

The Right Nudge: Making Upcycled Products Irresistible

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Problem of practice

Many businesses today recognize the importance of recycling and upcycling in reducing waste; however, their focus has primarily been on sourcing raw materials and production. It is time to involve consumers as active agents in circular business practices, such as upcycling. While consumer expectations of sustainable brand behaviour have increased, there is a gap between stated consumer intent and their actual behaviour. This gap can intensify when product attributes and/or the consumption experience are modified, as in the case of upcycled products. As a result, such products experience low adoption rates. The [recent research](#) by Tianfeng Shi, Rong Huang and Emine Sarigollu discusses how consumers' internal motivations can help shape purchase intentions for upcycled products.¹ Marketers can leverage these insights to go beyond highlighting environmental gains and work on enhancing the desirability of such products and ensuring wider adoption of upcycled products

¹ The article 'The role of internal motivations in consumer upcycling intention and purchase intention of upcycled products' by Tianfeng Shi, Rong Huang and Emine Sarigollu, featured in Volume 59, Issue 1 of *European Journal of Marketing* talks about how consumer internal motivations relate to purchase intention of upcycled products

Upcycling & consumer motivation

Global waste is projected to reach **3.4 billion tonnes** by 2050, more than double the population growth over the same period.² More than 1 billion tonnes of global food production is wasted and this figure is expected to double by 2050.³ Reducing global food waste may also be the **key** to mitigating the climate crisis.⁴ Not just food, but also more textile waste is produced every year – and is projected to grow from **90 million tonnes** currently to 134 million tonnes by 2030.⁵ At the same time, consumers are becoming more concerned about sustainability and one way to reduce waste is through **upcycling**, especially in the food and fashion sectors.⁶

Upcycling, different from recycling, has a more beneficial environmental impact. While recycling refers to the breaking down of waste products into raw ingredients for use in various production processes, upcycling is the reuse or repurposing of discarded materials, products or components of a product, without downgrading them to their raw form, to create a product of higher **value**.⁷ Two examples of upcycling come from the food and fashion industries: **Barnana** sources overripe bananas from regenerative farms in Latin America to make snacks such as chips and bites.⁸ Patagonia's **WornWear** programme repurposes pre-loved gear through repair and the addition of design elements.⁹

Consumers' internal motivations which positively impact purchase intention of upcycled products:

- Motivation for waste prevention
 - Motivation for social connectedness
 - Motivation for emotional attachment
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Though the number and variety of upcycled offerings are on the increase, the appeal and reach of these products remain limited. The recent research by Shi and team sheds light on how internal motivations impact purchase intentions for upcycled products. According to their research, three key internal motivations guide consumer purchases of upcycled products:

Motivation for waste prevention: **Waste prevention**, 'an individual's inherent tendency to minimize resource consumption and waste generation', aligns strongly with the value proposition of upcycled products.¹⁰ This motivation strengthens mindful purchase decisions and enhances preference for upcycled products, which are



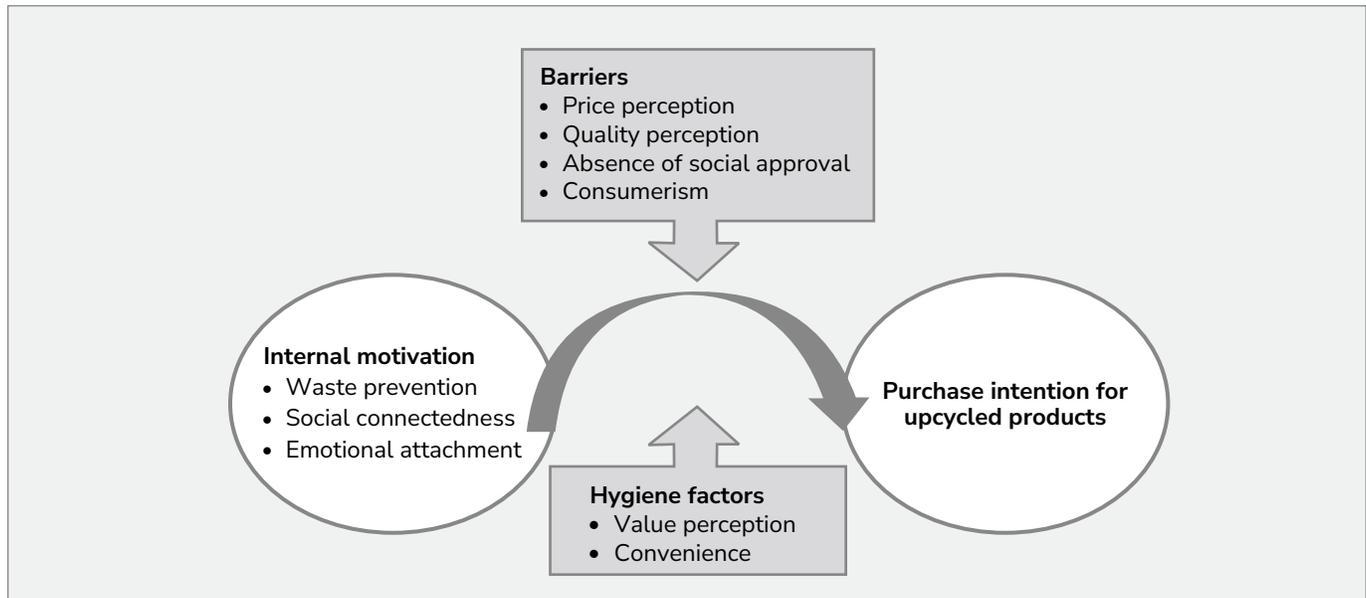
perceived as less wasteful, compared to new and recycled products.

Motivation for social connectedness: **Social connectedness** is a reflection of 'human desire to build and maintain relationships with others', through social media groups and brand communities, among others.¹¹ Many entrepreneurs reach consumers through social media communities that serve as marketplaces for upcycled **products**.¹² There is a higher level of buyer-seller interaction required for upcycled products, as customers seek more assurance and information on non-standardized **offerings**.¹³ Some upcycled products also involve co-creation, which involves extensive customer engagement, thereby strengthening **social connectedness**.¹⁴ Collaborating, discovering and sharing creativity reflected in the upcycled products also plays a key role in strengthening social connectedness.

Motivation for emotional attachment: Consumers are not easily willing to discard products with emotional value, which has a positive impact on longevity of **product usage**.¹⁵ This holds true even for commercial upcycled products, which may not have personal nostalgia but can still 'evoke **collective nostalgia**'.¹⁶ Creating emotional bonds helps the consumers in creating new memories and constructing a cohesive **self narrative**.¹⁷

To leverage these motivations and appeal to a broader customer base, it is also essential to identify the necessary conditions (hygiene factors) and barriers that can impact consumer adoption of upcycled products (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Factors impacting purchase intention of upcycled products



Source: Created by author (internal motivations as given by Shi and team)

Necessary conditions & barriers

While environmental benefits, social connections and emotional attachment may be important motivations for customers, they are effective only when the minimum necessary customer expectations are met. To reach scale, upcycled brands need to expand beyond the early committed customers and appeal to a broader segment, the majority of whom buy products based on their benefits. Establishing a value perception on par with other market offerings becomes a necessary requirement (hygiene factor) for an upcycled brand.

Convenience is another necessary condition for converting motivation to intent. Motivations will lead to purchase intention only if access to and use of upcycled products are convenient and do not require additional effort from the consumer.

A key barrier to consumer adoption of upcycled products is the high price perception due to the premium associated with green products. While price perception is generally high, the converse holds for quality perception, which is another key barrier. The use of old, discarded or pre-used materials can adversely impact consumers' perception of hygiene quality and longevity. This is compounded by the fact that upcycled products are often 'one-of-a-kind', leading to a lack of standardization.

A third barrier is the absence of social approval, which has adverse implications for user's image. [Flyrobe](#), which offers designer wear for rent in the Indian market, faced

significant hurdles in shifting consumer preferences from owned to rental wear.¹⁸ In spite of providing affordable access to designer wear and having a clear sustainability impact, the brand faced the challenge of social acceptability due to taboos about pre-worn garments and the impact on consumers' social identity. In categories like fashion, the need for variety and adherence to trends leads to a significantly reduced product use, despite its actual longevity. The fact that upcycling is not yet a prominent social practice and, therefore, lacks sufficient strength to counter consumerism, constitutes yet another barrier to the adoption of upcycled products. So, how can marketers integrate insights about motivation, barriers and expectations to succeed?

Crafting marketing strategy

Brand messaging for upcycled products typically focuses on how their offerings help consumers contribute to sustainability. However, a [2024 study](#) found that only 10% of customer reviews of upcycled products mentioned sustainability, while 74% highlighted creativity.¹⁹

To enhance adoption of upcycled products and move the consumer from motivation to purchase intention, a company's marketing strategy needs to take into account the motivating factors, consumer expectations and barriers most relevant to the target audience. Here are a few initiatives that brands can take while leveraging consumers' internal motivations:

- Implement waste reduction initiatives beyond the primary product offering. This includes optimizing packaging and logistics, as well as offering maintenance services. Upcycled high-fashion brand [Doodlage](#) launched self-destructing packaging, which, when discarded, transforms into earth-friendly wax.²⁰
- Use internal motivations as a basis for psychographic profiling and sharper segmentation, like [Zero Waste Daniel](#), a brand of gender-neutral, upcycled garments that targets fashion-forward young people who support a zero-waste lifestyle.²¹
- Highlight creativity, uniqueness and individuality like [Mishcat](#), which produces one-of-a-kind carpets from leftover sari scraps, taking pride in the inconsistencies of each piece.²² The company markets these carpets as anchor art pieces, around which interiors can be designed.
- Build upcycling communities and collaborations to enhance brand engagement and social connections like [Agricycle](#), which partners with small farmers to reduce wastage.²³ Designer brands like Coach or Gavriel offer peer-to-peer resale platforms to help connect fans of brands.²⁴
- Build emotional connect through creation of meaningful experiences and stories woven around history, culture or craft like [Rkive](#), where customers witness and learn more about the entire process of making the upcycled items in the stores.²⁵ This creates an emotional attachment to the clothing.
- Leverage pride as opposed to guilt in crafting brand communication.²⁶ Brand messages highlighting higher green, emotional and/or aesthetic value of upcycled products are likely to generate more positive consumer attitudes.

Brands also need to work at lowering the barriers and removing 'negative connotations' in consumers' minds about upcycled products. Marketers can use the following initiatives to build narratives challenging these perceptions:

- Design a compelling value proposition that should be able to match or exceed the non-upcycled product experience like the cassava chips launched by [Barnana](#), which were positioned as 'better, crunchier and tastier' than regular potato chips.²⁷
- Create appealing narratives around waste reduction by marketing upcycled products as statement pieces and conversation starters like [RE.STATEMENT](#), an online marketplace to buy and sell upcycled

fashion.²⁸ Companies can also reframe the way people perceive upcycled products. For example, Rubies in the Rubble, which produces condiments from fruits and vegetables that would otherwise be discarded, reframes 'waste' as 'surplus', and explains what they mean by [surplus produce](#), thus mitigating quality concerns.²⁹

- Promote product-as-a-service and offer variety and convenience, like [Patagonia](#), which covers the shipping costs and rewards consumers with store credit to facilitate the return of used products.³⁰
- Enhance affordability and access, to expand scale like the value for money [Dwij](#) products, made from upcycled jeans, which are priced under Rs 2000 and sold through selected sustainable e-commerce platforms.³¹

While environmental benefits, social connections and emotional attachment may be important motivations for customers, they are effective only when the minimum necessary customer expectations are met



What to watch out for

If brands want to launch a line of upcycled products, they need to be careful not to create a mismatch between the new product line and existing brand identity, as it can lead to brand dilution. In such situations, brands may consider launching upcycled products under a new brand name.³² The cultural context of the target consumer is also an important factor in shaping purchase intentions for upcycled products.³³ Consumers' internal motivations will depend on the culture they belong to.

Marketers of upcycled brands must consider the investment required to produce and market authentic upcycled products beyond the existing niche segments. Most of the existing supply chains, production processes and quality benchmarks are geared towards conventional production. Hence, the production of upcycled goods, involving repurposing and redesigning, entails higher costs and effort. Even the marketing

expenses are higher, as these brands need to invest in campaigns to bring about shifts in socio-cultural norms and behaviour patterns of consumers to expand the addressable market.

Motivation to intention

Leveraging consumer motivations can be the key to unlocking market potential for upcycled products. Joe Murphy, Executive Lead, Ellen MacArthur Foundation, sums up the role of marketing in enhancing sustainable consumption: "A circular economy is about giving people better choices. But for these products and services to become the norm, they need to be irresistible. Marketers need to celebrate the benefits of these new offers and not rely on people 'doing the right thing'."³⁴ By leveraging consumers' individual motivations, barriers and social norms, marketers can help consumers make sustainable choices.



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