



Unraveling the Second-Hand Clothing Industry:

A Case Study of H&M's Campaign *Let's Close the Loop*

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Abstract

This master's thesis investigates the dynamics of the Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) trade between the Global North (GN) and Global South (GS), focusing on the rewear, reuse, and recycling initiatives exemplified by a case study of H&M's Let's Close the Loop campaign. The study delves into the environmental- and social impacts of SHC importation in the GS, particularly exploring the sustainability of SHC in Ghana and Kenya, major importers in the SHC trade. Through analysis of sustainability reports and interviews, the research aims to uncover how H&M addresses and mitigates associated risks with collected used clothing. Additionally, this study incorporates perspectives from actors involved with SHC in Ghana and Kenya to shed light on local responses to SHC disposal. The findings reveal contradictions in H&M's claims of circularity and sustainability, upholding certain narratives around SHC through the campaign. The implications for development and natural resource management are significant as the findings also highlight some social- and environmental consequences. Including, financial instability for sellers with many facing debt due to declining quality and unpredictable sales. Additionally, SHC imports have undermined local textile industries and culture, while contributing to significant environmental harm through textile waste, pollution, and overburdened landfills. The disposal of unsellable clothing from the Global North not only disrupts local economies but also exacerbates ecological degradation, creating a worsening crisis. Interview findings and reports also exposes broader systematic maintenance of waste colonialism through the SHC trade. These insights underscore the need for critical examination of H&M's sustainability initiatives and broader implications within the SHC industry.

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1 Introduction

Textile production ranks as one of the most polluting industries, emitting 1.2 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent annually, more than international flights and maritime shipping together (Nature Climate Change, 2018). The rapid expansion of the fast-fashion industry has been a major contributor to this. Since the global market opened in the 1980s in the Global North, the fast-fashion industry has undergone explosive growth. By transforming industrial and digital platforms including reconstruction of the supply chain, the industry has accelerated their production vastly (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). By focusing on what consumers want and promoting the idea of “newness” based on consumers wishes, discarded clothing has increased, either ending up as waste or donations of different kinds. Out of every 5 garments produced, approximately 3 end up in landfills or are incinerated annually (Remy, Speelman & Swartz, 2016). As one imagines, this contributes to a major expansion of the second-hand clothing (SHC) trade, specifically between Global North (GN) and Global South (GS). The SHC industry often includes all types of garments, shoes, handbags, belts, and clothing accessories. Around 70% of SHC donated globally end up in African countries. Also, one of the biggest receivers of the lowest grade of SHC today (Kubania, 2015; Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023).

Due to its complexity and varied effects, tracing the full supply chain of Africa's SHC is difficult (Sumo et al, 2023), especially within the context of the SHC trade's complex international dynamics, which appear to sustain inequalities and imbalances between GN and GS, upholding a colonial dependence between nations (Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023). Therefore, as a result of the asymmetric power relationships that dictate trade policy, Africa possesses a subordinate role in the global economy. One likely reason is the aftermath of the economic liberalization in Africa (Brooks & Simon, 2012). Arguably, this movement of clothing and textiles from the GN to the GS indicates waste colonialism (Vanacker et al, 2023).

The environmental impact of SHC industry has been clearly emphasized in policy and research (The Or Foundation 2023; Changing Markets Foundation 2023; Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis 2023; Mensah 2023; Skinner 2019; Brooks 2015). For example, the practice of dumping and discarding unwanted clothing in landfills is a common adopted strategy, despite the serious environmental consequences. This is due to the absence of efficient legislation and infrastructure for the appropriate disposal of SHC in many African countries, and as a result these items often instead find their way to dump sites; clogging rivers, greenways, and parks, and potentially be an environmental health risk (Sumo et al, 2023; Bick, Halsey & Ekenga, 2018).

The SHC trade has been seen, primarily from a GN perspective, as vital for reducing poverty in GS (Sumo et al, 2023). Although, it has contributed to an uncertain economy while undermining the local manufacturing sector (Dissanayake & Pal, 2023; The Or Foundation, 2023b). Additionally, some argue that the SHC trade has good effects on the environment as it helps reduce pollution and saves resources. However, with the development of fast-fashion,

SHC and textile waste expanded beyond what is manageable (Dissanayake & Pal, 2023). As most research points to continued growth in the fashion and textiles industry in the coming decades (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2019; Global Fashion Agenda (GFA) & Boston Consulting Group, 2017). Industries such as SHC will most likely proceed to increase which raise concerns of social- and environmental harm in low-income countries.

In the past decade, there has been a significant rise in resale, rental, repair, and remaking activities in fashion, especially in the GN, creating a market worth USD 73 billion as of 2019 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). One company adopting this type of strategy is the Swedish fast-fashion company Hennes & Mauritz (H&M). Since 2013 H&M have promoted their campaign *Let's close the loop* where they encourage customers to donate any unwanted clothes or textiles, regardless of the brand or condition. The company provides recycling boxes in every global store where customers can drop off their used clothing. Then, a business partner takes care of emptying and sorting into three categories: Rewear (sold as second-hand clothing); Reuse (transformed into other products); and Recycle (shredded into fibers) (H&M, n.d., a). H&M was one of the first brands to initiate a garment collection program in 2013 and have since then collected over 155,000 tonnes of textiles (H&M Group, n.d., b). They express the following on their website,

“Here’s a not-so-fun fact: Today, less than 1% of the materials used to make clothes get recycled each year. This means that thousands of tonnes of textiles end up in landfills. By reusing or recycling fashion, we can turn that around.” (H&M, n.d.).

In 2015, the company produced 1.3 million garments with closed-loop material and is one of the biggest users of recycled polyester and organic cotton in the world (Edelbaum, 2019). While H&M has been leading example in clothing reuse, rewear, and recycle practice globally, there are some loopholes (Lindberg & Wennman, 2023a; *ibid*, 2023b; Lindberg, 2023; Lindberg & Fernvall, 2022) in which my thesis will try to explore. Also, many doubt whether the second-largest fast-fashion company in the world meets the requirements for a sustainable approach; a study shows that 96% of H&M's sustainability claims were unjustified or misleading – placing them as one of the lowest-ranking brands among the 50 of the world's biggest fashion brands (Changing Market Foundation, 2021).

Many articles emphasize the consequences of textile waste in specific countries but do not address H&M's involvement in this issue (Ayorkor & Ferrero-Regis, 2023; Sumo et al, 2023; Mensah, 2023; Khan et al, 2018; Brooks & Simon, 2012). This leads me to why I believe this research is important to study. The idea of the *Let's Close the Loop* campaign represents the transition of the fast-fashion industry from one-used and cheap fashion to rewear, reuse and recycle of used clothing, aiming to reduce textile waste. I am however interested particularly in **how this campaign is communicated by the company, and what challenges may be present**. Important to acknowledge, the SHC market does also contribute to sustainable fashion practices by extending the life cycle of clothing items, reducing overall environmental impact – if the process is done right. This examination, however, may give insights into whether major players such as H&M in the fast-fashion industry, serving as an example, are contributing or hindering such efforts. Questions concerning H&M's approach in their recycling initiatives will also be crucial to examine in need for stakeholders to be

accountable for their 'green claims', a phenomenon commonly referred to as greenwashing (European Commission, n.d., a). Lastly, the GS is a meaningful player in the global SHC supply chain. Addressing this may contribute to an understanding of unequal power dynamics between GN and GS.

1.1 Thesis aim, and research questions

This thesis aims to explore and comprehend, by discussing, the unequal power dynamics between Global North (GN) and Global South (GS) actors in the Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) trade of rewear, reuse and recycling using H&M's campaign *Let's Close the Loop* as a case study. The study will involve scrutinizing sustainability reports and interviews to identify messages related to issues such as responsibility, environmental harm in low-income countries, and how H&M addresses and mitigates associated risks.

- What are the key environmental- and social impacts of imported Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) in Africa?
- How do non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other relevant actors within the SHC industry in Africa perceive as well as address the disposal of SHC?
- In what ways does H&M, in their Sustainability Reports from 2013-2022, address and mitigate environmental- and social harm associated with the SHC trade, particularly in low-income countries?

1.2 Study Context Description

The primary focus will be to understand the environmental- and social impact of SHC, with a specific focus on Ghana and Kenya as recipient countries of SHC. Both countries surpass every other African nation in imports of SHC. In 2022 Kenya imported \$202M worth of SHC and Ghana imported clothing worth \$164M the same year (OEC, 2022). I plan to utilize secondary data to comprehend the global SHC market more carefully with focus on one of the biggest SHC markets today, Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana.

1.3 Background

1.3.1 The Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) Industry

From 2000 to 2015, clothing production doubled, yet the number of times an item of clothing was worn before being discarded decreased by over a third (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). In 2014, 100 billion garments were produced; by 2030, it's expected to exceed 200 billion. Many of which are made from non-recyclable synthetic textiles (Greenpeace, 2024). If you look at the post-production phase, referring to garments discarded by consumers as waste it

represents around 60% (Remy, Speelman & Style, 2016) of the approximately 150 billion garments produced worldwide in 2012 (Olivetti, Miller, Greene, 2015). In the European Union alone, 12.6 million tons of textile waste is produced annually, with clothing and footwear contributing a significant 5.2 million tons. Alarming, only 22% of post-production textile waste is collected for reuse or recycling, leaving the majority to burn or landfill disposal (European Commission, 2023).

Evidently, as a consequence of overproduction and consumption in fast-fashion, there has been a notable increase in textile waste. Although many leading fashion brands promote sustainable clothing and recycling practices, studies show that less than 1% is made from recycled fibers (Ellen Macarthur Foundation, 2017). When looking at reuse and recycling, it is argued that the effectiveness of circulation and reuse depends on the specific recycling routes. Hence, it may only be beneficial when the production of new products ceases and when a combination of both reuse and recycling routes are taken into account (Sandin & Peters, 2017). However, even though the industry is vital for the circular economy, it is a question of who gets access to the used clothes in the market, how materials move around, and how the profits are shared among different actors (Persson & Hinton, 2023).

1.3.2 H&M's Emerging Green Practices

H&M (Hennes & Mauritz) opened their first store in 1947 in Sweden and by the 2000s they released their first Sustainability Report. In the year of 2010, H&M introduced their first Conscious Collection with solely 'sustainable materials' and by 2013 their campaign *Let's Close the Loop* began, collecting used clothing globally. In 2022 they implemented the goal of reducing absolute greenhouse gas emissions across the value chain by 56% by 2030, and by 90% by 2040, while achieving net-zero (H&M Group, n.d. a). Last year, 2023, H&M Group launched Looper Textile Co., a joint project with Remondis, a garment collecting company. They operate primarily in Europe and collect used textiles from H&M's stores and other sources, sorting them according to the EU waste hierarchy. This includes preventing waste as the first option; second, preparing for reuse; third, recycling; fourth, recovery; lastly, disposal such as sending waste to landfill (European Commission, n.d., b). The company also emphasize post-consumer textiles as a valuable resource (H&M Group, 2021). Additionally, H&M Group supported Renewcell in developing a regenerated cellulosic fiber made from recycled cotton waste, including items from their in-store garment collection program (H&M Group, n.d., b; Looper Textile Co., n.d.).

H&M ranks as number two of all the biggest global apparel manufacturers and retailers in the world, after Inditex (Zara) (Fast Retailing, 2023). The company sells up to three billion articles per year (Paton & Maheshwari, 2019) and in 2019 the company had a \$4.1 billion worth of unsold clothes (Business of Fashion, 2019). Because of reduced production time, clothing companies can introduce new lines more often. On average, European fashion companies doubled their collections, from two times per year in 2000 and about five times per year in 2011. For example, Zara releases 24 new collections yearly, while H&M offers 12 to 16 collections every week (Remy, Speelman & Swartz, 2016).

A Report by Stica¹ shows that H&M is responsible for over 90 percent of emissions among Stica's member companies, which represent several influential Swedish clothing brands including NA-KD and Nelly.com. Around 95 percent of emissions within the industry comes from the supply chain, categorized under scope-3 in the greenhouse gas emission (GHG) protocol (Stica, 2022). From the year 2021 to 2022, H&M's scope-3 decreased with 4% in absolute GHG, now at 7% reduction in total, aiming to reduce GHG with 56% by 2030 (Appendix B, 2022a). In Sweden, 80% of the climate impact is caused by clothing, vehicles, and machinery consumption including fossil fuel energy used in the supply chain. This is representative of scope-3 (Stica, 2022).

Apart from the H&M brand, the company owns six individual brands as well, these include: Afound, Arket, COS, Monki, Weekday, and & Other Stories. It is possible to leave used garments to all stores (Appendix B, 2022a). H&M says their recycling program is non-profit and only covers their costs and they also donate a small amount to charity for each kilogram of clothes collected (Appendix B, 2016), but it is a small amount compared to what they make from selling the used clothing (Brooks, 2015). From the year 2013 until 2023, H&M's global clothing collection partner was I:Collect. A Swiss-based textile recycler which processes used clothing for resale in markets in the GS, vintage retail in the GN, and recycling (Brooks, 2015). However, H&M changed partners to a German recycling company, Remondis. After the process of collecting the used clothing, H&M sells it forward to Remondis which has an international system for handling SHC.

As H&M are profit-driven one assumes they aim to maximize the flow of materials to increase profit which ultimately grows their business (Brooks et al, 2017). During 2022, H&M collected 14,768 tonnes of used products (Appendix B, 2022a). Before being exported to the GS, clothing undergoes processing involving sorting, grading, and packaging in large industrial facilities. Exported clothes, when reaching the GS, enters a new economic cycle which benefits companies such as H&M economically. The system in used clothing is adaptable and shifting rather than a set structure, with companies and charities adapting to changes in rules and conditions within the global trade infrastructure (Brooks, 2015).

In 2022, H&M still partnered with I:CO, and they state that from the collected clothing, 55% of the items were reused as products, while 15% were repurposed as materials. Additionally, 22% were recycled for use in other industries or transformed into new fibers. For the remaining 8%, other disposal methods such as energy recovery through incineration was explored rather than sending textiles to landfills (Appendix B, 2022a).

To summarize, H&M, a major player in the global fashion industry, addresses the issue of textile waste through initiatives like their Let's Close the Loop campaign and partnership with Remondis for textile recycling. They collect used clothing globally, sort them according to the EU waste hierarchy and engage in

¹ The Scandinavian Textile Initiative for Climate Action (STICA), an initiative that supports the Swedish fashion and textile industry in its efforts to reduce its climate impact.

various recycling efforts. Despite efforts to reduce emissions by recycling garments, a significant portion of collected clothing is still shipped to low-income countries. H&M's approach involves outsourcing the handling of SHC beyond Swedish national boundaries, but it is important to take into account the role of EU's supply chains within SHC trade and their responsibility for 'green claims', also known as greenwashing (European Commission, n.d., a).

1.4 Limitations

Due to time and financial limitation, I have not conducted fieldwork in Ghana or any other county in the GS. Additionally, my focus on H&M will not be representative of the entire industry of SHC. Relying solely on H&M reports constrains the depth of my findings, especially considering the complexity of sustainability practices within large companies like H&M. Despite reaching out to individuals at H&M's department of Sustainability, the lack of response will hinder a more comprehensive understanding of the campaign. Also, conducting interviews primarily via Zoom and email had some limitations to my study. Zoom interviews lack the strength of face-to-face interactions and may lead to missing things such as body language and facial expressions. As well as lack of opportunity to observe the interviewee's environment or context. Email interviews may lead to miscommunication or misinterpretation of questions and responses due to the lack of direct contact. I conducted eight interviews which do not give a fully representative picture of the issue. Despite these limitations such as conducting interviews via Zoom, WhatsApp and email, this has provided valuable insights, especially because in-person interviews were not feasible. It is crucial to acknowledge these limitations in my study as they may have influenced my findings and conclusions.

2 Theory and Concepts

The concepts below are relevant to my analysis as they help to examine the unequal power dynamics between Global North (GN) and Global South (GS) within the second-hand clothing (SHC) market. I will explore this using the concepts of Ethical and Green Commodities in fashion, Greenwashing, and Closed Loop initiatives. This will allow me to evaluate H&M's role in green marketing and their recycling initiative *Let's close the loop*. Understanding these aspects is essential for my analysis.

2.1 Ethical and Green Commodity in Fashion

By 2030, the fashion industry could potentially consume one-quarter of the planet's lasting global carbon budget and expand land use by 35 percent to

produce fibers. The industry views recycling of textile waste as an opportunity, both economically and environmentally (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). However, for recycling to be effective it must minimize material leakages in the value chain; restrain the industry's material growth; and acknowledge consumers' role. Otherwise, efforts to 'close the loop' will not generate the desired results (ibid).

Often textile recycling practitioners present themselves as environmentally friendly enterprises, claiming to reduce waste. However, activities of traders and small sellers in the SHC chains are not discussed as much and there seems to be a lack of transparency regarding what happens downstream in the life cycle of SHC (Norris, 2015). A study done within India's SHC trade, the author questions whether used clothing as an export commodity can operate within an ethical framework. Many different actors are involved in enabling and controlling the supply and the author states that, within the SHC trade in India, corruption in civil society is rather evident. The study demonstrates how informal and illegal trades are connected to the interests of the elite. A few major importers seem to have a big influence on government actors, striving for profit, pushing out smaller dealers and taking control of specific categories to dominate the market, at the same time, relying on cheap migrant labor (Norris, 2015). This hidden side of SHC trade is discussed by Norris,

“...Although narratives of recycling as ethical behavior are used to encourage donations, these have little or no impact on the shaping of subsequent market exchanges in this second life. In fact, for many actors there is an apparent ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude, and surprisingly little attention has been paid in countries of origin to the trade’s scale, geographical distribution, and social and economic impact in developing countries. Leftovers are routinely externalized in capitalist economies and waste is often dealt with in marginalized spaces.” (Norris, 2021, p. 183).

Environmental impacts are another concern in fashion industry. As the sector grows, waste levels and water use have also increased, causing more harm to the environment. This has made the textile industry one of the biggest polluters globally. The authors suggest that we need to rethink what materials we choose in textile production to decrease the impact on the environment, as this will determine how much waste they create during production. Sustainable materials such as 'smart textiles' could be used both for customers but professionals across different fields (Provin et al, 2021). In addition, while strategies like upcycling and waste management initiatives exist to promote sustainability, it is crucial to reconsider a generation of products that either produce minimal waste or reduce it. The authors, however, argue that the global narrative in circular economy overlooks the social dimension and solely focuses on the GN. The study emphasizes the importance of placing people at the center of the fashion industry to achieve a just and circular transition (ibid).

However, important to acknowledge, the worldwide SHC trade relies on the unsustainable cycle of fast-fashion production and consumption. Low-wage workers in the GS end up using discarded clothes from the GN, often the same items they produced but cannot afford to buy new. This entire process derives from social and economic inequalities, both within individual countries and among trading partners (Norris, 2015). Moreover, for a circular fashion system, it is vital to make durable clothes that last as this is key to prolong their life cycle. Efforts to enhance durability should be combined with changing how we consume, for

example utilizing practices like repairing and reusing instead of buying new items. This shift is not solely about products; it involves broader societal changes (Vanacker et al, 2023).

In summary, the literature highlights several common themes regarding the fashion industry, textile recycling and the SHC trade. The textile industry is identified as one of the largest polluters globally, emphasizing the need to rethink material choices and adopt more sustainable practices. However, there is a lack of transparency in the downstream processes of SHC trade, raising questions about the ethical concerns. Ethical processes within SHC considers transparency and sustainability throughout the supply chain. As well as unfair trade and power imbalances between the GN and GS (Norris, 2015). Green commodities refer to sustainable practices that minimize environmental impact such as durable and long-lasting garments produced through care, repair, and upcycling, including broader societal transformations. It is however crucial to shift the focus of narratives around the circular economy away from the GN and more towards GS and social-, economic- and environmental factors (Provin et al, 2021; Vanacker et al, 2023).

To help expand the understanding of ethical and green commodities in the fashion industry, I will include the concepts of *closed loop* and *greenwashing*. They will serve to deepen the understanding of H&M's closed loop campaign as well as their emerging green practices, often referred to as greenwashing.

The Earth is entering the Anthropocene era, which is recognized in major human-caused environmental changes (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). Throughout time we have seen major shifts in clothing manufacturing and consumption patterns, which have had an impact on environmental systems. As stated, "*The long history of human-environmental interactions is interwoven with the development of international garment economies that have shaped biological and physical systems.*" (Brooks et al, 2023, p. 483). With growing concerns regarding the environmental consequences of clothing production and consumption, a response has emerged which is called closed-loop recycling. This approach gained support from industry leaders seeking to implement more sustainable practices (Brooks et al, 2017). To put it simply closed loop means that, instead of having separate steps for making clothes; selling, using, and throwing them away, it is believed that we could use old clothes as raw materials to make new clothes over and over. Positive solutions, such as closed-loop recycling initiatives, in response to the challenges of fashion and sustainability can be seen as being a "good Anthropocene". This perspective, rooted in utopian eco-modernist arguments, claims that human systems can successfully adapt and thrive in a changing world (ibid).

The authors emphasize that the idea of closed-loop recycling tends to benefit the status quo and technological change, initiatives that often originate from the idea of circular economy (Brooks et al, 2017). Although, closed-loop initiatives often acknowledge the damaging effects of the fashion industry, it does not admit to the root of the problem: growing consumption and production. This logic overlooks the underlying issues of capitalism and profit-seeking. The broader system and social relations that drive fast-fashion consumption remain unchanged, leaving the larger impacts intact. Besides, there is a lack of opposition from commercial interests or consideration of alternative models that prioritize sustainability over rapid growth and profit accumulation. Instead of

striving for a radical change that will fundamentally transform the relationship between fashion, technology, and the environment (ibid).

This is strengthened by an organization named The Or Foundation, they play a crucial role in addressing the issues of SHC in Ghana as well as conducting numerous of research cornering the issue. They challenge the idea that recycling alone can solve problems in the fast-fashion industry,

“...Nor will recycling address the root cause of overproduction, overconsumption and the diminished value of clothing overall. Recycled materials do not inherently make a garment a durable good. Recycling does little-to-nothing to change the societal view of fashion items as consumables. If anything, recycling provides an excuse to increase consumption without reckoning with the true cost.” (The Or Foundation, 2023a, p. 6).

With this model of closed-loop recycling, bins are placed in stores, encouraging customers to dispose of old clothes while shopping for new ones. Therefore, these closed-loop recycling initiatives seem to be attractive to fashion manufacturers like H&M because it allows for quick buying and throwing away of clothes. When customers want to get rid of clothes at an H&M store, they are likely tempted to buy more clothes as they must move around in the store (Brooks et al, 2017). This is strengthened by another study done from seven case studies of Swedish apparel firms (H&M included), arguing that it serves as both a marketing tactic and as a direct sales incentive to use ‘take-back bins’ (Stål & Corvellec, 2018). The Or Foundation also argues that H&M contributes to the current waste crisis as well as encourages consumption by offering discounts (The Or Foundation, 2023a).

With the low quality of fast-fashion clothes it makes it even harder to reuse and recycle (Ekström & Salomonson, 2014). This is since most of the fabric from fast-fashion clothing is made from synthetic fiber garments and in comparison, to ‘natural’ garments such as wool, cotton etcetera, synthetic fibers cannot be broken down by microorganisms (Brooks et al, 2017). The choice of low-quality fabric, often because of low cost, contributes significantly to environmental harmful and possess a direct and large impact on climate change (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). Arguably, most of the clothing we wear today was not intended for recycling (Skinner, 2019). Even garments made from natural fibers like cotton or linen often contain chemicals used in manufacturing processes such as dyes, bleaches, or finishings. These chemicals can disrupt the decomposition process during composting (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Additionally, fashion is complex and highly dependent on context, including trends, sizes, and climate. Clothing that ends up as waste often still has wearability but is discarded because it is no longer desirable to the owner. This distinction between wearability and desirability is crucial in fashion (The Or Foundation, 2023a).

Recycling campaigns within the fashion industry can be seen to represent a so-called ‘micromarketing issue of sustainability.’ A study conducted in Sweden with multiple actors such as big clothing retailers, recycling companies, and charitable organizations revealed that many participants, particularly those in fast-fashion brands, prioritize consumption over sustainability, showing little interest in reducing their environmental impact. While they engage in reuse and recycling initiatives, they often do so to justify continued consumption rather than

genuinely reducing their environmental impact. Including the fact that recycling will reduce costs since new fibers are more expensive than recycled ones (Ekström & Salomonson, 2014). This phenomenon is closely linked to the concept of greenwashing. To communicate their environmental initiatives, companies have adopted green marketing strategies to attract environmentally conscious consumers and develop their competitive approach. Though, not all of these efforts truly represent a company's actual environmental practices. While some businesses may reduce their environmental impact, others either overstate their efforts or falsely say are environmentally responsible (Szabo & Webster, 2020; Vieira de Freitas Netto et al, 2020). Complementary to this, European Commissions (EC) has suggested a law on 'green claims,' seeking to prevent companies from making deceptive statements regarding the environmental benefits of their products and services (European Commission, n.d., a).

However, different businesses have diverse approaches to sustainability and brands acknowledged the importance of communicating their sustainability actions, however they seem undecided how this should be done. Either they are concerned with being too transparent, for not delivering the right information or to greenwash. This ambiguity signifies how sustainability is merely 'performative' by securing trust from costumers (Brydgesa, Henningerd & Hanlone, 2022). Important to recognize, transparency does not necessarily mean sustainability and that brands are becoming more sustainable. The term 'sustainability' is seen too broad and fuzzy to even use for fashion brands. In fact, there is no such thing as sustainable clothing and instead brands need to be accountable for their actions and more or less avoid using concepts such as sustainability (ibid).

In conclusion, the authors introduce the concept of greenwashing, companies using environmental marketing strategies to attract consumers without necessarily implementing sustainable practices. These sustainable practices in many cases may be seen as solely performative in order to keep customers. Additionally, important to acknowledge is that transparency alone does not equal sustainability.

2.2 Waste Colonialism

The concept of 'waste colonialism' originates from the Basel Convention in 1989. In the 1970s and 1980s concern for the environment in industrialized nations caused public opposition to hazardous waste disposal. This resistance, along with increasing disposal costs, led some waste operators to look for cheaper options in Eastern Europe and developing countries where regulations were less strict. To address this issue, the Basel Convention was developed. The Convention oversees cross-border transportation of hazardous waste and other types of wastes. It requires that member countries ensure that the wastes are handled and disposed of safely for the environment and humans (Kummer Peiry, 2020). Both the Eastern African Community (EAC) and Ghana agreed to the Convention including major exporters of SHC such as France, UK, USA and Germany (Basel Convention, n.d.). The Or Foundation defines waste colonialism as the exploitation of one group of people by another through the use of waste and pollution in the other group's homeland. In many African countries such as Ghana, the SHC trade started during colonialism, and despite independence, the

power dynamics remain, with the GN sending and the GS receiving (The Or Foundation, n.d., a).

Even though Africans are no longer under direct white colonial rule, there are some lasting effects of white supremacy and colonial influences. One of the visible effects of colonial legacy can be detected within the SHC trade (Mensah, 2023). GS countries seem to bear an uneven burden of both human health and environmental costs without any profits generated by the GN nations (Pratt, 2011). Including the closing and slow decrease of the African textile industries (The Or Foundation, n.d, a). The dominant actors in the GN control the SHC supply chain, neglecting the communities they send clothes to and failing to track what happens to the clothing (Arnaud van Boeckholtz, 2020).

Understanding the role of colonialism in waste is crucial to comprehend the relationship between waste and power. Waste colonialism occurs when one dominant group controls another group by exploiting waste and pollution. This often involves the dumping of waste from wealthier nations into poorer regions, leading to environmental degradation and health dangers for marginalized communities. Foremost, it is about maintaining power structures that decide what is valuable and what is not in society (Liboiron, 2018). The author argues that waste colonialism also is connected to the access of land. Models of waste management influenced by discourses, practices, regulatory norms, and standards, are rooted in access to land. In addition, another way land is accessed for settler goals, whether planned or not, is through dispossession by contamination. For example, toxic environments disrupt relationships between land and inhabitants, forcing them off land. Highlighted, even when establishing environmental and anti-capitalist politics to address oppression within waste and pollution (ibid).

In addition, one can explore how power dynamics influence waste issues. For instance, the recent work by Manglou et al. (2022) focus on the impact of overconsumption, through Western models of production, and examine dominant narratives shaping these dynamics. They study three island territories Ndzuwani (Comoros), Réunion, and New Caledonia, all colonized by France to understand how waste manifests in these cases, considering both localized processes and colonial legacies (Manglou et al, 2022). Similarly, in a study focusing on an indigenous community in the Pacific Islands and plastic waste, they argue that the burden should primarily be with plastics producers, transnational corporations, and trading partners from GN nations, who sit at the top of the waste hierarchy (Fuller et al, 2022). Often, women who sell the SHC discard a significant portion as waste. It also affects local fishermen whose boat motors can break down when they become entangled with discarded clothes in the sea. This situation indicates an environmental injustice situation as the receivers of SHC are in fact not responsible but are forced to endure the environmental burden. Evidently, this affects not solely the environment, but public health and livelihoods (Mensah, 2023).

Furthermore, the intersection between colonialism and capitalism is a crucial framework for understanding waste colonialism. Colonialism's role in shaping capitalist systems underscores how historical processes of colonization continue to influence current structures, including the global trade in waste. The takeover of land and displacement of indigenous peoples, as highlighted by Bhabra, are not isolated events but are connected with the exploitation of resources and labor

which fuel capitalism. Similarly, waste colonialism persists unequal power dynamics, where GN nations exploit GS countries by exporting their SHC, without addressing the environmental and social consequences. By connecting Bhambra's insights to waste colonialism, we can recognize how colonial legacies continue to shape patterns of waste disposal and distribution, sustaining inequalities and environmental injustices in the global waste trade (Bhambra, 2021).

To summarize, the concept of waste colonialism sheds light on three aspects concerning SHC. First, the power dynamics inherent in the global SHC trade, particularly between the GN and the GS. It reveals how historical legacies of colonialism and ongoing structures of inequality shape the distribution of waste and pollution, with GN nations sending unwanted clothing to GS countries. Second, the waste colonialism provides an insight into the unequal burden of environmental and health costs suffered by GS communities. Lastly, by understanding how waste colonialism operates within the SHC trade, the analysis may uncover hidden power dynamics and challenge dominant narratives in SHC trade and recycling practices. In the context of the study exploring the SHC market in the GS, waste colonialism allows for an examination of the intersections between ethical and green commodities, closed-loop recycling, and greenwashing.

3 Review of Literature

3.1 Management of Second-hand Clothing in the Global North

Between 1600–1850, the development of early capitalism in Europe can be seen from different phases of economic and social change. Initially, used clothing was seen as an alternative income, to foster economic growth by selling used clothing when needed. This trade encouraged women to start small businesses and increase the circulation of goods. Meanwhile colonial trade routes expanded and so did the SHC market. However, by the late nineteenth century, with the industrial revolution, middle-class consumers avoided the market which can be seen today still. By the end of the nineteenth century, commercial trade in SHC was mostly concerning exports to colonial Africa, while charities began collecting used clothing for the poor. After World War II, cheaper clothing and increased consumer purchasing power led to a rise in donations to charity, marking a shift in used clothing distribution from charity to commerce. By the 1980s, the liberalization of African markets and declining garment costs led to a major increase in the sale of SHC to commercial textile recyclers – similar to how it appears today (Lemire 2015 & Hansen 2008 in Norris, 2015).

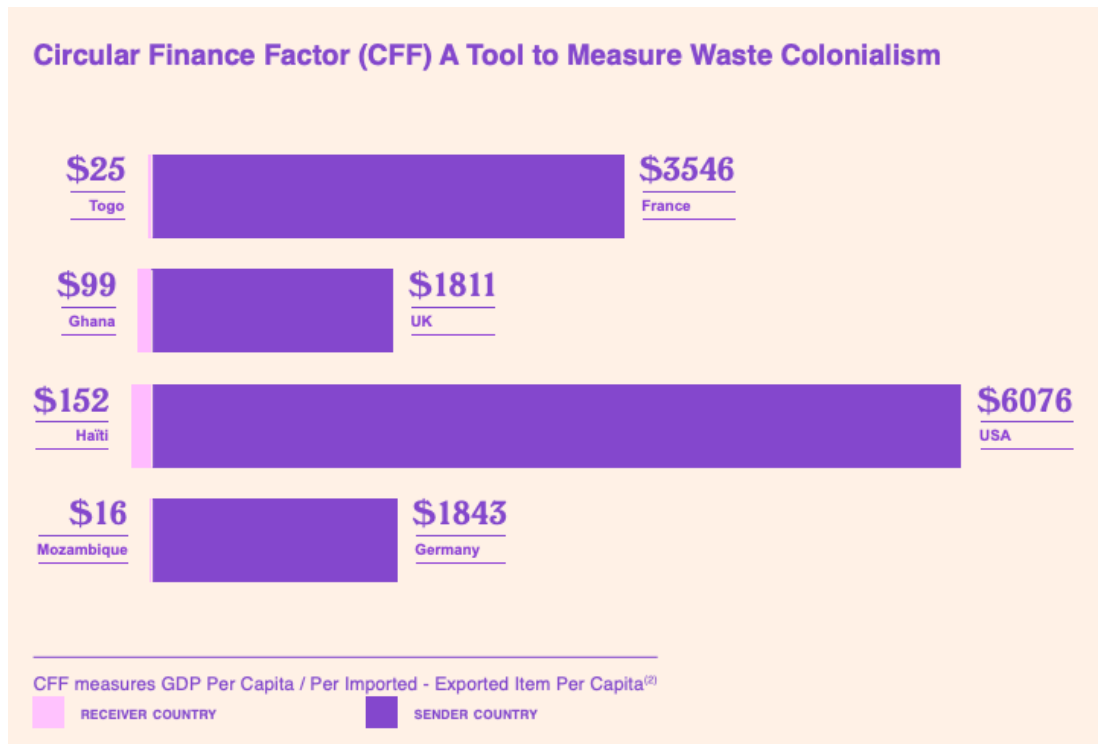
Most of the SHC imported into the Global South is clothing that is collected by charities and recyclers in Europe and North America (Katende -Magezi, 2017). However, post-consumer textile collection rates vary widely between countries worldwide today. In the USA, approximately 70 pounds of textiles per person each year is thrown away, resulting in 17 million tons of annual waste where only

2.5 tons are recycled (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). In European countries it also varies from country to country, Italy for example, recycles only 11% of its annual textile waste, while Germany recycles 75%. Whereas some countries lack any textile recycling system altogether. In countries like Italy and the Netherlands, all textiles collected via containers are classified as waste but must be registered. Countries also differ on whether they encourage citizens to deliver non-reusable textiles or not, and if it is for reuse or disposal (European Clothing Action Plan [ECAP] 2018).

An ongoing law proposal in the EU that considers responsibility of the full lifespan of used clothing, called Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) could be of great importance in the SHC industry. The policy involves producers' accountability for the collection and treatment of certain products during their **full** lifecycle (Naturvårdsverket, n.d.). In 2023, an EPR for textiles was proposed by the European Commission concerning all EU member states. Including responsibility for the full lifecycle of the product and sustainable management of textile waste within the EU. This will further expand the collecting, sorting, reuse, and recycling sector in the EU. The textile waste cost will be paid by the producer to the EPR scheme. The proposal also aims to tackle the issue of illegal exports as well as ensuring the textile is reusable and handled in a sustainable way (European Commission, 2023).

“The new law would clarify what constitutes waste and what is considered reusable textiles, to stop the practice of exports of waste disguised as being done for reuse.” (European Commission, 2023).

However, so far, France is the only country that has shifted the responsibility to the producers and importers by implementing EPR for textiles. Before EPR Regulations were adopted in France, collection rates were low and have gone from 18% to 36% between 2010 and 2016. Mainly by collaborating with municipalities, charities etcetera, to reach out to citizens (ECAP, 2018). Today, there are over 400 EPR programs in the world. Electronics account for 35% of these programs, tires 18%, packaging 17%, vehicles/auto batteries 12%, and other sectors such as paint and textiles making up for 18% (OEC, 2022). However, the Or Foundation argues that EPR neglects environmental justice and waste colonialism within all sectors. As EPR focus has been on the high costs of waste management in the Global North, the policy has ignored the costs that the bottom of the downstream in the global flow of waste are experiencing. Where GS countries make minimal financial gains for receiving and handling SHC from the GN (The Or Foundation, 2023b). See the chart below.



(The Or Foundation in Stop Waste Colonialism, 2023).

The Or Foundation states that using GDP per capita is mainly to visualize the contrasting economic situation between countries involved in the global SHC trade and does not indicate individual wealth, but instead it highlights the overall financial position (The Or Foundation, 2023b). In 2022, the countries with largest trade value in imports of SHC were Kenya (\$201M). While the United States (\$982M) and China (\$806M) had the largest trade value in exports (OEC, 2022). The United States exports over a billion pounds of used clothing annually, with a significant portion being sent to East African countries (Warner & Kestenbaum, 2013).

Moreover, there are two crucial distinctions within the SHC industry in the GN, not-for-profit (NFP) and for-profit (FP). For example, H&M is a FP company, however, they do not earn directly from SHC but get profit indirectly since customers earn a discount voucher for new clothing if one leaves used clothing to their recycling boxes (H&M, n.d., a). This can be seen as 'add-ons' to linear models of production, expressed by Ellen MacArthur Foundation,

“To date, there are many examples of circular business models as ‘add-ons’ to linear models, rather than as a core part of a business’s strategic ambition.” (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021, p. 25).

It stands unclear if second-hand businesses fundamentally change how firms operate and make money. This raises questions about whether the increase of recycling options, particularly those also selling new items, actually diminishes consumer purchasing. It may be possible that it contributes to the already high levels of new product consumption. Since many circular business models rely on

traditional, linear ways of production and consumption even when they try to incorporate a SHC option (Persson & Hinton, 2023; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021).

However, as known, NFP organizations put all their profits back into social causes and create job opportunities for marginalized workers. Meanwhile, FP businesses are more focused on generating profit. Although expanding the SHC market could be a step towards a circular economy, there are concerns about how SHC moves around and who benefits financially (Persson & Hinton, 2023). A common belief in the GN is that donated clothing is given to those in need, but often they are sold for reuse or recycling, which in turn convert clothing donations into commodities (Arnaud van Boeckholtz, 2020). This is argued by Norris (2015) as well, charities selling unsold clothing are sold to textile recyclers and collected from textile bins. These recyclers play a crucial role in global trade, transforming donated and discarded clothing into commodities through grading processes (Norris, 2015). After sorting, the clothing is categorized and the destination of distribution is determined, whereas the lowest grade of clothing is exported to Asia and Africa (Hansen, 2000; The Or Foundation, 2023b). One study tracked objects of clothing along the SHC supply chain from the GN (the Netherlands) to GS (Ghana). First as a 'donation', to a 'commodity', lastly ending up as 'waste' (Arnaud van Boeckholtz, 2020). Only 20% of donated clothes are resold in the domestic market, while the remaining 80% are sent to recyclers. At this point around half of it is exported to developing countries that do not require the clothing, and the other half is recycled into rags and household insulations (Bryant, 2018).

The cultural and economic imbalance are visible in the export of SHC trade – sustaining inequalities and dependency between the GN and GS. Some argued that GN takes advantage of the situation to dispose of unwanted clothes and low-valuable clothing in the GS (Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023). As argued by Brooks (2015), the global trade in SHC has created new ways of making profit. In wealthy cities for example, vintage clothing is highly valued and popular, which in fact sparked new trends in fast-fashion and pushed for consumption. Expressing that the vintage fashion sectors emerging in the GN most likely depend on the material culture generating production and consumption. Meanwhile, in less visible markets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the trade exposes the unevenness of global economic development. The SHC trade is part of a larger phenomenon within the clothing sector, he states the following,

“The uneven development of the clothing sector plays a part in keeping locations of new clothing consumption rich and areas of production and second-hand consumption poor.” (Brooks, 2015, p. 203).

Clothing retailers aim to offer a solution for unwanted clothes in the GN without slowing down fast-fashion sales, and Brooks (2015) describes it as they are developing their own ways to address the issue of clothing overconsumption. Like many collection programs, such as H&M's *Let's Close the Loop*, the marketing downplays the wider social and economic effects of the SHC system in the GS. They encourage people to get rid of old clothes so they can buy new ones, linking discarding clothes to more consumption. They try to illustrate a

positive image by recycling some textiles, but mainly focus on generating profit from selling new clothes rather than converting old ones to sell (Brooks, 2015).

In this section I highlight the development of early capitalism in Europe, as well as the aftermath of World War II where SHC shifted from charity to commerce. Including how the liberalization of African markets and declining garment costs increased the sale of SHC. Today, an ongoing law proposal in the EU, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for textiles is on the agenda and could play a crucial role in addressing the environmental- and social impacts of the SHC trade. Some efforts by retailers, such as H&M, have addressed textile waste through recycling programs, however, such initiatives often downplay the wider social and economic effects of the SHC systems in the GS, emphasizing profit from new clothing sales instead.

3.2 Import of Second-hand Clothing in Africa

In recent decades, African countries have been one of the largest importers of second-hand clothing (SHC). In the 1960s to the early 1980s, Sub-Saharan Africa SHC supply chain was strong and well established, both for local and export markets while providing employment for thousands of people. However, when the debt crisis hit local economies in the 1980s and 1990s together with the structural adjustment policies dictated by GN countries, local manufacturing was challenged by international competition, leading to the closure of factories (Brooks, 2015; *ibid*, 2016). Over time, the industry collapsed due to the rise of the informal SHC sector and today most people in Africa rely on the informal sector for clothing, hindering domestic markets to grow (Katende-Magezi, 2017). With time, used clothes got different names in different parts of Africa which Brooks says reflects their uncertain identity. For example, in Zambia, they are called “*salaula*,” which means searching through a pile. In Lagos, Nigeria, they are known as “*kafa ulaya*” meaning clothes of the dead white or “*okirika*” translates to bend down boutique, including ‘*London Clothes*’. In Ghana the used term is “*obroni wawu*” or “*dead white man’s clothes*.” In Congo-Brazzaville, they are called “*sola*”, meaning to choose. In Zimbabwe, the term used is “*mupedzanhamo*,” meaning where all problems end, while in Kenya and Tanzania, they are referred to as “*mitumba*,” meaning bundles. According to Brooks research, SHC now constitutes 81% of all clothing purchases in Uganda (Brooks, 2015).

Some argue that communities in the GS are at the bottom of the global system, and they bear a noteworthy social and environmental burden from the imported SHC. Vulnerable countries and communities are at much higher risk of the harmful consequences of global waste production (Vanacker et al, 2023; Favarin & Aziani, 2020). Since a lot of garments get classified as waste as it arrives in the GS, the waste stays in local ecosystems and has grown over time. To cope, communities have incorporated the imposed SHC into their local cycle of reusing and remaking. While the GS has effectively been able to upcycle large amounts of clothing and extend the life cycle of garments, generations of waste remain (Vanacker et al, 2023). The clothing culture in Africa has a long history but today the global clothing market is mainly controlled by wealthier countries in the GN which push for mass consumption. This dominance of consumption in the

GN limits the creativity and vibrancy of clothing culture in poorer communities (Brooks, 2015).

Over the years, the EAC (East African Community) including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, had plans to phase out the SHC trade by 2019 (The East African, 2016). However, the only country going through with the plan was Rwanda. In 2016, they implemented high taxes on 'mitumba' (Swahilian term for used clothing) imports to decrease trade and eliminate it gradually. One of the arguments is that it affects the local (textile) industry. However, the US responded by ending the Rwandan duty-free export privileges in the US market (Anami, 2022). Kenya, one of the countries that receive the most imported SHC of them all, retracted their proposal when lobbyists from the US warned that it could affect Kenya's privileges under the Africa Growth Opportunity Act (Agoa), which gives developing countries special market access. Additionally, many observers believe that completely stopping the import of SHC is extremely difficult (ibid). In Uganda for example, approximately 4 million people are involved in the supply chain of SHC and have built their life on the industry and a valuable source of tax revenue. One solution would be to gradually phase out the imports and ban import of non-wearable, dirty SHC (Kolade, 2023; Katende -Magezi, 2017). In EAC the SHC is sorted into three grades: Grade A for items in good condition, Grade B for those with minor flaws, and Grade C for heavily damaged ones. The EAC long-term phase out would be to start by banning Grade C and Grade B items, while imposing higher tariffs on Grade A items, aiming to eventually ban all grades within 5 to 8 years (Katende-Magezi, 2017).

However, Brooks argues that prohibiting the flow of used clothing imports will not automatically boost local manufacturing. Since the proposed ban does not cover new clothing imports from outside the EAC, and since foreign garments may cost more than used clothes, they will likely be cheaper than locally made ones (seen in South Africa). Therefore, banning used clothing imports may not help the local economy unless new clothing imports are also regulated (Brooks, 2016). Additionally, Skinner (2019) states that a ban on secondhand clothing would cause harm on people's livelihoods, leaving them without a cheap and legal system to buy clothing. It may also leave people active in the informal sector feeling neglected by the government (Skinner, 2019).

As many SHC garments in Africa find their way from landfills to oceans, the plastic components gradually degrade into microplastics, invisible to the human eye. This poses a significant threat to ecosystems and biodiversity. Additionally, certain plastics contain hazardous chemicals that leach into the environment, threatening wildlife, and human health (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021; Greenpeace, n.d.). The African continent contains major freshwaters such as The River Nile, crucial to the human population, and has over the years been more and more exposed to the threat of microplastic (Khan et al, 2018). As mentioned previously, these dumping sites, including those on Accra's beaches, represent the final destination for these garments, which have circled the globe and undergone multiple redefinitions in the GN (The Or Foundation, 2022b).

The importation of SHC to African countries have a long history, with the industry experiencing shifts from providing local employment to reliance on informal sectors. Despite being an important source of clothing in Africa, the influx of SHC reflects inequalities in global trade and preserves environmental burdens. Attempts to phase out SHC imports by some East African countries

have faced challenges due to economic dependencies and possible impacts on local economies. Prohibiting SHC imports could possibly affect livelihoods in Africa, while environmental consequences, such as microplastic pollution, further highlight the need to address the issue.

3.3 The Kantamanto Market in Ghana

The SHC trade is significant in West Africa's largest SHC market, located in Accra, Ghana, known as the Kantamanto market. Around 30,000 people work in the market (Skinner, 2019). An average of 100 containers, with each carrying 400 bales, are delivered to Kantamanto every week – counting to around 15 million items every week, about 114 million kg of SHC on a yearly basis, whereas approximately 40% are unsellable and become waste. When the SHC reaches GS, the containers are sold to importers from US \$12,000 to US \$35,000 and delivered to retailers between US \$20 to US \$500, depending on the sort of bale. The content of the bales differs and is unknown to the buyer beforehand (Arnaud van Boeckholtz, 2020). In Kpone Landfill in Accra around 20% comes from Kantamanto SHC. The overfilled landfill has led to multiple occasions of catching fire (Ricketts & Skinner, 2020). About one-third of the bales unloaded at Kantamanto are redistributed to other markets, both within Ghana and neighboring countries like Burkina Faso. Overall, between 1,375,000 kg to 1,650,000 kg of clothes are accessible for sale in the market every week (Skinner, 2019). Many people working in the market expresses it as informal and rather disorganized, and that people are finding it hard to survive as new consumer trends emerge. This have led to environmental harm such as disposal as well as social division in suburban areas. The primary landfill in Accra, opened in 2014 expected to last eight years, reached its capacity in just half that time, according to landfill administrators and city officials (ibid). In Kantamanto Market the SHC is called obroni w'awu (the white man is dead), this association, the authors emphasize, highlights not only the low value of clothing from GN but the economic and psychological consequences of these clothes (Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023).

Skinner (2019) further explores the various roles associated with different actors in Kantamanto Market. He found that experienced retailers often have established partnerships with foreign importers. Retailers lacking such relationships or needing assistance with bale selection turn to middlemen. An importer may collaborate with multiple middlemen, who, in turn, sell to several retailers. Retailers then hire young women, called kayayei, to transport their weekly bales to storage. Each storage is supervised by a manager (often young men) responsible for tracking bales and retailers' debts. Retailers also often hire 'kayayoo' to move bales from storage to their stalls, where the carrier balances the weight of the bale on their head. Now, the bales find their way to the retailer (sellers stalls). He found that out of 55 respondents, earning (of the sellers) per day varied a lot, from GH¢1,580 (112,90 EUR), from GH¢ -430 (-30,46 EUR, negative) to GH¢1150 (82,17 EUR). A few make rather good money; a majority lose money or struggle to make ends meet.

Skinner further describes the uncertainty of bales for the sellers,

*“Wrapped in plastic and tightly compressed, it is impossible to tell whether a bale will be a good investment or a waste of money. Retailers can choose what type of item they want and what country the bale is from -- for instance, ladies’ cotton blouses from the UK is a popular bale -- but there is no peeking inside until they have purchased the bale. **Numerous retailers have described the business as a game of chance.** Some bales might have enough first selection pieces to cover the price of another bale -- to stay in the game -- and go home with money to spend. Some bales might cost retailers everything. Some clothes are immediately considered trash.”* (Skinner, 2019, p. 104).

The bales are divided into four groups. The first selection consists of high-quality pieces, often new, lightly worn or comes from a popular brand, which gives the highest prices and generate around 50% of a retailer's income. Second selection includes above-average quality items, covering about 30-40% of a bale and contributing a similar percentage to the retailer's income. Third selection involves worn pieces that are less desirable, accounting for over 40% of each bale but only 10% of income. Fourth selection, known as ‘asei’ or ‘under,’ consists of unsellable garments with significant damage or stains, representing about 4% of the inventory (The Or Foundation, 2022b).

Since 40% of the SHC in Kantamanto Market are non-wearable (The Or Foundation, 2022b), they either end up as waste at dumpsters or re-made by tailors and seamstresses – to better suit the Ghanaian climate. As a result of SHC, sewing has become an integral part of the local culture, recognized as a valuable life skill. In the context of the SHC trade, this skill serves to transform garments for size adjustments and trends. As the authors mentions, SHC trade has over the years become institutionalized in order for small traders to enhance the local economy (Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023). Skinner (2019) saw retailers, seamstresses, upcyclers among others, were highly present in Kantamanto Market. He noted that Accra is home to numerous individuals who engage in “upcycling” goods from Kantamanto, selling them in small boutiques and online (Skinner, 2019). While an official count of people involved are non-existence due to the informal structure of the market, The Or Foundation’s own numbers suggest around 3,000 individuals engaged in clothing remanufacturing with 2,000 seamstresses, tailors, and their assistants, along with dozens of screen printers, overdyers, and tie-n-dyers. Additionally, around 100 people were involved in ironing, washing clothes, repairing shoes, and selling tools for remanufacture. However, one noticeable impact of SHC has been the decrease of the local textile sector, reducing jobs from 25,000 in 1975 to 5,000 in 2000, as well as fostering the idea that clothing is disposable (The Or Foundation, n.d., a).

During colonial times, Ghanaians had to wear Western clothing to meet British standards for certain places or to be seen as ‘modern’. Colonizers benefited by selling and importing used clothing, setting the foundation for today's trade (The Or Foundation, 2023b). Brooks (2015) highlights that the textile and clothing employment sector in Ghana experienced a decline by 80% between 1975 and 2000 (Brooks, 2015). Nowadays, trends deriving from GN is what sets the trends. Western clothing seems dominant in its association with fashion, whereas clothing from non-Western cultures is often labeled as traditional or cultural. The authors suggest that there needs to be a balance between keeping local textile traditions and SHC circulation and repair culture

where clothing is transformed into a valuable commodity. Since the SHC trade in Kantamanto employs thousands of Africans (Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis, 2023). Almost all class- and demographic groups in Ghana wear SHC, but mostly middle and low-income earners (Skinner, 2019).

Moreover, Skinner found that municipal governments oversee the informal sector and spend time collecting taxes while lacking resources to help people in the SHC sector. While the central government focuses more on the formal sector and private investment to develop the country, rather than supporting the informal sector. In addition, this type of waste is costing money for the country (Skinner, 2019). Additionally, no governmental support has been present to those working in the market. The author argues that the informal sector, such as the SHC industry, is vital both to Ghana's everyday economy and economy in general. The large amount of money received from the trade to the government has led to passivity (Skinner, 2019). Unlike South Africa and Nigeria, Ghana has no regulations on the import of SHC – leaving people more exposed to its effects. In addition, the country is also dealing with high unemployment, where people are forced to sell SHC despite its effects on the environment (Mensah, 2023). However, some argue for its positive effect, specifically on the country's economy. One paper state three outcomes from SHC that are essential to Africa's economy. It creates employment opportunities; it contributes to government revenue; and offers affordable clothing options for poor Africans (Sumo et al, 2023). Additionally, Mitumba Institute and Research Centre of KENYA highlights the crucial economic contribution of the SHC sector to the country, stating that the industry can coexist with local manufacturing industries and will cause no harm to the domestic textile industry (Prashar, 2022).

It is crucial to recognize that the environmental effects of SHC are apparent in all African countries, with Kantamanto Market in Accra serving as a good example. As the waste from Kantamanto Market cannot be properly handled, about one-third of discarded clothing ends up illegally dumped in places like the Korle Lagoon, a sacred area located half a mile from the market (Skinner, 2019) and one of the most polluted water bodies in the world (Owusu Boadi & Kuitunen, 2002). The dumping of clothing leads to pollution as microfibers from polyester and other plastics in the clothes enter the ocean. Waste from Korle Lagoon often washes up on the beaches of Accra. In Jamestown, a beach next to a large Chinese-financed port is surrounded by cliffs filled with clothes (Johnson, 2023). Additionally, burning piles of clothes contribute to air pollution in Accra and even contaminate food sources (Skinner, 2019). Another known dumping site for discarded clothing is The Old Faduma, two miles from Kantamanto Market and home to around 80,000 people. The largest dumping ground for illegal disposal of clothing from Kantamanto Market. Dumping sites in Accra, including the city's beaches, mark the final destination for these garments. Once a garment reaches Old Fadama, it has circled the globe and been redefined multiple times in the GN (The Or Foundation, 2022b; Johnson, 2023).

Kantamanto is also a place built on communities, entrepreneurship, female owned businesses and generational progress, thus a complex space with multiple elements (Skinner, 2019). Both Skinner (2019) and Brooks (2015) mentions how many see SHC and textile waste as a resource. Often to upcycle to new clothing or other items (Skinner, 2019; Brooks, 2015). Even though some successful importers of SHC exist, referred to as 'big men' who make good profit, they are not on top of the ladder as Skinner (2019) and Norris (2015) describe it.

This remains to be the exporters (from GN) as they hold the largest influence and profits because they control the packing lists for shipments sent to the markets. Most of the sellers at Kantamanto market describe their future to be insecure and many lack trust in the government. In terms of gender, mostly women work as sellers and young women work as 'kayayei', carrying heavy loads of SHC clothing, many of whom are immigrants. Reports show that many kayayei, after several years of carrying heavy bales, often experience severe neck and back pain, sometimes incapable of moving. Gender also plays a significant role in determining who benefits and who faces challenges: the average weekly income for the 27 male survey respondents was GH¢1143, while for the 28 female respondents it was GH¢-163 (Skinner, 2019; The Or Foundation, 2023b).

In summary, the Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana, serves as an important center for the SHC trade in West Africa, employing around 30,000 people and receive masses of SHC every week. Despite its economic importance, the market faces environmental harm and economic uncertainty. Sellers in the market navigate the uncertainty of the industry. The informal sector of SHC trade contributes to Ghana's economy but lacks government support and regulation.

4 Methodology and Method

This thesis delves into the second-hand clothing (SHC) trade between Global North and South, aiming to explore its dynamics and impacts. By employing H&M's campaign as a case study, I aim to uncover additional implications of the SHC industry and gain insights into broader recycling and upcycling practices. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the SHC market, the study will conduct a literature review on its impact in the global South (GS) and specifically in Ghana, including Kenya to build the context richer, however focusing mostly on Ghana. Using keywords such as "secondhand clothing", "textile waste", and "global south" to explore both social- and environmental impacts of imported SHC from GN to GS. Complemented by interviews with actors in the GS addressing relevant aspects of this subject. I completed the study in Stockholm, Sweden by using qualitative methodologies. In order to analyze my results, I developed a conceptual framework that highlights greenwashing and ethical commodity as a critical approach, and emphasis on waste colonialism to highlight the unequal relations between GN and GS within the SHC trade.

In flexible design research one utilized approach is case study. A case study approach usually includes different forms of qualitative research. The case in this context will be H&M's campaign *Let's close the loop*, which then revolves around their recycling activities. As mentioned by Robson and McCartan, this can involve an examination of an organization – and its empirical evidence speaks for what is happening and I will use multiple methods for evidence (Robson & McCartan, 2016). I will use a case study of the campaign as what Yin refers to as case description, this framework helps guide data collection and analysis and may lead to unexpected discoveries and help identify patterns that contribute to explaining a phenomenon. This will help to connect the claims of the emergence of the green industry with the actual impacts in the GS. Foremost, I will look for patterns emerging, specifically working with my data from the "ground up" as Yin

refers to it. In this process I found useful concepts that led me to my analytical part (Yin, 2014). A case study will be necessary in order to deepen my knowledge on H&M's campaign and to understand more about the context – one cannot study a phenomenon and not take context into account. As argued, a case study investigates a specific case, which I will do (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

In conclusion, I employed a mixed-methods approach to gain an understanding of the dynamics and impacts of the second-hand clothing (SHC) trade, focusing primarily on Ghana. Utilizing a flexible design research methodology, I conducted a literature review on the social- and environmental impacts of imported SHC from the GN to the GS, with specific keywords guiding my research. The selection of interview participants was conducted through snowball sampling which relies on the availability and willingness of early participants to introduce new relevant participants. This was also done by searching through previous participants Instagram accounts to find new ones to contact. Additionally, a case study approach allowed an examination of the campaign's recycling initiative and implications within the broader context of the SHC trade.

4.1 Interviews

To understand the impact of the Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) industry in Africa, I had personal interviews with one textile upcycling NGO working in Ghana; two in Kenya; one entrepreneur, activist and board member of The Or Foundation situated in Ghana; an upcycling designer; a SHC seller in Kantamanto Market; and lastly, an institute and learning center with focus on sustainability, all of them in Ghana. Everyone operates specifically with imported SHC by reusing, upcycling, or recycling. The common determinant of their work is to address the issue with textile waste, and essentially a fairer economic system where the fashion industry is not controlled by the dominant model of fashion, where GS are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Additionally, I had an email correspondence with a climate- and foreign affairs journalist at the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet that investigated H&M's campaign (see Lindberg, 2023).

The advantages of personal interviews include mobility and the interviewer's control over the situation, this was crucial since all of my interviews were carried out online, specifically on Zoom with camera. Here, it is possible to analyze the interviewee's reactions and possible influence of the setting. Personal interviews can be perceived as insecure, especially on sensitive topics - and sometimes limit the respondent's anonymity (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). Moreover, preparing an interview protocol, for example taking interview notes and recording was important for the process and analysis. With guidance from my research questions, aim and literature review I chose around 5-10 questions to stick to and was fully prepared and well read on the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Furthermore, I considered that a relevant interview method to use is the semi-structured interview. In this method, the interviewer has predetermined topics, and the respondent is given some freedom to develop their answers during the

interview. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that the method manages to partly remain a structured interview, while the subject can be enriched with new reflections (Willis, 2006). The interviews will be a central part of my study. The collection of data from the interviews will predominantly contribute to perspectives from people working at site in GS with the issues of SHC. In summary, these methods will together help to answer my research questions.

4.1.1 Participant #1

Participant #1 formed an upcycling NGO in Ghana in 2018. Before starting the organization, the participant worked as a seller, personal shopper and stylist in Kantamanto Market (in Accra, Ghana) for more than 15 years. The participant does research within Kantamanto Market and educates both workers and consumers in order to change consumer behavior. Both collect textile waste from the Market to upcycle new clothing and arrange workshops for sewing, upcycling and repairing. The NGO has since started collecting, converting and preventing over 2 million pieces of waste garments from going to landfills. We initially connected on Instagram and later conducted an interview over Zoom. As a former seller turned upcycling NGO founder, Participant #1 brings valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities within the textile waste industry in Ghana.

4.1.2 Participant #2

The participant, situated in Kenya, Co-founder of an NGO that started in 2019. Their main focus is to collect used textiles to recycle and upcycle by providing the public with convenient drop-off points labeled as collection bins. For example, in major malls, churches, and institutions. Once they collect the items, everything is weighed to understand how much each collecting point collects. Then, the collected textiles are brought into their facilities and sorted into different categories. Both through collecting, sorting and upcycling the organization provides jobs to people. They have collected 138,642 kg of textiles and created 99 jobs. At the current moment Kenya imports more than 200 million kgs of post-consumer textiles from Europe, every year. Kenya has one of the biggest second-hand markets in Africa, after Kantamanto Market in Ghana, called Gikomba Market (TRT Africa, 2023). I got in touch with the participant via email and then conducted the interview on Zoom. With a focus on textile recycling and job creation in Kenya, this participant provides insight into Kenya's textile waste situation and the local initiatives addressing waste management.

4.1.3 Participant #3

Participant #3, a Swedish journalist for the newspaper Aftonbladet. In 2023, an investigation into H&M recycling practices led the journalists and his colleague

to Benin, located in West Africa. We communicated solely via email, with the interview conducted exclusively through email. This investigative journalist contributes to an important perspective on H&M's role within the SHC trade shedding light on the situation in Benin, Africa.

4.1.4 Participant #4

A British-Ghanaian entrepreneur based in Accra. In 2023, the participant swam 450 km along Ghana's Volta River for 40 days to raise awareness about textile pollution and capture the local culture. Initial water samples taken from the lower Volta River revealed unexpected high levels of synthetic microfibers. The expedition supported the efforts of The Or Foundation to address environmental issues in Accra. The participant is also a board member of The Or Foundation which is one of the biggest NGOs in Ghana within the field of textile waste (The Or Foundation, n.d., b). We communicated first via Instagram and then conducted an interview via Zoom. Participant #4 involvement in addressing textile waste issues in Ghana, both through activist actions and as a board member of The Or Foundation, provides a crucial perspective to include in my thesis.

4.1.5 Participant #5

A founder of an impact advocacy organization based in Kenya. The organization develops and campaigns on all issues concerning waste, including plastic and textile pollution. They also conduct community waste actions (cleanups) in Kenya. We got in touch through email and our correspondents happened only through email. As a founder of an impact advocacy organization in Kenya, this participant provides insights into community-based waste management and statistical information regarding the issue.

4.1.6 Participant #6

A Ghanaian upcycling designer of denim textile with a passion for fashion and design. The participant started the company in 2020 and sells pieces on an online platform. Every denim piece is from Kantamanto Market which they then bring back home to design. They collaborate with tailors working in Kantamanto Market. Their interest in working with SHC stems from a passion and due to the limited job opportunities in Ghana. I connected the participant on Instagram and we later on had an interview over a telephone call on Whatsapp. Participant #6 experience as a Ghanaian upcycling designer offers knowledge on transforming SHC into fashionable products, highlighting the role of upcyclers in Ghana.

4.1.7 Participant #7

For 30 years participant #7 has run an institute that aims to provide a space for collaboration from various fields, including artists, writers, designers, environmentalists, and researchers, to promote sustainable community-based activities. Currently, the institute has around 20 employees. Its focus is on traditional Ghanaian or African knowledge systems to understand how they can inform modern development. By for example exploring the value of traditional knowledge in areas like food, housing, and community-building. They engage in activities such as recycling SHC and glass, and they released four collections of clothing made from SHC, outsourced from Kantamanto Market. We connected through Instagram and email, and finally we had a Zoom interview. This participant offers insight into Ghanaian sustainability practices and community-based activities using SHC.

4.1.8 Participant #8

This person has worked at Kantamanto SHC market in Ghana for 10 years, and their family has been there for more than 50 years. The participant contributes with valuable insights into how the market has changed over time and helps understand the market better including its development and current challenges. We got in contact through participant #1 and I did the interview via Whatsapp.

5 Empirical Evidence and Findings

5.1 Discourses on Circular Business Models

This section presents my empirical findings. Here, I looked at how H&M, from the years 2013-2022, framed their recycling campaign *Let's Close the Loop* (See Appendix B) with focus on the discourse around circular business models with inclusion of statements from interviews. I tried to identify if the reports consider the potential risks of collecting used clothing harming low-income countries, and if H&M addresses such risks in their recycling procedures. The timeline places H&M within a distinct context, potentially shaping a specific narrative. Below are the outcomes according to themes that I systematically searched and analyzed.

In general, H&M demonstrates a strong emphasis on sustainability and circular business models throughout their reports. They promise to decrease their greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030, and during that period also double their production of clothing (Appendix B, 2022b). A key concept often used to achieve this goal is 'decoupling' economic growth from environmental harm such as resource use and climate impact, and one of the strategies of this will be their recycling activities, they state the following,

“Scaling circular business models, such as resell, remake, care and repair solutions enabling customers to extend the use of products, can decouple our financial growth from resource use and climate impact.”
(Appendix B, 2022b, p. 106).

As mentioned, decoupling refers to a situation where the rate of growth of an environmental pressure, such as pollution or resource use, is lower than the rate of growth of its economic driving force, such as GDP (Gross Domestic Product), over a specific time frame. Meaning, economic growth is happening without a related increase in environmental damage or resource consumption (OECD, n.d.). This concept is often used by policymakers to achieve 'green growth' without reducing economic production and consumption (EEB, 2019). Parrique et al found that currently, there is no empirical evidence to support the occurrence of decoupling in the sense where *“an absolute, permanent, global, large and fast enough decoupling of economic growth from all critical environmental pressures.”* (p. 4). Further, they state that it is highly unlikely and unrealistic that economic growth can continue without an increase in environmental pressure (Parrique et al, 2019).

Another study that analyzed domestic and imported materials in 186 developed countries found that even though actors claim to achieve relative/absolute decoupling, the evidence suggests it is smaller than reported or even non-existent. For example, the illusion of decoupling by moving resource-intensive modes of production to less developing countries (Wiedmann et al, 2013). According to Sasja Beslik, an expert on scrutinizing sustainability promises by large corporations, in order for H&M to achieve their goal of decoupling and decrease their greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030, it would require a relative emission reduction of 15% every year until 2030. Which he states as being an illusion and unachievable equation (Lindberg, 2023).

Concerning recycling practices as a strategy to decouple, Parrique et al argues that there is only limited potential since recycling cannot fully support a growing demand and production of materials such as clothing. In addition, recycling rates remain rather low, and the processes often require high levels of energy and new raw materials (Parrique et al, 2019). Further, H&M seem to heavily rely on technology in their pursue for a circular business, stating that they hope to increase their fiber-to-fiber (mixed materials) recycling practices in the future (Appendix B, 2021). However, technological progress does not address the core of the issue such as production rates as well as it diminishes the chances to find new innovative solutions. Also, the rather small scale of recycling technology is not enough to achieve significant decoupling (Parrique et al, 2019). In addition, Ziegler et al argues that the concept of the green circular economy often focuses on the commercial use of technology in markets, prioritizing the

relationship between the environment and the economy by using for example the concept of decoupling. However, it does not address societal factors or the friction between profit-driven capitalism and the circular economy (Ziegler et al, 2023).

As H&M explains, circular products are those designed to last, crafted from safe, recycled, and sustainably sourced materials that can be reused multiple times. Stating that they began this journey in 2013 by implementing the campaign (H&M Group, 2021). The idea that the SHC trade equals circularity is, argued by The Or Foundation, not valid. They argue that the market consists of major supply chains with multiple actors and for-profit businesses, and the clothing sent to SHC markets are not recycled into new textiles. Stating that, as many brands are reshaping the image of the SHC trade by promoting it as 'recycling' or 'circularity.' While recycling typically implies old garments being transformed into new ones, most brands export them to the GS (The Or Foundation, 2022a). Given that the SHC market currently generates large profits, Participant #1 expressed in our interview that it appears those in positions of power lack any interest to transform the industry,

“The SHC industry is a multi-million industry, so many people here in power are making money from it so then it is not in their interest to ban or reduce or do something about it.” (Participant #1).

Reports from 2019 show that the company collected around 34,000 tons of textile waste (from every H&M-owned store globally), equivalent to the weight of 178 million t-shirts. In contrast, some predicted numbers (from external sources) counted that H&M produced annually up to 550 to 600 million garments; exact figures have never been disclosed by H&M themselves (Edelbaum, 2019). In reports from recent years, they state that they will *never send textiles to landfills* (H&M, 2022a, p. 55; H&M, 2020, p. 50; H&M, 2019, p. 50; 2018, p. 50; 2017, p. 44). However, in 2016 the narrative differs a bit, they state that it is important to 'avoid' and 'reduce' clothing going to landfills (H&M, 2016, p. 53-54). Similarly, in previous reports they state that “...*Our aim is to send as little waste to landfills as possible.*” (H&M, 2015, p. 94; 2014, p. 85; 2013, p. 63). In their last reports from 2022 they state that,

“To help address the global challenge of textile waste ending up in places without reuse and recycling systems, we actively engaged in discussions to strengthen legislation, and increase scrutiny of data, reporting and follow-up. In the EU, we continued advocating for harmonised Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes and other waste policies that facilitate effective collection, sorting and recycling of textile waste.” (Appendix B, 2022a, p. 50).

Even though there is no exact number (from H&M or Remondis) on how much of the collected clothing from H&M ends up being disposed of in landfills in GS. Participant #3 found in their investigation that six of the ten garments submitted to H&M were shipped to GS. Concluding that, with the same distribution, 56 of the 94 million garments the fashion giant claims to collect each

year would end up in the GS. For instance, Ghana, a major destination for SHC, received an amount of one million items from H&M at the start of 2023. Making H&M one of the top companies exporting used clothing to African nations like Ghana (Lindberg & Wennman, 2023a). Six years of study in one of the biggest SHC in the world, Kantamanto Market in Ghana, showed that 40% of imported SHC were considered waste (The Or Foundation, 2023b). Additionally, argued by several of the participants, most African countries do not have the infrastructure nor the resource capacity to handle all the SHC.

“The more the Global North floods the Global South with disposable clothing, the more prolific the attitude that clothing is meant to be cheap and disposable.” (The Or Foundation, 2022a).

The company says it wants to lead the fashion industry to a new, circular approach, making the shift from a linear to a circular model mainly through recycling practices and technological solutions. The campaign's name refers to 'closing the loop', emphasizing the significance of reusing garments and completing the cycle in textile production, as outlined in their reports (Appendix B). Mentioned previously, one study scrutinizing green claims, showed that 96% of H&M sustainability claims were unjustified and misleading (Changing Market Foundation, 2021). Lindberg's (2023) investigation also found that none out of the nine pieces of clothing handed in to H&M used garment collecting bins, showing signs of being used again. Instead, the pieces have been circulating around the globe for one and a half rounds before ending up in different countries in the GS (Lindberg, 2023). Expressed by participant #3 on why they chose to investigate H&M recycling campaign,

“Because it is by far Sweden's largest fashion company with a very large environmental impact. The fact that the company also has a clear green profile to the outside and claims to want to lead the entire fashion industry's transformation outwards makes H&M even more relevant to review.” (participant #3).

Skinner (2019) questions whether the developments in the circular economy will impact SHC trade, that even though technological efforts have been adapted in the GS, as mentioned at least 40% of imported SHC leaves Kantamanto Market in Accra as waste (Skinner, 2019). In one of my interviews with participant #1, he mentions that H&M's employees, from the Stockholm office, came to visit Kantamanto Market in Accra, he stated the following,

“I spoke to people from H&M. I told them ‘You need to take responsibility; you cannot be doing this. You make so much money, but you do not take any responsibility. That's terrible’. That was last year in October. They were from the Stockholm Office Headquarters. I also heard that they visited Kantamanto. However, I never received any feedback from them, no email or nothing.” (participant #1).

He further expressed his desire for major players like H&M to assist individuals in the Kantamanto Market and to cease greenwashing and hypocrisy in their actions. Participant #3 also noted that consumers expect clothes to be handled in a more environmentally friendly manner, recycled in nearby markets rather than shipped across the globe without proper care. Further stating that these

companies fail to take responsibility and admit their role in the problem, instead shifting blame on other, less calculated actors. H&M states that in order to ensure the fashion industry's transition to a fully circular model, it is crucial not to hinder cross-border shipments of post-consumer waste intended for collection, preparation for reuse, or recycling. Only if handled properly in the receiving country, shipments must follow recycling regulations obtained with the right facilities and abilities (H&M Group, 2021).

“This is not a new phenomenon. There's a continuing issue here that global North countries have too much impact on what happens in global South countries. So, you know, the fact that global north actions are having such a huge impact on people's livelihoods, on people's health, on people's access to clean water, that is not a situation that is allowing for agency of the individual.” (participant #4).

The discussion regarding the benefits of circularity, including the contributions of recycling, is apparent in H&M's reports. They mention that the increasing awareness of the climate crisis may affect whether people will purchase at H&M and why it is important to push for a more sustainable approach (Appendix B, 2022b). To attract more customers to leave their used clothing, customers get rewarded for donating clothing through H&M's garment collections. They offer a voucher that can be used in their next H&M purchase (See picture below). H&M claims that by rewarding customers... *“This prolongs the life of products and educates customers about the importance of extending the life of garments.”* (H&M Group, 2021, p. 2).

Examples of how these vouchers are used can be seen on TikTok. A video with 400 thousand views shows one woman donating clothes to get 10 vouchers (for 10 different bags of used clothing) with 15% off for the next purchase. She expresses that she will use the vouchers to get “new clothing for tonight.” However, this is one of countless videos encouraging this practice (Zulu, 2023; TikTok, 2023). One website argues that *“RECYCLING is good for the environment, but it can also be good for your wallet too.”* The article encourages readers to save money by suggesting they exchange unwanted clothing for discounts on new clothing purchases. H&M is one among other companies mentioned in this context (Barber, 2021). The Or Foundation highlights that portraying the SHC trade as solely ‘recycling’ targets the perspective of the sender and creates a depoliticizing narrative that confuses people and justifies overproduction and overconsumption. They argue that the current SHC trade derives from Colonialism and an oversupply of new fashion which attracts people to purchase more new clothes (The Or Foundation, 2022a). Additionally, participant #7 argues that these types of campaigns follow an economic model, ‘a kind of capitalism on steroids’ that is constantly trying to create new markets’ as well as trying to invent more ways to extract money from the public (participant #7).



H&M Facebook, (2022-04-22).

In summary, my empirical findings scrutinize H&M's Let's Close the Loop campaign from 2013-2022, focusing on its discourse around circular business models and recycling procedures. H&M emphasizes sustainability and circularity, aiming to decrease greenhouse gas emissions while doubling production. However, the feasibility of decoupling economic growth from environmental harm, as proposed by H&M, is questioned by studies and experts. Furthermore, the reliance on recycling and technological solutions may not address the core issues of production rates and societal factors. The SHC trade, often portrayed as recycling, fueling overproduction and overconsumption, and driven by a capitalist economic model according to the findings.

5.2 The Impact of Second-hand Clothing

In this section I discuss empirical findings concerning the various impacts the second-hand clothing (SHC) has on the people in the Africa, their livelihoods as well as on the environment. Concerning the first research question: *What are the key environmental- and social impacts of imported Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) in Africa?* I try answering in this section. Focusing specifically on the situation in Ghana. In all my interviews with an environmental activist, upcyclers, a journalist, a seller from Kantamanto Market, and NGOs in the Africa, every participant had strong beliefs that the situation is far worse than imagined.

"The situation is getting worse and worse; it is not getting better. We keep getting a lot of unsaleable clothing which could be recycled or

repaired from wherever it is coming from. But it ends up here.”
(Participant #2).

In parallel, H&M encourages people to leave non-wearable clothing and promises that the clothing will be recycled to new fibers and garments, *“If the garment is too worn to repair or resell, customers can take it to the garment collecting point available in our stores. The textiles can then be recycled to create new fibres and garments.”* (Appendix B, 2021, p. 24).

“Looking at the flood of textiles coming into Ghana is very dramatic, very, very dramatic, and a lot of our attention goes there.” (Participant #1).

One of the major issues for sellers is the uncertainty of not knowing the content of the bale of used clothing, Participant #1 states that if you buy a bale, you cannot open it beforehand, so it is like rolling a dice, and when I ask *why* he explains that it has always been the business model. This is strengthened by participant #6, comparing opening the bale as *“taking a bet”* and stating that you make a profit margin of 20-40% each day. The earnings for the sellers vary a lot from day to day, for example one week can yield around 100 dollars, another week yields 60 dollars or even 20 dollars. Everything is dependent on the quality of the clothes (participant #1). One of the participants has seen a significant decrease of good quality clothing. Stating that with approximately 40 pieces in the bale, original ones (with tags) in 2014 consisted of 20 pieces (50%) while in 2020 only eight pieces. Fairly worn pieces in 2014 counted around 25% and the rest was third selection pieces. Not only has the quality diminished and the use of synthetic fabrics such as polyester, polyethylene, and polyimide increased through the years, but the pieces do not last for long before torn and thrown away (participant #8). The participant further state,

“This waste is waste of Europe. This waste is not produced in Ghana. It’s coming directly from Europe. If we say they should handle the waste in the Global North, there is going to be resistance because it’s going to break their business model.” (Participant #8).

Participant #1 also expressed that the sellers are often unaware of the items they are buying, and uncertain about what will sell. As a result, they frequently end up going into debt from purchasing SHC (participant #1). Overcoming debt is a challenge faced by almost every seller interviewed by the Or Foundation (2022b). Most small businesses in the market rely on self-financing or personal debt from importers or banks. While this micro-financing approach has benefited some, it has trapped many others in deep debt. The sellers also belong to the informal economy and lack government-sanctioned economic safety nets – which include VAT tax, social security collection, and employment contracts with regular salaries. Nevertheless, community-organized social safety nets often exist to provide support in crisis (The Or Foundation, 2022b).

“Some retailers have described frequently going without food in order to service a loan to buy bales of clothing that individuals in the Global North may have given away for free believing that the garments would go to a good cause.” (The Or Foundation, 2022b).

Participant #1 stated that complaints were coming from the sellers, they were not making as much money as they spent and many of the clothing received were unsaleable. Hence, *“...always running at a loss and in debt.”* From October 2023 until now, the imported tax duties increased 100% and this affected every supply chain. He says that five to six months ago he could buy a t-shirt for 5 dollars, now it would cost around 10-12 dollars. Similarly, when I ask about the situation for the sellers of SHC in Kenya, Participant #3 says that the traders are really suffering, *“they are living hand to mouth.”* One element is that the high-quality items stay in the GN while the influx of low-quality clothing into collection points has led to an apparent lack of desirable items to the global SHC trade in GS, which reflects the disposability inherent in the fashion industry’s business model (The Or Foundation, 2023a).

Participant #1 showed me how the label looks on the bales. See below.



Big capitals: company name of the shipper, New Kevin. 121LBS shows the weight of the bale and the content is presented in the middle, M. (male) t-shirts.

The Or Foundation further state,

“The vast majority of clothing arriving in Kantamanto Market is pre-sorted and labeled. Still 40% of the average bale (which is pre-sorted) leaves as waste — because sorting does not improve the overall quality of clothing on the market.” (The Or Foundation, 2023a, p. 5).

Most sellers in the Kantamanto market inherited the occupation from their relatives such as fathers, and many of them do not want to ‘break the cycle’ of

five to six decades of family businesses. Similar to Ghana, the jobs within SHC in Kenya are often inherited from family members, participant #3 says that if your mother was a seller of clothes, there is a probability you become one of the sellers. Another reason for engaging in the SHC industry, participant #1 explains that there are no other jobs to choose from as the unemployment rates are high in the country [Ghana] (Participant #1). Participant #6 also mentioned that one of the reasons they started upcycling was the awareness of limited job opportunities in Ghana after finishing University. This led the participant to establish their own upcycling brand, driven by their passion for SHC and fashion (participant #6), which matches participant #1 story why SHC became the only option to engage in. This goes along with both Skinner's (2019) and The Or Foundation (n.d., a) studies that suggests that apart from being a seller at the Kantamanto Market, thousands of people engage in other activities such as upcycle in different ways such as seamstresses and tailors, among others. In many ways the Market is a significant player in recycling, processing around six million items every week and those numbers do not include items recycled by other markets that receive unopened bales from Kantamanto (Skinner, 2019 & The Or Foundation (n.d., a).

Furthermore, one significant effect of the imported SHC into African countries is on their local culture. For example, the local, traditional styles and textiles in Ghana, according to Participant #1 and #8, have significantly reduced in the last decade. Especially with the younger population engaging in social media. Dating back to colonial times, Ghanaians had to embrace Western clothing to follow British standards for certain places or to be viewed as 'modern'. This trend seems to persist today, along with globalization and social media (The Or Foundation, 2023b). Participant #7 argues that one of the biggest impacts of the SHC industry in Ghana is the disruption and undermining of the local clothing industry. Stating that people were once wearing traditional clothes, but the market was compromised by the influx of cheap second-hand clothes. Participant #7 further explains that dealing with waste problems in the GN is to ship it to the GS. Demonstrating that the situation is '*a double-edged sword because it not only takes the waste out of the North, but it also disrupts the industry, the clothing industry and the culture of another society, which is the global South*'. This is also stated by participant #1,

"It has had a huge effect on our culture. The increase of SHC has reduced the local textile manufactured in Ghana. Younger people do not even wear traditional clothing from Ghana. It is cheaper to buy SHC and social media influences them to buy what people are buying in the GN." (Participant #1).

As the green circular economy gains more attention, one concern is that it may not fully address societal factors such as human health being negatively affected through exposure to hazardous toxic metals and toxins in the collection, reuse, and recycling of waste (Ziegler et al, 2023). Including, the fact that handling SHC requires extensive labor and involves significant costs for businesses. Ricketts, co-founder of the Or Foundation, expressed that,

"We treat waste as if it is a free resource. Sure, you might give it away for free, but it takes a tremendous amount of effort and labor and

skill to try to re-commodify that thing that you gave away.” (Wicker, 2024).

Both participant #6 and #7 has built their work on collecting SHC from Kantamanto Market, upcycling unsaleable items. Participant #6 work with tailors in the market and describe the process of finding items, in this case denim pieces to upcycle, as very hard. One whole day of searching through around 200 usable denim items at Kantamanto, none of them in conditions to be used. The latter participant (#7) explains that the creation of collections from SHC entails more than just exploring material; it involves developing systems that encourage engagement with used garments. The aim is to move beyond one-off creations and towards the development of collections that can potentially make a lasting impact.

Concerning environmental impacts of SHC, Participant #2 tells me that there are massive ecological- and environmental implications. This comes from the burning of clothing which pollutes the atmosphere, including large amounts of clothing that finds its way from the landfills down in the lagoon, which are connected to the ocean. For example, beaches close to Accra and the Kantamanto Market are not sanitary for that reason. In addition, gutters get choked when the rains come, leading to flooding. Which in turn increases health risks such as malaria, diarrhea, and cholera (Participant #2). Another participant highlights the issues of overflow of SHC causing land degradation, pollution of water bodies, overfilled landfills and fires, which in turn causes cancer. Including microplastic from textile harming fishes, and fishermen eating this fish (Participant #8). This is also stated by participant #3, after visiting Benin, he states that the environmental consequences of the textile waste are the fact that it ends up on the beaches and in the sea (Participant #3).

“If you go to Nairobi River for example, it is full of textiles. The Nairobi River connects to the Indian Ocean, so, the water system or the water body and the land is full of textile waste.” (Participant #3).

Additionally, participant #5 state that in the last seven years, 1 billion kilograms of used textiles have been imported into Kenya and an estimate of 40 percent are waste. Highlighting that the import of SHC is having a devastating impact on the environment since Kenya lacks adequate waste management infrastructure. This is strengthened by NGO Clean Up Kenya, Wildlight and Changing Markets Foundation that found that the export of plastic waste to the GS is driven by the increased production of cheap synthetic clothing by Northern brands. A significant portion of used clothing shipped to Kenya consists of synthetic materials, contributing to environmental and community harm. The findings suggest that over 300 million damaged or unsellable synthetic clothing items are exported to Kenya annually, worsening the plastic pollution crisis through dumping, landfilling, or burning (Changing Markets, 2023).

Participant #4 and #6 likewise states that in Accra, Ghana the internal water bodies, and within the coast you find huge pieces of clothing and tons of waste. Later, these clothing decomposes into microfibers, polluting the waters. The participant elaborates that it impacts people's access to clean water; for instance, the internal waterways in Accra are highly toxic, making them unsuitable for

drinking or swimming (participant #4). Additionally, The Or foundation found that by monitoring along Accra's beaches in Ghana, extensive textile waste and what they refer to as 'tentacles' spanning often up to two meters with 100 pieces of clothing, filled with heavy water and sand, some too far out at sea for counting (The Or Foundation, 2022b). These clusters of clothing damage marine ecosystems, hindering turtle egg laying and fostering mosquito breeding, increasing risk of malaria. Including, affecting livelihoods by catching on to fishermen's nets and hindering activities, such as swimming for children and community football matches (The Or Foundation, 2023b). In 2021, Ghana also experienced a significant fish kill, with the exact cause remaining unknown. However, samples suggest an 'hostile aquatic environment', potentially impacted by textile waste from SHC into the sea (The Or Foundation, 2022b).

The Report discovered three of the most common ways to dispose of waste in Kantamanto Market. 'Official waste hauling' represents around 59-75% of the waste stream and 250,000 - 450,000 of daily garments. 'Burning around Kantamanto' approximately 40,000-150,000 pieces daily, 12-19% of the waste stream and the same number goes for 'open dumping ' (The Or Foundation, 2022b). In Accra's central business district in Ghana, discarded SHC from global trade constitutes the biggest waste source (The Or Foundation, 2023a). Skinner's (2019) study in Kantamanto Market revealed the massive amount of textile waste being sent to landfills almost every day, he states,

"From conversations with various officials we know that the Accra Metropolitan Assembly hauls 70 metric tons of clothing waste from Kantamanto to the city's landfills six days a week. In total that is 420,000 kg of clothing weekly, or roughly 2.8 million items of clothing." (Skinner, 2019, p. 106-107).

To summarize, the findings shed light on the damaging impacts of second-hand clothing (SHC) on both people in the global South and the environment, with a focus on Ghana and Kenya. Interviews with activists, journalists, sellers and NGOs reveal a narrative that the situation is worsening, with a flood of unsaleable clothing exacerbating the issue. Despite H&M's recycling promises, reports indicate that only a small fraction of clothing actually gets recycled, with over one million garments shipped to Ghana by H&M's recycling partner in a four-month period. Sellers in markets like Kantamanto face financial uncertainty, debt, and environmental hazards, while the import of SHC threatens local culture and ecosystems, contributing to pollution, health risks, and ecological degradation.

6 Analysis

6.1 Ethical and Green Commodity in Fashion

Some argue that 'decoupling' and green growth practices such as recycling sometimes are used as an excuse to continue business models prioritizing economic growth, diminishing environmental concerns. Relying exclusively on

technological solutions without addressing production rates, consumption levels or social dimensions (Provin et al, 2021; Vanacker et al, 2023). Circulation and reuse have turned into a way of transferring the environmental impact from the global North (GN) to the global South (GS). As a result, circulation and reuse are only environmentally friendly for the GN but have negative effects on the GS. Hence, recycling companies labeling themselves as leaders in promoting sustainable fashion is mostly for improving their corporate image (Norris, 2015; Wiedmann, 2013). Furthermore, this part seeks to answer the research questions, namely: *In what ways does H&M, in their Sustainability Reports from 2013-2022, address and mitigate environmental- and social harm associated with the SHC trade, particularly in low-income countries?*

One crucial aspect to acknowledge from the reports is that they identify a problem (textile waste) and position themselves as drivers to solving it, emphasizing their role in minimizing environmental impact by collecting and recycling textiles; thus, keeping them from landfills and incineration. Clearly, they adopt the identity of being 'circular' and 'sustainable' (See Appendix B). However, ethical concerns such as consideration of what happens in the downstream of Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) or concerns regarding the social- and economic implications of collected used clothing, are not addressed in any of the reports. Neither the evident power imbalance between GN and GS countries, and the actors involved in the industry (Provin et al, 2021; Norris, 2015). H&M fails to acknowledge the known risks associated with sending clothes to impoverished countries, or to mention *how much* Remondis exports of the collected clothing. They state that they will either be sorted as rewear, reuse or recycled. But as shown in the findings, their distributor Remondis often sends a large portion to the GS (Lindberg, 2023). When excluding the receiving end of the supply chain, their branding to be 'circular' and 'sustainable' lose validity as they do not communicate with transparency of the collected used clothing, even though they state that no items will end up in landfills (Norris, 2015).

H&M framing their campaign as a key circular achievement can be problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the SHC supply chain is not exclusively focused on circular practices as claimed by H&M, but rather operates within larger and complex SHC supply chains. Additionally, research indicates that the majority of clothing ends up in the GS (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Skinner, 2019), contradicting the notion of it being circulated as implied by H&M's campaign. The information H&M shares does not account for what happens after they sell it for reuse or recycling. Also, no statistics are presented on CO₂ emission of collected clothing that usually travel long distances when collected by buying partners. The only presented statistics is the one on how much clothing they collect every year and percentage unit of rewear, reused, and recycled (Appendix B).

Second, as argued by Norris (2015) promoting recycling as ethical has little or no effect on how SHC is sold and handled after being donated. Many overlook the size of the trade and the further impact on poorer countries. One major concern is that waste, such as textile waste, is often ignored in wealthier countries, leaving marginalized areas to deal with it (Norris, 2015). Third, to 'close the loop' and for recycling practices to be successful it is necessary to limit the industry's material expansion, which is not mentioned as an option, instead they plan to double their production by 2030 (Appendix B, 2022b). However, one noticeable approach H&M adopts is to recognize consumers' role in recycling

and donating used clothing, emphasizing that nothing should go to waste which is one crucial aspect of the circular economy. However, as mentioned, recycling and downsizing textile waste is important, but reducing consumption is another essential aspect necessary to make the recycling and SHC market manageable while generating positive results (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). In fact, The Or Foundation explains the supply chain of SHC being built on an oversupplied chain of new fashion encourages people to buy more new clothes (The Or Foundation, 2022a).

Moreover, H&M's approach appears to be positive towards waste policies in order to reduce waste ending up in countries that lack systems and infrastructure to handle it. In practice, evidence from Lindberg (2023) suggests that clothing collected from the campaign does in fact end up in the GS and none of them stays in Sweden. Despite promises to *never* send textiles to landfills, there is no guarantee of this. Since Remondis sells clothing onwards to actors in the GS, H&M appears to have no responsibility for them. This lack of accountability makes their statement less valid and transparent (Norris, 2015). One recurrent narrative from the participants is the lack of responsibility and accountability from actors as H&M, one participant (#1) met employees and got no response afterward. Two other participants (#4 and #8) state that H&M seem to fail to acknowledge the tremendous harm they do to countries such as Ghana, the number of livelihoods affected by all the SHC and textile waste flow. Another perspective by participant #7, strengthened by The Or Foundation (2022a), states that aside from harmful consequences of the massive flow of SHC into GS, the influence goes further to send a message that clothing is meant to be cheap and disposable. GN consumption culture is actually more and more impinging on countries such as Ghana. Which is seen in areas of local textile manufacturers in Ghana where local fashion trends have been severely affected.

One of the most apparent circular markets is found in the GS. Whereas four out of eight participants engage with upcycling in different ways. Some argue that they felt almost compulsory to undertake textile upcycling since they have witnessed the distress in for example Kantamanto Market and decided to combine their love for fashion with helping their community with the overflow of textile waste. Others have been driven to uptake sustainable practices that will hopefully impact on a broader societal scale. The fact that a majority of participants in the study are involved in upcycling activities reflects a growing awareness of the environmental and social challenges posed by textile waste. This suggests a shift towards more sustainable practices driven by both personal experiences and broader societal concerns (Vanacker et al, 2023).

6.2 Closed-Loop Recycling

In this section I continue to answer the question: *In what ways does H&M, in their Sustainability Reports from 2013-2022, address and mitigate environmental- and social harm associated with the SHC trade, particularly in low-income countries?*

The so-called Anthropocene era or being a 'good Anthropocene,' characterized by human-induced environmental changes, needs to be further

scrutinized. One finding from H&M's report on their campaign is that the campaign itself could be seen to steer away from H&M's own practices as the focus lies mostly on customers' role to reduce textile waste. In fact, this campaign's main goal is to be seen as a 'good Anthropocene', ignoring to deal with core issues such as production rates (Brooks et al, 2017). H&M relies on the campaign to achieve circularity that will depend on technological solutions and most likely suit the political contemporary climate around recycling but do not fundamentally change the system (ibid). As mentioned, one reason to adopt a more sustainable approach is the recognition of climate change, which is presented in the reports as a business opportunity for H&M. They present their reward system as being necessary to promote circularity to customers, to be seen from an Anthropocene perspective as a helping hand to reach circularity. While at the same time offer vouchers to buy new produced items from H&M, which seems to be contradictory and most likely to reproduce the usual system of overconsumption over again. Additionally, recycling being one of the methods to deal with the collected clothing, it should be noted that only a limited amount of textile can be recycled. Most of the clothing we purchase today is made from synthetic fibers which makes it hard to recycle (Brooks et al, 2017; Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). Also, several of the participants highlight the enormous impact on the local environment in GS. Countries such as Ghana and Kenya lack adequate infrastructure to handle the massive amount of SHC which has led to overfilled landfills of textile, lagoons intoxicated by microplastic from textiles and textiles choking gutters leading to floodings, this among other consequences. None of which are mentioned or considered in H&M's reports to be issues with exporting SHC to low-income countries.

H&M can be seen to not only put responsibility on consumers to recycle but depoliticize the actual supply chain of SHC by simplifying the process to customers where you only need to put your clothing in a bin and that's it – the process behind seems to be completely hidden from customers (The Or Foundation, 2022a). This issue can be referred to what Ekström & Salomonson label as micromarketing of sustainability by offering a recycling option while simultaneously continuing justified business as usual (Ekström & Salomonson, 2014). The collection of used clothing does not mean that H&M reduce their new production of clothes and the overall impact will likely lead to little gain in terms of circularity. As SHC and production of waste are directly connected to the manufacturing of new clothes (Skinner, 2019). In contrast to the amount H&M collects annually and their production levels (Edelbaum, 2019), and the shipment of one million garments to Ghana in early 2023 (Lindberg, 2013), whereas 40% imported SHC in Kantamanto Market usually become waste (Skinner, 2019). While I lack specific numerical data from my research, one can indicate that H&M's collected clothing most likely contributes to the overwhelming volume of imported SHC into countries like Ghana and Kenya.

“H&M are not acknowledging that they are bringing waste into Africa, because they do not know the pathways of these pieces, eventually ending up in Africa.” (Participant #8).

Additionally, H&M uses the term 'used clothing' rather than 'secondhand' in their reports (see Appendix B). This choice requires further examination. Labeling garments as 'used products' may neutralize the political nature of these items,

often ending up in the hands of sellers in the GS. Once H&M sells the clothing to Remondis, it becomes a commodity, since secondhand clothing imply having some kind of value while 'used clothing' may not. The global SHC trade operates as a for-profit supply chain, not as a charity, as highlighted by The Or Foundation (The Or Foundation, 2022a). Thus, H&M may avoid using the term 'secondhand' to downplay the value of these items and their role as commodities traded within the supply chain, whether they ultimately become secondhand or waste. This is reinforced by the fact that the public have little knowledge on where their donated clothing finishes up. Also, since SHC is highly dependent on desirability even though it might be wearable, it must be seen as discarded by original users, then collected in bins, tightly baled, shipped thousands of kilometers, and lastly, the process of sorting and 're-use' starts (The Or Foundation, 2023b). This implies that the journey of SHC involves multiple stages where the resorting actually continues in the GS – none of it expressed in H&M's campaign materials.

The contradiction between H&M's portrayal of their campaign as 'closing the loop' and the reality that many of the collected items may never be reused, especially in countries like Sweden, reflects a broader tension between language narratives and practice in the fashion industry's sustainability activities. This disconnect highlights a complexity in addressing environmental challenges as highlighted by Brooks et al (2023). However, while closed-loop recycling initiatives are presented as a solution to mitigate the environmental impact of clothing production and consumption, the actual efforts seem too often be restricted by systemic issues. This is a situation that exemplifies the Anthropocene era where sustainable practices essentially are built upon consumption and production (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021).

Adopting green practices may be a symptom of wanting to be a 'good Anthropocene' (Brooks et al, 2017). The discussion on greenwashing and the need for clearer sustainability definitions in the fashion industry can be analyzed in comparison to H&M's campaign, particularly in how H&M communicates its environmental initiatives. While H&M has implemented various sustainability efforts and promotes them through the 'Let's Close the Loop' campaign, there may be questions about the transparency and trustworthiness of these sustainability claims. It raises questions about whether H&M's sustainability narrative addresses the multifaceted aspects of sustainability, including social justice and environmental risks, as highlighted in the theory. Furthermore, the debate on the broadness and fuzziness of the term 'sustainability' resonates with the need for H&M to be accountable and transparent for its actions (Szabo & Webster, 2020; Vieira de Freitas Netto et al, 2020; Brydgesa, Henningerd & Hanlone, 2022).

6.3 Waste Colonialism

This section aims to address the research question: *How do non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors within the textile industry in the Africa perceive as well as address the disposal of SHC?*

Analyzing these findings through the lens of waste colonialism underscores the severe consequences of the SHC trade on both the people in the GS and the environment. Interviews conducted along with reports from the Or Foundation,

portray a rather harsh picture of the situation. In markets like Kantamanto in Ghana, the influx of unsaleable clothing has exacerbated challenges such as bad infrastructure. Despite the narrative from H&M that the used clothing to be recycled 'responsible,' the reality on the ground tells a different story. Only a small amount of the clothing collected for recycling is actually processed with the rest of it ending up in countries like Ghana, burdening local communities and ecosystems. Every participant I discussed had several observations of deep inequalities, one of them being the low quality of items being exported and the uncertainty of the content of the bails. Leaving communities even more insecure, seen from participants interviewed, in terms of economic securities and debt traps, this seems to happen in order to navigate the unpredictable industry which may keep cycles of poverty and dependence. The apparent risk of social- and economic inequality within the SHC trade is not mentioned by H&M in their reports (Appendix B), even though it is known that their partner Remondis sent SHC to countries in the GS (Lindberg, 2023).

Waste colonialism manifests in various ways, including environmental degradation, public health risks, and economic disparities. For example, people who sell SHC often discard a significant portion as waste, contributing to environmental pollution and impacting local livelihoods. Furthermore, the environmental burden extends to local fishermen, whose equipment can be damaged by discarded clothing in the sea (Mensah, 2023). Thus, understanding waste colonialism is crucial both regarding environmental challenges but also broader issues of power dynamics and social justice.

Moreover, the importation of SHC poses a threat to local culture and local textile industry as traditional textiles and styles are increasingly declined which led to major barriers for GS to develop their own textile industry. As one participant mentioned, this may leave communities and people in the industry with little or no agency. By examining these issues through the framework of waste colonialism the influx of SHC has in a cultural sense led to loss of heritage for communities that had long traditions of local clothing. Which may be seen to uphold power structures that dictate what is held value and not within a society (Liboiron, 2018). Beyond its socio-economic impact, the SHC also impacts the environment. The disposal of massive quantities of clothing leads to pollution, contaminating land, waterways, and marine ecosystems. Reports from the Or Foundation shows significant textile waste in rivers, lagoons, and coastal areas, which causes serious risks to public health and biodiversity. Additionally, the decomposition of these discarded garments releases chemicals and plastic microfibers into the environment, further exacerbating ecological degradation. This can be observed as a matter of land access, as highlighted by Liboiron (2018), which poses barriers for local communities, as seen by the interviews, in accessing certain beaches and waters contaminated with textile waste (The Or Foundation, 2023b). Here, toxic environments disrupt the bond between land and its inhabitants, forcing them off land (Liboiron, 2018). Understanding the role of colonialism in waste is key to understanding the connection between waste and power. Waste colonialism emerges when one group dominates another through waste and pollution and central to this dynamic is preserving power structures that control societal values and hierarchies (Liboiron, 2018).

Essentially, the SHC trade may seem to uphold a cycle of exploitation and environmental degradation, rooted in historical patterns of colonialism and economic inequality. Shipping SHC to the GS serves as a way for the GN to

dispose of its waste problem, transferring the same issues to the GS. In the long term, this has left GS dependent on the SHC industry.

When analyzing the issue of decoupling within the framework of waste colonialism, it becomes evident that the burden of environmental and health costs associated with SHC industries mainly falls on GS countries, while the profits mainly go to GN nations. This may reflect a continuation of colonial power dynamics, where dominant actors in GN control the SHC supply chain, neglecting the communities in GS nations and failing to track the impact of discarded clothing (Liboiron, 2018). Studies examining waste issues in colonized territories, such as island nations colonized by France, reveal how power dynamics influence waste management practices. In this context, it is important to understand both localized processes and colonial legacies in addressing waste-related challenges (Manglou, Rocher, & Bahers, 2022). Similarly, indigenous communities in the Pacific Islands faced with plastic waste issues often are forced to take responsibility, instead of plastics producers and transnational corporations from GN, which highlights the environmental injustice rooted from waste colonialism (Fuller et al., 2022).

6.4 Waste Crisis in Fast-Fashion

The rapid growth of fast-fashion in recent decades has intensified this issue. Clothing trends change faster than before, leading to garments being produced and disposed of quickly and the poor quality means a short lifespan, exacerbating the problem of waste. The relationship between the new and used clothing sectors seem to be intertwined as new garments are closely linked to their later disposal to countries in the GS (Brooks, 2015). SHC seems to be one aspect of a larger issue – overproduction of clothing in fast-fashion while textile waste is a matter of both social and environmental justice. Since most SHC markets consist mainly of cheap fast-fashion items, they later become waste; creating a cycle that reinforces the idea that clothing is disposable (The Or Foundation, 2022a).

This circulation of both new and used clothes keeps poorer countries in dependency. Often stuck in cycles of debt, in a system that exploits them for example as importers have little negotiating power over what is shipped. The power structures can be seen already in the sorting- and distributing process of SHC. Categorization becomes a social, economic, and political undertaking, shaped by the 'regime of profitability' (Arnaud van Boeckholtz, 2020, p. 24) which constitutes GN nations.

Taking H&M as an example, the focus on the 'charitable' part of their contributions, shipping clothing to low-income countries, has shifted to a focus on how they contribute to a 'sustainable circular textile industry'. However, as mentioned by The Or Foundation, the SHC trade has not been shown to diminish the consumption and manufacturing of new garments. On the contrary, this phenomenon has played a role in creating new markets, fostering increased consumption of fast-fashion in these regions (The Or Foundation, 2023). The 'sustainable circular textile industry' narrative can be seen to normalize certain 'sustainable' methods within fast-fashion where power operates through discourse to maintain existing structures. H&M's narrative of sustainability may also serve to reproduce existing power structures within the fast-fashion industry by presenting itself as a responsible actor committed to sustainability by

maintaining the status quo (Foucault, 1970). Also, as H&M presents themselves as leaders in sustainability initiatives and as an integral part of its business model, it may cover underlying issues within the industry, such as overconsumption and environmental degradation (ibid).

These types of recycling campaigns are clearly being adopted, apart from H&M, by multiple fast-fashion companies (Zara, including all the stores owned by H&M; Weekday, COS, & Other Stories, Arkivet, Monki and Afound). Even though H&M may not be the biggest textile recycling company where clothing ends up in the GS, they clearly have a major role in textile waste if you look at their production rate. The company clearly does not address issues such as textile waste in depth seen from the reports. Expressed by Skinner (2019),

“Improved labor and environmental conditions in and around certain factories may appear positive in one specific location, but what of the labor and environmental conditions where the consumptive byproducts of the improved production standards are sent as waste?” (Skinner, 2019, p. 59).

Addressing the waste crisis in fashion requires addressing the systemic exploitation that affects the majority of people working in the industry. Recycling alone cannot solve the problem of overproducing garments and exploiting people in the industry, this involves people working in Kantamanto Market for example (The Or Foundation, 2023b).

To summarize, the rapid growth of fast-fashion has led to an increase in textile waste, with clothing trends changing quickly and garments having short lifespans. The relationship between new and used clothing sectors maintains the cycle of waste, reinforcing the idea of clothing as disposable. This dependency on SHC keeps poorer countries in cycles of debt and exploitation. Companies like H&M, despite promoting sustainability initiatives, may preserve existing power structures within the fast-fashion industry. Addressing the waste crisis in fashion requires systemic changes to reduce overproduction and exploitation throughout the industry.

Furthermore, my work goes beyond the case of H&M, touching on broader aspects of development, and natural resource management. The findings reveal some deep-rooted challenges that the SHC trade poses for sustainable development, especially in the GS. The influx of low-quality clothing from the GN to African nations such as Ghana and Kenya reflect a problematic model where waste is offloaded to less-developed countries under the guise of reuse or charity. This trade not only exacerbates waste management problems but also undermines local industries, particularly in textiles, which could be a driver of rural employment and economic development.

In terms of sustainable development, one of the key implications is the need to reconsider how global supply chain's function, especially within the fashion industry. The focus of many corporations, such as H&M, on recycling and circular economy initiatives sounds promising on the surface. However, much of the clothing that reaches Ghana is non-recycled, in poor quality, and ends up in landfills, polluting water bodies and contributing to environmental degradation. This suggests that corporate-led sustainability efforts need higher supervision

and transparency to ensure that they do not shift the burden of waste management to vulnerable communities.

The environmental degradation caused by SHC waste, especially in urban and rural areas near major markets like Kantamanto in Ghana, highlights implications for natural resource management. Textile waste clogs water systems, pollutes oceans, and contributes to health risks through microplastic pollution and harmful emissions from burning clothing. The current waste management infrastructure in many African countries is ill-equipped to handle the volume of imported textile, lots of it considered waste. This points to a need for stricter international regulation on waste exports, particularly in ensuring that countries in the GS are not used as dumping grounds for unsellable or non-recyclable goods.

Beyond the case of H&M, my research calls attention to the broader systemic issues inherent in global trade, consumerism as well as overproduction, and environmental justice. There is also a need for empowering local actors – such as market sellers, upcyclers, and small-scale entrepreneurs – to play a more prominent role in shaping a sustainable economy.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research addresses the research questions by investigating the dynamics of the Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) trade between Global North (GN) and Global South (GS), with a particular focus on H&M campaign Let's Close the Loop. The study shed light on the environmental and social impact of SHC importation in low-income countries, focusing on Ghana and Kenya. Through the lens of ethical and green commodity, closed-loop recycling, and waste colonialism, some key insights have emerged. Firstly, H&M portrays themselves as circular and sustainable through the campaign, but their statements lack transparency regarding the handling of used clothing. Their focus on collecting used clothing often overlooks the downstream impacts in low-income countries, where much of the collected clothing ends up. Secondly, waste colonialism and the concept of being a 'good Anthropocene' have been important to understand the complexities of the SHC trade. By analyzing the SHC trade through waste colonialism some evident underlying power dynamics, as well as environmental injustices, and inequalities are present. Thirdly, the research emphasizes broader systemic issues within the fast-fashion industry such as overproduction and exploitation which contributes to the waste crisis. Which may include promoting slow fashion. However, there are still gaps that may be important for future research. For example, an investigation into the socio-economic impacts of the SHC trade on local communities in low-income countries such as understanding how the influx of SHC affects the local textile industries and economic stability. Additionally, research on recycling initiatives and transparency, similar to Let's Close the loop, that claim to mitigate environmental harm. Furthermore, policy suggestions may include Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to have producers responsible for the items along the whole supply chain. Including, the need for transparency and accountability for companies in recycling initiatives to avoid reproducing the depolitized

narrative around SHC trade. Lastly, it will be essential, for policies effectiveness, to ensure the voices of actors downstream in the supply chain are heard.

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Popular science summary

This thesis investigates the global trade of Second-Hand Clothing (SHC), with a specific focus on the actions of H&M through their Let's Close the Loop campaign. The aim is to understand the environmental and social impacts of SHC importation, particularly in Ghana and Kenya, both major importers in the SHC trade. By analyzing sustainability reports and conducting interviews with actors in the GS, including environmental NGOs in Kenya and Ghana, the research seeks to uncover how H&M addresses associated risks with collected used clothing.

The findings reveal contradictions in H&M's claims of circularity and sustainability, raising questions about the transparency of its initiatives while sustaining narratives around SHC trade. Additionally, it sheds light on broader systemic issues within the SHC trade, such as ethical considerations and waste colonialism, where richer countries ship unwanted clothing to low-income countries, worsening environmental and social challenges.

Emphasizing the importance of examination of sustainability initiatives, such as H&M's campaign, and its broader implications on the SHC industry. Transparency and accountability are essential for companies like H&M, and to address the underlying issues rather than just presenting a facade of sustainability.

Finally, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities within the SHC industry. It highlights the need for more responsible practices and systemic changes, mainly in overproduction and consumption, to guarantee a more sustainable future for both people and the planet.

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Appendix A

List of Individual Interviews

Identity	Country	Name of organization/occupation	Date of interview
Respondent 1	Ghana	The Revival (upcycling, workshops)	2024-02-13
Respondent 2	Kenya & Nigeria	Africa Collect Textiles [ACT] (upcycle, recycle)	2024-02-22
Respondent 3	Sweden	Journalist for Swedish Newspaper Aftonbladet	2024-02-22
Respondent 4	Ghana	British-Ghanaian entrepreneur Co-founded the Pure and Just Food Company Board member of The Or Foundation	2024-03-11
Respondent 5	Kenya	Clean Up Kenya (advocacy, cleanups)	2024-04-04
Respondent 6	Ghana	Demin Store (upcycle, online shop)	2024-04-11

Respondent 7	Ghana	Kokrobitey Institute (upcycle, among others)	2024-04-11
Respondent 8	Ghana	David Adams (Seller at Kantamanto Market)	2024-04-29

Appendix B

List of H&M's Sustainability Reports

H&M's Sustainability Reports	Country	Year of Issue	Link
Report 1	Sweden	2013	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Conscious-Actions-Sustainability-Report-2013_en.pdf
Report 2	Sweden	2014	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Conscious-Actions-Sustainability-Report-2014_en.pdf
Report 3	Sweden	2015	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/HM_SustainabilityReport_2015_final_FullReport.pdf
Report 4	Sweden	2016	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/HM_group_SustainabilityReport_2016_FullReport_en.pdf
Report 5	Sweden	2017	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HM_group_SustainabilityReport_2017_FullReport.pdf
Report 6	Sweden	2018	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HM_Group_SustainabilityReport_2018_-FullReport.pdf
Report 7	Sweden	2019	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HM-Group-Sustainability-Performance-Report-2019.pdf

Report 8	Sweden	2020	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HM-Group-Sustainability-Performance-Report-2020.pdf
Report 9	Sweden	2021	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HM-Group-Sustainability-Disclosure-2021.pdf
Report 10	Sweden	2022a	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/HM-Group-Sustainability-Disclosure-2022.pdf
Report 11	Sweden	2022b	https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/HM-Group-Annual-and-Sustainability-Report-2022.pdf

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