)

THRIFT SHOPS

The wave of new thrift stores began around 2019–2020, largely influenced by a thrift shop called Toirog, which has become the most popular thrift shop among younger generations, particularly high school students. *Toirog* means 'circle' in Mongolian, emphasizing their mission to create the circulation of used clothes for sustainability efforts. Toirog's main customers are high school and university students around 14–25 years of age. Their slogan is 'not old, pre-loved' (*'Huuchin bish, khairlaj edelsen*'). According to its founders, Toirog's mission is not solely about selling old clothes for profit but rather about promoting the culture of used clothing. They aim to challenge the stigma

associated with buying secondhand clothes and educate people about environmentally conscious shopping practices, distinguishing themselves from *komiss* shops. Their intention can be discerned in their use of phrases such as 'to give a second life to clothes' and 'pre-loved' in their social media content. With an audience of forty-four thousand followers on Instagram, Toirog has created its own community of thrift enthusiasts, secondhand clothes lovers and sustainability advocates. Toirog has a subproject called Shkaf,[4] which is another branch that resells charity and also buys old clothes from people. Shkaff offers pre-loved clothes for people of all ages, while younger people choose mostly Toirog for stylish, trendy and unique outfits. They played a significant role in dispelling the taboo around purchasing secondhand clothing by maintaining transparency about their operations. This approach has effectively educated and raised awareness about the importance of recycling, reusing and reducing waste. For instance, Toirog's Instagram post from August 2022 says thus:

> We gave life to 2.6 tons of used clothes in last 2 years. If this 2.6 tons of clothes were to be manufactured anew, a total of 19.5 million liters of water would be used and 20,000 kg of greenhouse gases would be emitted. Thank you for making environmentally friendly choice. (from Instagram post of Toirog thrift @toirogdii)[5]

The interior of Toirog evokes nostalgia for Mongolia's socialist past. Typical Soviet household furniture and items are placed as decors or showcase stands. An old glass-door bookshelf filled with high heels, a rustic vintage suitcase showcases vinyls and handcrafts, and rooms are decorated with a stereo sound system, vintage armchair, box TV and wall rug on the floor. The online presence of Toirog has a vibrant and eclectic aesthetic that blends vintage nostalgia with modern style. Photoshoots are mostly tapped into the atmosphere of the past decades, particularly of the 1980s and 1990s, which are often celebrated in alternative cultures (Le Zotte, 2023), indicated by the incorporation of soviet apartment spaces, vintage furniture, bold and unconventional styling of retro clothes and accessories. This blend of retro flair and contemporary relevance appeals to

[4] Shkaff is the Latin transcription of *Шкаф*, a commonly used Russian word for 'wardrobe'.
[5] https://www.instagram.com/p/ChUvyn-P5oW/?hl=en&img_index=1

a young audience, who have not themselves experienced the time they now consume (Jenss, 2005) through thrift shopping. These young Toirog customers/followers didn't live the reality of Mongolia's socialist past. However, a nostalgic reimagining of the past enabled by consumption serves them as a means to perform identity (Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013) and belong to the community.

Figure 2. A customer going through the jeans section at Toirog thrift shop

Other thrift shops often feature nostalgic decor themes too, including carpets with 90s patterns, vintage television sets, DVD players and music played on vinyl players. Additionally, these thrift shops sell local handmade accessories, small crafts and zero-

waste products, and they feature young artists. Some have additional areas or spots to serve coffee as well as seating corners to hang out and read. By cultivating such (often nostalgic) atmospheres, thrift shops establish cultural spaces for customers, transforming secondhand clothes shopping into a form of cultural consumption. There is TAKO vintage shop that specializes in 60s vintage clothing imported from Japan, marking it as a pioneer in introducing vintage culture to Mongolia. The founder emphasizes that TAKO is not a thrift shop but a vintage shop:

> We are not just another thrift shop where high school kids are hanging out and being loud. It's a space where people who love vintage culture come together and talk about something meaningful. (participant Ts, 28 years old, founder of TAKO vintage)

In the case of Toirog, clothes are affordably priced to cater to a wide range of shoppers, particularly young people. For those seeking specific vintage pieces at higher price points, TAKO provides a selection to meet their preferences. During fieldwork, I encountered an 11-year-old girl visiting the thrift shop Shkaff for the first time, curiously surveying clothes alongside her father. Today, many young Mongolians' first experience of buying secondhand clothes begins at Shkaff or Toirog, which opens the door to the world of secondhand clothing.

According to participants, people buy clothes from thrift shops for the following three reasons: the unique style, an ethical aspect for the environment and affordability. For thrift shop customers, consumption serves as a means to express and showcase their personal taste, acting as a tool for constructing their identity. By buying secondhand clothes from thrift, the younger generation express their style and identity as well as demonstrate their ethical stance. Unlike *komiss* clothes, people don't necessarily search for good quality when shopping at thrift shops, but for unique, vintage and retro styles of clothes.

> The reason I buy thrift clothes is first the uniqueness. Secondly, I'm trying to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle by thrifting, saving water, and so on. Thirdly, thrifting is wallet-friendly. (Participant D, 23 years old, female)

At Toirog, people donate their old clothes, which are then sold in the market. Not all thrift shops operate on a charity or donation-based model; however, Toirog's popularity enabled small thrift shops to capitalize on the narrative of the 'sustainable' aspect of secondhand clothes. Many in-store and online thrift shops either import items from other countries or curate trendy secondhand pieces from the vast selection available in *komiss* stores, tailored to their target market. Some of these shops openly acknowledge that they are essentially retailing *komiss* clothes to younger generations under the guise of a 'thrift shop'. An owner of the online thrift shop was honest about the matter and said, 'thrift shops are just the same old *komiss* with an Instagram page'. Although there are distinctions between thrift shops and *komiss* shops, in terms of buyers' motivation, shop space and trade models, the line is at the same time getting blurry.

SHIFTING PERCEPTION OF SECONDHAND CLOTHES

Clothes are instrumental in embodying social change and have an agency to demonstrate class, gender and generational aspirations (Martin, 1994). What people wear communicates to others the wearer's belonging, social status and financial ability. Deliberately choosing secondhand clothes encompasses a range of motivations, including economic savings, environmental sustainability, cultural expression, embodying identity and the acquisition of unique or high-quality items. In the Mongolian context, a surge of thrift shops in Ulaanbaatar has sparked a generational shift in the ethical perception of wearing secondhand clothes. Secondhand clothes sold in *komiss* shops used to be associated with notions of danger, contamination and ambiguity. While practicality, frugality and economic circumstances might drive people to buy from *komiss* shops, these purchases were not typically linked with ethical consumption.

As the environmental impacts of over-consumption have become more apparent, there is a growing recognition of the need to embrace the reuse of secondhand clothes. Globally, including younger generations in Mongolia, there is a significant trend towards choosing used clothes as a means of expressing both sustainability and personal identity at affordable value.

Through their secondhandedness, the clothes are transformed from 'bad' to 'good' consumption choices, absolved of their association with the many social, environmental,

economic and political ills of fast-fashion and mass consumption (Stansfield, 2022). Whether donated to thrift shops or purchased directly, engaging with secondhand clothes is widely regarded as an ethical practice today. As Gregson and Crewe (2003) noted, secondhand exchange is equally shaped by the seller and the buyer. Thrift shops like Toirog curate an atmosphere nostalgic to Mongolia's socialist past, thus transforming the act of shopping for secondhand clothes into a cultural experience, fostering cultural spaces where customers can connect with nostalgia, community and sustainable consumption practices.

The younger generation's preference for secondhand clothes challenges the stigma of wearing *komiss* garments. A noticeable generational divide exists in how secondhand clothes are perceived as an ethical choice. The older generation tends to be more hesitant about both buying and donating secondhand clothes. While some still prefer to retain old clothes within the family circle or dispose of them through burning, rather than donating, others are gradually embracing the purchase of secondhand clothing. On the other side, engaging in thrift and *komiss* shopping is significant for the younger generation as it allows them to express their identity, fashion sense and ethical stance while also fostering a sense of community among thrift shoppers. Younger generations are more inclined towards global and modern ethical perspectives regarding secondhand clothes, while the older generation maintains a focus on local and traditional values.

Furthermore, it was observed that many young Mongolians perceive the religious and cosmological beliefs surrounding used clothes as outdated and superstitious. However, there were also a few young participants who expressed their alignment with the traditional belief when shopping at thrift shops, such as avoiding the purchase of hats, belts and upper-body clothing:

> I don't believe that one's clothes accommodate their energy or spirit. Mostly I think of hats, connected to the traditional ethics of used clothing. It is said that one should respect their hat because their hat represents their *khiimori*. So, if I'd wear someone else's hat, I would spit, etc. (according to folk custom). Also, I don't buy hats from *komiss* shops. For other clothing, I don't mind at all to thrift. (Participant D, 22 years old, female)

Findings demonstrate that the younger generations in Mongolia are actively shaping their ethical stance on secondhand clothes through the proliferation of thrift shops, thereby challenging and integrating the traditional perceptions associated with secondhand clothing.

CONCLUSION

This study discusses the evolving dynamics of secondhand clothing consumption in Mongolia, examining two models of secondhand clothing sales and exploring intergenerational perspectives and evolving ethical values. The existing modes of secondhand clothing sales include *komiss* shops and thrift shops. The *komiss* shop, as a form of *naimaa*, has been ethically refreshed with the introduction of 'western' thrift shops. Unlike *komiss* vendors, thrift shops often evoke a nostalgic environment by reimagining the past, appealing especially to young shoppers and fostering a consumption of thrift and vintage culture through secondhand clothes. The younger generation's embrace of secondhand clothes represents a pivotal challenge to the stigma historically connected with *komiss* garments. This shift reflects a generational divide in how secondhand clothes are perceived ethically. What were once objects associated with ambiguity and contamination are now accepted as sustainable and ethical consumption. Engaging in thrift and *komiss* shopping carries significance beyond simply finding cheap garments. It acts as a means for self-expression, allowing individuals to display their identity, fashion tastes and ethical values. In challenging traditional reluctance, young Mongolians are defining their own ethical stance on secondhand clothes, drawing from both local and global ethical narratives and actively participating in the ongoing discourse on sustainable consumption practices.

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