

# “Let It Go!”: What Brands Should Do To Promote Resale Behaviour

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## Problem of practice

While recent years have seen rising consumer interest and demand for second-hand goods, one persistent challenge remains: the supply. Consumers are often reluctant to part with their possessions, even those that they no longer use. This reluctance is especially strong among those who purchase new products firsthand, as they tend to form deeper emotional connections with such products, which inhibits their re-entry into the supply cycle. So how can brands break this deadlock? The answer lies in recent [research](#) by Feifei Huang and Vincent Chi Wong, which suggests a virtuous ‘reuse-resale cycle’ – second-hand purchases involve weaker attachment, which reduces barriers to reselling<sup>1</sup>. Thus, this increases supply and encourages more consumers to buy second-hand products. To leverage this insight and provide brands and marketers with a playbook of interventions, we outline a framework to identify the most effective nudges based on purchase type and consumer type. These strategies can help expand the second-hand market and align with sustainability goals

<sup>1</sup> The article ‘From Second-Hand to Third-Hand: Reuse and Resale Cycle’ by Feifei Huang and Vincent Chi Wong, featured in Volume 51, Issue 1 of *Journal of Consumer Research* talks about promotion of reuse and resale behaviours and how such behaviours can reduce waste as well as save energy and resources in the production of new goods

## Resell and reuse

Fatima had bought a new jacket a couple of years back. At the same time, Seema had also bought a similar jacket second hand. Two years passed since the purchase, and neither of them wears their jacket so often now. So, if they were to resell the jacket, who would be more likely: Fatima or Seema? Recent research by Huang and Wong suggests Seema would be more likely to resell hers. According to their research, consumers are more willing to resell a product they purchased second hand, as most consumers form weaker connections or emotional attachments to second-hand products. When consumers buy a product first hand, they develop unique personal associations with it, create a strong connection and link it to their identity. However, if it is a second-hand purchase, they recognise its 'history' with a previous owner, weakening their personal association, making them more willing to resell it.

The second-hand market (recommerce) is expected to grow rapidly in the next few years. The second-hand market for apparel is projected to [cross](#) USD 360 billion by 2030, at a growth rate upwards of 10%.<sup>2</sup> Products related to entertainment (movies, music, games and books) are the second popular category in the second-hand market in [China](#) and [France](#).<sup>3,4</sup> Responsible brands are increasingly looking at [facilitating](#) used products transactions, be it directly from the brand to consumer, from retailer to consumers or from consumer to consumer.<sup>5</sup> A 2025 resale [report](#) by ThredUp points to increasing global demand for second-hand goods, highlighting that 76% of US-based retailers are exploring resale options.<sup>6</sup>

## Barriers to supply

While the push so far has been on building demand for second-hand products, encouraging resale behaviour to expand the supply side is equally important. There are three key barriers to the supply side:

- **The consumer barrier:** This can be described as the consumers' materialistic attachments and low motivation to part with products that are still usable, which adversely affects sustainability and sharing economy goals. Unwillingness to part with a product could stem from product attributes or consumer emotions. For instance, [85%](#) of women keep clothes that do not fit, hoping to re-wear them or out of guilt about discarding them.<sup>7</sup> This limits the inflow of products available in the second-hand market.
- **The market barrier:** The resale market receives sporadic supply of low-quality and limited variety of

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### Three key barriers to resale supply side

- **Consumer barrier:** The consumers' materialistic attachments and low motivation to part with the products
- **Market barrier:** The resale market has limited and sporadic supply of low-quality and variety of products
- **Social barrier:** Prevailing social norms and mindsets about the use of second-hand products and their disposal can have an impact



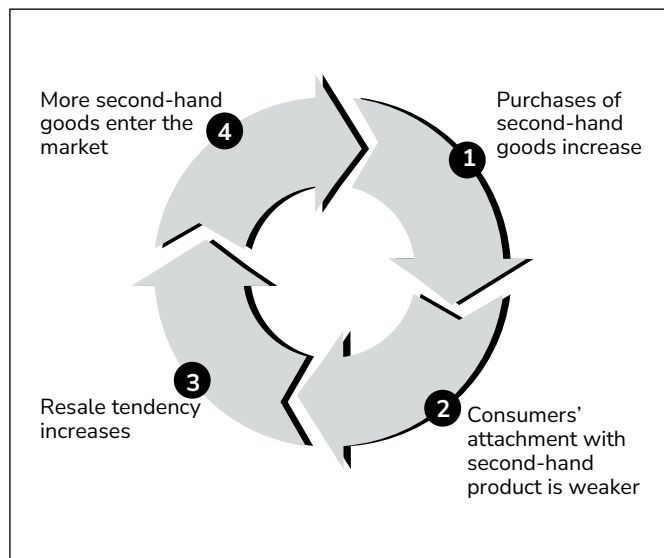
products, which hinders the growth of a robust second-hand marketplace. Resale outlets and thrift stores report that about 50% of the clothing they get is not in a condition to be resold.<sup>8</sup>

- **The social barrier:** Often, prevailing social norms and mindsets about the use of second-hand products and their disposal can have an impact on the gap between stated intent and actual behaviour. A study in Malaysia found that consumers' hesitation to buy second-hand products was due to quality concerns (63.2%) and hygiene issues (57.9%).<sup>9</sup>

## Marketer's playbook

The research by Huang and Wong suggests that people have a strong tendency to retain products that they have bought, even when they are no longer useful. But when consumers buy second-hand, they are more likely to resell, which in turn makes more products available in the second-hand market for others to buy, creating a virtuous 'reuse and resale cycle' (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The virtuous reuse-resale cycle**



Source: Created by the authors based on research by Feifei Huang and Vincent Chi Wong. "From Second-Hand to Third-Hand: Reuse and Resale Cycle." *Journal of Consumer Research* 51, no. 1 (2024): 104–13. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucad042>.

Brands can leverage this insight to encourage consumers' participation in the resale cycle through a two-pronged approach:

1. Promote more second-hand buying behaviour by enhancing accessibility to second-hand markets and products. Promoting second-hand transactions can reduce waste, strengthen supply in resale markets, and drive sustainable consumption. Some ways to encourage resale behaviour are:

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- *Encouraging sale and purchase of second-hand products between consumers* by providing visibility and easy matching. Some examples are C2C platforms such as [OLX](#) and [eBay](#).<sup>10</sup> In the not-for-profit space, thrift stores such as [Goodwill](#) attempt to encourage repurchase and resale behaviour.<sup>11</sup>
  - *Facilitating return of used products to the retailer/brand for resale*, like [Patagonia's](#) worn wear programme, where clothes returned by consumers are refurbished and resold, [IKEA's](#) Buy Back Friday, where IKEA buys back customers' furniture at double price and [H&M's](#) initiative to provide store credit in exchange for any used clothes.<sup>12,13,14</sup>
  - *Strengthening government/regulatory mechanisms* to support and reward such circular efforts, such as India's Consumer Protection (Direct Selling) Rules, 2021, an [act](#) that establishes guidelines to protect consumers.<sup>15</sup>
2. Incentivise those who have bought first hand to resell. If marketers can find ways to weaken consumers' connection with new products, it could encourage resale behaviour, enhancing product reuse, thereby limiting new production. Some ways to incentivise reselling are:
    - *Promoting decluttering techniques* and popularising practices such as the [KonMari method](#) can encourage minimalism and help people break attachment with their possessions.<sup>16</sup> Reframing the practice of reselling as a form of decluttering and doing good may enable individuals to feel the 'warm glow' effect and encourage weaker attachment with their possessions.
    - *Including prompts on mindful consumption* and highlighting the adverse impact of materialism on consumer well-being in brand messaging and social awareness campaigns can sever or weaken product connections. For example, [Back Market](#), a marketplace for refurbished tech, highlights the absurdity of the obsession for possessing the 'newest' gadgets.<sup>17</sup>



- *Establishing a personal connection with the prospective buyers of products that may have strong nostalgia or meaningful associations. This connection may enable meaningful transfer to some extent, thereby increasing willingness to part with the product. For example, a ‘mother’ sharing memories of a LEGO set for sale on a P2P platform might create a sense of ‘entrusting to’ the future owner, which could weaken ties.*
- *Offering return and exchange programmes and specifying the time period for exchange at the time of the original purchase could create an association of temporary ownership, thus weakening the consumer-product connect and making the consumer more inclined to return the product. The brand can then resell returned products. [Aretto](#), a flexible-size shoe brand for children, asks consumers to return the shoe when the child outgrows it and take a bigger size in exchange.<sup>18</sup>*
- *Promoting rental models like [Rent the Runway](#) and [Flyrobe](#) may also help shift consumer mindsets from ownership to ‘temporary custodian’, strengthening the circular view of consumption.<sup>19</sup>*

## Pitfalls to manage

- Marketers face a conundrum with resale programmes: On the one hand, they want to encourage consumers

to return products. But they also want to generate more sales and create brand associations of long-lasting products, rather than evoking ‘resale’ as the dominant association. For instance, a durable brand could risk signalling lower quality if it encourages consumers to replace the product sooner or if second-hand sales see a surge. Lower prices can impact demand and price perception of new products sold by authorised dealers.

**Action:** Brands can introduce well-timed nudges after a defined period post-purchase, based on the typical product lifespan. At that point, promotion of reselling can happen without harming brand associations or losing customer loyalty. Another way could be to reframe ‘resale’ behaviour by focusing on the brand portfolio.<sup>20</sup> A customer may be persuaded to resell one product, while their attachment to the brand can be strengthened by trading within the brand portfolio.

- Apart from this ‘qualitative cost’, managers also need to consider the operational and financial costs of introducing a resale programme.

**Action:** Brands can incorporate technology-enabled [resale processes](#) with integrated quality-control mechanisms in their existing loyalty programmes.<sup>21</sup>

- Measuring impact is important for analysing the effectiveness of these reselling initiatives.

**Action:** Brands can monitor the percentage of products included in [resale programmes](#), the typical product lifespan, and customer participation rates across segments.<sup>22</sup>

## Product and consumer type

How brands can create successful resale programs also depends on the type of product and consumer:

**Product type:** While second-hand purchases are likely to form weaker connections, this may not always be true. Consumers can create a strong connection with second-hand products if previous ownership reinforces desired associations, such as with luxury or aspirational brands such as when buying a second-hand Harley-Davidson from someone who embodies the brand.

Products bought first-hand also may not always forge strong connections. A consumer's connections may be stronger for brands like [Patagonia](#) that align with their self-expression and emotional benefits.<sup>23</sup> Such connections may not appear to be as strong for products purchased for their functionality, like a vacuum cleaner, which gets the job done but rarely carries any emotional weight.

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**Consumer type:** How resale tendencies play out also depends on the type of consumer the brands need to target. Take the instance of a writer who opened up about her [hoarding tendencies](#) for high-end garments.<sup>24</sup> Even without looking at such extreme cases, consumers can be classified along the continuum of minimalist or maximalist tendencies. Some are frugal and detached, while others are unable to part with their possessions, as their sense of self is tied to the products.

Marketers can apply different nudges for each type of consumer orientation and nature of connection (see [Figure 2](#)): emotion-laden narratives, status or identity-driven rewards, or ease/convenience.

## The final pitch

Brands' encouragement of resale behaviour can bring more products back into the supply chain and help the 'reuse-resale' cycle to flourish. A report shows that

**Figure 2: Consumer personas, connections and marketer responses\***

Consumer orientation	Materialistic	<p><b>Utilitarian hoarders:</b> Buy a lot of products, mostly for specific functional attributes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incentivise resale with upgrade options</li> <li>• Position reselling as facilitating purchase of new variants</li> <li>• Ensure encouraging resale does not lead to unmindful pursuit of variety</li> </ul>	<p><b>Aspirational collectors:</b> Consumer group that finds resale the most difficult</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build brand-led return incentives with status appeal and personalised recognition</li> <li>• Link incentives to exclusive brand loyalty benefits</li> <li>• Redirect this segment's attachment to toward the brand by providing seamless resale and upgrade options</li> </ul>
	Minimalistic	<p><b>Functional &amp; detached:</b> Consumers who find resale the easiest; they have low emotional ties and low ownership desire</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build awareness and ease of listing on consumer-to-consumer reselling platforms</li> <li>• Simplify resale, including integrated options in the brand/retailer app</li> <li>• Introduce rental and leasing models</li> </ul>	<p><b>Attached declutterer:</b> Internally motivated and meaning driven. Values self-expression, open to decluttering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlight benefits to provide intrinsic motivation</li> <li>• Establish a personal connection or shared context between buyer and seller to encourage the seller to let go</li> <li>• Emphasize decluttering benefits of resale and pitch C2C platforms</li> </ul>
		<b>Weak/easy to part with (utilitarian/bought second hand)</b>	<b>Strong/difficult to part with (self-expressive/hedonic, bought first hand)</b>
<b>Nature of connection</b>			

\*Marketer responses provided in *italics*

Source: Created by the authors (axis variables are drawn from the research by Feifei Huang and Vincent Chi Wong. "From Second-Hand to Third-Hand: Reuse and Resale Cycle." *Journal of Consumer Research* 51, no. 1 (2024): 104–13. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucad042>)

72% of consumers are likely to buy a brand's products if the brand offers and promote resale options.<sup>25</sup> Marketers need to highlight consumers' awareness and appreciation of reselling as responsible consumption behaviour.

As we recommended above, marketers should tailor their responses based on the type of buyer. For second-hand buyers like Seema, who may have a naturally higher tendency to resell, marketers can help through resale

programmes and platforms. Marketers can encourage first-time buyers like Fatima to appreciate the benefits of resale by offering incentives that strengthen the consumer-brand relationship.

Second-hand sales and purchases should be promoted as responsible brand behaviour, which will increasingly be seen as a mainstream option and valued by consumers.



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