

**Fashion Rental:
Exploring the Self-Concept through
Women's Lived Experiences of
Access-Based Consumption**

**A G WARD
PhD THESIS 2024**

**Fashion Rental:
Exploring the Self-Concept through
Women's Lived Experiences of
Access-Based Consumption**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of Manchester
Metropolitan University for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

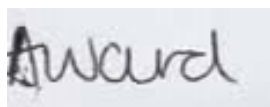
Department of Marketing, International
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Manchester Metropolitan University

2024

Declaration page

No material contained in this thesis has been used in any other submission, for another academic award or qualification of this or any other university.

Signed

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Amy Ward', is shown within a light blue rectangular box.

Amy Ward

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This thesis is the result of four-years of passion, dedication, determination and resilience. There are many people who have been a part of my PhD journey and for whom I owe thanks, but first, a shout out to *my team* – Joe, Mum, Dad, Dan and Meg.

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Glossary of key terms

B2C – business-to-consumer

CBM – circular business model

CE – circular economy

EP – existential phenomenology

MMU – Manchester metropolitan university

PaaS – product-as-a-service

PGR – postgraduate

PI – principal investigator

PIS – participant information sheet

PS – principal supervisor

P2P – peer-to-peer

SE – sharing economy

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Abstract

This thesis explores the emerging phenomenon of fashion rental as an access-based form of consumption. Specifically, it explores whether renting fashion items informs a consumer's self-concept and, if so, how. Drawing on the novel combination of two seminal theories – Bauman's theory of liquid modernity and Belk's theory of the self-concept - and a conceptual framework (solid-liquid consumption), this research advances theoretical understanding surrounding liquid consumption and identity. To gain insight into consumer's lived experiences of the phenomenon, existential phenomenology is utilised. Twenty-four phenomenological interviews were conducted with female consumers with experience of renting fashion items. Thematic analysis reveals three key themes that contribute to their self-concept, through the act of renting: (1) *elevation*, (2) *advocacy*, and (3) *surrogacy*. Specifically, participants shared a desire to rent items that elevate their sense of self, ensuring they protected and preserved their rented item while actively promoting renting as a sustainable alternative to consuming fashion - in the strive towards a circular economy.

The findings offer a counterpoint to the prevailing view that access-based consumption has low relevance to the *self*. Instead, findings reveal how consumers rent fashion items to temporarily alter their self-concept and feel the best version of themselves. The act of renting appears to be as important, if not more so, than the item rented – revealing how the act of *advocacy* contributes to the self-concept. The surrogate consumer is introduced, which highlights how renting informs the self-concept through a sense of *surrogacy* and in doing so, presents a novel concept to the field of consumer research. *Surrogacy* problematises contamination concerns that are understood to be a current barrier to access-based consumption – advancing existing literature and presenting valuable insight for rental companies/marketers. Wider implications for theory, practice and policy are also presented.

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1.0 Introduction

This chapter establishes the context for this research. First, the real-world problem is introduced: overconsumption and textile waste – caused by the fashion industry which significantly contributes to the climate crisis (1.1). Second, the circular business model of ‘renting’ is presented – which is suggested to be a suitable alternative to (traditional) fashion consumption (i.e., buying and owning), posing a potential solution to the ‘problem’ (1.2). Accordingly, the shift from ownership to access is discussed, recognising that consumers’ increasing preference for access (vs. concrete ownership) has implications for consumer research; specifically, understanding how material possessions contribute to a consumer’s self-concept (1.3). Finally, the objectives and research questions are presented (1.4) and an overview of the thesis is offered (1.5).

1.1 The fashion industry: Overconsumption and textile Waste

The fashion industry has seen rapid growth over the last 15 years, largely owing to a growing middle class, who have greater disposable income and a propensity for “fast fashion” (EMF, 2017; McKinsey and Company, 2023; PACE, 2024). Tempting consumers with low-cost fashion items, designed to be worn once, fast fashion has generated a ‘throwaway’ culture - reinforced by brands who stress the importance of staying “on trend” (Pederson et al., 2018; Colucci and Vecchi, 2021; Meng and Leary, 2021). Facilitating this, globalisation - with actors and processes spread across the globe - affords technology purposefully designed to cut labour costs and reduce distribution time (McKinsey and Company, 2019a; Belk, 2020; Fung et al., 2020; Saha et al., 2020). This has seen the production and consumption of fashion rise at an unprecedented rate – to such a degree that overconsumption has surpassed overpopulation as the leading driver of climate change (Sekhon and Armstrong, 2020; Ki et al., 2023). It is suggested that *if* consumption continues at the current rate, by 2030, we will be discarding more than 134 million tonnes

of clothing every year, emitting around 2.7 billion metric tons of greenhouse gas (McKinsey and Company, 2020; Sustainable Brands, 2020).

Due to this, the fashion industry is now recognized as the second largest polluting industry worldwide; overpassing both aviation and shipping combined (UN Environment, 2018; Colucci and Vecchi, 2020; Saha et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2023; UKRI, 2023). The depletion of raw materials has meant that natural biological products such as water and cotton are in scarce supply - with 20% of global water wastage attributed solely to textile production (UN Environment, 2018; Drapers, 2023; UKRI, 2023; WRAP, 2023). Mass textile waste continues to threaten marine life as toxic chemicals and textile dyes are emptied into rivers/seas and clothing is discarded into landfill (UN Environment, 2018; WRAP, 2023; PACE, 2024). Furthermore, the fashion industry's association with labour violations, including modern slavery, child labour, garment worker exploitation and poor working conditions, makes the fashion industry notorious for its exploitative supply chain (Pederson et al., 2018; McKinsey and Company, 2023). Developing countries, such as Bangladesh, where cotton is sourced and picked for fashion garments, are often at high risk of drought – putting workers under immense pressure to ensure they meet supply demands (Saha et al., 2020). As a result, the production, consumption *and* disposal of fashion has become more harmful and less transparent (EMF, 2017; McKinsey and Company, 2019a; Fung et al., 2020; Gale, 2023; McKinsey and Company, 2023; PACE, 2024). The fashion industry thus demands urgent action to slow its escalating impact to society and the environment.

1.2 Renting: A circular business model

‘We must create an economy that emulates nature: naturally circular and supporting life’ (Circle Economy, 2023).

A transition from linearity to circularity is recommended to truly administer change within the fashion industry (EMF, 2017; Circle Economy, 2023; Drapers, 2023; EMF, 2024). Circularity means change at every stage of the supply chain, from design, sourcing of fabrics and production, through to manufacturing, distribution and disposal (UN Environment, 2018; McNeil and Venter, 2019; Sekhon and Armstrong, 2020; Sustainable Brands, 2020). This can be achieved through implementing a Circular Economy (CE), which represents:

‘A system where materials never become waste and nature is regenerated. In a circular economy, products and materials are kept in circulation through processes like maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, recycling, and composting. The circular economy tackles climate change and other global challenges, like biodiversity loss, waste, and pollution, by decoupling economic activity from the consumption of finite resources’ (EMF, 2022).

Underpinned by three key principles, (1) *Eliminating waste and pollution*, (2) *Circulating products and materials (at their highest values)* and (3) *Regenerating nature*, the CE aims to form a “closed loop” within supply chains (EMF, 2017; Tari and Trudel, 2023). However, realising a CE is no easy feat; it relies on collaborative action from a range of stakeholders, including companies and brands, government, policy makers, educators and consumers (EMF, 2017; De Angelis et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2018; McKinsey and Company, 2020; Saha et al., 2020; Tari and Trudel, 2023).

The fashion industry recognises that urgent action is needed to alter the way in which it currently operates (McKinsey and Company, 2019a; 2019b; Drapers, 2023; Ki et al., 2023; McKinsey and Company, 2023). Big brands including Burberry, Gap and the H & M Group remain core partners of ‘Make Fashion Circular’ – an initiative launched by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF, 2017) to eliminate waste and pollution directly caused by the fashion industry. Patagonia have introduced an in-house repair and resale model - buying back their own products and selling them to consumers at a discount

price (McKinsey and Company, 2019b). More recently, 'The Jeans Redesign' (EMF, 2023) has seen 100 brands, retailers, garment manufacturers and fabric mills participate in the re-design of the most water intensive garment known to the industry – jeans (Saha et al., 2020). As of 2023, 34 UK fashion brands and retailers have signed the Textile's 2030 voluntary agreement which strives to reduce carbon and water by 50% and 30% respectively throughout the textile supply chain (WRAP, 2023). While such progress is encouraging, further work is needed to ensure that the industry meets the 1.5-degree pathway set out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2018; McKinsey and Company, 2019a; 2020; Drapers, 2023).

From a business standpoint, a CE can be achieved through the adoption of circular business models. According to Rovanto and Bask (2020: 1157), a Circular Business Model (CBM) can be conceptualised as:

'The company-level application of a CE. It is the logic of slowing and/or closing material loops, by which an organisation creates, delivers and captures value with long-term environmental, economic and social implications in a systemic manner on the micro, meso and macro levels to accomplish sustainable development'.

To date, CBM's have been implemented across a range of industries, including transport (such as car sharing) and hospitality (such as Air Bnb) (Lawson et al., 2016; Morewedge et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024); and, more recently, with furniture (e.g., IKEA offering furniture rental) and consumer household goods (e.g., washing machine subscriptions) (Marketing Week, 2019; EMF, 2024). Such examples demonstrate the application of a Product-as-a-Service (PaaS) model. Otherwise referred to as access-based consumption, PaaS is a CBM that contributes towards a "closed loop" by giving consumers access to a product/service for a fixed period (Yang et al., 2018; Mukendi and Henninger, 2020; Patwa et al., 2020). Subsequently, ownership remains with the company and consumers return the product at the end of the fixed period (Bardhi and

Eckhardt, 2012; Schaefers et al., 2016; Morewedge et al., 2021). This permits products to stay 'in use' for longer, extending their product life - conducive to a CE (Pantano and Stylos, 2020).

It is understood that applying circularity to fashion will have positive implications for not only the environment and society (though that will be significant), but for brands and retailers alike (McKinsey and Company, 2020; WRAP, 2021; Drapers, 2023; McKinsey and Company, 2023; EMF, 2024). The emergence of new markets, new business models and new customers will see significant and positive changes for an industry that desperately needs to alter the way in which it operates (Belk, 2014; McNeill and Venter, 2019; Colucci and Vecchi, 2021; Jain et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2021; Tari and Trudel, 2023). There are a range of ways in which the CE can be achieved within the fashion industry, with CBMs such as rental, resale, re-pair and remaking all successful propositions (EMF, 2017; McKinsey and Company, 2020; WRAP, 2023). Nonetheless, *renting* has been suggested as a suitable alternative to 'traditional' fashion consumption, with consumers welcome to alter their style in a way that avoids harm to society and the environment (Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Jain et al., 2021).

The fashion rental market is projected to be worth \$2.1 billion by 2025 and \$3.6 billion by 2033, with growth largely driven by demand for renting luxury/designer items for special occasions/events (McKinsey and Company, 2019a; Market Data Forecast, 2023; Customer Market Insights, 2024). In 2023, 58% of the global fashion rental market was accounted for by women, with significant growth expected to continue (Future Marketing Insights, 2023). With female consumers more sensitive to changes in fashion (trends), rental services pose an appealing option (Future Marketing Insights, 2023). Consequently, fashion rental companies continue to primarily target women (Market Data Forecast, 2023). Following the launch of Rent the Runway in 2009 - a subscription-based model, charging customers \$150 a month to rent clothing - rental fashion has flourished (Loussaïef et al., 2019; FT, 2023; 2024).

Platforms such as My Wardrobe HQ, HURR Collective and By Rotation have emerged, offering diverse types of rental services to cater for varying consumer needs (Elle, 2021; Customer Market Insights, 2024; EMF, 2024; FT, 2024). These include one-off rentals (usually for short periods of time, i.e., 3 days) and subscription rentals (for extended periods of time, i.e., a month) and they can be accessed through various means: from a Peer-to-Peer (P2P) platform (*item rented directly from the consumer*), a Business-to-Consumer (B2C) platform (*item rented from the platform/ individual brand*) or, a peer listed item on a B2C platform (*item rented directly from the consumer via a rental platform*) (EMF, 2017; FT, 2024). Regardless of the rental service chosen, consumers can access products on a temporary basis before returning items back into the supply chain – “closing the loop” and contributing towards a more circular industry (Lawson et al., 2016; Linder and Williander, 2017; Yang et al., 2018).

1.3 Shifting consumer preferences: From ownership to access

The move towards a circular fashion industry, however, requires a conceptual shift in consumer behaviour – relying on consumers foregoing ownership (as the ‘traditional’ mode of consumption) in exchange for temporary possession (Schaefers et al., 2016; De Angelis et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2019; Makri et al., 2020). Nonetheless, renting fashion has gained momentum; largely among younger consumers (typically millennials¹ and Generation Z²) who are growing increasingly concerned with social and environmental causes (McKinsey and Company, 2019; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023; Shukla et al., 2024). Recognising the fashion industry is a major contributor to global warming, these younger consumers consider sustainability when making decisions around their fashion consumption (McKinsey and Company, 2023).

¹ Millennials - also known as Generation Y, are the generation of consumers typically born between 1980 - 1994 (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

² Generation Z - the generation of consumers following millennials, typically born between 1995 - 2010 (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

Such concerns are bolstered by the increasing number of “ethical” or “green” influencers promoting circular fashion (WGSN Insight, 2019; The Guardian, 2023; Vogue Business, 2023). This new wave of environmentally conscious influencers use social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, to encourage consumers to engage in more sustainable consumption practices (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Kapoor et al., 2023; Mintel, 2024). Hashtags, such as #ThanksItsRented or #Thrifty, are used by influencers to spotlight their ‘sustainable finds’ and direct consumers to sustainable fashion content (WGSN Insight, 2022). Notably, “haul” culture – synonymous with fast fashion, whereby influencers video and share their latest purchases, influencing consumers to buy them - has received viral backlash from consumers (Forbes, 2023; BBC, 2025). Specifically, #AntiHaul received 21.5 million views on TikTok, with consumers subsequently sharing videos of ‘items not to buy’ (WGSN Insight, 2022). Such changes in consumer culture serve to highlight the growing demand for more conscious consumption – moving away from the excessive (and over) consumption of fashion that has dominated the industry (Business of Fashion, 2020; Vogue Business, 2023).

To address such demand, leading UK fashion retailers are implementing circularity into their (traditionally linear) business models. Mainstream providers, such as John Lewis and Marks & Spencer, are trialling in-store repair alterations to try and extend the product life of garments; while Primark has launched an in-store “swap-shop” where consumers can exchange pre-loved items for digital tokens – redeemed with the circular clothing company Verte (WARC, 2024). Additionally, Marks & Spencer offer consumers access to items through the online rental platform, Hirestreet - with up to 40 fashion brands available to rent from £13 (for four days) (Retail Week, 2021). Similarly, e-commerce brand, ASOS, has partnered with Hirestreet to offer a subscription-based service to everyday consumers - with more than 20,000 items across more than 50 brands available to rent, this collaboration is forecast to be the largest rental-retailer service on the market (Retail Week, 2024).

Crucially, this shift in consumption behaviour requires not only change from brands and retailers - through the implementation of CBM's - but also from marketers who must evaluate *how* they communicate these sustainable practices to consumers (Makri et al, 2020; Mukendi et al., 2021; Hewer, 2022; Lee et al., 2024). While extensive marketing has contributed to overconsumption, specifically the rise of fast fashion, it also has the potential to be a part of the solution (Makri et al., 2020; Sekhon and Armstrong; 2020; Gale, 2023; Shukla et al., 2024). Within the marketing literature, research exploring renting and the CE within the context of fashion is sparse, with only a handful of studies offering insight from a consumer behaviour perspective (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023). Considering this, and increased preference for access-based consumption among consumers, it is necessary to explore the phenomenon further to help understand its scalability (Makri et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2021; Mukendi et al., 2021; Ki et al., 2023).

Moreover, as consumer desire for ownership 'waned', it is necessary to question 'what marketers, consumers and society may lose in its absence' (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020: 301). Ownership has long been recognised for the sense of stability and security it offers consumers - with material possessions, such as clothing, signalling status, achievement, and wealth (Belk, 1988). However, as consumers shift towards access-based consumption, in search of variety, sustainability, and affordability, the safety and sense of identity traditionally obtained through 'solid' ownership is called into question (Belk, 2014; McKinsey and Company, 2019b; Atanasova et al., 2024; EMF, 2024). Accordingly, calls are made for further research to investigate whether access-based consumption, or 'liquid consumption' experiences, contribute towards a consumer's self-concept (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021). This research responds to such calls.

1.4 Objectives and Research Questions

This doctoral research positions itself within the field of consumer research; addressing the scant literature surrounding access-based (liquid) consumption and the self-concept. Adopting an existential phenomenological approach, insight is gathered into the lived experiences of 24 female consumers who have rented fashion items. By exploring *why* consumers choose to access fashion items and *how* this contributes towards their self-concept, findings from this research make contributions to theory, practice, and policy alike.

This research marries together two seminal theories: (1) Bauman's (2000) theory of liquid modernity, and (2) Belk's (1988) theory of the self-concept, alongside Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) (solid-liquid consumption) conceptual framework. In doing so, this research presents a novel combination in which to address the following research questions:

1. *Why do female consumers choose to rent, over buying, fashion items?*
2. *Does renting, rather than owning, fashion items contribute to a consumer's self-concept?*
3. *How can marketers encourage other consumers to engage with fashion rental systems, in the strive towards a CE?*

1.5 An overview of the Thesis

Chapter two offers an in-depth review of literature surrounding fashion rental (2.0). Specifically, it examines three pools of literature; access-based consumption (2.1), the self-concept and the extended self (2.2.) and ethical concerns (2.3). The review of access-based consumption (2.1) begins by exploring the notion of liquid modernity (2.1.1 and 2.1.2). Conceptualised by Bauman (2000), liquid modernity offers insight into the shift away from 'solid' ownership and towards 'liquid' access. Next, the concept of liquid consumption is introduced - with emphasis placed on Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) (solid-

liquid consumption) conceptual framework (2.1.3), and literature pertaining to access-based consumption is reviewed (2.1.4). Subsequently, studies examining access-based fashion consumption are examined, although such insight is limited and thus, the need for further research is highlighted (2.1.5).

Second, the self-concept and the extended self is reviewed (2.2). The notion of liquidity is addressed in relation to identity (2.2.1) and Belk's (1988) seminal theory of the self-concept is presented (2.2.2). Following this, literature that has explored the *self* in relation to access-based consumption is examined (2.2.3). This is then extended to the current, albeit scant, research that has examined access-based fashion consumption, specifically renting, and how it relates to a consumer's sense of their self-concept (2.2.4). The final section examines ethical consumption and concerns (2.3). Specifically, it examines the extant pool of literature surrounding anti-consumption (2.3.1) before narrowing focus to the practice of voluntary simplicity (2.3.2). Motivations for engaging in voluntary simplicity are discussed (2.3.3) before voluntary simplicity and identity is reviewed (2.3.4) – with literature largely focussing on the work of Helen Cherrier (2007; 2009). This chapter closes by identifying the 'gaps' in the literature, which this research seeks to resolve, and stating the research questions.

Informed by the literature, chapter three presents the methodology and methods chosen to respond to the research questions most effectively (3.0). An introduction to the chapter is first offered, accentuating the existential phenomenological approach harnessed, alongside the method of data collection and analysis (3.1). The study's interpretivist epistemological position is introduced, and its Existential Phenomenological (EP) (Thompson et al., 1989) approach (3.2). Here, emphasis is placed on why exploring the phenomenon from the perspective of consumer's lived experiences is important – followed by the phenomenological interview being identified as the method of data collection. Accordingly, the sample size and selection are

identified (3.3.1), with consideration made for the ethical principles relevant to carrying out this research (3.3.2). Guided by a five-phase approach, data collection and data analysis are discussed (3.3.3 and 3.3.4) before a reflexive account is offered, drawing on the researcher's methodological reflections (3.4).

Chapter 4 presents the findings (4.0), specifically the three key themes that have emerged from thematic analysis: (1) *Elevation*, (2) *Advocacy* and (3) *Surrogacy*. Each theme is presented in-turn (4.1, 4.2 and 4.3), alongside a theme definition and identification of its constituent parts – i.e., the sub-sections which, when taken together, tell the 'overall story'. Themes are supported throughout the chapter with (anonymised) direct quotes from participants, offering rich insight into the lived experiences of fashion rental. Shedding light on *why* female consumers choose to rent, over buying, fashion items and *how* renting contributes to a consumer's self-concept - via a sense of *elevation*, *advocacy* and *surrogacy*, findings successfully respond to the research questions. Moreover, they address recent calls for research to explore if/how liquid consumption experiences contribute towards the self-concept (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021).

Most crucially, the findings offer a new concept to the field of consumer research - the 'Surrogate Consumer'. The identification of 'the surrogate consumer' problematises contamination concerns – currently a significant barrier to engagement with fashion rental and access-based consumption more widely (Argo et al., 2006; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hazée et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). The categorisation of care (as seen in *Figure 1*) can assist marketers in promoting the issue of cleanliness/protection of rented items in an effort to encourage consumers to engage in fashion rental systems – addressing social and political calls to reduce overconsumption and textile waste (EMF, 2017; IPCC, 2018; UN

Environment, 2018; EAC, 2019; UK Parliament, 2022; EMF, 2023; UKRI, 2023; WRAP, 2023; EMF, 2024; PACE, 2024).

Chapter five provides the discussion and conclusion to this doctoral thesis (5.0). It begins by offering a summary of the key findings, *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy* (5.1), before interpreting them in relation to the existing literature (5.2). Upon discussion of the final theme, *surrogacy*, a conceptual model identifying the surrogate consumer is presented (*Figure 1*) (5.2.4). A further figure (*Figure 2*) is presented to illustrate how the three themes interconnect in the context of renting. It is here that the research questions are specifically re-addressed, with detailed responses given and contributions to theory, practice and policy made clear (5.2.5). Limitations of the research are then presented with recommendations made for future research (5.3). Following this, the practical application is discussed with a specific focus on how marketers can encourage other consumers to engage in fashion rental systems in the strive towards a CE (5.4). Finally, the thesis is brought to a close, drawing conclusions based on the existing literature, the data, the key findings, and their implications (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Revealing the ‘so what’ of the research, it presents the contributions for theory, practice, and policy one more (5.5).

2.0 Literature Review

‘Bauman knows that you learn more about a civilisation from its waste than from its general architectural achievements: we are what we throw away’

(Blackshaw, 2016: 123).

This chapter offers an in-depth review and analysis of the current literature surrounding access-based consumption and the self-concept, as well as examining literature surrounding ethical consumption and concerns.

The first section specifically examines access-based consumption (2.1), through the lens of liquid modernity (2.1.1), followed by a discussion of the critique and challenges (2.1.2) of its application to consumer research (2.1.3 and 2.1.4), before finally reviewing the current application of access-based consumption within the fashion industry (2.1.5). The second section discusses the role of the self-concept and the extended self (2.2) - addressing liquidity and identity (2.2.1) and Belk's theory of the self-concept (2.2.2) - before examining the self-concept in relation to access-based consumption (2.2.3 and 2.2.4). This section of the review closes by offering insight into the self-concept, the extended self, and fashion rental (2.2.5). The third and final section offers insight into the pool of literature pertaining to ethical consumption and concerns (2.3), specifically examining anti-consumption (2.3.1) and voluntary simplicity (2.3.2), as well as addressing motivations for voluntary simplicity (2.3.3) and how voluntary simplicity relates to identity (2.3.4).

2.1 Access-based consumption

Traditionally, consumer research has focused on the concept of ownership as the primary mode of consumption. Ownership practices involve the exchange of goods between buyer and seller and are characterised by the buyer retaining sole, legal possession of a consumer good (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Morewedge et al., 2021). However, with changes to modern society and continual technological advancements, the practice of *accessing* products has gained in popularity (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020b; Morewedge et al., 2021; Kang and Park, 2023; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023; Barnes and White, 2024; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). This newly emerging form of consumption allows consumers to gain temporary access to a product in exchange for an access fee, with the most notable difference to ownership being that no transfer of possession takes place (Lawson et al., 2016; Christodoulides et al., 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024).

Access-based consumption has been revolutionised across a wide range of product categories, including transportation, fashion, accommodation, and financial services (Lawson, 2011; Lawson et al., 2016; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Christodoulides et al., 2021; Hewer, 2022; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023; Barnes and White, 2024; Shakla et al., 2024; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). However, adoption of such shared consumption practices remains an issue (Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). As such, further research is needed to understand consumer reluctance to access-based consumption practices and how to overcome it – in the strive for a Circular Economy (CE) (Sekhon and Armstrong, 2020; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). Moreover, consumer research remains embryonic with regards to exploring the implications of access-based consumption on the *self*, and as such, further research is needed to build upon current findings and expand theoretical understanding (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020).

2.1.1 Liquid modernity

Historically, access-based consumption has been branded as an inferior consumption practice, with consumers who engage with access consumption (e.g., renting, rather than buying, consumer goods) often shamed for their lack of financial power and status within society (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020b). This ideology stems from the capitalist era, when society was built on ownership and bound by fixed, solid structures (Bauman, 2000; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Elliot, 2013; Morewedge et al., 2021). Such consumer acquisition was concerned with the notion of materialism, with physical ownership symbolising achievement, and buying and selling were married together by labour and capital (Bauman, 2000; Jacobsen and Poder, 2016; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Hewer, 2024). However, the collapse of bureaucratic social structures resulted in the emergence of a post-industrial economy, replacing traditional forms of consumption (i.e., ownership) with the fluidity and ephemerality of access (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020b; Thompson and Kumar, 2020). Working

life became an uncertainty, with the introduction of rolling (often precarious) contracts and individuals moving between jobs, garnering a short-term mentality towards labour (Bauman, 2000; Poder, 2016; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). Bauman (2000: 117), the contemporary sociologist who analyses the conditions of consumerism, portrays employment of labour in the liquid era as: ‘...a camping site which one visits for just a few days and may leave at any moment if the comforts on offer are not delivered’.

Bauman’s (2000) theory of liquid modernity encapsulates the changes that occurred within society, highlighting the shift from ownership to access. While the industrial era was characteristic with all that was heavy, including labour, production, goods and society, the post-industrial era harnessed technology and transport to make things lighter and more flexible (Bardhi et al., 2012; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). This de-emphasis on structure was conceptualised by Bauman, who employed a metaphor (liquidity) to amplify how the stability and security of society had been overturned with uncertainty and vulnerability (Bauman, 2000; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Subsequently, the shift from a *solid* social structure to a *liquid*, ephemeral, structure was reflected within consumer research (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020b; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022; 2023). In the new era of liquid modernity, consumers ‘threw caution to the wind’ and set out to seek instant gratification (Blackshaw, 2016: 120) - which access-based consumption afforded.

Bauman’s take on liquid modernity can be supplemented by Belk’s (2010) concept of dematerialisation. Dematerialisation has accelerated with the digitalisation of products and services, forming a new wave of consumers, who crave instant access, facilitated by the Internet of Things (IoT) (Belk, 2013). Material possessions have been reconfigured to adopt a digital form, e.g., photographs, music, and books, which has subsequently influenced consumption behaviour – converting it from a private consumption practice to an access-based consumption practice (Belk, 2013; 2020; Christodoulides et

al., 2021; Leung et al., 2022; Kang and Park, 2023; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). The ease of access reinforced by dematerialisation has generated instant gratification, meaning consumers can receive immediate satisfaction before their desire swiftly becomes obsolete and they want for the next product (Bauman, 2000).

Dematerialisation offers widespread advantages to consumers (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Mardon et al., 2022; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). Belk (2020) highlights the speed of digital access and ease of duplication, changing the notions of rarity, scarcity and luxury that were once associated with materialism. A further result of dematerialisation is the emergence of the Sharing Economy (SE). Traditionally an exchange between family and friends, sharing has become popular amongst strangers, with the short-term rental of goods *shared* via digital means (Belk, 2013; 2020; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). Eckhardt et al. (2019: 7) define the SE as ‘a scalable socioeconomic system that employs technology-enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and intangible resources’. Sharing, widely used amongst pre-industrial societies and considered a dated concept, is bound by interpersonal exchanges and access to communal possessions and thus this longstanding exchange can be observed in liquid modernity (Belk, 2010).

The SE has generated an opportunity for consumers, who, in the *solid* era of ownership, would not have been able to afford to own luxury goods (Belk, 2010; Christodoulides et al., 2021). Sharing economy platforms are a key example of how the SE can benefit consumers, considered a marketplace for co-creation, and popular platforms such as Air Bnb, Couchsurfing, and Tinder have allowed consumers to act as both service provider and service user (Scaraboto and Figueiredo, 2022). Furthermore, greater value for society has been generated as more consumers pay for access at a lower monetary cost (Belk, 2020; Christodoulides et al., 2021). Bauman (2000: 122) offers an insightful depiction of liquid modernity and the rise in remote technology,

stating that ‘who rules the (air) waves, rules the lived world, decides its shape and contents’. This statement captures the changes within society, signalling the domination of technology on consumers’ everyday lives, suggesting that technology is not only relevant but is fundamental to consumers’ evaluation of themselves, others, and the world around them.

Moreover, the SE has allowed for movement between social hierarchies, permitting consumers to gain and lose status outside traditional social structures (Parsons and Cappellini, 2020). Subsequently, the traditional source of social status, i.e. social class, has diminished, and consumers are free to create or modify their own social standing (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Christodoulides et al., 2021). With consumers adopting liquid lifestyles, and subsequently liquid consumption, they are suggested to be free to accrue social status outside the constraints of social class (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). Consequently, the long-standing signalling of status, i.e. financial wealth, and material possession, has been replaced with a new founded desire to access products, albeit on a temporary basis (Bauman, 2000).

This considered, liquid modernity and the innovative approach to consuming products raises the question of whether social status and class distinction are still relevant (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). Previously, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) acknowledged that liquid consumption requires access to economic and cultural capital, meaning consumers with sufficient resources are more likely to thrive in a liquid society. More recently, they have stated that social hierarchies still exist, however, they argue the division between traditional social classes have been decoupled and revised with a flexible and fluid distinction – which consumers can gain and lose over their lifetime (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). This decoupling, alongside the rise in dematerialisation, has resulted in access for the masses to the once ‘untouchable’ products, and arguably the loss of exclusivity amongst luxury brands (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021).

The new symbol of *status* has increasingly become characterised by inconspicuous consumption, whereby more subtle, refined and minimalistic products denote status (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Thompson and Kumar, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021). Furthermore, inconspicuousness has become associated with a preference for experience, as opposed to material goods, e.g., sharing out your house through Air Bnb, thereby signalling an openness to people and new experiences (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021). Most interestingly, many consumers will now pay a premium for inconspicuousness, it has been suggested, revising the traditional markers of status that once dominated society (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Christodoulides et al., 2021).

The next section addresses the challenges and critiques of Bauman's work, as well as offering insight into how the theory has been implemented within the context of consumer research.

2.1.2 Critique and challenges of liquid modernity

Jacobsen and Poder (2016: 3) neatly summarise Bauman's account of liquid modernity by offering an analogy – 'Bauman enters a furnished 'room', containing the story of the transformation of modernity through a variety of different 'doors', i.e., globalization, freedom, love, sexuality, the working class, [and so on]'. It is understood that Bauman tackles the same sociological topic, 'modern liquidity', by looking at it from a wide range of different perspectives (Elliott, 2013; Jacobsen and Poder, 2016). While Bauman's theory does capture the changes within post-industrial society and subsequent liquification, and does so with multifariousness, it has not gone without challenges and criticism.

Blackshaw (2016) reports on how the post-industrial liquid era disadvantages the lower, more traditional, working class, who cannot afford to be fully

immersed in liquid consumerism. The re-alignment of the boundaries between the traditional social classes (as seen in the capitalist era) has separated those consumers who can happily navigate liquid society, termed by Bauman as *free* consumers, with those who cannot, termed as *flawed* consumers (Atkinson, 2008; Blackshaw, 2016; Davis, 2016). However, as Blackshaw (2016) argues, while access for the masses may be true of liquid modernity, there is still a minority within society who are not able to consume freely. Bauman openly acknowledges this in his analysis, stating that 'liquid modernity has let one partner out of the cage', i.e., the ones who are freer to move are the ones who can gain higher status and benefit most from liquid society (Bauman, 2000, in Elliott, 2013: 38). Despite this, Bauman also claims to believe that individuals are not bound to social structure and hierarchy, but instead have the freedom to engage in cultural pluralism – presenting confounding beliefs (Poder, 2016).

Caldwell and Henry (2020) argue that Bauman's theory is too broad and attempts to generalise liquidity to all aspects of human life, including power relations, globalisation, social life, and individual emotional responses. Despite Jacobsen and Poder (2016) illustrating Bauman's account of liquid modernity as heterogenous, Caldwell and Henry (2020) critique Bauman for acquiring a one-size fits all approach that cannot be assumed entirely. Elliot (2013) previously critiqued Bauman for neglecting the more solid, structured forms of social life that remain within liquid modern society (structures such as social traditions and religious regimes). With that said, Elliott (2013) argues that Bauman places too much significance on liquification, exaggerating his theory, specifically with regards to his account of social and cultural relations in a globalized world - in which consumer motivations and dispositions can vary extensively (Caldwell and Henry, 2020).

Bauman (2000) argues that in liquid modernity we are observing the revenge of nomadism, as previously deemed a subordinate lifestyle in the capitalist era, nomadic consumers become the *global elite* in post-industrial society. However, Bauman's account of globalisation and liquid modernity separates

those consumers who have the freedom to move, coined by Bauman as *tourists*, and *vagabonds*, who lack resources, and therefore have restricted mobility (Atkinson, 2008; Davis, 2016). Interestingly, while Bauman's (2000) argument that we are seeing a revenge of nomadism may be accurate, it appears to be the advantaged consumers who have the capacity (i.e., resources) to be able to adopt liquid lifestyles and become successful global nomads (Caldwell and Henry, 2020; Hewer, 2022).

Owing to liquification is the rise of digital nomads: adopting the nomadic lifestyle, digital nomads differ from global nomads in that they utilise digitalisation and the IoT to work remotely while indulging in luxurious lifestyles (Bardhi et al., 2012; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021). The concept of travelling light and always remaining flexible to relocate is now thought to be a signifier of progress and success, reversing the meaning of the concept that once denoted inferiority and statelessness in the pre-modernity era (Bauman, 2000; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Atanasova et al., 2024). However, as previously mentioned, the ability to move freely and remain flexible is regarded a fortune of the *tourists* and as claimed by Caldwell and Henry (2020), is the observation of a continued social structure within liquid society. Hewer (2022) discusses the darkness of liquid modernity, highlighting the *forced mobility* that many consumers are subjected to, with economic uncertainty a prominent concern, such consumers are disadvantaged in liquid society. This contrasts to those who yield power through the flexibility and availability of their resources and therefore can fully embrace liquid life (Hewer, 2022).

More recent research, however, sheds light on the emergence of 'liquid consumer security', derived from 'circumventing the temporal demands, financial liabilities, and commitments that solid consumption requires, which emerges as sources of risk' (Atanasova et al., 2024: 7). Through their ethnographic study of digital nomads, Atanasova et al. (2024: 2-3) spotlight the 'stabilising quality' of liquid consumption, characterised by 'lightness and detachment', and in doing so, build upon the work of Bardhi and Eckhardt

(2017). Crucially, their research provides nuanced insight into the security that liquidity can afford, paradoxical to the traditional sources of security (i.e., tangible, material 'ownership' of goods) - suggesting that liquid consumption is a far lesser risk and offers greater security to modern consumers (Atanasova et al., 2024).

Further, Bauman (2000) conceptualises *work* in the liquid modern era as a source of entertainment, measured by its ability to amuse and satisfy the desires and needs of consumers, it no longer holds its utilitarian function but rather allows consumers to use work to *collect experiences*. Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020a: 90) echo this, finding that flexibility, i.e. 'the ability to embrace and adapt to new possibilities' offers (digital nomads) a new form of work that embraces the flexibility of liquid modernity such as taking on more short-term work, often with multiple employers. Poder (2016) supports this view, previously stating that employment and labour have shifted radically because of the liquification of society, with employees gaining power to self-manage, they are no longer surveilled by their managers. This claim demonstrates the gains that can be reaped because of liquid modernity and highlights the visible benefits of a liquid society – refuting the critique made by Caldwell and Henry (2020).

Despite Bauman arguing that social class no longer exists in liquid modernity and that consumers are free to enjoy cultural pluralism, much of the research in this section has evidenced that a distinction does still exist. Critiques of Bauman argue there is a divide between consumers who can live happily and fully engage in cultural pluralism and those who lack resources and subsequently cannot (Atkinson, 2008; Blackshaw, 2016; Davis, 2016; Jacoben and Poder, 2016; Caldwell and Henry, 2020). Bauman believes that social conditions in liquid society are un-ascribed from class, with each condition vulnerable to change and no one situation guaranteed (Atkinson, 2008). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2020a) support this notion. However, they differ from Bauman in that they believe solid structures still exist in liquid society, as well

as liquid conditions retaining the ability to re-solidify - supporting the view of Elliot (2013).

On a final point, Atkinson (2008) argues that Bauman's analysis of class bears inconsistencies that undermine his theoretical account. With Bauman postulating that social class and hierarchy no longer exist within liquid modernity, one would expect that his analysis would reflect that, demonstrating no distinction between the *free* and the *flawed*, but rather equal conditions for all. However, what we observe in Bauman's analysis is his acknowledgement of the division between the *tourists* and the *vagabonds*, the *free* and the *flawed*. Atkinson (2008) stands firm that Bauman's theory is conflicting in nature, specifically surrounding notions of class, with contradictory possibilities and characteristics of freedom set out. However, he does commend Bauman for his 'spirit of the diagnoses' of liquid modernity, which he claims can be utilised further in sociological works (Atkinson, 2008: 14).

With that considered, this next section will explain and analyse the application of Bauman's theory of liquid modernity to the context of consumer research.

2.1.3 Application of liquid modernity to consumer research

Using Bauman's theory to enable their theoretical understanding, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) proposed a conceptual framework that applies liquid modernity to consumer behaviour. Specifically, they propose a solid-liquid framework which highlights the continuum between solid and liquid consumption, illuminating a distinction between the solidity of material possessions and the ephemerality of liquid access (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) (see *Table 1*).

Table 1: Solid versus liquid consumption

Solid consumption	Liquid consumption
Permanent, long-term, fixed	Ephemeral, short-lived, temporary
Ownership and legal possession	Access, sharing, borrowing
Private consumption practice	Public (shared) consumption practice
E.g. home ownership, furniture, cars, clothes, electronics	E.g. car rental, clothing rental, home rental, tool rental, toy rental
Material, physical and tangible	Dematerialised, experiential, and virtual

Source: Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017); Lamberton and Goldsmith (2020); Morewedge et al. (2021).

It is noteworthy to comment, however, on the critique offered by Paul Hewer. Hewer (2022: 298) views liquid modernity as a threat to the lifeworld, synonymous with hopelessness and powerlessness, he maintains the ‘fear of the liquidation of the self’. This is contrasting to Bardhi and Eckhardt, who, Hewer (2022) claims, possess an overly optimistic view of Bauman’s theory, dismissing the consequences of ephemerality, instead, viewing the marketplace as a solution for the uncertainty of liquid modernity. More specifically, Hewer (2022) argues that they, like other consumer researchers, disregard the negative consequences of liquid modernity (including financial, emotional, and existential) and focus on the opportunities it can afford, such as global elitism, global nomadism, and digital nomadism (Hewer, 2022). Furthermore, Hewer (2022) differentiates between the position of consumer theorists (such as Bardhi and Eckhardt) and social theorists, with the former regarding *individual* choice as the most important facet of liquid modernity, with consumers autonomously navigating liquid society for their own benefit – ignoring the glaringly obvious sociological aspect underpinning society.

Despite the critique presented by Hewer (2022), there have been numerous high impact journal articles that have referred to Bardhi and Eckhardt’s work, both drawing upon their conceptual framework and their previous consumer

research (see, for example, Belk, 2014; Lawson et al., 2016; Schaefers et al., 2016; Hazée et al., 2019; Loussaïef et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Thompson and Kumar, 2020; Jain et al., 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021; Schaefers et al., 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). Therefore, while Hewer's (2022) contention may instil ambiguity around Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) framework, it is still a defensible starting point for this research to build upon and further theoretical understanding.

Motives for engaging with access-based consumption

Access-based consumption is defined as: 'market-mediated transactions that provide customers with temporarily limited access to goods in return for an access fee, while the legal ownership remains with the service provider' (Schaefers et al., 2016: 571). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012), prior to proposing their framework, understood that consumer engagement with access-based consumption was largely for utilitarian purpose and instrumental value. However, later research discovered the most prevalent motivations for consumer engagement to be economic benefit and environmental consciousness, indicating that consumers value lower cost and greater benefit to the environment as reasons to access products, as opposed to buy and own them (Lawson, 2011; Lawson et al., 2016; Tariq, 2017; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Christodoulides et al., 2021).

Furthermore, research has shown convenience and ease of accessibility as significantly influencing consumer engagement with access-based consumption – something that is not exhibited through the practice of ownership (Tariq, 2017; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). This finding supports key functions of the SE, aligning with Belk's concept of digitalisation, highlighting the ability for consumers to share access as well as mutually share consumption benefits (Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Mardon et al., 2022). Most recently, Schaefers et al. (2021) reveal that for low-income consumers access-

based services warrant less financial risk (compared to ownership) – affording greater financial flexibility and a reduced burden of ownership, these consumers are more inclined to access a product than to own it. This finding directly contradicts previous research which argues that financial risk affords negative influence on consumer attitudes toward access-based consumption, with consumers voicing concerns that they will not receive value for money if they access as opposed to own (Lang, 2018). Moreover, it contradicts the supposition made by Bauman (2000) and further rebuts the sentiments of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) - challenging the notion that *flawed* consumers are disadvantaged in liquid society. Nonetheless, Schaefers et al.'s (2021) finding lends support to more recent research which suggests that consumers perceive liquid consumption a more secure and reliable means of consuming (compared to 'solid' ownership) – affording them a greater sense of being 'in control' (Atanasova et al., 2024).

The importance of the SE is highlighted in the aforementioned research, indicating how access can be a more obtainable and feasible consumption practice for those who cannot afford to buy and own products directly (Schaefers et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). Khalek and Chakraborty's (2023) recent systematic review of shared consumption reports *economic value* as an influencing factor for engaging in access-based consumption. This supports their previous study that revealed the benefit of accessing for those consumers who cannot afford to acquire and maintain desired products but rather, at a reduced cost and for short term access, can enjoy the desired product (Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022). It is evident that contradictory findings reside within the consumer literature with regards to consumer motivations of, and engagement towards, access-based consumption and thus further study is advised (Jain et al., 2021; Schaefers et al., 2021).

An earlier systematic literature review revealed that access-based consumption (specifically renting) offers *greater* accessibility to consumers,

who, via using an online platform or mobile application, can search for fashion items, thereby saving time in their product decision making process (Jain et al., 2021). Once more, the work of Belk and the SE is demonstrated in this review, highlighting the implications of digitalisation. However, the review reveals that ethical and environmental benefits are not a primary motivation for consumers to engage in liquid consumption (Ibid). Rather, Jain et al. (2021) reveals functional benefits, expression of self-identity and variety of choice as motivations for access-based consumption, with financial concerns the most important incentive – contradicting prior research (Lawson et al., 2016; Tariq, 2017; Pantano and Stylos, 2020).

An interesting finding from McNeill and Venter (2019) contributes to the understanding of consumer motivations towards renting fashion. They find that some consumers perceive renting as a ‘perfect solution to the wear once phenomenon’, with designer rental the preferred rental approach, due to the luxury appeal it offers (McNeill and Venter, 2019: 375). However, McNeill and Venter (2019) find this to only be the case for consumers who wish to stand out from the crowd and express individuality. This aligns with the findings of Jain et al.’s (2021) review, that ultimately, variety and self-expression are the motivating factors for consumers engaging in access-based consumption – and any environmental/ethical concerns come as a secondary, additional benefit of their fashion rental consumption behaviour.

More recently, research reveals insight into consumers decision to rent, rather than buy. Kang and Park (2023) reveal that consumers are more likely to rent, rather than buy, a product with an unethical attribute to reduce anticipated guilt - such as a product manufactured under poor labour conditions. This is an interesting finding, positioning renting as a ‘coping strategy’ for consumers who wish to avoid feeling the (negative) consequences of their (solid) consumption, yet who still wish to experience/use an item (Kang and Park, 2023: 2). However, important to recognise is that while this study presents

novel insight, findings emerge from hypothetical scenarios – presented across six experimental studies - and *not* from lived experiences of renting.

Current understanding of the factors which motivate access-based consumption is sparse, with troubling inconsistencies apparent throughout the literature, further work is needed to gain an accurate understanding and determine the significance and relevance of access-based consumption behaviour to the consumer (Lawson et al., 2016; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Jain et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022).

Barriers to engaging with access-based consumption

While the need to understand consumer motivations towards access-based consumption is fundamental to advancing a CE, an insight into potential barriers is necessary to gain a full picture of the scalability that access-based consumption can have within modern society. Research consistently reveals that some consumers are deterred from accessing products as they struggle to relinquish the concept of ownership and material possession (Lawson et al., 2016; Lang, 2018; Jain et al., 2021; Mardon et al., 2022; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). There are conflicting findings regarding access-based consumption and materialistically inclined consumers, with some research demonstrating that renting luxury products produces similar positive effects for materialistic consumers, compared to owning the same luxury good (Krekels et al., 2020). While more recent research shows consumers who are more materialistically inclined and have preference for ownership are less likely to approach accessing goods, subsequently resisting habit transformation (Jain et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). Such contradictions in recent research need addressing to understand potential barriers and the best approach to targeting consumers.

In 2006, Argo et al. proposed a theory of consumer contamination, contending that consumers perceive products touched by others as less favourable to those untouched. The authors reveal three cues to have a negative impact on consumer perception of access-based consumption; proximity to contact, time elapsed since contact and number of contact sources, in addition to the feeling of *disgust* mediating product evaluation, purchase intention and Willingness to Pay (WTO) (Ibid). Most interestingly, Argo et al.'s (2006) study highlights the premise that consumer contamination can ensue entirely from a consumer's *perception* of contamination, as opposed to *actual* contagion, and thus emphasises the potential challenge to the rudimentary nature of liquid consumption.

With that considered, the theory of consumer contamination can be applied to much of the recent research on access-based consumption and consumer behaviour. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012), prior to their conceptualisation of liquid consumption, conducted research into car sharing as an access-based consumption practice. They find that some consumers perceive car sharing as a contagion risk due to the shared nature of the service - feeling *grossed out* at the thought of others smoking cigarettes in the car and subsequently 'contaminating' it (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012: 888).

Advancing this, Hazée et al. (2019) argue that consumers with high contamination concerns are less likely to adopt access-based consumption and are more likely to experience contamination concerns towards a product that is in close proximity to their body. Furthermore, they reveal that consumers are more likely to display contamination concerns when a product brand has lower equity – as they perceive it to be less superior (Ibid). Interestingly, Vogel et al. (2019) discover that consumers, specifically millennials, view luxury brand clothing as less prestigious when the option to rent is offered alongside purchase, facilitating the *trickle-down* effect, whereby the luxury brand loses its status, becoming less attractive the more consumers gain access to it and subsequently the less *exclusive* it becomes. Their

research offers insightful findings to the literature and highlights the importance of brand dilution in the context of luxury fashion rental.

More recently, Meng and Leary (2021) explore consumer perceptions towards clothing made from recycled plastic bottles, finding that, like Argo et al. (2006), consumers perceive products as more contaminated if they have been in contact with another consumer. This finding came with a heightened contamination concern amongst consumers with high sensitivity to feelings of *disgust*, supporting the proposed theory of consumer contamination (Argo et al., 2006). Further, they find that disgust for recycled plastic clothing only exists for products that are in close contact with the skin, complimenting previous findings (Hazée et al., 2019). Important to note is that while this study does not investigate an access-based form of consumption (i.e., renting), it does explore consumer perceptions of re-used material (and thus the findings offer relatable insight and are an important contributing piece of scholarly evidence to this field of research).

Further, recent research has addressed consumer contamination concerns specifically in the context of renting. Jain et al.'s (2021) review emphasises the physical risk of contamination and hygiene issues that dissuade consumers from engaging in access-based consumption, with such concerns including cleanliness and the knowledge that clothing has been worn by other consumers. Their review highlights additional barriers to renting, including uncertainty about business continuation, unclear company motives, provider's reputation, quality issues, maintenance issues, durability, convenience, lack of accessibility, technical requirements, and hassle in the cancelation process (Ibid). This has since been affirmed in Khalek and Chakraborty's (2023) systematic review, with contamination concerns a considerable risk factor in the adoption of shared consumption practices.

More recent research has identified social obligation as a potential barrier to access-based consumption (Dion et al., 2023; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). Dion et al. (2023: 2) reveal how consumers' navigate, or trick, access-based consumption platforms by engaging in certain 'hacks' (e.g., reserving items in advance and then cancelling them before you are billed) - which they refer to as 'savvy misbehaviours that outmanoeuvre the company's policies and guidelines surrounding the consumer experience'. Dion et al. (2023) recognise that such 'hacks', while not violating (accepted) social norms - as consumer misbehaviours do, can destroy value for other consumers and the platform. This is something which Trujillo-Torres et al. (2024) have since acknowledged as a lack of social obligation and a barrier to access-based consumption.

Trujillo-Torres et al. (2024) found that if one consumer fails to take account of their social obligation when accessing a product (e.g. returning the item late, or not looking after it), it can disrupt and affect subsequent customer journeys (i.e. other consumers' experiences with the accessed item). They suggest that it is the "not knowing" if others have taken care of an item that can result in consumers avoiding renting altogether. It is noteworthy to mention that the sample in Trujillo-Torres et al.'s (2024) study mostly had an 'unlimited' membership with the rental platform, whereby they could rent 15 items per month (5 items at a time) - with general mishap and repairs covered under the subscription model, and thus, they may have felt they had no obligation to others. Regardless, Trujillo-Torres et al. (2024) acknowledge the importance of social obligation when renting and the need for renting to be viewed as an interconnected, social experience. Specifically, they emphasise the role of the *consumer*, noting that because, in access-based consumption, customer journeys are shared, consumers are reliant on each other taking care of items – as a means of eradicating contamination concerns. This lack of social obligation echoes the interconnectedness and complex nature of access-based consumption which requires further understanding. Khalek and Chakraborty (2023: 904) emphasise this in their systematic literature review, recognising that 'the sharing economy represents an unorganised and majorly unregulated marketplace compared with other traditional marketplaces'.

Further, and important to note, is anonymity as a potential barrier to consumer acceptance of renting fashion. Battle et al. (2018) sheds light on the issue of anonymity, specifically consumers choosing to remain anonymous when engaging with renting as a sustainable consumption practice. Battle et al. (2018) share that some consumers do not wish to be associated with renting, as to not risk lowering their social status. However, luxury second hand and vintage clothing is growing in recognition and acceptance - with consumers perceiving such garments as *authentic* and *trendy*, luxury could become a sustainable alternative to enjoying fashion (Ibid).

Despite exploring the ownership of fashion items, Abdelrahmen et al. (2020: 308) offer parallel insight into consumers' perceptions of vintage fashion items. Specifically, their research reveals how consumers feel it is their responsibility to take care of items that have belonged to other people/been important to them when renting vintage fashion items. Their analysis of in-depth interviews reveal that consumers interpret their consumption as a 'form of guardianship'; perceiving that it is *their* role to ensure the preservation of an item (and its meaningful history) before passing it on. Consumers describe their ownership of the item as a process - where they use it and enjoy it before selling it on, for others to do the same. Owners of such vintage fashion items refer to the next owner as the 'new guardian' i.e. the next custodian in charge of looking after the item (Abdelrahmen et al., 2020: 305).

Abdelrahmen et al.'s (2019; 2020) work expands upon early understanding of *curatorial consumption*. Curatorial consumption was established by McCracken (1990) who 'drew on practices of curation (e.g. the preservation and display of an item) to develop an account of the 'curatorial consumer' – an individual who 'exhibits a sense of responsibility towards family possessions and a desire to ensure their preservation through transferal to other family members' (Abdelrahmen et al., 2020: 305). Such curation was traditionally exhibited through the preservation, and passing on, of family heirlooms – alongside their attached stories and meanings (Curasi et al., 2004;

Abdelrahmen et al., 2020). However, Abdelrahman et al.'s (2019; 2020) work offers insight into curation *beyond* the family setting; recognising that consumers understand curated items as something temporary in their life – resembling the process of renting.

With the above research considered, further work is needed to understand consumer's potential engagement, and avoidance, of access over ownership. The aforementioned barriers to access-based consumption – including uncertainty about shared product quality (contamination concerns), 'other' service users social obligation and anonymity - requires further research to ascertain how such barriers could be overcome. Through an existential phenomenological approach, gathering rich insight into consumers lived experiences of renting, this research intends to address such concerns, expand on previous research and disentangle current contradictory findings.

The next section will specifically examine the application of access-based consumption within consumer research – with key consumer studies presented in *Table 2*.

2.1.4 Application of access-based consumption to consumer research

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) commenced their exploration of liquid consumption through an interpretative study of car-sharing. They advanced consumer research by gaining insight into why consumers engage in car-sharing (as an access-based consumption practice), the process involved, and the implications this has for consumer relationships (Ibid). Their interpretative methodology offers insight into the increasingly popular consumption practice and clearly defends the differences between access and ownership. Bardhi and Eckhardt's research is crucial to the narrative of this research project, setting the scene for access-based consumption and its implications for consumer research.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012: 886) define car sharing as: 'a group of individuals who access a fleet of cars along with other paying members periodically over time'. Using the case of Zipcar, a car-sharing service established in 2000, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2000: 890) identified four outcomes of car sharing: *avoiding identification* (the consumer not wanting to identify with the car), *use and sign value* (functionality dominating consumer-car relationship with sign value emerging as a more flexible form of consumption), *negative reciprocity and big-brother governance* (consumption regulated by the market's norms, adopting a big brother governance model) and lastly *deterrence of brand community* (consumers avoid adopting a sense of brand community). Most pertinent to the current research is the outcome of use value, with Zipcar consumers indicating *convenience* and *economic benefits* as primary motivations for use. Such findings ignore one of the main value propositions that Zipcar offers, that being the circular business model of *renting* - promoting sustainability and an eco-friendly alternative to owning a car. Rather, consumers suggest *functionality* as the key determinant of their use, indicating a utilitarian consumer-object relationship (Ibid). However, Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) findings reveal that consumers had preference for the sign value that Zipcar offered, with consumers disclosing their interest in the flexibility to express their identity and experiment with different lifestyle choices.

The implications of Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) work has aided the conceptualisation of access-based consumption within consumer research, providing invaluable insight into the conditions of liquid consumption and offering a robust foundation for further research. However, it is important to note that while Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) offer novel insight into liquid consumption, they do not occupy a full critique of liquid modernity (Hewer, 2022). More specifically, they ignore the challenges that inhabit a liquid society, such as financial uncertainty, and instead speak only to the benefits, i.e. flexibility to travel and relocate (Hewer, 2022). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suppose that consumers with mobile lifestyles and digital proficiency will manage liquid modernity most successfully. However, it is argued that they fail

to address the challenges and demands of liquefaction, and as such fail to acknowledge and subsequently offer insight into the generation that will be subject to such demands (Hewer, 2022).

Advancing the earlier work of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012), Schaefer et al. (2016) investigate how access-based consumption, specifically car-sharing, can relieve the *burdens of ownership*. Burden of ownership refers to the risks and responsibilities that co-exist with owning a product, such as maintenance and repair (Schaefer et al., 2016; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022). Schaefer et al. (2016) argue that the risks associated with ownership can result in consumers avoiding ownership practices altogether; with risk understood as the significance and uncertainty of a decision. Schaefer et al. (2016) signal to Bauman's theorisation of liquid modernity, as with the ephemerality of society, consumers become faced with uncertainty and vulnerability surrounding purchase decisions. Schaefer et al.'s (2016) research contributes to the literature surrounding access-based consumption, specifically the burdens of ownership, with access-based consumption perceived as a sound alternative – subsequently becoming understood as a feeling of liquid security (Atanasova et al., 2024).

Recent research shows that a preference for de-ownership, i.e., the preference for the utility of a good and not possession of a good, results in a greater likelihood of access-based consumption being adopted by a consumer (Christodoulides et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022). Khalek and Chakraborty (2022) argue that de-ownership reflects liquid modernity, with consumers shifting their attitude away from material possessions and towards liquid consumption. Specifically, their research reveals that burden of ownership and economic benefit are the strongest drivers of de-ownership orientation, followed by environmentalism (specifically the shared use of products which extends product life). Most notably, consumers with an orientation for trends (i.e. the preference for having the latest product) are more likely to adopt de-ownership and thus are more likely to engage in

access-based consumption (Ibid). This has direct relevance to the exploration of fashion rental, in which *trends* are a fundamental characteristic of the fashion industry (Lawson et al., 2016; Lang, 2018; Pantano and Stylos, 2020), with access-based consumption affording consumers the opportunity to keep up with the latest trends without the frequent expense and burden of ownership (Christodoulides et al., 2021). Moreover, Belk (2020) highlights the change that the SE affords within the fashion industry, with globalisation allowing fashion to travel at a much faster rate, contemporary trends can be experienced by widespread consumers.

More recent research published by Schaefers et al. (2021) builds upon their original findings of risk perception. However, they suggest that low-income consumers perceive access-based services to possess less financial risk than ownership and are therefore more likely to access than own products (Ibid). The research offered by Schaefers et al. (2021) provides nuanced insight into the access-based intentions of low-income consumers, who, in an era of transiency and temporality, are less able to afford to own and subsequently upkeep a product. Moreover, the work of Schaefers et al. (2021) contributes to the growing pool of literature pertaining to access versus ownership, directly contradicting previous claims offered by Bauman (2000), as supported by Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020a), into low-income consumers and liquid society – whereby *flawed* consumers are considered disadvantaged and unable to obtain benefits from a liquid society. It can be argued that Schaefers et al.'s (2016; 2021) research is contributory to our (now) understanding of liquid security (Atanasova et al., 2024).

While the context of car sharing offers essential insight into access-based consumption, a mixed method study into the streaming and sharing of music presents equally insightful findings. A timely and interesting topic area, Tariq's (2017) research explored the digitalisation of music and its impact on the consumer-object relationship. The study had two distinctive aims: firstly, to explore the drivers of consumer attitude towards access-based consumption

of digital content, and secondly, to investigate the role of identity forming on this consumption type (Tariq, 2017). The qualitative data revealed four consumer characteristics that predict a positive attitude towards the access of music: *convenience orientation*, *price/value consciousness*, *innovativeness* and *variety seeking* (Tariq, 2017). Convenience orientation was suggested to have a positive relationship with attitude towards access-based consumption, supporting previous (qualitative) findings (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Quantitative data analysis also reveals that access-based consumption has a significant positive relationship with behavioural outcomes including loyalty, usage frequency (supporting Schaefers et al., 2016), repurchase intentions and product attachment (Ibid).

Most interesting to note from Tariq's (2017) findings is the low significance between price/value consciousness and attitude towards access-based consumption. Tariq (2017) explains how this relationship contradicts the study's qualitative finding that consumers appreciate the availability of large amounts of content for a low monetary cost and thus warrants further investigation. This finding also contradicts research that suggests consumers prefer access-based consumption for reasons of price and economic benefit (Lawson et al., 2016; Schaefers et al., 2016; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Schaefers et al., 2021). It is evident that further research is required to definitively understand the attitude, and motivation, of consumers when accessing products (as opposed to owning them). This research aims to achieve this.

Table 2: Key studies relevant to the proposed research

Authors	Date	Research aim	Theory applied	Methodology & Methods	Contribution to research
Bardhi and Eckhardt	2012	To examine the nature of access-based consumption in the context of car sharing.	Liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000)	<i>Qualitative approach:</i> purposive sampling: 40 semi-structured interviews with Zipcar users located in Boston (ranging from 21-38 years). Data collection began with non-participant observations, followed by interviews (hermeneutic analysis) and analyses of secondary data (Zipcar newsletters, videos, promotional messages etc).	Conceptualisation of access-based consumption and associated dimensions (including how these differ from sharing and ownership). Identification of the outcomes of these dimensions in the context of car sharing.
Bardhi and Eckhardt	2017	To conceptualise liquid consumption and stimulate further investigation within the field of consumer research.	Liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000)		Solid-liquid conceptual framework – identifying the nature and dimensions of liquid consumption (<i>relevance to self, nature of social relationships, access to mobility systems and precarity</i>) in relation to solid consumption

					outlining a spectrum of consumption from solid to liquid. Advance the theory of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) by introducing liquid consumption.
Lamberton and Goldsmith	2020	To provide an agenda for future research in the study of ownership.	Solid-liquid framework (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017)	Curation of five papers (Aspara and Wittkowski, 2019; Shah et al., 2016; Weiss and Johar, 2016; Kirk, Peck and Swian, 2018; Harding et al., 2019) to identify future research agenda.	Theoretical model for studying ownership – consisting of curated papers and proposed future research.
Loussaïef, Ulrich and Damay	2019	To explore the different self-object relationships in the practices of <i>access</i> versus <i>borrowing</i> and <i>sharing</i> in the domain of luxury fashion.	Access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012)	<i>Qualitative approach:</i> purposive and convenience sampling - 28 in-depth interviews with women in France (ranging from 16-85 years) who had experience with accessing, borrowing, and/or sharing luxury fashion items.	Findings enrich literature on the consumer self-object relationship – specifically in relation to access – and extend prior research on sharing and borrowing practices.

Pantano and Stylos	2020	To investigate the motivations to engage with luxury garment renting, within the context of collaborative consumption.	Multi-level consumption framework (Chen, 2009)	<i>Quantitative approach:</i> data mining - automatic content analyses (Wolfram Mathematica software) of spontaneous consumers' online communications – in the form of Tweets (total of 1,334) between December 2018-January 2019. Analysis (number of phrases extracted): <i>Initial analysis</i> – 934 <i>Second stage analysis</i> – 14.	Offers originality in implementing automated content analysis for consumer research. Findings provide five explanations (motivations) to the clothing sharing economy. phenomenon, with high importance placed on making more sustainable consumption choices (i.e., renting).
Jain, Jain, Behl, Pereira, Del Giudice, and Vrontis	2021	To conduct a review of the existing research on fashion rental and to identify the factors influencing its adoption by consumers.	Systematic Literature Review (SLR) –Denyer and Tranfield (2009)	SLR of 41 articles (published between 2010-2021) followed by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).	Offers a novel review by focussing on the rental business model of collaborative consumption in the context of fashion – compared to prior reviews that have explored related phenomenon (Becker-Leifhold and Iran, 2018).

Baek and Oh	2021	To understand how diverse consumption values of fashion rental service form attitudes towards the service depending on one's contamination concerns and predict adoption intention.	Consumption value theory (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991)	<i>Quantitative approach:</i> survey (total of 270 responses) of American consumers aged between 18-34 years. Data collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk (online survey platform) and analysed using AMOS 22.0 and SPSS.	Offers an integrative framework to understand how diverse values of fashion rental service influence consumers with varying degrees of contamination concerns (<i>functional, economic and emotional</i> values essential to building positive attitudes towards fashion rental).
Rosenberg, Weijo and Kerkelä	2023	To explore how changes in consumer desires influence decisions to either liquify or solidify consumption over time: The case of Finnish Clothing Libraries.	Sociological theories of consumer desire (Simmel, 1978; Campbell, 1987)	<i>Qualitative approach:</i> Phenomenological inquiry - 24 semi-structured interviews with women aged between 24-57 years of age, living in Helsinki, Finland. Further data was collected through wardrobe study (presentation of participants' wardrobes) and observations of clothing libraries (including in-store	Offer a theoretical model representing how changing consumer desires over time inform consumers' decision to engage in liquid (or solid) consumption – providing originality through the identification of the 'burdens of access-based consumption' – which can result in consumption

visits, interactions with
owners and members and
borrowed items).

reverting back to solid
ownership.

The next section will expand on the application of access-based consumption within specifically the context of fashion rental.

2.1.5 Access-based consumption and the fashion literature

Research addressing access-based consumption (specifically renting) and consumer behaviour within the context of fashion is sparse, with only a handful of studies offering insight from a marketing perspective (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Jain et al., 2021; Mukendi et al., 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023).

Adopting an exploratory approach, Loussaïef et al. (2019) present first-hand insight and offer novel findings into the self-object relationship of non-ownership consumption – something they claim has been absent from a fashion perspective. Most striking to Loussaïef et al.'s (2019: 267) research is the finding that some women in their sample engage in non-ownership practices for reasons of 'ecological sensitivity' and their sense of 'responsibility towards society'. Pantano and Stylos (2020) later discover *the need to make more sustainable choices* and the *possibility to increase product lifecycle* as important motivations to rent fashion, as opposed to buying items. This finding suggests that renting may be motivated by a desire to practice more sustainable ways of consuming fashion. As such, these studies offer a sound platform for the current research to address consumer motivations.

However, despite environmental concerns emerging from qualitative analysis as a motivation to rent, Loussaïef et al. (2019) fail to expand on this finding, neglecting to link the practice of non-ownership and self-identity to the wider conversation of the CE. Subsequently, the current research aims to make this connection and enhance knowledge within the field of consumer research. Furthermore, while Loussaïef et al. (2019) offer a novel contribution, the current research seeks to gain a more advanced, up-to-date understanding

into the phenomenon, to build upon the solid-liquid framework, explicitly addressing liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

Pantano and Stylos (2020) argue that within the marketing literature insufficient attention has been paid to exploring the SE in relation to the fashion industry (which, instead, has tended to explore industries including transportation and hospitality), and thus there is a worthy need for research to concentrate on sharing-based consumption practices, such as renting. Pantano and Stylos (2020) explored consumer motivations to engage with renting luxury fashion, noting five main reasons for consumer willingness to engage, corresponding to three themes (social, economic, and environmental). The five main motivations to emerge were: (1) the *desire to wear an item for a specific event* (i.e. wedding), (2) *the inspirations recommended by brands* (visible to consumers on a media platform), (3) *the possibility to explore a new way of consuming luxury goods* (i.e. disengaging from ownership), (4) *the need to make more sustainable choices* and (5) *the willingness to increase product lifecycles* (Pantano and Stylos, 2020). While the need to ascertain consumer motivations of renting fashion is essential, it is equally important to understand the risks and/or challenges that may act as a barrier to engagement – something which Pantano and Stylos (2020) admit their study failed to investigate. By adopting an existential approach, the current doctoral research aims to gather insight into lived experiences - encompassing both positive and/or negative experiences of fashion rental, potential risks and/or challenges can be identified.

Baek and Oh (2021) reveal the inconsistent finding that *social values* (i.e., favourable self-presentation and social approval) and *green values* (i.e. contribution to environmental sustainability) have no effect on positive consumer attitude towards fashion rental – contradicting previous research (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020). Baek and Oh (2021) claim these findings are unexpected after assuming green and social values would have a positive effect on attitudes towards fashion rental. They argue that by

measuring social value by the *activity of renting* rather than the *social value* that rented items provide, they confess they are not surprised that values such as *feeling accepted* or *making a good impression* are not significant. Further research could gather insight from the *value* that rented items offer and whether they inform a consumer's sense of self and subsequently how that relates to being viewed by others (i.e., social value) – something which this research seeks to explore.

Furthermore, Baek and Oh (2021) offer essential findings in relation to consumer contamination concerns when renting, specifically they find that emotional value, i.e. enjoyment and pleasure, is most contributory in building positive consumer attitudes towards fashion rental, irrelevant of contamination concerns. They note enjoyment as a value the consumer obtains not only as an outcome of fashion rental but as part of the process in 'budling their own infinite closet' (Baek and Oh, 2021: 171). This is a crucial finding that could be addressed by marketing practitioners, as exploiting the emotional value a rented item can offer could subsequently diminish any contamination concerns, leaving the consumer with a positive attitude towards rented fashion (meaning they are more likely to engage with it as a form of access-based consumption). While Baek and Oh's (2021) research does have important practical implications, it is important to highlight that they did not study *actual* rental adoption behaviour, but rather behavioural intentions. As such, it is necessary to study actual adoption behaviour to observe if emotional value still holds a positive effect (Baek and Oh, 2021). The current research will address this through the proposed in-depth exploratory approach.

Jain et al. (2021), through their systematic literature review, identify the main enablers and inhibitors of fashion rental consumption. However, their review highlights that most existing studies consist of non-users of fashion rental, with little or no actual experience of the consumption practice, and thus further work is needed which examines 'real' fashion rental behaviour (including motives and barriers). Consequently, the suggestion is made for *actual* fashion attitude

and behaviour to be explored, as opposed to the hypothetical scenarios that are counted in the review (Jain et al., 2021). With these future research recommendations considered, the current research aims to actively explore the real-life, lived experiences of female consumers who have rented fashion items and who have directly engaged with fashion rental services.

Notably, the review published by Mukendi et al. (2021: 2) encourages researchers to connect theory and practice by asking critical questions related to sustainable fashion consumption, specifically they ask: ‘what do we know about sustainable fashion and where do we go from here?’. The meta-narrative review identifies the need for theory-building of sustainable fashion consumption behaviour that is built specifically from the fashion consumption literature and not drawn from the extant pool of sustainable consumption literature, which has shown to be unrelated and unsupportive in understanding fashion consumption behaviour (Mukendi et al., 2021). Further, Mukendi et al. (2021) highlight the limited research exploring sustainable business models, such as collaborative consumption, i.e. renting, and subsequently note the need to build a conceptual model that addresses the sustainability of the fashion industry. The current research aims to specifically address this absence, building upon the solid-liquid conceptual framework (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) and expanding on theoretical understanding of consumption behaviour within specifically the context of fashion rental and the CE.

As a final remark to this section, and key to note, is the most recent work of Rosenberg et al. (2023). Their exploration into Finnish clothing libraries - a collection of fashion items that consumers can access – reveals the co-existence of solid-liquid consumption. Furthermore, it reveals that fluctuations between the solid-liquid continuum are caused by changes in consumer desire. Findings from Rosenberg et al.’s (2023) study will be examined further in the findings chapter (4.0) and discussion chapter (5.0).

The next section of this review will explore the role of the *self* – the self-concept, and the extended self; placing particular emphasis on how it informs consumer behaviour and the role of the *self* when engaging in access-based consumption behaviour.

2.2 Self-concept and the extended self

With the centrality of consumer research addressing the *self* in relation to solid consumption, i.e. ownership of material possessions (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt et al., 2019), this section will review the self-concept in relation to liquid consumption i.e., access, but not ownership, of material goods.

2.2.1 Liquidity and identity

Bauman's analysis infers that liquid society can be observed through two lenses; the first lens, in which the privileged (free consumers) are liberated to enjoy emerging globalisation, and the second lens, in which the underprivileged (flawed consumers) remain *local* in the growing globalized world around them (Davis, 2016). Referred to by Bauman (2013) as the *filling up* of the world, globalisation is most notably defined by Robertson (1992: 8) as both the 'compression and intensification of the world'. Simply put, it consists of the global exchange of people, places, objects, and information (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Poder, 2016). Described as 'on the move', *tourists* seek new experiences, immersing themselves in uncertain and unfamiliar environments (Bauman, 1996: 29). Accordingly, research implies globalisation is a process geared towards the lives of the tourist, with *flawed* consumers remaining at a disadvantage - possessing limited consumer freedom (Davis, 2016; Poder, 2016). To the contrary, Hewer (2022) argues that *free* consumers, despite having the ability to move without restriction, and thus vaunt greater freedom, are burdened with anxiety and uncertainty – something which the underprivileged are not laboured with, and a contradiction to the

security and stability that was upheld pre-liquid modernity. While this can leave consumers saddled with fear and ambiguity, it does permit them to experiment with their identity, free from the all-consuming identities they may have harboured for the longevity of their consumer life (Atkinson, 2008).

As such, an open and flexible identity is viewed as fundamental to navigating the liquid world (Bauman, 2000; Atkinson, 2008). However, as stated, remaining fluid and flexible is a benefit of the *free* and *tourists* amongst society (Atkinson, 2008; Elliott, 2013; Davis, 2016; Poder, 2016). Blackshaw (2016: 122) argues that consumers are left seeking guidance on how to manage liquid society, needing help on how to *live*, with guides on ‘where to shop’, ‘what to eat’ and ‘where to go on holiday’. However, more recent research realises the potential of liquid society for consumer freedom, whereby individual freedom and social mobility can co-exist – unlike during the solid, industrial era, when consumers were bound to social hierarchies and their freedom governed (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020b; Atanasova et al., 2024). Rather, Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020a) suggest that along with the SE, globalisation has the potential to create the necessary *spaces* for consumers to experience greater freedom and subsequently alter their identities.

Bauman (2013: 17) considers humans as responsible for ensuring solidarity within society, particularly in the face of globalisation, with ‘us all responsible for each other’. Blackshaw (2016) summarises Bauman’s view of globalisation, stating that humans must move away from consuming carelessly and forge a new, responsible relationship with the world, and, in doing so, remake their identities. By marrying Bauman’s (2000) theory of liquid modernity to Belk’s (1988) theory of the self-concept, this research aims to offer nuanced insight into access-based consumption and identity formation, while simultaneously advancing understanding of the CE, specifically circular fashion.

2.2.2 Belk and the self-concept

The seminal work of Russel Belk (1988) offers insight into how consumers attach meaning to material possessions and provides an appropriate theoretical lens to apply to this doctoral study. Belk (1994: 291) defines materialism as:

‘The importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction’.

Belk's (1988: 153) original work posits that possessions are considered important components of a consumer's sense of self – used to ‘distinguish an individual from others and express an individual sense of being’. With possessions understood as ‘a distinct type of consumer-object relationship’, different possessions can *mean* different things to different consumers (Mardon et al., 2022: 3). Moreover, possession can be considered a process – whereby the consumer-object relationship can change over time (Kramarczyk and Oliver, 2020; Mardon et al., 2022) and ownership can facilitate consumers in ‘defining and living out their identity’ (Mittal, 2006: 550). However, Antanasova and Eckhardt (2021) suggest that the concept of materialism and possessions are not bound to solid ownership but can manifest themselves in access-based consumption. As such, the traditional notions of material possessions and their relationship to an individual's sense of self need re-examining in relation to liquid consumption (Belk, 2014; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Antanasova and Eckhardt, 2021).

The self-concept is considered the subjective perception an individual has about who they are and the characteristics they most strongly associate with (Ahuvia, 2005; Mittal, 2006) – ‘a placeholder for the “core in our being” which people typically feel’ (Tadajewski, 2024: 549). Whereas, the extended self

encompasses a range of attributes, including an individual's body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences, in addition to people, places, and things – with the latter boasting the strongest likelihood of contributing to the formation of oneself (Belk, 1988; Mittal, 2006; Belk, 2013; Tadajewski, 2024). The notion of the extended self can be observed throughout history, dating back centuries, when deceased bodies were buried with meaningful belongings (Belk, 1988). Such acts (traditions or rituals) tended to follow a process of extension which is reflected in modern-day consumer behaviour, e.g. individuals using personal possessions such as cars, make-up, and clothing to define themselves to others and indicate their own sense of self (Belk, 1988; Tadajewski, 2024). The extended self is thus considered a valuable mechanism for individuals, offering people an exhibition of their transition throughout life, in which they can view their past, present, and future through the possessions they have obtained and/or lost (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005; Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005).

Most pertinent to this doctoral research is *loss of possession* which Belk (1988) highlights in his early work. He posits that if possessions form a part of the self-concept, then any possession that is physically *lost* is equally considered a loss to the *self* (Ibid). Furthermore, if damage is incurred to a material possession, consumers can feel that a sense of their identity has likewise been damaged (e.g. if an item of clothing has been ripped/torn), and in this instance, consumers are faced with the dilemma of restoring the item (and in doing so, restore their damaged sense of *self*) or replacing it with an *in-tact* alternative (Belk, 1988). This early understanding of the *self* is highly relevant to the growing literature surrounding access-based consumption. However, in light of the rate at which access-based consumption continues to grow, there is a need for research to offer further insight into liquid consumption and the self-concept (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020).

The digitalisation and dematerialisation of products and services has altered the way that individuals consume. For example, books, music, and television

can now be accessed, consumed, and shared online, as opposed to the hard copy versions that possess a tangible physicalness (Belk, 2010; 2013; 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Belk, 2022; Leung et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2022). As such, Belk (2013) suggests that the disposition of the self-concept and the extended self may have also changed, with the digitalisation of material items unlocking a vast range of possibilities for self-extension to inhabit. Furthermore, Belk (2013; 2014) notes the opportunity for digitalisation to better the planet, with the practice of 'sharing' lessening the depletion of valuable resources required to manufacture and distribute goods. Subsequently, the once highly sort after material, tangible possessions (such as books and movies) are replaced with digital, immaterial counterparts (Belk, 2020; Leung et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023).

While the emerging market can offer consumers a digital (or dematerialized) alternative to former physical goods/services, most goods are still material and require tangible consumption i.e., food, clothing, furniture, and cars (Belk, 2020; Minami et al., 2021). Nevertheless, with the IoT facilitating sharing on a wider scale, the transfer of such tangible goods can take place between consumers (Belk, 2014). Specifically, through items advertised by others online, consumers can gain access to material goods with no acquisition of ownership required (Belk, 2014; Minami et al., 2021). It is important to highlight the difference between the SE and collaborative consumption. The SE is 'the practice of using and sharing products or services between two or more individuals with the support of the Web 2.0, and that does not involve any form of monetary compensation' (Minami et al., 2021:127). In contrast, collaborative consumption is 'the practice of using and sharing products or services, a peer service provider and a customer (user)...in exchange for monetary compensation' (Minami et al., 2021:127). Both sharing and collaborative consumption are understood to influence a consumer's *self*, with more materialistically inclined consumers less likely to share possessions that occupy a strong emotional attachment (Belk, 2010). While consumers who engage in collaborative consumption display a self-concept that is influenced

by the goods that they choose to share with others, evolving consumer identity to become 'you are what you share' (Belk, 2014: 1599).

According to Belk (2014), car sharing can be considered the aggregate form of collaborative consumption, with consumers gaining temporary access to a car in exchange for money. Interestingly, Belk (2014) argues that car sharing is gaining popularity amongst younger consumers due to ownership no longer viewed as an important contributor to self-identity, and rather consumers find car rental a hassle-free alternative. With other industries, including the fashion industry, adopting access-based consumption (Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022), Belk (2014) questions whether we are entering a post-ownership economy - with consumers turning to liquid consumption over the traditional solid ownership of material goods. Therefore, should Belk's (2014) suggestion be reflected in the market, further work is needed to address the shift from ownership to access, and the subsequent outcome to our understanding of the *self*. With the above considered, this research strives to address whether liquid consumption (in this case, renting fashion) contributes to a consumer's sense of their self-concept – and, if so, how.

2.2.3 The self-concept and access-based consumption

Offering an original contribution to consumer research, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) explore the relationship between liquid consumption and the extended self. Through in-depth interviews, they find that consumers lack attachment to rental cars, conflicting with attachment towards previously *owned* cars, where they report a close and favourable relationship. This discovery advances Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self, offering nuanced insight into access, the self-concept, and identity. Through learning that consumers lack attachment to products that are accessed, and rather utilise such services for functional value, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) establish an exciting line of research for others to build upon. However, they recommend future research explores access-based consumption in contexts where identity is more

prominent (Ibid). This doctoral research responds to this call, exploring renting and identity in the context of fashion.

Later research offers insight into how identity is affected by non-ownership, expanding on Belk's previous work surrounding the SE (Tariq, 2017). Exploring dematerialisation, digitalisation, and *sharing* in the context of digital music streaming, Tariq (2017) argues that consumers who access music content possess an emotional attachment to it, sharing fears of losing their online playlists and having to exert great effort to re-create them. Crucially, consumers display a greater loss of their digital playlists (or music account) compared to physical versions, e.g. CD (Tariq, 2017). This *loss* emulates Belk's (1988) view that a possession that is physically *lost* is equally considered a loss to the *self*. However, what differs markedly in Tariq's research is that no *physical* possession is lost (but rather digital content has disappeared or has been misplaced). Thus, Tariq's (2017) research extends Belk's conceptualisation to understand that loss of, or to, immaterial products can induce the same distress and loss to their identity as their material counterparts. Despite this research exploring the practice of music streaming, it still offers nuanced insight into liquid consumption and identity, with consumers accessing music to endorse their individual identities. Furthermore, Tariq's (2017) findings indicate an emotional attachment to access-based consumption - directly contradicting the earlier finding that consumers lack attachment to access-based car rental (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Thus, it is evident that further research is needed to resolve inconsistency, gaining insight from a diverse consumer context.

Despite identifying the financial benefit of access-based consumption for low-income consumers, Schaefer et al. (2021) contrarily reveal that low-income consumers perceive access as a social risk – aligning with Battle et al. (2018). Notably, while this finding aligns with Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) that *flawed* consumers are disadvantaged in liquid society, it does so from a perspective that suggests *flawed* consumers are not disadvantaged *because* they lack the

mobility or freedom to navigate a liquid lifestyle, but rather *because* they are limited, or restricted, to access-based consumption. Hinting at a possible *stigma* attached to renting, this finding alludes to sociological works such as Hamilton (2012: 85) who, through her exploration into low-income consumers and stigmatization, spotlights the ‘cruel irony [that] consumption choices that are driven by a desire to mask poverty instead only serve to further stigmatize’. This finding thus presents an intriguing area for future research to explore.

Consistent with Belk (2014), Lamberton and Goldsmith (2020) cast doubt on whether consumers have reached the end of ownership. In making such a proposition, they question which is better for consumers; ownership, or access, in addition to how valuable it is for marketers to advertise solid ownership versus liquid access (Ibid). Drawing upon Bardhi and Eckhardt’s (2017) conceptual framework, they call for further research to address such uncertainties. The current research aims to respond to Lamberton and Goldsmith’s (2020) timely questions by employing Bardhi and Eckhardt’s (2017) solid-liquid framework in conjunction with Belk’s (1988) interpretation of the *self* to explore the phenomenon of fashion rental.

2.2.4 The self-concept, the extended self and fashion (rental)

‘After the body, it is the clothes that we purchase and wear which facilitate
our identity construction’

(Tadajewski, 2024: 548).

It has become clear, upon review of current literature surrounding access-based consumption (2.1), that research exploring the shift from ownership to access within the context of fashion is steadily increasing – with important findings emerging from recent studies (Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Jain et al., 2021; Mukendi et al., 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023). However, research addressing access-based consumption (specifically

renting) and the self-concept within the context of fashion is sparse – with only one piece of research, to my knowledge, exploring this relationship (Loussaïef et al., 2019).

Loussaïef et al.'s (2019) research offers nuanced insight into access-based fashion and self-identity and thus lays important foundations for this doctoral study. Notably, Loussaïef et al. (2019: 266) reveal that consumers seek to rent luxury fashion items that are synonymous with 'the person they are' and reflect their identity. Furthermore, the women in their study perceive a rented item as *theirs* in the same way as an owned item, suggesting that their participants nurture a temporary extended self when accessing fashion, albeit with an awareness that the item is only *theirs* for a fixed period (Ibid). These findings are contradictory to Bardhi and Eckhart's (2012) earlier research that suggests consumers do not incorporate accessed goods (in their case, cars) into their extended self and in-fact avoid identification. In other words, they do not experience a sense of perceived ownership and therefore do not consider the car 'theirs'. Loussaïef et al. (2019) offer the explanation that fashion items are more likely to draw a parallel with an individual's sense of self, with fashion items consumed in an intimate manner and thus have a greater likelihood of influencing identity.

However, contradictory findings are evident regarding the role of the self-concept when accessing luxury fashion (Loussaïef et al., 2019). Specifically, some women describe engaging with fashion rental to alter their physical appearance (i.e. for a special event, such as a wedding) without wishing to change their self-concept – reflecting the concept of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). This is compared to women who describe renting as a means of gradually transforming a latent/discreet aspect of their self-concept, e.g. a change in life stage, with renting enabling them to, over time, match their physical appearance with their desired self-concept, using rental as a way of slowly forming a new sense of self. These findings are contradictory in

suggesting the role of the self-concept when accessing luxury fashion and neither finding reveal any instinctive effect of renting on the self-concept.

Important to note is that only 7 out of the 28 participants interviewed in Loussaïef et al.'s (2019) study had rented luxury fashion (with only 1 out of those 7 participants being under 25 years old). Focussing exclusively on renting, as an access-based form of consumption, this doctoral research aims to gather the necessary in-depth insight into the emerging phenomenon, exploring the lived experiences of female consumers who have all rented fashion items. Furthermore, the current research offers contribution beyond consumer research, with regards to the role of fashion rental as a circular business model in the strive towards a CE – something which Loussaïef et al.'s (2019) study fails to address.

It is evident from the limited research that further research is needed to explore fashion, as an access-based form of consumption, and the self-concept. While limited research does exist in offering insight into attitudes, motivation, and barriers to renting fashion, research exploring identity and sense of self is scant. This doctoral research aims to address discrepancies between current studies in addition to gaining novel insight, through first-hand accounts of fashion rental consumers, into if (and how) consumers 'derive identity or linking value in liquid consumption?' (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2017: 24).

The final section of this chapter will cover literature surrounding ethical concerns, namely, anti-consumption (2.3.1) and voluntary simplicity (2.3.2), examining research to understand the ethical (and/or environmental) aspect to the phenomenon (2.3.3) as well as the connection between voluntary simplicity and identity (2.3.4).

2.3 Ethical concerns

While a range of motivations have been identified concerning access-based consumption - e.g., economic benefit, convenience, ease of accessibility, reduced burden of ownership, variety and opportunity to experiment (Lawson, 2011; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Lawson et al., 2016; Tariq, 2017; McNeill and Venter, 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Christodoulides et al., 2021; Jain et al., 2021; Schaefers et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023), ethical concerns focus on motives for consuming more sustainability, in line with principles of a CE. And, as such, literature pertaining to ethical consumption (and concerns) is reviewed with relevance to the research problem/question.

During the 1970s, marketers became aware of groups of consumers who restricted their consumption or made consumption decisions based on ethical/ecological reasons (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Cherrier, 2007; García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). To better understand how to target this growing consumer segment, consumer research began to examine the defining characteristics of this emerging consumption behaviour (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1993; Etzioni, 1998). With further exploration, it became apparent that consumers sought to simplify their consumption for reasons other than *ecological concerns*, and for reasons of *self-interest* (Craig Lees and Hill, 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Zavestoski, 2002a; 2002b; Cherrier, 2009; Black and Cherrier, 2010). This section examines the literature surrounding ‘voluntary simplicity’, specifically examining consumer motivations (*ecological* and *self-interest*) and the connection between voluntary simplicity, as a form of anti-consumption, and identity – but first the concept of anti-consumption is introduced.

2.3.1 Anti-consumption

‘Those who have influenced the largest numbers of people for the longest time, have been people with extremely few possessions...’ (Gregg, 1936: 8).

Early research acknowledges that certain pleasures and satisfaction can be derived from material goods but that ‘the most permanent, most secure and most satisfying sort of possession...lies in intellectual, emotional and spiritual understanding’ (Gregg, 1936: 9). Gregg (1936) claims this is because the essence of oneself is not determined by ownership of property (or material possession) but by creativity and interconnectedness. Anti-consumption is characterized as a ‘resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment or rejection of, consumption’ (Zavestoski, 2002a: 121). Therefore, anti-consumption research seeks to study ‘phenomena that are against the acquisition, use, and dispossession of certain goods’ (Lee et al., 2011: 1). Importantly, to be considered anti-consumption, actions and behaviours must be motivated by reasons “against consumption” - and not simply as a response to a recent change in the marketplace e.g., a hike in product price (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013; Sekhon and Armstrong, 2020). Regarded as both an attitude and an activity, anti-consumption manifests itself in a variety of ways, including consumer resistance, voluntary simplicity, boycotting, counterculture, and ethical consumption (Cherrier, 2009; Lee et al., 2011; Lim, 2017; Makri et al., 2020). Such manifestations include the purposeful *rejection* of products (that do not align with ethical considerations), purposeful *restriction* of products (where complete anti-consumption is not possible) and the *reclaiming* of consumption – occurring as part of the consumption process and/ or as a shift in one’s identity (Lee et al., 2011).

Consolidating Zavestoski’s (2002a) earlier conceptualisation of anti-consumption and Lee et al.’s (2011) subsequent classification of the phenomena (i.e., *reject*, *restrict*, and *reclaim*), Makri et al. (2020:178) offer a new definition:

Anti-consumption is defined as '*intentionally and meaningfully* excluding or cutting goods from one's consumption routine or reusing once-acquired goods with the goal of avoiding consumption'.

An early example of anti-consumption is The Burning Man festival, an anti-event held in the Black Rock desert, Nevada, which started in 1999 (Kozinets, 2002). This was the 'first major event to distance consumers and consumption from the market' (Kozinets, 2002: 26). The event focussed on a sense of sharing and community – tenets of everyday life thought to be antagonistic to mainstream consumer culture. Considered a transformative event, Burning Man participants were expected to question their consumption and detach from their material possessions – demonstrating an antithesis of Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self. However, the event came under scrutiny as monetary exchange still took place. With tickets for the event charged at \$110, Kozinets (2002) questions how the event could truly demonstrate anti-consumption practices when the point of entry comes at a significant monetary cost to participants.

Direct observations made by Kozinets (2002) further question the legitimacy of the event. A hierarchy amongst participants was apparent, with those who returned annually being 'directly compensated by the organisers' - obtaining 'special privilege and status' – e.g., being given the closest seating to the "Burning Man" (Kozinets, 2002: 29). Such self-interest demonstrates the importance of status-building for some participants. Once again, Kozinets (2002) questions how this event can be considered a true evasion of the marketplace, when clearly market-related conditions are at play. Nonetheless, the Burning Man provides rich insight into anti-consumption behaviour and practices and thus is a noteworthy study to include in this review.

More recent research has explored *conspicuous anti-consumption* as a 'powerful lever to encourage anti-consumption' (Sekhon and Armstrong, 2020: 279) – and in doing so, sheds light on Kozinets' (2002) observation of 'status-

building' present amongst anti-consumers. Sekhon and Armstrong (2020: 279) realise that as humans we have a 'deep-seated desire for status' - which, traditionally, we have signalled to others through our consumption of material goods (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Christodoulides et al., 2021). However, in light of growing environmental concerns and an urgent need to reduce consumption, Sekhon and Armstrong (2020) query what happens when an individual is not consuming and therefore has no identifiable means of signalling status. Their quantitative study finds that consumers would be willing to reduce consumption *if* their environmental motivations could be signalled and understood by others. Thus, leading Sekhon and Armstrong (2020) to suggest that *conspicuous anti-consumption* could be a possible mechanism to deliver symbolic benefits to 'moderate' consumers who may not be intrinsically motivated to reduce consumption - nudging them to engage in anti-consumption behaviours which fundamentally contribute towards a CE. Furthermore, Sekhon and Armstrong (2020) recognise the opportunity for marketers, who, through carefully curated marketing strategies (such as patches 'sewn into' garments which indicate their 'anti-consumption' credentials, i.e., reused/ recycled etc), can ensure that a brand signals anti-consumption practices - subsequently supporting a brands customer acquisition, retention, and profitability.

The next section examines the literature surrounding 'voluntary simplicity' - as one form of anti-consumption. It begins by reviewing the early conceptualisations of the movement before addressing more recent consumer research and the connection between voluntary simplicity and the *self*.

2.3.2 Voluntary simplicity

One particular manifestation of anti-consumption is voluntary simplicity. Zavestoski (2002a: 149) refers to voluntary simplicity as:

‘...both a system of beliefs and a practice, centred on the idea that personal satisfaction, fulfilment, and happiness result from a commitment to the non-material aspects of life’.

As a movement, voluntary simplicity is focussed on free-will (Leonard-Barton, 1981; Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002a; McDonald et al., 2006). Voluntary simplifiers ‘reject the idea that the good life is found through high consumption levels’ (Cherrier, 2007: 329) - linking to concerns surrounding ownership and materialism discussed earlier in the chapter (2.1). Rather, voluntary simplifiers argue that in their limiting material consumption, they become free to live a less-cluttered, more meaningful way of life (Etzioni, 1998; Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002a; McDonald et al., 2006; Iyer and Muncy, 2008; Makri et al., 2020; Wilson and Bellezza, 2022). Gregg (1936) argues that simplicity is a fundamental condition for living a satisfied life and is best implemented by creating an environment that will offer freedom and clarity. It is through the conscious decision ‘to learn to live with less’ that voluntary simplifiers harness greater self-reliance (Cherrier, 2007: 7). Elgin and Mitchell (1977: 2) describe this as ‘...living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich’. Elgin and Mitchell (1977) identify five values which they believe typify voluntary simplicity:

1. *Material simplicity*
2. *Human scale*
3. *Self determination*
4. *Ecological awareness*
5. *Personal growth*

As a core aspect of voluntary simplicity, *material simplicity* refers to the simplification of material possessions and subsequent attachment to material goods (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977). *Material simplicity* can therefore be observed in access-based consumption, where consumers choose to limit their material consumption in search of greater flexibility and freedom (Bauman 2000; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Crucially, it is the freedom from material attachment that

is of particular interest to the current research. *Human scale* concerns the preference for simpler and more manageable living and working environments. Voluntary simplifiers tend to associate large scale institutions and living environments with ‘anonymity, incomprehensibility and artificiality’ (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977: 6). They feel that such environments should be reorganized to more manageable structures that better align with basic living. Both these initial values are reflected in *self-determination* - the intention to reduce one’s dependence on large institutions (both public and private) and harness greater autonomy (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977). This conscious decision to become more self-determined is exhibited particularly in those who become self-sufficient, e.g., growing their own vegetables or making their own clothes (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Ballantine and Creery, 2010; Lee et al., 2011).

Ecological awareness, referring to the sense of interconnectedness between people and resources, is displayed in consumers’ environmental and social concerns. Elgin and Mitchell (1977) suggest that there are certain problems which can ‘pull’ consumers towards voluntary simplicity. These include the prospect of running out of finite resources, the growing threat of polluting substances and rising material demands on third and fourth world countries. The final value, *personal growth*, illustrates the desire for internal growth. Simplifiers believe that through material simplicity they can work on themselves – free from external clutter. Values may be held differently by different people and at various levels of concentration (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013). In other words, while consumers may harness the values in different ways, the underlying principle of each value is reinforced by their shared goal – voluntary simplicity.

Variations

Following Elgin and Mitchell’s (1977) typology, three variations of voluntary simplicity are identified: *downshifters*, *strong simplifiers*, and *the simple living movement*. Based on Etzioni’s (1998: 623-626) identification, a description of

each variation is offered below. *Downshifters* portray a moderate form of voluntary simplicity, typically practiced by consumers who choose to give up material goods despite being able to afford them. Typically, such consumers will swap luxury for more basic, inconspicuous products – a notion later supported by wider consumer research (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Thompson and Kumar, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Christodoulides et al., 2021). While *downshifters* may adopt the notion that less is more, they may in-fact pay more per item. Etzioni (1998) refers to celebrities who downshift their fashion consumption, choosing to wear a pair of plain jeans and a white t-shirt instead of several, overstated garments. However, in doing so, they signal to others that while they choose to simplify their consumption, they do not do so at the detriment of quality/cost.

Strong simplifiers describe consumers who choose to give up their (high paying) professions to live a less stressful, more meaningful life. In doing so, they often have far less income and socio-economic status. However, their resources (i.e., time and money) become free to spend more time with family, travel and take up new hobbies. Importantly, *strong simplifiers* differ from *downshifters* because they demonstrate a greater intensity towards adopting simplicity – as opposed to *downshifters* who only moderate their lifestyle by choosing to reduce *certain* consumption behaviours. Of note, some *strong simplifiers* will retire early or change career path to assimilate with a quality of life that is more peaceful and fulfilling.

The simple living movement illustrates the most dedicated voluntary simplifiers who adjust their whole life to align with the ethos of voluntary simplicity. They adopt a holistic view of simplicity, implementing it into each aspect of their life and as such demonstrate the highest intensity of the movement. For example, they will leave their jobs and relocate from busy, urban areas to the countryside. They differ from *downshifters* and *strong simplifiers* because they alter their *whole* lifestyle to align with the philosophy that living a simpler life is living a happier life.

2.3.3 Motivations for voluntary simplicity

There is no single reason for choosing to voluntarily simplify, but rather multiple reasons are highlighted - consisting of intrinsic (i.e., ecological concerns for the environment), practical (i.e., to reduce stress and dissatisfaction) and spiritual motives (i.e., reducing consumption to acquire a more authentic *self*) (Craig Lees and Hill, 2002; Bekin et al., 2005; Huneke, 2005; Cherrier, 2007; Iyer and Muncy, 2008; García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). As such, simplification can be expressed in a variety of ways. For those who live in urban areas, not having a car may be a form of simplifying (Huneke, 2005). In contrast, those who live in rural areas may harness simplicity by becoming self-sufficient (Ballantine and Creery, 2010). This heterogeneity emphasises the importance of understanding the nuances of voluntary simplicity, specifically *why* consumers choose to engage in this alternative lifestyle (Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Bekin et al., 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Ballantine and Creery, 2010). Both ecological concerns and concerns of self-interest are discussed below.

Ecological/ environmental motives

Shaw and Newholm (2002: 169) acknowledge that while *downshifters* demonstrate a reduction in their consumption, they more than likely have 'little concern for wider moral issues'. This interpretation aligns with Etzioni's (1998: 622) early claim that *downshifters* 'maintain their rather rich and consumption-oriented lifestyle'. With that considered, Shaw and Newholm (2002) suggest that *downshifting* and *ethical consumption* are two non-exclusive forms of voluntary simplicity, defining 'ethical simplifiers' as voluntary simplifiers who are motivated by ethical concerns. Shaw and Newholm (2002) explore *ethical simplifiers* as those whose motivation for voluntary simplicity is the environmental *and* social impact of consumption – in contrast to the desire for autonomy and self-control that underpins Etzioni's (1998) typology. Findings reveal ways in which ethical simplifiers find behavioural solutions to their consumption concerns.

Firstly, they reveal that most *ethical simplifiers* do not own a car, or if they do, they avoided using it – recognising the environmental consequences of car use on the environment and the planet (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). A finding later supported by Ballantine and Creery (2010) who reveal voluntary simplifiers' desire to limit car usage and where possible engage in shared consumption i.e., renting or borrowing a car. Both findings indicate relevance to Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) earlier work on car sharing, specifically the shift towards liquid consumption. Secondly, Shaw and Newholm (2002) find that most *ethical simplifiers* feel obligated to consider their consumption behaviour and evaluate how they can consume more ethically. Their voluntary reduced consumption appears rooted in a consideration for the environment and society. This is distinct from environmentally oriented-consumption (EOA) which later research acknowledges as anti-consumption behaviour motivated solely by concerns for the environment (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). Such environmental *and* social concerns seemingly prompt consumers to evaluate their own decisions and make changes that align with a more simplified lifestyle (Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Ballantine, and Creery, 2010).

Crucially, Shaw and Newholm's (2002) research highlights the complexity of voluntary simplicity and suggests that further research should explore this type of consumer behaviour in more specific contexts. Following this, McDonald et al. (2006) introduced 'beginner voluntary simplifiers' (BVS), reconceptualising the notion of voluntary simplicity. BVS are characterised as those consumers who reside between voluntary simplifiers and non-voluntary simplifiers. Their research suggests that BVS may undertake *some* aspects of voluntary simplicity but not fully commit to it as a lifestyle. As such, McDonald et al. (2006: 518) consider BVS to be an important consumer group to target in the 'process of moving towards sustainable consumption'. Their findings reveal three types of BVS: *apprentice simplifiers*, *partial simplification* and *accidental simplification*. Below is a breakdown of each, as identified by McDonald et al. (2006: 526-528).

Apprentice simplifiers represent those who are currently going through lifestyle changes, shifting from identifying as a non-voluntary simplifier to a voluntary simplifier. They engage in reconsideration and reflection of their consumption habits and typically rely on accessible mainstream media and product information to inform them of more sustainable choices. These type of BVS are considered an important focus for marketers, who can examine what information is most effective at guiding *apprentice simplifiers* to make more environmentally conscious consumption decisions (McDonald et al., 2006).

Partial simplifiers are considered BVS who, while harnessing certain aspects of voluntary simplicity, do not adopt others. McDonald et al. (2006) give the example of a family who walk their children to school and use local recycling banks yet simultaneously use the car to travel to work each day and regularly use the dishwasher. While *partial simplifiers* may consciously embark on a BVS lifestyle, pressures such as time constraints and convenience may lead them to later neglecting certain behaviours. This type of BVS is regarded to represent a higher proportion of the population and thus a worthwhile target consumer group.

Those who identify with *accidental simplification* undertake aspects of BVS without any intention to do so for ethical and/or environmental reasons. They are typically consumers with a lower socio-economic-status who occupy a simpler life, e.g., using public transport or conserving gas and electricity. This distinction is later supported by Makri et al. (2020) who emphasise the difference between reduced consumption that takes place voluntarily, i.e. intentionally, and reduced consumption that occurs nonvoluntarily. Makri et al. (2020) highlight how simplification is not necessarily driven by intentional choice but rather socioeconomic factors, such as poverty. Such acts of simplicity, that are not undertaken voluntarily – but rather through no other choice are comparable to Bauman's (2000) notion of 'flawed' consumers. Fundamentally, this type of BVS is someone who adopts a simpler lifestyle but 'by no means represents a rejection of consumption or a commitment to the environment or a fairer world' (McDonald et al., 2006: 527).

Crucially, McDonald et al. (2006) wish to emphasise the dynamic nature of voluntary simplicity by offering the notion of BVS. As such, they suggest that further qualitative research needs to be undertaken to aid conceptualisation at a micro-level of analysis before quantitative measures are employed. Such individual-level anti-consumption practices may have strong implications for macro-level economy and therefore further research is needed to shed light on the importance of anti-consumption implications (Makri et al., 2020). The current research addresses this by exploring the rising phenomenon of fashion rental systems. By analysing consumer's lived experiences – including identifying their attitudes and motivations - findings will provide rich insight into access-based consumption as a more sustainable consumption choice.

Self-interest

Despite clear ecological motivations for voluntary simplicity, there is a shared consensus that voluntary simplicity is rooted in self-interest and self-motivation, i.e., consumers simplify areas of their life that most meet *their* individual needs/wants (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1993). It is suggested that motivations for voluntary simplicity can be considered against Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002a; Huneke, 2005; Iyer and Muncy, 2008). Grouped into five distinct levels, Maslow's hierarchy illustrates the various motivations for human behaviour: *physiological*, *safety and security*, *love and belonging*, *self-esteem* and *self-actualisation* (Maslow and Frager, 1987). Each level is mapped onto a pyramid - ranging from the most basic (lower-level) needs at the base to the most psychological (higher-level) needs at the top (Maslow and Frager, 1987). Etzioni (1998) argues that only those consumers whose lower-level needs have been met (such as safety and security – i.e., employment, health and a home) are able to concentrate on higher-order needs such as self-actualisation (i.e., creativity, acceptance and inner potential) – in the knowledge that they are not sacrificing their lower-level needs to do so. As such, voluntary simplicity is recognised as a 'movement primarily of the well-off' (Huneke, 2005: 529). This is synergistic with Bauman's (2000) concept of the 'free', who, as consumers with more resources, can

navigate liquid modernity more easily than the 'flawed' (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

Zavestoski (2002a) later expands on this notion, claiming that higher-level needs cannot be satisfied by consumption but rather other, non-materialistic, means – i.e., voluntary simplicity. In an adaptation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Zavestoski (2002a; 2002b) suggests that higher-level needs can be broken down into two distinctive needs; *authenticity* and *efficacy*. He suggests that while *authenticity* and *efficacy* are both self-actualising needs (i.e. higher-level needs), only *efficacy* can be acquired through consumption. Through his empirical examination, Zavestoski (2002a) finds that consumption is ineffective in accomplishing *authenticity* and therefore consumers seek their most authentic *self* elsewhere. His findings reveal that simplifiers can achieve *authenticity* by engaging more with interpersonal relationships, having greater involvement with community activities, and taking up creative hobbies, such as gardening and crafts. The sample in Zavestoski's (2002a) study were all highly educated and in high-earning jobs and as such, were in the fortunate position to have their basic needs met - leaving them with the time and security to seek out *authenticity* at no cost to their lower-level needs. This affirms Etzioni's (1998) claim, highlighting the distinction between those who are *free* to *choose* voluntary simplicity and those who are not and once again, nods to Bauman (2000) and liquid modernity (2.1).

More recent work examines minimalism in relation to voluntary simplicity (Wilson and Belleza, 2022). Minimalism refers to a style of work and can be applied to a range of consumption categories, e.g. art, fashion, and furniture. Through their identification of the Minimalist Consumer Scale, Wilson and Bellezza (2022) situate their work alongside the anti-consumption literature – claiming that minimalism is the most closely related measure to voluntary simplicity. Adopting a grounded theory approach - examining primary data alongside secondary sources - they identified three dimensions of consumer

minimalism; (1) *Number of possessions*, (2) *Sparse aesthetic* and (3) *Mindfully curated consumption*. A brief description of each dimension is offered below.

Number of possessions: This dimension refers to consumers who *choose* to live with less by limiting their possessions – something which has utmost relevance to access-based consumption. Reflecting on their ownership practices, consumers limit their consumption to products that are either ‘essential’ or that ‘spark joy’ (Wilson and Bellezza, 2022: 800). Included in this dimension is the purge of possessions, whereby consumers dispose of goods that no longer serve a purpose or are not considered central to their life. *Sparse aesthetic* is characterised by the preference for simple and uncomplicated designs. Such designs may include features such as smaller items, basic patterns and those free from excess colour. A ‘pared-down wardrobe...that comprises of limited colours, patterns and designs’ is offered as a good example of sparse aesthetic within fashion (Wilson and Bellezza, 2022: 800). It is the stripped back, free-from (excess) versions of consumer goods that minimalists seek - to align with their interpretation of simplicity.

Mindfully curated consumption: The third and final dimension refers to consumers’ collection of possessions. Adopting a thoughtful approach to their consumption, minimalists ‘engage in a constant process of curating their goods to ensure they own only things that continue to add value...or use frequently’ (Wilson and Bellezza, 2022: 800). Demonstrating a mindful attitude towards consumption, consumers are selective about what they choose to buy and ensure they do not make accidental (i.e. duplicate) or impulsive purchases.

While Wilson and Bellezza (2022) propose that consumer minimalism is closely related to voluntary simplicity, they acknowledge that the importance of anti-consumerism is not an essential aspect of consumer minimalism (as it is for voluntary simplicity). Specifically, they explain that some forms of minimalism can in-fact be wasteful and harmful to the environment e.g.,

frequent purging. Such purging of consumer goods (e.g. furniture, clothes or books) if not disposed of responsibly, could likely end up as waste and/or in landfill. Thus, while 'purging' may be considered a form of consumer minimalism, it cannot be considered a form of voluntary simplicity as it disregards ecological/ environmental concerns.

Wilson and Bellezza (2022) identify an association between minimalism and socio-economic status – something previously discussed in relation to voluntary simplicity (Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002a; Huneke, 2005). They find that minimalism is often associated with greater wealth and spending - with minimalists spending more money on fewer things to curate a collection of higher quality possessions. Furthermore, those with greater wealth and financial resources may have more possessions to pare-down in the first place and are suggested to harness consumer minimalism with ease – signalling once again to liquid modernity and those consumers (the 'free') who can more easily navigate liquidity *because* they have the resources to do so (Bauman 2000; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a).

Through examining the motivations for voluntary simplicity, it has become apparent that voluntary simplicity is considered a lifestyle *chosen* by those who are secure enough (economically and socially) to reduce their consumption without consequence. This contrasts with those who live a simplistic lifestyle 'purely in response to their economic constraints' (Leonard-Barton, 1981: 247) and who may not be regarded as 'true' voluntary simplifiers - but rather involuntary simplifiers (Makri et al., 2020). In other words, voluntary simplicity is seemingly the 'choice a successful lawyer, not a homeless person, faces...'. (Etzioni, 1998: 832). Considering this, it is important to understand *why* voluntary simplifiers choose to simplify and subsequently *how* these (self-motivated) decisions relate to our understanding of the *self* (Lim, 2017; García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). The final subsection discusses the relationship between voluntary simplicity, as an anti-consumption movement, and consumer identity.

2.3.4 Voluntary simplicity and identity

'Anti-consumption practices take place alongside construction of consumer identity'

(Cherrier, 2009: 189).

This final section draws predominantly on the work of Helen Cherrier (2007; 2009), specifically her exploration of consumer identities within the context of anti-consumption. Just as consumption has evolved to become an expression of identity, so too has consumption resistance (Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002a; McDonald et al., 2006; Cherrier, 2009; Black and Cherrier, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Lim, 2017). By reducing and controlling consumption, voluntary simplifiers 'express their values, beliefs, and overall identities' (Cherrier, 2007: 8). The degree to which they simplify is a personal matter - decided upon by the individual, for the individual (Gregg, 1936; Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Bekin et al., 2005). Some practice anti-consumption to 'maintain or enhance their desired self-concept', others to avoid association with their undesired *self* (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013: 197). For voluntary simplifiers, 'restricted rather than extravagant consumption becomes the instrument of self-expression' (Cherrier, 2007: 331).

Cherrier's (2007) earlier work identifies the *inner (individual)* and *outer (collective)* conditions (identities) associated with anti-consumption. It is understood that consumers make decisions to simplify in a way that most benefits them - and the search for their *most authentic self* (Zavestoski, 2002a; Cherrier, 2007; Lee et al., 2011). However, voluntary simplicity is not entirely free from the influence of external factors such as 'ecological collapse and societal control' (Cherrier, 2007: 326). While consumers cannot evade such external factors, Cherrier (2007) argues that these external, or 'outer', conditions are not enough to influence consumers in isolation. Rather,

consumers must *choose* to voluntarily simplify, through personal reflection and self-inquiry – echoing the aforementioned belief that voluntary simplicity is a volitional choice, focussed on free-will (Etzioni, 1998).

Moreover, Cherrier (2007: 323) argues that constructing ethical consumption lifestyles (such as voluntary simplicity) is subject to ‘not only the inside (self-identity) but also the outside (collective identity)’. Voluntary simplifiers engage upon a process of self-reflection, choosing to simplify areas of their life that best represent their *individual* qualities, values, and beliefs (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1993; Cherrier, 2007). On a quest for self-determination and greater autonomy (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977), they seek a ‘lifestyle that gives rise to their desired self and state of being’ (Cherrier, 2007: 328). Thus, the individual plays a fundamental role in their identity construction. Still, Cherrier (2007) recognises the influence of the ‘collective’ - established through consumer interactions with recognised members of the same anti-consumption practice (Cherrier, 2007).

While all voluntary simplifiers reflect upon their lifestyle - and choose to simplify it depending on *their* individual needs - they simultaneously exhibit shared values and beliefs which can be recognised by other voluntary simplifiers (Cherrier, 2007). According to Cherrier (2007: 300) it is this ‘plurality’ which ‘triggers discussions, exchanges of ideas, and dialogues on possible ways of living simply through submerged networks, such as support groups, chat rooms, conferences, and classes’. Such interactions offer a sense of togetherness - recognising this, Cherrier (2007) posits that voluntary simplicity ‘represents the conditions and outcomes of interactions between individual and collective identity’ (Cherrier, 2007: 331).

Advancing this understanding, Cherrier (2009) employed Existential Phenomenology (EP) to explore the lived experiences of voluntary simplifiers

and culture jammers³ as two subcultures of consumer resistance. Important to note is her discovery that both voluntary simplifiers and culture jammers demonstrate ‘ecological uncertainty as a claim against counterculture’ (Cherrier, 2009: 183). In other words, consumers blame consumer culture for the degradation of the environment and society. It is through Cherrier’s (2009) discourse analysis that the concept of ‘resistant identities’ is identified, classified into two types: *hero* versus *project* identities (as seen in Table 3).

Table 3: Classification of consumer-resistant identities

Two types of resistant identities		
Identity type	Hero identity	Project identities
Themes	Living in an uncontrollable world	Emotional solitude
Discourse	Exploitative consumption	Positional consumption
Resistance	Political consumption	Creative consumption
Goals	Outer change	Inner change

Source: Cherrier (2009) ‘Anti-consumption discourses and consumer-resistant identities’. *Journal of business research*, 62(2), pp185.

Hero identity

The essence of *hero* identity lies in a consumer’s desire for outward change, i.e., consumers resist consumer culture to make a difference to society and the planet. A *hero* identity, therefore, is orientated towards making positive changes to the world. As a form of resistance, it is about challenging exploitative consumption, i.e. the ‘manipulation of social inequalities and the exhaustion of natural resources’ (Cherrier, 2009: 185). Consumers characterised as having a *hero* identity challenge the ideology of mass production and mass consumption by adopting a lifestyle central to justice, equality, and participation. Crucial to a *hero* identity is the desire to raise

³ Anti-consumption movement that involved ‘jamming up or blocking the flow of commercial messages’ (DeLaure and Fink, 2017: 7).

awareness and influence other consumers' lifestyles in accordance with the voluntary simplicity movement and principles.

Project identity

In contrast, a *project* identity refers to those consumers who seek to make inner change. As an identity, it is about 'finding one's place' by positioning (or re-positioning) oneself within society (Cherrier, 2009: 189). Adopting a *project* identity is not so much about refuting the principles of consumer culture but is more about creating alternative market structures and codes of practice. Consumers who exhibit a *project* identity will consume in accordance with their own personal values, not in response to the expectation and pressure of others and the mass market – aligning with self-interest as a motivation for simplifying. Unlike *hero* identities, *project* identities do not seek to influence others and raise awareness of aspects surrounding over/mass consumption. Through creative consumption, consumers can express an evolving (*project*) identity which aligns with their lifestyle at a particular moment in time, e.g. making one's own clothes. Cherrier (2009: 189) neatly surmises the distinction between *hero* and *project* identity by asking, '...is it about a concern for social change or is it about self-discovery?'. With that considered, Cherrier (2009) calls for greater examination of anti-consumption practices in relation to identity formation.

As stated, voluntary simplicity is more than limiting consumption, it is about finding fulfilment and meaning in things other than material possession. While voluntary simplicity is not a new concept (Gregg, 1936; Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1993; Etzioni, 1998), it is pertinent to current conversations within consumer research, namely sustainable consumption, and therefore is a relevant area of literature to consider against the current research (Lim, 2017; Peyer et al., 2017; Makri et al., 2020). While anti-consumption was initially understood to be associated with environmental concerns and a sense of social responsibility (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Craig-

Less and Hill, 2002), more recent research show that anti-consumption can equally be motivated by self-interest and a desire for *authenticity* (Craig Lees and Hill, 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Zavestoski, 2002a; 2002b; Lee et al., 2011; Makri et al., 2020).

It follows that, like consumption, anti-consumption is closely related to identity and our understanding of the *self* (Cherrier, 2009; Lee et al., 2011; Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013; García-de-Frutos et al., 2018). Crucially, identity formation is considered central to the development of consumer resistance and thus while voluntary simplicity is socially constructed *by* participants, *it* simultaneously constructs the social world (Cherrier, 2007). With that in mind, the current research seeks to explore how renting, as a socially constructed phenomenon (in the strive to reduce textile waste), informs a consumers sense of self – as well as identifying attitudes and motivations for renting in relation to the CE.

A thorough review of the literature surrounding access-based consumption reveals that research exploring renting within the context of fashion is sparse - with only a handful of studies having explored the phenomenon from a consumer behaviour perspective (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023). While these studies reveal motivations and barriers towards renting fashion, findings are inconsistent and do not offer sufficient insight into the fashion rental experience. Further study is recommended to better understand *why* consumers choose to rent, over buying, fashion items and *how* they engage in fashion rental (Lawson et al., 2016; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Jain et al., 2021; Mukendi et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022). This study aims to build upon the currently limited research by exploring the phenomenon through the lived experiences of female consumers who have actually rented fashion items.

Further review of the literature has shed light on the limited research surrounding liquid consumption (or access-based consumption) and the *self*. The bulk of traditional consumer research has explored the self-concept and the extended self through the traditional practice of ownership (i.e., ‘solid’ consumption) (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt et al., 2019). However, with increasing engagement of liquid consumption, it is necessary to explore the self-concept and extended self in the context of access-based consumption (Belk, 2014; Atanasova et al., 2024). Specifically, this study responds to recent calls that question if, and subsequently how, liquid consumption experiences contribute towards a consumer’s sense of self (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021).

The notion of voluntary simplicity has been well-studied within consumer research, with consumers who simplify their consumption behaviour *because* of their ethical/environmental concerns labelled voluntary simplifiers (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1993; Etzioni, 1998; Craig Lees and Hill, 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Zavestoski, 2002a; 2002b). Moreover, the relationship between anti-consumption practices, such as voluntary simplicity, and the *self* has been acknowledged - with anti-consumption recognised for its contribution to identity formation (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Lim, 2017). While current literature reveals ethical/ environmental concerns as a motivation for renting fashion items (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021), it fails to reveal the connection between renting, the *self*, and the notion of voluntary simplicity – something which this research aims to address.

Upon critical review of this literature, ‘gaps’ have been identified which this research seeks to resolve, and which are discussed in the findings chapter (4.0). Specifically: *motives/barriers of engaging with fashion rental as an access-based form of consumption; the role of the self when engaging in*

fashion rental and ethical considerations/concerns when engaging in fashion rental - with a particular focus on the implications for identity construction. Such 'gaps' have informed this research in addition to recent calls for research to explore if/how liquid consumption experiences inform the *self* (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Antanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021). Together, this has resulted in the following research questions:

1. *Why do female consumers choose to rent, over buying, fashion items?*
2. *Does renting, rather than owning, fashion items contribute to a consumer's self-concept?*
3. *How can marketers encourage other consumers to engage with fashion rental systems, in the strive towards a CE?*

The next chapter presents the methodology and subsequent methods considered most effective in responding to these questions.

3.0 Methodology

This study has embraced a qualitative methodological approach to the research problem. Specifically, it has harnessed Existential Phenomenology (EP) to guide the research design, gathering in-depth insight into the phenomena of fashion rental. This chapter discusses the methodological approach and subsequent methods chosen to most effectively respond to the research questions.

3.1 Introduction

This study has harnessed EP (Thompson et al., 1989) to gain in-depth insight into the lived experiences of consumers who have rented fashion items. Crucial to the research design was the need to capture the first-hand accounts of consumers who had *actual* experience of renting and who could therefore

offer meaningful insight into the phenomena under study. Accordingly, phenomenological interviews were conducted with participants who had rented fashion items at least once. Each interview lasted, on average, one hour and was conducted via Microsoft Teams. Upon completion of data collection, interviews were transcribed verbatim before Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was employed to interpret meaning behind the data.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. First, the ontological, epistemological, and methodological basis for exploring fashion rental and the self-concept is specified (3.2). Second, the study's method of choice is explained in detail, referring specifically to sample selection, ethics, data collection and data analysis (3.3). Following this, a reflexive account is offered, drawing on the researcher's methodological reflections (3.4). Finally, a conclusion summarising the chosen sample, method and methodology is offered (3.5).

3.2 Research philosophy

Research philosophy refers to 'a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge' (Saunders et al., 2019: 130). Philosophical assumptions concern the perspectives one has about the nature of reality (ontology) and the study of knowledge (epistemology) (Hirschman, 1986; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). Such assumptions underpin methodological choice, research strategy, data collection and data analysis and are therefore a crucial consideration for any research project (Deshpande, 1983; Hirschman, 1986; Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001; Shankar and Goulding, 2001; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Bansal et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). Within marketing, two prominent research approaches dominate, positivism and interpretivism (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Marsden and Littler 1996). Each approach embraces different philosophical assumptions and subsequently employs

different methods of inquiry (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Marsden and Littler 1996; Creswell and Poth, 2016).

A positivist approach claims that a single, objective reality exists - independently from individual observation (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001; Shankar and Goulding, 2001). Positivists uphold the view that phenomena exist in the natural world and that it is our job, as researchers, to apply scientific method to 'discover' it (Crotty, 1998). An interpretivist approach, however, posits that multiple realities exist, depending on individual perception (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001). In line with this ontological perspective, interpretivists search for knowledge through the meaning that humans assign to the physical world (Crotty, 1998).

Historically, marketing has been dominated by a positivistic approach to research, with methods of investigation rooted in the physical sciences (Deshpande, 1983; Hirschman, 1986; Hunt, 1994; Marsden and Littler 1996; Goulding, 1999). Positivists seek to discover a 'universal law that explains reality and reveals objective truth' (Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001: 19). Therefore, quantitative methods of inquiry have dictated the study of consumers, largely involving experiments and use of questionnaires (Hirschman, 1986; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988; Marsden and Littler, 1996; Pratt, 2009). Initially, marketers were considered 'objective observers detached from consumers in the research process' (Marsden and Littler, 1996: 649). However, the knowledge of what marketing *is* has evolved, and with it, its approaches to research inquiry (Hirschman, 1986; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988; Marsden and Littler 1996). Accordingly, marketing has embraced interpretivism as a valid approach to study knowledge, specifically in the study of consumer research (Hirschman 1986; Holbrook, 1987; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Hunt, 1994; Goulding, 1999; Denzin, 2001; Thompson, 2024). So much so that marketing is now

viewed as a 'socially constructed enterprise' (Hirschman, 1986: 237), with much consumer research undertaken embedded within a qualitative, interpretive manner.

The next section considers the study's philosophical standpoint, providing explanation in turn for both the ontological and epistemological perspectives.

3.2.1 Philosophical position

'Different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world' (Crotty, 1998: 66).

There are many valid ways of seeking knowledge about consumers (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). However, as researchers, it is essential to establish 'how we know what we know' to guide us in our search for knowledge (Deshpande, 1983: 102). While positivists follow a generalising approach to knowledge generation - assuming that abstract laws can be applied to a wide range of phenomena (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) - interpretivists claim that knowledge is generated through meaningful interactions (Crotty, 1998; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Via an interpretivist approach, researchers can gather deep insight into social contexts with an emphasis on consumers' lived experiences (Thompson et al., 1989; Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001).

Interpretivist research echoes the 'standpoint of the inquirer' (Denzin, 2001: 32). In other words, all interpretivist research is considered from the philosophical position of the researcher (Hirschman 1985; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Bansal et al., 2018). With consumers experiencing different social realities based on their circumstances, adopting a positivistic position - where a strict, universal set of rules apply (Deshpande, 1983; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Marsden and Littler, 1996; Saunders et al., 2019) - was not deemed a suitable approach to respond to the research

problem. Instead, interpretivism presented the relevant assumptions to explore a phenomenon which is socially constructed and open to interpretation. Thus, this research has adopted a social constructionist ontological view, implementing an interpretivist epistemological position to direct the research and respond to the research questions.

Social constructionism

Marketing has embraced constructionism as a valid ontological perspective to underpin research (Deshpande, 1983; Hunt, 1994). Crotty (1998: 42) defines constructionism as:

‘...the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world’.

Social constructionism specifically seeks to develop meanings that are formed via social interactions (Schwandt, 1994; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Crotty (1998: 55) emphasises that ‘the “social” in constructionism is about the mode of meaning generation and *not* about the kind of object that has meaning’. In other words, the object of our interaction may not involve individuals at all, but rather interaction with the natural world (e.g., a sunset, a mountain, or a tree) (Crotty, 1998). Despite the object of our interaction belonging to said, “natural world”, Crotty (1998: 55) claims ‘it is our culture that teaches us how to see’. Therefore, regardless of whether we would describe the object of our interaction as natural (such as a tree) or social (such as a person), the ‘basic generation of meaning is always social’ (Crotty, 1998: 55).

Nonetheless, interactions are context and situation dependent and therefore depending on *how* individuals interact with the world, multiple realities can co-exist (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Hackley, 1998; Denzin, 2001; Pratt, 2009; Creswell and Poth, 2016). The goal of consumer research is to understand phenomena ‘in its own terms’ (Hirschman, 1986:

237). Consequently, it is essential that consumer researchers accurately describe and interpret the reality that is communicated to them (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). Crucially, researchers must work *with* consumers throughout the research process to 'clarify and expose their world view' (Marsden and Littler, 1996: 649; Gummesson, 2003). Understanding different socially constructed realities is important for not only researchers but marketers who are reminded 'of the fluidity, complexity and dynamism of the market' (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000: 189).

Interpretivism

Interpretivism emerged as an antithesis of positivism to understand and explain social worlds and contexts (Crotty, 1998; Saunders et al., 2019). Interpretive research is grounded in the belief that 'a deeper understanding of a phenomenon is only possible through understanding the interpretations of that phenomenon from those experiencing it' (Pratt, 2009: 1823). Interpretivists refer to this approach as *verstehen* (Schwandt, 1994; Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001). Based on the concept developed by Max Weber, *verstehen* 'unites the two levels of understanding on which the knowledge creation process is based' (Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001: 22). Consumer research seeks *verstehen* to understand consumer motives, actions, and behaviours (Holbrook and O'shaughnessy, 1988; Shankar and Goulding, 2001; Chowdhury, 2014).

The first level of *verstehen* relates to 'the process by which individuals are led, in their daily lives, to interpret and understand their world' (Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001: 22). The second level concerns the process whereby researchers interpret the 'subjective meanings that give rise to the behaviour of the people he or she is studying' (Lee, 1991: 348). Hence, the reliance on the researcher to accurately describe the subjects' reality is substantial (Shankar and Goulding, 2001). It is this reliance and level of subjectivity that has given rise to positivists claiming that interpretivist research lacks scientific rigor (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the

ways in which interpretivist research is verified and validated. Accordingly, suitable criteria have been applied to the current research to 'assess' robustness - such criteria are discussed later in the chapter (3.3.3), demonstrating how data collection and data analysis has harnessed scientific rigor.

From a consumer research perspective, interpretivists are interested in 'how consumers perceive themselves and their relations to the outside world and the products they consume' (Levy, 2005: 344). The current study harnesses an interpretivist approach to understand and interpret the phenomena of fashion rental as an access-based form of consumption. To obtain rich insight, an existential phenomenological methodology is employed to understand consumer's lived experiences of renting fashion and to determine if, and subsequently how, renting informs their self-concept. The next section explicates how the philosophical perspective informed the methodological approach.

3.2.2 Methodological approach

Interpretivism favours qualitative methods of inquiry because they provide the necessary means to understand consumer behaviour (Deshpande, 1983; Holbrook, 1987; Hunt, 1994; Morse, 1994; Marsden and Littler, 1996). Qualitative methodologies primarily rely on qualitative data - addressing "how" questions to understand the realities of those under study - with the aim of generating, or constructing, theory (Desphande, 1983; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Pratt, 2009; Bansal et al., 2018). Creswell and Poth (2016: 39-40) posit that qualitative research is best implemented 'when a problem or issue needs to be explored'. It was deemed necessary, therefore, to implement a qualitative methodological approach in response to recent calls for research to explore if/how liquid consumption experiences inform the *self* (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et

al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Antanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021).

Important to note is that the interpretivist approach loosely captures several qualitative methodologies including, but not limited to, subjectivism, phenomenology, symbolic interaction, and hermeneutics (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Spiggle, 1994; Cope, 2005). While each offers a valuable lens with which to view phenomena (Bansal et al., 2018), phenomenology was deemed the most suitable to explore the processes which surround the relatively new phenomenon of fashion rental. The next section explains the rationale behind adopting a phenomenological methodology. This rationale is then extended to discuss why EP, in particular, was deemed the most suitable means of obtaining rich insight to respond to the research questions.

Phenomenology

Before EP is discussed, it is important to acknowledge phenomenology and its underlying philosophical assumptions. In doing so, we can address certain critiques of phenomenology which have informed the decision to harness an existential phenomenological approach.

“Phenomenology” is a compound of the Greek words *phainomenon* and *lagos*. It signifies the activity of giving an account, giving a *lagos*, of various phenomena, of the various ways in which they appear. By *phenomena* we mean, for example, pictures as opposed to objects, remembered events as opposed to anticipated ones, imagined objects as opposed to perceived...all such phenomena can be explored when we realize that consciousness is consciousness “of” something’ (Sokolowski, 2000: 13).

While phenomenology is more commonly recognised as a methodology, it has long been considered a philosophy – dating back to the 19th century when Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, shared his contemplations of existence and the purpose of human events (Goulding, 1999; Creswell and

Poth, 2016). Kiekergaard's work paved the path for further cogitation, specifically that of Edmond Husserl (Goulding, 1999). Husserl (1859-1938) was a German philosopher who rejected the belief that 'objects in the external world exist independently' (Groenewald, 2004: 43) - synonymous with a more positivist viewpoint - and instead argued that 'all objects are encountered perspectively' (Moran, 2000: 31). At the turn of the 20th century (1900-1901), Husserl published his 'Logical Investigations' – a series of inquiries aimed at understanding issues of philosophy and epistemology (Kvale, 1983; Moran, 2000; Husserl, 2012). His Investigations impressed early readers who became aware of a 'radically new way of doing philosophy' which focused on the 'analysis of the things themselves' (Husserl, 2012: xxii). Thereafter, Husserl's work became widely recognised and accepted (Kvale, 1983; Moran, 2000; Husserl, 2012). So much so, that Husserl is now recognised as the father of phenomenology (Goulding, 1999; Moran, 2000; Pietersma, 2000).

The primary motivating factor behind Husserl's work is considered to be his 'desire for a philosophy that was free from presuppositions' (Cope, 2005: 166). Crucially, Husserl proffered that 'the achievement of knowledge cannot be understood without consciousness' which is 'presupposed in all our dealings with the world' (Moran, 2005: 2). Husserl reasoned that we must 'carefully describe things as they appear to consciousness' (Moran, 2000: 26). Accordingly, Husserl's phenomenology attempts to 'recognise and describe the role of consciousness in the achievement of knowledge' (Moran, 2000; 2005) - offering 'a holistic approach to the relationship between objectivity and consciousness' (Moran, 2000: 31). Husserl referred to this approach as "objectivity for subjectivity" and in doing so majorly contributed to contemporary philosophy (Moran, 2000: 31). The fundamental concept of "objectivity for subjectivity" was Husserl's understanding of intentionality – 'that every act of consciousness we perform, every experience we have is intentional...it is a "consciousness of" or an "experience of" something' (Sokolowski, 2000: 8). For example, 'every act of loving is a loving *of* something, every act of seeing is a seeing *of* something' (Moran, 2000: 36). In phenomenology, "intending" is the conscious relationship we have to an

object' (Sokolowski, 2000: 8). By recognising the structure of intentionality, phenomenology can provide 'a careful and authentic description of ordinary conscious experiences' (Cope, 2005: 166).

However, Husserl recognised that to achieve this there must be a suspension of "natural attitude" (Pollio et al., 1997; Moran, 2000; Groenewald, 2004; Cope, 2005) – whereby 'we accept the world and its forms of givenness as simply *there*, 'on hand' for us' (Moran, 2005: 7). In other words, 'all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions...have to be put aside' (Moran, 2000: 21-24). Consequently, we 'go beyond the natural attitude' (Cope, 2005: 167) and move towards a 'philosophical', or 'transcendental', attitude (Pollio et al., 1997; Moran, 2000; Groenewald, 2004). Husserl acknowledged however that for such a transition to occur, "bracketing" must be applied (Cope, 2005). Also referred to as epoché, eidetic or transcendental reductions, "bracketing" simply means 'to isolate the central features of the phenomena under study' (Moran, 2000: 31). Bracketing is thus considered a subtractive process by 'removing conceptual biases that may distort interpretive vision' (Pollio et al., 1997: 47). Husserl argues that it is only when bracketing is applied that we can consider our experiences as they are 'given to us' (Moran, 2000: 29).

Moran (2000: 22-23) best describes Husserl's phenomenology:

'...as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense, as whatever appears in the manner which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness to the experienter'.

The aim of phenomenological research is 'to develop 'bottom-up' interpretive theories that are inextricably 'grounded' in the lived-world' (Cope, 2005: 171). Thus, there is only one source of data that is considered legitimate when it

comes to phenomenological research and that is the lived experiences of the participants under study (Pollio et al., 1997; Cope, 2005; Goulding, 2005). Phenomenology aims to 'describe what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon' (Creswell and Poth, 2016: 58), resulting in a description of each individual's personal experience. Crucial to phenomenology is that 'explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within' (Moran, 2000: 4). In phenomenological research, data collection usually comprises of in-depth interviews with individuals who have first-hand experience of the phenomena in question (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Within consumer research, phenomenology is increasingly utilised as a means of understanding complex issues that may not be immediately implicit from surface-level responses (Kvale, 1983; Goulding, 1999; 2005). In doing so, it presents 'the potential for change in the socially created world' (Kvale, 1983: 195). Most notable is the work of Craig Thompson (Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1990; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Thompson, 1996; 1997; Thompson and Haytko, 1997) who has applied phenomenology to a range of consumer contexts. Other consumer research studies that have harnessed phenomenology include O'Guinn and Faber's (1989) exploration of compulsive buying behaviour; Mick and Demoss's (1990) insights into self-gifts; Hirschman's (1992) study of addictive consumption; Cotte et al.'s (2004) investigation of consumer time-styles; Goulding et al.'s (2009) study of pleasure within the context of clubbing and Wallpach et al.'s (2020) account of experiential luxury consumption. Such studies demonstrate a consistency in the application of phenomenology towards the study of consumer behaviour.

Creswell and Poth (2016: 60) argue that phenomenology is best suited to a research problem which demands understanding several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. However, while this presents phenomenology as a worthwhile approach to the current research (i.e., fashion rental), it carries certain criticisms which must be considered. Internal criticism

has largely come from Martin Heidegger, Husserl's student, who rejected the central facets of Husserlian phenomenology (Moran, 2000; Groenewald, 2004). Specifically, Heidegger was concerned with the absence of any consideration for human existence. He argued that experience is not 'a consequence of some internal set of events, such as mind or brain but as a relationship between people and their world, whether the world at that moment consists of other people, nature, time, one's own body, personal or philosophical ideas' (Pollio et al., 1997: 4-5). Heidegger refuted Husserl's *philosophy of consciousness* and insisted on a move towards a *philosophy of existence* – combining existentialism with phenomenology to seek a 'rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency and ambiguity' (Pollio et al., 1997: 5). Consequently, phenomenology in the 1930s and 1940s came to be associated with that of Heidegger, and later, with the EP of Jean-Paul Sarte (1905-1980) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) (Moran, 2000; Groenewald, 2004).

Moreover, concerns have been raised by existentialists who emphasise the 'human-being-in-the-world' - whereby human existence is defined by the current experiential context in which it occurs (Cope, 2005: 170). The figure/ground metaphor, commonly applied within psychology, illustrates what is meant by the 'human-being-in-the-world' – that 'what is figural from one perspective may be ground from another' (Thompson et al., 1989: 136). According to Thompson et al. (1989: 136) three main points can be taken from the figure/ground metaphor which elucidate the philosophy of EP:

'First, experience is conceptualized as a dynamic process in which certain events become figural (stand out) in the individual's lifeworld while others recede into ground. Second, the figure that stands out is never independent of its ground and vice versa. Neither figure nor ground cause the other; instead, both are co-constituting. Third, all modes of human experience, such as thinking, feeling, knowing, imagining, and remembering, are viewed as intentional phenomena, that is, as having some focus toward which the experience is directed'.

Unlike (Husserlian's) 'pure' phenomenological approach to research, which is underpinned by the need to suspend natural attitude through bracketing, EP 'focuses on the lifeworld of the individual...rather than separating and then objectifying aspects of the lifeworld' (Thompson et al., 1989: 136). This is because 'experience emerges in a contextual setting and, therefore, cannot be located "inside" the person as a complete subjectivity nor "outside" the person as a subject-free objectivity' (Thompson et al., 1989: 136). An existential phenomenologist views experience as 'a pattern that emerges from a context' in which 'experience and world are viewed as co-constituting' (Thompson et al., 1989: 137). The 'situatedness of human experiences requires us to emphasise not only that there is a situation, but that the situation is significant only in the unique way it is experienced by the person' (Pollio et al., 1997: 15). This core premise of EP aligns with the current research as it seeks to explore the relationship between consumer's access-based consumption behaviour (fashion rental) and their sense of self (their identity). With criticisms of phenomenology considered and the suitability of an existential phenomenological approach recognised, it was deemed appropriate to harness EP to approach the current research. The next section introduces and discusses EP.

Existential Phenomenology

'For existential phenomenology, the world is to be lived and described, not explained' (Pollio et al., 1997: 5).

Consumer researchers have embraced interpretive research techniques such as EP to study consumption behaviour (Shankar and Goulding, 2001). The seminal work of Thompson et al. (1989) presents EP as both a philosophy and a methodology. Consumer studies that have drawn upon and implemented EP include Belk et al.'s (2003) inquiry into consumer desire; Kaufman-Scarborough and Cohen's (2004) study of consumer impulsivity; Karanika and Hogg's (2010) study of (Greek) women's' consumption experiences in relation to their *self*; Russell and Levy's (2012) investigation of volitional re-

consumption; Roux and Belk's (2019) study of 'the body as place' (within the context of tattooing) and, most recently, Rosenberg et al.'s (2023) study of solid-liquid consumption in the case of (Finnish) clothing libraries. Thompson et al. (1989: 144) summarise EP:

'Existential phenomenology provides a philosophical base from which to explore consumer experience in non-dualistic terms. It seeks to develop and use methods that allow for a first-person description of lived experience. In both philosophy and method, existential phenomenology offers a means for putting consumer experience back into consumer research'

It is through EP that we understand human experience to be anything but static – with the *meaning* of an experience ever-changing as it is described and reflected upon by the individual (Kvale, 1983; Pollio et al., 1997). As Goulding (1999: 864) highlights 'the basic assumption [of EP] is that a person's life is a socially constructed totality in which experiences interrelate coherently and meaningfully'. The focus of existential phenomenological research is to ascertain a first-person description of experiences – guided by a holistic research strategy, it 'seeks to relate descriptions of specific experiences to each other and to the overall context of the lifeworld' (Thompson et al., 1989: 137). By doing so, EP offers an empirically based and rigorous methodology in which to understand phenomena (Thompson et al., 1989; Pollio et al., 1997).

Thompson et al. (1990) emphasise three central concepts of EP: (1) *Intentionality*, (2) *Emergent dialogue* and (3) *Hermeneutic endeavour*. *Intentionality* refers to the awareness that the objective of phenomenology is to 'describe human experience as it is lived' (Thompson et al., 1989: 136) - acknowledging that this "lived" experience 'may not always align with standard processes' (Thompson et al., 1990: 347). In other words, phenomena must be understood in relation to the context in which it is lived (Thompson et al., 1990; Pollio et al., 1997) – in accordance with Heidegger's philosophical view. The

second central concept of EP, *Emergent dialogue*, relates to the dialogue between the subject and the researcher (Thompson et al., 1990). Specifically, it posits that 'the interviewer has no a priori questions concerning the topic' and thus, dialogue should be set by the subject (Thompson et al., 1989: 138). Finally, *Hermeneutic endeavour* underlines the iterative nature of EP, whereby a 'part' should be able to relate to the 'whole' (Thomson et al., 1990). Collectively, these concepts offer 'a thematic description of experience' (Thompson et al., 1989: 137).

While the work of Craig Thompson demonstrates how EP can be harnessed within consumer research, it is important to acknowledge its application to work more closely related to the current research problem. To my knowledge, there is one study that has harnessed an existential phenomenological approach to explore access-based fashion consumption (Rosenberg et al., 2023).

Through a phenomenological inquiry of Finnish (subscription-based) clothing libraries, Rosenberg et al. (2023) explored the co-existence of solid-liquid consumption. They argue this approach was necessary to understand the social phenomena from the viewpoint of the subjects' lived experience. Data collection comprised of 24 phenomenological interviews - lasting between 40-100 minutes, and each interview followed the typical guidelines of an existential phenomenological inquiry (Thompson et al., 1989). Rosenberg et al. (2023) employed hermeneutical analysis, specifically Spiggle's (1994) iterative coding process, to interpret the data (verbatim written transcripts). Crucially, Rosenberg et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of obtaining insight into subjects' 'lived experiences' as they are experienced by them and, how, by following the guidelines of phenomenological inquiry, they were able to do so.

Despite the suitability of EP in which to understand consumer behaviour, it is important to address its criticisms, namely subjectivity (Pollio et al., 1997; Goulding, 1999; Szmigin and Foxall, 2000; Shankar and Goulding, 2001; Pratt, 2009). Levy (2005: 344) argues that interpretative research is gripped by 'the inevitable demon of subjectivity, on the part of the subjects, the researchers, and certainly their critics'. In other words, not only does interpretation rely on the subject's description of their lived experience and subsequently the researcher to describe the subject's reality but it subsequently harbours the views of those who critique it (Shankar and Goulding, 2001; Levy, 2005; Chowdhury 2014). By its very nature EP, as an interpretivist methodological approach, is rooted in subjectivity (Hirschman, 1986; Denzin, 2001).

EP maintains a 'descriptive and facilitative purpose' (Pollio et al., 1997: 35), ensuring the subjective experience of the participant is captured (Goulding, 2005). The argument remains that EP persistently protects the 'subjective view of experience as a necessary part of any full understanding of the nature of knowledge' (Moran, 2000: 21). Thus, issues of subjectivity can be disregarded. This considered, the current study employs EP to understand how individuals' who engage in fashion rental construct *their* reality of the phenomena. Consequently, only those consumers who had rented fashion items – and thus who had experience with renting as an access-based mode of consumption – were eligible to participate. Obtaining first hand insight was essential in responding to calls for further research to examine if/how liquid consumption experiences inform the *self* (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Antanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021).

Crucial to mention is Khalek and Chakraborty's (2023) recent systematic review. Khalek and Chakraborty (2023) note the scarcity of qualitative empirical research within the shared consumption literature. Specifically, they highlight that only 13.6% of current consumer studies (published in academic

journals ranging from ABS⁴ 2 to ABS 4*) adopt a qualitative approach, with fewer adopting phenomenology. Furthermore, they note the lack of studies that use multiple theoretical frameworks to 'develop integrated conceptual models' (Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023: 896). The current study acknowledges this and employs two seminal theories (Bauman's (2000) theory of liquid modernity and Belk's (1988) self-concept) and a conceptual framework (Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) solid-liquid framework) as a lens in which to explore the phenomenon of fashion rental in the wider context of the Circular Economy (CE). Khalek and Chakraborty's (2023) future research agenda calls for greater research to focus on conceptual development in the facilitation of theoretical advancement within this area of consumer research.

So far, this chapter has discussed the rationale for adopting a qualitative methodological approach to the research problem, specifically an existential phenomenological approach. The next section discusses the method deemed most suitable in responding to the research questions, the phenomenological interview.

3.3 Method

It is important to recognise is that there is 'no such thing as the *one* phenomenology' (Heidegger, 1988: 328). That is to say, there is no single approach, or method, that must be applied or followed when adopting a phenomenological approach (Moran, 2000; Zahavi, 2018). Nonetheless, Thompson et al. (1989) identify the phenomenological interview as a suitable method of data collection when applying EP to consumer research. Moreso, they claim that it is 'perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experiences' (Thompson et al., 1989: 138). The meaning consumers assign to their experiences is understood to provide

⁴ ABS – Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide (CABS AJG 2021) <https://charteredabs.org/academic-journal-guide-2021/#>

the necessary insight to interpret social phenomenon (Pollio et al., 1997; Creswell and Poth, 2016).

The phenomenological interview

The phenomenological interview typically involves a conversational dialogue, largely set by participants (Thompson et al., 1989; Pollio et al., 1997). The role of the researcher is to provide a context for the participants to fully describe their experiences (about the phenomena under study) in as much detail as possible and to probe only when further explanation or clarification is needed (Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1990). Thus, 'how the dialogue will unfold is not known in advance' (Thompson et al., 1990: 347). This method enables researchers to acquire an understanding of phenomena as it is interpreted by those who have *actually* experienced it (Kvale, 1983; Thompson et al., 1990; Pollio et al., 1997; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Phenomenological interviews were deemed appropriate for the current research – a means of collecting data that would respond to the research questions and offer rich insight into the relatively new phenomenon of fashion rental.

While a literature review was carried out prior to data collection, to guide the research and identify gaps in knowledge, no existing theories or beliefs were imposed upon the data in advance. An interview guide was produced in the form of a 'loose' structure and included introductory questions to support rapport building as well as opportunity for participants to add anything as the interview ended (Thompson et al., 1989; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Furthermore, opportunities to dig deeper into participants lived experience(s) were pointed out as possible probes throughout the guide (Thompson et al., 1989; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Arsel, 2017). Certain issues and themes were discussed during the interviews such as the CE, ownership (i.e., solid consumption), renting (i.e., liquid consumption) and the *self*, however interviews remained open to any new direction/s that were presented by participants (Arsel, 2017). While such issues and themes were guided by the literature (review) and thus go against a 'pure' (Husserlian) phenomenological

approach, they are supportive of the 'modified' phenomenological approach (i.e., Heidegger and EP) which claims that it is not possible to set aside all existing knowledge and prior beliefs and that fundamentally, as a researcher, you inevitably bring to the study 'theoretical baggage' (Arsel, 2017: 939).

That said, EP recognises that the researcher's assumptions and presuppositions must not sway their interpretation of the subject's lived experiences. The researcher must interact with participant's descriptions 'in a non-dogmatic fashion and attempt to grasp, rather than impose, meanings emerging from the dialogue' (Thompson et al., 1989: 140). In their study of (contemporary married) women's everyday consumption behaviour, Thompson et al. (1990) applied two procedures to facilitate this alternative (existential) view of bracketing: (1) *they ensured that themes (emerging from written transcripts) were generated in emic terms (i.e., accurately representative of the participants)* and (2) *they ensured that evolving thematic description was regularly subjected to critical evaluation* (Thompson et al., 1990).

The current research recognises Thompson et al.'s (1990) facilitation of bracketing and ensured that the focus remained on the participants lived experiences. Interviews were very much driven by the participants as they described *their* experiences of fashion rental (Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1990). Findings and subsequent themes emerged organically from the conversational dialogue between the researcher and the participant. Data and subsequent analysis were regularly evaluated by the researcher and supervisory team during scheduled discussions. In doing so, issues of subjectivity, as a primary critique of EP, were recognised and addressed accordingly.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows, sample size and selection are discussed (3.3.1), ethical considerations are outlined (3.3.2),

data collection is presented (3.3.3) and the steps taken in data analysis (3.3.4) are each addressed in turn. Following this, methodological reflections (3.4), are presented and the chapter concluded (3.5).

3.3.1 Sample size and selection

This research aims to analyse consumer attitudes, motivations, and engagement towards renting fashion items - to explore if/how renting informs the self-concept, and to identify how marketers can encourage other consumers to engage with fashion rental systems, in the strive towards a CE. To obtain such in-depth insight, phenomenological interviews were conducted. Before data collection is discussed, details of the participants - sample size and selection – as well as ethical considerations are presented.

Participants

Participants were purposively selected based on their eligibility to meet a set criterion. They were required to be 18 years old or over, female and live in the UK. The age requirement assured that participants would either be in employment or higher education and therefore able to engage with renting autonomously. It was important that the sample selected was representative of the primary target audience for the majority of fashion rental platforms – female, fashion conscious consumers (Future Marketing Insights, 2023; Gale, 2023; Market Data Forecast, 2023; Mintel, 2023). With women in the UK placing sustainability higher on their priority list than men when it comes to buying fashion, a female sample was deemed appropriate in exploring renting as a circular business model (Mintel, 2024). Moreover, with increasing concern surrounding textile waste in the UK, both from a political and social standpoint, it was important to obtain a UK sample (EAC, 2019; 2020; UK Parliament 2022; Gale, 2023; Mintel, 2024) - presenting opportunity for unique findings to complement previous studies conducted in France and Finland (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Rosenberg et al., 2023).

Participants were only recruited if they had lived experience of engaging with the circular business model 'renting' (Thomspon et al., 1989). The participants had varying educational backgrounds and diverse salaries (five participants were either in full-time higher education or had recently graduated), thus a range of disposable incomes. This meant that frequency and cost per rental item varied across the sample – a breakdown of each participant, including their frequency of renting and type(s) of item(s) rented can be observed in *Table 4*. If participants had accessed and engaged with renting fashion at least once and met the above conditions, they were eligible for the study. Please note that while Michelle lived (and worked) in Berlin, her experience of renting fashion took place in the UK. Michelle rented a dress from the UK rental platform, Hurr, for a family wedding in Scotland. She reserved the dress online, through the website, and had it delivered to her parent's house – also in Scotland. Thus, while she was based in Berlin, her experience of renting is from a UK perspective.

Sample size and selection

Sample size is often associated with a positivistic approach where generalizability of findings is contingent upon the number of participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986). In qualitative research, however, where the intent is not to generalize findings, but rather to gain in-depth understanding, the concept of data saturation is often applied (Boddy, 2016; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Creswell, 2018). Data saturation refers to the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data and is often used to justify the use of a particular sample size in qualitative research (Boddy, 2016). According to Morse (2000: 3-4) the number of participants required to reach saturation depends on a number of factors; *the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the quality of the data and the study design*.

Accordingly, a sample of 20-25 participants was deemed appropriate in obtaining necessary insight into female consumers' lived experiences of fashion rental (see Creswell and Poth, 2016: 121). This sample size

recognises the disparate nature of qualitative research - more specifically phenomenological research, whereby one participant may offer greater in-depth insight than another (Morse, 2000). Conducting (on average) one-hour interviews with a sample this size was considered sufficient to gain depth of understanding into the phenomenon and for data saturation to be reached (Morse, 2000). Previous studies that have explored access-based fashion from a qualitative perspective support this (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Rosenberg et al., 2023) – with sample sizes of 28 and 24 respectively. Much of the sample selection followed the technique outlined by Loussaïef et al. (2019) who employed purposive (and convenience) sampling to recruit female participants from a range of backgrounds.

Purposive sampling lends itself to qualitative research as researchers can select participants who will inform understanding of a specific research problem or phenomenon (Goulding, 2005; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Arsel, 2017; Creswell, 2018). In phenomenological research, it is essential that the sample consists of ‘individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experiences’ (Creswell and Poth, 2016: 119-122). This considered, purposeful sampling was considered an appropriate means of identifying and selecting participants. Purposively selecting participants meant that the researcher could identify individuals who had experience of renting fashion items and who met the set criterion (female, 18 years old or over and living in the UK). Accordingly, the current study adopted two methods to identify and approach participants: (1) *via appeals made on social media through Instagram*; and (2) *via direct appeal to fashion rental companies to help recruit participants*. The social media platform, Instagram, was used to identify possible participants.

First, the researcher used Instagram to search for fashion rental companies which presented as renting fashion to the target audience. The following fashion rental accounts were purposively identified and ‘followed’ by the

researcher; *Hurr*⁵, *Rotaro*⁶, *By Rotation*⁷, *On Loan*⁸, *My Wardrobe HQ*⁹, *Endless Wardrobe*¹⁰, *Girl Meets Dress*¹¹, *Front Row London*¹², *Hire the Catwalk*¹³, *OWF*¹⁴, *Taite Ro*¹⁵, *Chiara & co*¹⁶, *The Devout*¹⁷, *Cupio closet*¹⁸ and *Wardrobe Wellbeing*¹⁹. Next, the researcher examined each accounts' list of 'followers' to identify potential participants. Individual accounts of followers who appeared to meet the set criterion for the study (determined by their picture and/or Instagram biography) were contacted. Initially, a direct message was sent via Instagram briefly outlining the research and asking if they would like to take part (see *Appendix B* for the message template). Participants who responded and were interested in taking part were asked to confirm that they met the set criterion, i.e., were female, aged 18 years old or older, lived in the UK and had rented fashion at least once. The latter criterion permitted for insight to be obtained from consumers with a variety of fashion rental experiences – from those who may have only rented once (and the reasons why they may have not rented again) compared to more seasoned renters. Upon confirmation, they were then asked to share their email address so the researcher could email them a consent form and Participant Information Sheet (PIS) - further details regarding these documents and the specific process involved in obtaining them are outlined in the next section (3.3.2). If after one week the potential participant had not responded with their email address, the researcher sent a follow up message via Instagram, asking if they were still interested in taking part. Upon confirming, they were given another week to sign the consent form and return it. Anyone that was no longer interested or

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/hurr/?hl=en>

⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/rotaro/?hl=en>

⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/byrotation/?hl=en>

⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/onloan/>

⁹ https://www.instagram.com/mywardrobe_hq/

¹⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/endlesswardrobe/>

¹¹ <https://www.instagram.com/girlmeetsdress/?hl=en>

¹² <https://www.instagram.com/frontrowlondon/>

¹³ <https://www.instagram.com/hirethecatwalk/?hl=en>

¹⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/onewearfreedom/?hl=en>

¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/taiterouk/?hl=en>

¹⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/chiaraandcouk/?hl=en>

¹⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/wearethedevout/?hl=en-gb>

¹⁸ https://www.instagram.com/cupio_closet/

¹⁹ https://www.instagram.com/wardrobe_wellbeing_/?hl=en

that did not respond (after the follow up message) was no longer considered a potential participant.

In addition, the researcher appealed directly to fashion rental companies to ask for their help in recruiting participants. This offered greater chance of identifying and recruiting participants. Specifically, the researcher contacted the (thirteen) companies listed above to ask for their help with recruitment (see *Appendix C* for template email message). Two companies responded and were happy to help promote the study: *Loanhood* and *Cupio Closet*. In addition, *Little Green Dress* - a rental company identified later in the recruitment process – also agreed to help. They each did this by sharing the call for participants on their social media and via email (see *Appendix D* for the Instagram appeal made by Cupio Closet). In exchange for their support with recruitment, these three companies were offered a write-up of the study's findings. A snowball recruitment method to harness further recruitment from participants was also utilised (i.e., participants were asked to recommend contacts from their network, who also had experience of fashion rental, to take part in the study) - this largely resulted in friend and family referrals. See *Table 4* for participant demographics, including the number of items each participant rented and the type of rental they engaged in (i.e., Business-to-Consumer (B2C), Peer-to-Peer (P2P) or P2P via rental platform).

Table 4: Participant demographic table

Name	Age	Location	Education	Occupation	Items rented	Type of rental
Lola	27	London	Bachelor's	Advertising & Media	3	B2C
Clare	29	London	Bachelor's	Carer	1	B2C
Stacey	25	London	Bachelor's	Travel start-up	3/4	B2C and P2P
Kate	25	London	A Levels	Freelance (film industry)	2	B2C and P2P via rental platform
Selena	34	London	PhD (current)	Business owner (rental fashion company)	10-20	B2C, P2P and P2P via rental platform
Bella	20	Sheffield	Bachelor's	Student	1	B2C
Gina	34	Aberdeen	Bachelor's & HNC	Pharmacy advisor	2	P2P
Michelle	37	Berlin	Bachelor's	Translator	1	B2C
Ramona	27	London	PhD	Medical writer	10	B2C
Etta	23	Manchester	Bachelor's	Graduate	2	B2C
Cilla	27	Bristol	A Levels	Chartered Executive Solicitor	4/5	B2C
Kelly	22	Southampton	Bachelor's & Master's	Student	3	P2P and B2C

Rose	23	London	Bachelor's	Paramedic	2	P2P and B2C
Tessa	27	London	Bachelor's	Creative Partner (environmental charity)	15-20	P2P, B2C and P2P via rental platform
Polly	37	York	Bachelor's	Business owner (rental fashion company)	30-40	P2P, B2C and P2P via rental platform
Kira	19	London	Bachelor's	Student	5	B2C
Ivie	23	Manchester	Bachelor's	Graduate	2	P2P and B2C
Joan	49	Angus	HNC	Early Years Practitioner	1	P2P
Hattie	36	Teesside	Professional Doctorate	Lecturer	1	P2P
Melanie	23	London	Bachelor's	Graphic Designer	1	B2C
Beatrice	41	Maidenhead	Bachelor's & MBA	Strategy & Business Partner (clinical trials company)	4	B2C
Sasha	21	Brighton	Bachelor's	Waitress	1	B2C
Vivian	22	London	Bachelor's	Content & community specialist (tech start-up)	3	B2C

Anna	45	Manchester	PhD	Economic Development Specialist	1	B2C

3.3.2 Ethics

In accordance with Manchester Metropolitan University's (MMU) commitment to conducting only the highest quality research, the following ethical principles were considered:

- participant informed consent
- participants' right to withdraw
- protection from harm
- participant confidentiality
- participant anonymity

The meaning of informed consent was clearly conveyed to participants via the PIS where they could comprehend the nature and purpose of the research project and the implications of their participation. Accordingly, consent was only obtained upon participants willingly signing the consent form. The participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study, even if data collection had taken place; however, it was made clear that they could not withdraw once data had been anonymised. Participants were assured that any data collected would remain confidential and that it would not be shared with any third parties. Similarly, participants were assured that no personally identifiable information would be disclosed – through assigning pseudonyms to each participant, data would remain anonymous. By signing the consent form, participants agreed to data being quoted anonymously in research outputs as well as deposited in the MMU Open Access repository (E-space). While the current research did not present the potential for harm, it was important to inform participants of what to do should they feel any discomfort/ have any major concerns - including the contact details of the Principal Supervisor, Faculty Head of Research Ethics and Governance and Data Protection Officer.

Research governance

The participants were informed that only the Principal Investigator (PI), Principal Supervisor (PS) and secondary supervisor would have access to the raw data – with the PS and secondary supervisor having access to only anonymised data. Participants were assured that their identities would be removed by the PI at the time of transcription (by destruction of the consent forms) with raw audio recordings deleted thereafter (phase 5 of data collection) – thus, no data could be linked to the participant's real names. The means of data storage was conveyed to participants, that being that all online data would be stored on the secure MMU cloud service, OneDrive, which was password protected and only accessible by the PI. Similarly, it was made clear that any hard copies of data would be stored in a locked cabinet in a secure MMU office. Furthermore, participants were informed that the PI was responsible for destruction of the data upon completion of the project. It was made clear to participants that findings from the study would be made accessible through the MMU's E-space as well as displayed on the MMU PGR Research Blog webpage (this is in exchange for being awarded the internal funding for the research). Moreover, that results from the research were intended to be published in a peer-reviewed journal as well as presented at academic conferences (using the anonymised data only).

Ethical approval was applied for via EthOS – MMU's online ethics application system. The documents included in the EthOS application consisted of a protocol form (*Appendix E*), a participant information sheet (*Appendix F*), a consent form (*Appendix G*), and an (initial) interview guide (*Appendix H*). The contents of each are presented below.

Protocol form

The project protocol form was a document that outlined the full details of the research project, including:

- background/ context of the research

- research questions/aims/objectives
- research design
- setting and participants
- study procedures
- incidents
- data analysis and handling
- regulatory issues and dissemination policy
- project timeline

It was also the document against which the research was to be ‘insured, monitored, and audited by the university and other relevant regulatory authorities’ (MMU²⁰, 2023).

Participation information sheet

The purpose of the PIS was to ensure that potential participants had ‘sufficient information to make an informed decision about whether to take part’ in the study (MMU, 2023). The document provided a brief summary of the research project and its aims, outlining the research process in a way that would be comprehensible by all prospective participants. Further, it outlined what would be required of them if they chose to take part, i.e., how long the interview would likely take, where it would take place and what it would involve. It also provided detail of any potential risks involved with their participation (of which there was none) and outlined the advantages of taking part - a voucher was offered as a token of thanks for participating. The process for dissemination of results was explained, including details of who would review the project. Signposting was also offered for participants who may have any concerns. The PIS was sent to potential participants via email along with the consent form - they were advised to carefully read over the PIS and should they have any questions, concerns, or need anything clarifying to contact the PI via email

²⁰ MMU (2023) - research ethics and governance guidance
<https://www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-integrity/ethics-and-governance/university-approval#ai-12164-2>

Consent form

This was a one-page document which required potential participants to provide their informed consent. They did this by agreeing (ticking 'yes') or disagreeing (ticking 'no') to ten statements directly relating to the research study. Participants' were informed of their right to withdraw – that being up until data anonymisation. Informed consent was only obtained once participants had signed and dated this form. The consent form was sent to participants along with the PIS - they were advised to firstly read over the PIS and, if they were still happy to participate, to read and sign the consent form. They could either e-sign this or sign it by hand and were asked to return the consent form via email to the PI within one week of receiving it. If after one week the participant had not returned the consent form, the researcher sent a follow up email. Participants that responded and confirmed they were still interested in taking part were given another week to sign the consent form and return it. Anyone that was no longer interested or that did not respond (after the follow up email) was no longer considered a potential participant and their email address was deleted. Once participants had returned the consent form, a date and time for the interview was arranged via email. Signed consent forms were printed off and kept in a secure cabinet that only the PI had access to. Each participant was assigned a participant identification number prior to their interview – the list of which was kept in a separate location to the list of participant names and consent forms (stored electronically on the MMU OneDrive which only the PI had access to). Consent forms were destroyed once participants had been assigned pseudonyms and data was fully anonymised.

Interview guide

This was an initial interview guide, comprising of a list of topics informed by the literature and the research questions. These included the CE, ownership (i.e., solid consumption), renting (i.e., liquid consumption) and the *self*. The guide followed a 'loose structure', affording participants opportunity to describe their experience(s) of renting fashion as well as for these themes/ topics to be

explored. Furthermore, it provided the researcher with a rough outline to follow – including a *general introduction*; where the researcher introduced themselves as PI and reminded the participant that the interview would be audio recorded; a *‘warm-up’* where the participant was asked to share a little bit about themselves (age, occupation, educational background, (favourite) fashion brand(s) you have rented); and a *‘roundup’* – concluding the interview by thanking the participants and asking if they had any questions.

The researcher also used this opportunity to ask the participant if they knew of anyone who met the set criterion for the study and who they thought may be willing to take part. In the instance that they did, the researcher asked them if they would pass on their contact details (MMU email) and ask them to make contact. The interview ended once the participant was happy with what they had shared and felt confident in what to expect next (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Implementing a (loose) introduction and conclusion is indicative of a phenomenological interview and afforded the opportunity to build rapport with each participant and help them feel relaxed as a means of obtaining rich, in-depth data (Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1990). Please note, it was stipulated within the EthOS application that this guide was an initial interview guide to begin data collection, and that it would be amended, if necessary, upon completion of the pilot study.

The EthOS application was initially rejected, with some minor changes requested, including the need to complete health and safety training. As part of the Post-Graduate Research (PGR) training offered at MMU, two mandatory online modules were subsequently completed: (1) *data protection* and (2) *research integrity*. After addressing the reviewer comments and making the necessary amendments, the application was re-submitted. Following this, ethical approval was granted, and data collection commenced.

The next section details the process of data collection.

3.3.3 Data collection

Data collection followed a five-phase approach:

1. Phase 1 involved recruiting participants – following the sampling selection process outlined in 3.3.1.
2. Phase 2 involved undertaking the small-scale pilot study. Three phenomenological interviews were conducted using the (initial) interview guide.
3. Phase 3 involved analysis of the pilot study data, and refinement of the interview guide.
4. Phase 4 involved undertaking the phenomenological interviews with twenty-one participants. As outlined (in 3.3.1), it was deemed appropriate to adopt a similar sample size to previous consumer research exploring access-based fashion consumption (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Christodoulides et al., 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023).
5. Phase 5 involved analysis of the whole dataset. The phases of thematic analysis are discussed below (3.3.4).

All the interviews were conducted over the summer of 2022. Three pilot study interviews were conducted on the 20th of May, the 27th of May, and the 6th of June 2022, respectively. The pilot study was beneficial for the researcher, as a novice to conducting qualitative data, and reduced the risk of encountering any issues while obtaining the data, through refining the interview style and questions posed (Ismail et al., 2018). Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams in accordance with MMU EthOS guidance and lasted around one-hour long. Conducting the interviews online was not only convenient but it meant that participants were likely to be in their own home and therefore in a familiar setting. Thus, they were more likely to feel relaxed, at ease and hopefully more inclined to go into as much detail as possible - supporting the core principles of EP (Thompson et al., 1989). Data collection for the remainder of the study

(phase 4) commenced on the 7th of June and proceeded until the final interview on the 16th of August. After each interview, participants – including those interviewed in the pilot study, were sent a £20 e-gift voucher via email to thank them for participation. This token of thanks was made possible through the MMU Research Support Award – totalling a value of £500 aimed at supporting PGR students with their data collection. This was extremely valuable in ensuring the project stayed on track and that research was carried out in accordance with the project timeline.

To support data analysis, handwritten notes were made during each interview - at both phase 2 and phase 4 of data collection. Notes were made in shorthand, in a data collection notebook and were only accessed by the PI. The purpose of these interview notes was to support audio recordings and written transcripts throughout data analysis. Notes included comments on participants' body language, intonation, and any point they stressed as particularly significant. The interview adhered to the phenomenological approach (Thompson et al., 1989) with participants invited to share their experience(s) of renting fashion items - probed by the researcher to further clarify or expand a point. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim.

Before discussing data analysis, it is important to assess the 'robustness' of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Indicative of any interpretivist research, interpretation cannot be assumed to be value-free (Hirschman, 1986; Denzin, 2001). It is owing to this that interpretive research has long been criticised for its ability to generate valid scientific knowledge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986; Szmigin and Foxall, 2000; Hogg and Maclaren, 2008; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Unlike positivistic research, interpretivism is rooted in subjectivity and therefore applying set criteria, namely reliability and validity, to determine scientific rigor is not suitable (Hirschman, 1986; Shankar and Goulding, 2001; Pratt, 2009). That being said, suitable criteria can be applied to qualitative research which demonstrates robustness of data and scientific rigor - that is distinct and yet

comparable to that of a positivistic approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Pratt, 2009). One way of evaluating qualitative data is by assessing its *dependability* (i.e., trustworthiness) through the practice of reflexivity – a means of reflecting on, and considering, how the values and beliefs of the researcher inevitably play a role in interpretation of the data (Guba, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986; Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

It is through the practice of reflexivity that the PI was able to consider how their values and beliefs as a researcher may have informed sense-making and subsequent interpretation of the data (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). The case for reflexivity was reinforced by the interpretivist assumption that ‘the knowing takes place at different points in the research process’ (Morse, 1994: 14). This could be as early as before data collection has begun or later on, when the project is being written up (Gummesson, 2003). By keeping detailed and descriptive records, the researcher was able to produce an “audit trail” - a running account of the scientific process behind data collection, data analysis and interpretation (Guba, 1981; Creswell and Poth, 2016). In doing so, they provide a means for others to understand *how* they made sense of the data, permitting for interpretations constructed by multiple observers (in this case researchers) to be compared (Hirschman, 1986; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989; Chowdhury, 2014). It is through such comparison that we can determine ‘which elements are consistent across interpretations and, thus, are more dependable’ (Hirschman, 1986: 244). Satisfied with the ‘robustness’ of the data, the researcher was able to proceed to data analysis.

3.3.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data - following the six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Specifically, reflexive thematic analysis was applied to explore ‘deep, complexed, nuance meaning

and understanding' while critically reflecting on the researcher's subjective role throughout the process (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 247). Thematic analysis is a common method used to analyse qualitative data - noted for its flexibility, it can be used across multiple theoretical frameworks (in this case, the solid-liquid framework) and analyse a range of interpretative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021; 2022a). Furthermore, it can be useful in offering a "thick description" of a large dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013) – synergistic with the existential phenomenological approach underpinning the study's methodology. It is also suggested to be especially beneficial for research conducted by a single researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Accordingly, it was deemed an appropriate means of analysis for the present research.

Braun and Clarke (2006) discuss 'themes' within data, with a 'theme' capturing a meaningful concept that has direct relevance to the research question. There are six phases to thematic analysis, outlined below (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022a):

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generation of codes
3. Construction of themes
4. Review of potential themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

It is important to note that thematic analysis is an iterative process, with data transitioning from a descriptive state to an interpretative state (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022a). Iteration involves 'moving through data collection and analysis in such a way that preceding operations shape subsequent ones' (Spiggle, 1994: 495). The emphasis on iteration supports the concurrence of data collection and data analysis that is consistent with qualitative research seeking to build theory inductively (Pratt, 2009).

It is important to note that analysis of the pilot study data initially occurred at phase 3 of data collection - its primary purpose being to 'trial' the interview guide ahead of the main data collection phase. In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, each of the three-pilot study interviews were transcribed as the researcher familiarised herself with the dataset (phase 1). Subsequently, a total of 269 codes were generated and 8 themes were constructed (phase 2 and 3). At phase 4, five themes were discounted, and three (higher order) themes remained. These tentative themes were archived, and phase 4 of data collection commenced. The pilot study data was later incorporated into the full dataset (24 interviews) - coded again in accordance with the codes generated at phase 5. Below is a detailed breakdown of the steps taken during data analysis.

Phase 1 of data analysis: Familiarisation with the data

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), familiarisation is all about immersing yourself in the dataset - reading and re-reading, re-listening, and starting to form very early analytical ideas. Phase one of data analysis began by firstly anonymising the data. Participant's identities were removed, and each participant assigned a pseudonym. Following this, each interview was transcribed. Initially, transcriptions were completed manually by the researcher using a foot pedal. Manual transcriptions were made for the first nine interviews (this included the three pilot study interviews). Following this, NVivo transcription software was employed to complete the remainder of the transcriptions (interviews 10-24). NVivo software was obtained thanks to research funding secured by MMU Business Transformations research centre. Subsequently, each transcript was checked by the researcher for accuracy – aware of varying accents/dialects across the participant dataset, it was essential to check interview transcripts produced by NVivo and edit accordingly. Entries from the data collection handbook were cross-referenced with each written transcript. Once completed, phase 2 of thematic analysis commenced.

Phase two of data analysis: Generation of codes

Coding is considered the 'systematic and thorough creation of meaningful labels attached to specific segments of the dataset' (Terry et al., 2017: 15). Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight three levels of coding; 1st order coding (also referred to as descriptive), 2nd order coding and 3rd order coding (also referred to as interpretative). They suggest that coding should be an open and organic process (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2022a). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) a code refers to a 'label' that captures something interesting about the data. Codes can be *semantic* or *latent* (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). *Semantic* codes 'capture explicitly expressed meaning; they often stay close to the language of participants or the overt meaning of data' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 57). Conversely, *latent* codes 'focus on deeper, more *implicit* conceptual level of meaning...abstracted from the obvious content of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 57-58).

Accordingly, "labels" were assigned to data that had relevance to the research question (Terry et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Codes were applied to data, which was either repeated, unexpected, explicitly stressed as *important* or had synergy with the literature. Braun and Clarke (2022a: 70) argue that you should 'work through your dataset, more than once, when coding, to ensure rigor'. Following this guidance, three rounds of coding were conducted. Codes were written directly onto transcripts, using a different colour pen to differentiate rounds. After each round, codes were inputted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with transcripts numbered horizontally (in columns) and codes inserted vertically (as rows). Subsequently, cells were marked 'x' if the code was present in the corresponding transcript. This made for a clear and coherent visual to demonstrate phase 2 of thematic analysis. The three rounds of coding can be found in the Appendix (*Appendix I, J and K* respectively).

Round one resulted in a total of 244 codes – this was across transcriptions 4-24 (i.e., the 'main' dataset excluding the pilot study transcripts). At each subsequent round of coding, codes were examined and then either combined,

collapsed, or clustered depending on whether they overlapped or were repeated. This led to a natural reduction in the number of codes generated each round thereafter. Round two generated a total of 90 codes – again, this was across transcriptions 4-24. The final round comprised of the whole dataset (i.e., transcripts 1-24) and generated a total of 90 codes. Phase 2 was complete once there was a ‘compiled list of codes’ based on the final dataset (i.e., 24 transcripts) (Terry et al., 2017: 17).

Phase three of data analysis: Construction of themes

Construction of themes is considered an active process - themes do not ‘emerge’ from the data but are *actively* generated by the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis recognises the ‘importance of the researcher’s subjectivity as *analytic* resource and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 330) and supports the existential phenomenological approach harnessed throughout this research. It was essential therefore that the study’s ontological and epistemological assumptions were acknowledged throughout data analysis to ensure that the consumer’s own lived experiences were accurately captured. Such assumptions were particularly important to consider when constructing themes, with themes representing the shared interpretation of renting fashion as a socially constructed phenomenon.

The research questions acted as a guide to help ‘determine what is, and what is not, relevant in terms of potential clusters of patterned meaning’ (Terry et al., 2017: 18). Braun and Clarke (2006: 89) note that it is at this phase that you must ‘re-focus the analysis’ - analysing data at a broader level (i.e., themes), moving away from the focussed analysis that occurs when coding. Doing so closely mirrors the iteration process examined by Spiggle (1994: 495), permitting the researcher to form a more ‘uniformed interpretation of the data’. Thus, codes were analysed, carefully with consideration that ‘different codes may combine to form an overarching theme’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 89). All relevant coded data was then (temporarily) assigned to a theme based on a

‘central organising concept’ (see *Table 5*) - a single, core idea that underpinned each identified theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). It was equally important at this phase to remain flexible in the knowledge that codes may change/ fluctuate as analysis progressed (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Thematic mapping was employed as an effective visual tool to aid identification and sense-making of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). By mapping each theme onto a piece of paper, it helped to not only determine how themes related to each other but to clearly differentiate between main themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022a). Further, it provided clarity around if/how themes related to the research question(s) – a crucial condition for any potential theme (Terry et al., 2017). In total, four themes were constructed: (1) *elevation*, (2) *surrogacy*, (3) *advocacy* and (4) *sustainable identity*. The phase 3 thematic map can be found in the Appendix (*Appendix L*).

Table 5: Demonstrates the codes clustered under each potential theme at phase 3

Potential theme	Codes – assigned to data extracts
Elevation	11, 16, 25, 30, 43, 53, 55, 69, 73, 78, 83, 88, 89, 96, 52, 54
Surrogacy	56, 77, 79, 81, 84, 85, 86, 47
Advocacy	10, 18, 23, 24, 27, 28, 31, 44, 48, 51, 74, 80, 82, 87
Sustainable identity	3,4, 5, 6, 8, 18, 19, 23, 28, 32, 36, 51, 60, 70, 72, 74, 80, 83

Braun and Clarke (2022a: 102) stress that ‘frequency is not the most important element...a ‘minor theme’ (in terms of frequency) may offer a vitally important meaning to capture and report’. Therefore, despite the second theme, *surrogacy*, having only half the number of codes compared to the other three themes, it still captured important interpretation. By employing reflexive thematic analysis, ‘rich, complex, non-obvious themes’ could be generated – effectively responding to the inductive nature of the research problem and

subsequent questions. Phase 3 was complete once codes had been clustered into themes with visual mapping facilitating the scope of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022a).

Phase four of data analysis: Review of potential themes

Reviewing themes is a vital part of thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Therefore, phase 4 involved reviewing and refining the potential themes identified in phase 3 - to establish the 'nature' and 'story' of each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021). This can be considered 'quality control' – 'ensuring that the themes work well in relation to the coded data, the dataset, *and* the research question' (Terry et al., 2017: 21). Braun and Clarke (2006: 91) identify two levels of reviewing: level one which involves 'reviewing at the level of the coded data extracts' and level two which involves considering the 'entire data set'.

At level one, boundaries for each theme were identified (as seen in *Table 6*). Establishing the boundaries of a theme (i.e., the inclusion and exclusion criteria) helped to distinguish whether codes (and corresponding data extracts) were in-fact relevant to that theme and its central organising concept or, if they needed to be removed (Terry et al, 2017).

Table 6: Displays the initial boundaries for each identified theme

Theme	Boundary (inclusion criteria)
Elevation	• Desire to 'treat' oneself (for an event) • Elevate themselves/ impress (make an impression to others) • Make a statement • Desire for luxury • Desire for high quality item/ brand • Access to an item they could not afford to buy (and own)
Surrogacy	• Aware the item was not <i>theirs</i> • Protect/ preserve • Careful worried/ stressed

Advocacy	• Desire to promote fashion rental as much as possible • Importance of transparency when renting • No shame in renting • Renting is positive for the environment/ CE • Renting benefits consumers (reduced price and access to luxury) • Feel they have a responsibility to advocate renting • Proud that they have rented/ rent and feel renting is an excellent alternative to consuming fashion
Sustainable identity	• Desire for rental to become mainstream • Most ppts²¹ have social media accounts dedicated to circular fashion • They wish/ choose to portray a sustainable identity • Desire to advocate • Have awareness/ understanding of CE • Have awareness/ understanding of fashion industry • Desire to be part of the 'solution' • Want to talk/ advocate about renting fashion – wish to portray a sustainable identity

Subsequently, each theme was taken in turn and all coded data extracts were re-read to establish whether collectively they told a coherent story and accurately represented the theme to which they had been assigned. Braun and Clarke's (2022a: 99) specified criteria proved helpful upon reviewing each theme:

- Is there a central organising concept?
- What is the quality of the theme?
- What are the boundaries of the theme?
- Are there enough data to support theme?
- Are the data too diverse?
- Does the 'theme' work in relation to coded extracts *and* the entire dataset

It was clear that the first three potential themes: (1) *elevation*, (2) *surrogacy* and (3) *advocacy* told a consistent story – with codes sharing predominantly *latent* meaning. However, for the fourth theme, sustainable identity, it was apparent that the coded data extracts did not contribute to 'higher order'

²¹ ppts – shorthand for participants

analysis. Rather, they represented more *semantic* level meaning. Such meaning did not align with the phenomenological approach, failing to support interpretation that may not have been immediately implicit from surface-level responses (Kvale, 1983; Goulding, 1999; 2005). Furthermore, the inclusion criteria for 'sustainable identity' seemingly overlapped with those of the other three themes, unable to offer a distinct boundary/ concept. However, before discarding this theme, level two of the review process was carried out.

Level two involved reviewing the themes in relation to the 'entire data set' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 100). At this level, the validity of themes was considered by referring to the thematic map (generated in phase 3) and determining if it 'accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data set as a whole' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 91). After re-examining the thematic map which represented the four potential themes and their central organising concept, it was felt that 'sustainable identity' was not a strong enough theme. It generally represented 1st order (descriptive) codes – unlike *elevation*, *surrogacy*, and *advocacy* which explicated 3rd order (interpretive) codes. After careful consideration and review, sustainable identity was discarded as a theme. With a strong sense of the 'confirmed' themes, how they connected and how they related to the research questions, phase 4 was complete.

Phase five of data analysis: Defining and naming themes

This penultimate phase consisted of further refining and subsequently defining themes. Braun and Clarke (2006: 92) emphasise the importance of clearly defining 'what your themes are and what they are not'. They recommend the following key questions to ask yourself when defining and naming the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022a):

- What are the assumptions underpinning the theme?
- What are the implications of the theme?
- Why do people talk about it in a particular way?
- What is the overall story the theme reveals about the topic?

Further supporting theme definition was the central organisation concept – an ‘abstract’ which concisely described what the theme was all about (Terry et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Theme boundaries determined in the previous phase were reviewed, with careful consideration around what was unique and specific to each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Accordingly, boundaries were altered/ amended. *Table 7* presents the finalised boundaries for each of the three themes.

Table 7: Displays the confirmed boundary criteria for each confirmed theme

Theme	Boundary (inclusion criteria)
Elevation	• Elevates sense of ‘self’ (more than typical self-concept) • Elevates <i>self</i> by the way the rented item makes the ppts look and feel • Makes ppts feel the ‘best’ version of themselves (more than can be achieved through buying and owning fashion items) • Ppts consider renting a ‘treat’ (both the item itself and the experience) • Consciously choose items they do not wish to own • Avoid identification with the item (i.e., they do not experience a sense of perceived ownership and therefore do not consider the item ‘theirs’).
Surrogacy	• Hedonic pleasure (excited, amazing...) • Aware that the item is not <i>theirs</i> • Avoid identification with the item • Protect/ preserve the rented item • Worry/stress about looking after the item – <i>but</i> this does not deter them from renting • Greater care/ concern for spillages/ marks • Happy to return the item at et end of the rented period • Sense of pride in looking after the item - ‘surrogate’ role
Advocacy	• Openly and actively share rental experiences • Open reveals that item is rented (even when not asked) • Desire to advocate/ promote renting as much as possible • Importance of transparency when renting • Feel you have a responsibility when renting to advocate • Believe rental is good for you (access to luxury, reduced burden of ownership and a more environmentally conscious way to consume) • Desire for renting fashion to become mainstream

Finally, a second thematic map was developed (*Appendix M*). This provided a clear illustration of each theme and their respective relationships (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Crucially, this thematic map offered a strong visual to help analyse how each theme contributed to the ‘overall story’ and if/ how it successfully responded to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Finally, theme definitions were approved, (1) *elevation*, (2) *surrogacy* and (3) *advocacy*, and the final phase of thematic analysis, phase 6, began. Theme definitions are presented below followed by a breakdown of each theme’s contribution to the overall research ‘story’ (see *Table 8*). Please note that theme definitions are offered again in the findings and discussion chapters (4.0 and 5.0).

Elevation

The first theme of *elevation* reveals how renting elevates the way participants *look* - by choosing to rent high-end, expensive items, they accomplish a version of themselves that they consider to not be possible through traditional means (buying and owning) due to financial constraints. Moreover, participants reveal how renting *feels* like a treat, eliciting excitement, and a sense of experience - enhancing the way they *feel* in their item. Furthermore, the feeling of being a good, ethical consumer elevates their sense of self - as they wear their rented item like a badge of honour. The self-concept is formed through the elevation consumers accomplish – owing to the act of renting and consuming/displaying the rented item itself.

Surrogacy

The second theme of *surrogacy* represents consumers’ awareness that items they rent are *not theirs* but rather they are responsible for that piece for a fixed period. Participants revealed the need to be especially vigilant when wearing rented items, ensuring they are returned to the legal owner in the same condition as they received it. Here, the self-concept appears to be formed through a consumer’s role as ‘surrogate’: caretaker of the item/ensuring it is kept in pristine condition, allowing the potential of fashion rental systems to overcome consumer ‘disgust’ at renting, rather than owning, fashion products. Surrogacy, in the context of access-based consumption, can describe a

consumer who has access to another consumer's possession, acting as custodian and protecting the item for a fixed period of time.

Advocacy

The theme *advocacy* demonstrates consumers' desire to influence others to rent by actively promoting the phenomenon both verbally (through word of mouth) and via social media (posting pictures and/or tagging items on Instagram). Participants view it as their responsibility to advocate renting, openly sharing their rental experience with others – adopting the role of renting 'ambassador'. Participants place less importance on the item they rent, and more on ensuring they *tell* others it is rented. As such, it appears that the *act* of renting (and subsequent advocacy) contributes to a consumer's self-concept.

Table 8: Represents each themes contribution to the 'overall story' – supported by the phase 5 thematic map (Appendix M)

Theme	Contribution
Elevation	• Consumers achieve an elevated self-concept by looking <i>and</i> feeling good • Renting is a treat (gift-like experience) • Sense of <i>self</i> is elevated from <i>both</i> the rented item itself and advocating rental systems
Surrogacy	• Consumers avoid identification with the item • They view the role of 'surrogate' as important and necessary • Contamination concerns/ hygiene issues (feeling 'grossed out') are downplayed as ppts take extra care of rented items
Advocacy	• Achieve a sense of elevation through advocating/ their role as ambassador • Open about their experience (positivise <i>and</i> negative customer experience) • View advocating as important to their role as surrogate • Transparency is key – to make renting mainstream <i>and</i> to reduce the stigma surrounding renting fashion

Phase six of data analysis: Producing the report

The purpose of phase six was 'to tell an *overall* story, with conclusion drawn across the whole analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 128). Thus, codes,

themes, informal interview notes and existing literature collectively supported this final phase (Terry et al., 2017). Emphasis was placed on ‘weaving together’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 128) data, analysis, and literature (Terry et al., 2017). It was essential that themes clearly connected to the purpose of the research *and* relevant scholarly work (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Moreover, it was imperative to reflect on the theoretical underpinning – that being the theory of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) and self-concept (Belk, 1988), as well as the solid-liquid conceptual framework (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Recognising how data and subsequent analysis related to the study’s theoretical approach was crucial in assuring a strong ‘analytic narrative’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 94).

Within thematic analysis, there are considered to be two ways of writing data: *illustrative* and *analytic* (Terry et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2022a). The former is used to ‘quickly illustrate something you are claiming’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 133). Whereas, the latter style, *analytic*, is applied when extracts are ‘discussed with specific aspects or features forming the basis for analytic claims’ (Terry et al., 2017: 25). For the current study this meant carefully considering, and selecting, data extracts i.e., direct quotes, that most effectively represented each theme and their respective sub-themes (depicted by headings and sub-headings in chapter 4.0). A range of extracts from *across* the dataset were subsequently selected – bearing in mind that ‘many analyses contain both styles’ and therefore illustrative and analytic extracts would likely overlap (Terry et al., 2017: 25).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 94), analytic claims ‘need to be grounded in, but go beyond, the ‘surface’ of the data, even for a ‘semantic’ level analysis’. To address this and guarantee high validity, lengthier, more substantial extracts were selected to best evidence analytical claims (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). It was equally important to ‘edit out unnecessary detail’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 134). This meant using ellipsis to break up lengthier extracts, ensuring that text relevant to the analytical claim was clearly

demonstrated. Further, it was important to contextualise extracts, to ensure the reader had a clear picture of the ‘scenario’ or ‘situation’ that was being analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Doing so supported the study’s epistemological position (EP) – with strongly evidenced analytic claims providing rich interpretation of participants’ lived experiences of renting fashion. The varying styles of written data; *illustrative* and *analytic*, are evidenced within the findings chapter (4.0).

When deciding on which order to write the themes, it was important to consider the ‘flow of the story’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 140). This meant using the thematic map to help determine how best to tell the story behind the data. Doing so made it clear that *elevation* was the most suitable theme to introduce the findings. It provided data extracts that would guide the reader through the following themes and to effectively begin the ‘story’. *Advocacy* was selected second because it offered a ‘logical flow’ from the analysis discussed in theme one, i.e., participants had a desire to promote renting and openly share their rental experience with others (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 140). Finally, *surrogacy* was deemed the most relevant theme to discuss last, largely because its analytic narrative built upon the analysis discussed in *elevation* and *advocacy* (Braun and Clarke, 2022a) – demonstrating clear interconnection and thus an appropriate theme to conclude the findings by drawing together the three themes as a ‘whole’. Further, it introduced a new concept, the ‘surrogate consumer’, which would later be supported with a conceptual model.

The issue of generalisability was important to address when writing up data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Interpretive research is not about being able to generalise data but rather obtaining rich meaning behind data (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Thus, careful consideration was taken when deciding if/how to report frequency and prevalence across the dataset. As stated by Braun and Clarke (2022a: 142) ‘qualitative research focusses on constructions rather than truths’ and for that reason they recommend ‘embracing

impartially...refusing to nail down a final, absolute analysis'. Recognizing this, expressions such as 'most of the participants' or 'the majority of the participants' was reported. This presented as a way of informing the reader of a theme's prevalence (across the participant sample) while upholding the study's interpretivist position (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

For example, the boundary condition, 'consciously rented an item they would only want to wear once', for the initial theme *elevation* (as listed in *Table 6*) comprised of coded data extracts from 16 participants – representing two thirds of the sample. Conversely, one third of the sample (8 participants) did not exhibit data which met this particular condition. Nonetheless, this presented as a convincing boundary - offering meaningful interpretation and providing strong insight into how renting fashion items informs the self-concept through a sense of *elevation*. As stressed by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is not about discovering frequency but about generating themes which credibly represent meaning behind data. That considered, it was important to ensure that expressions regarding the 'general' prevalence of interpretation was indicated throughout written analysis so that themes could be considered against other contexts in future research – recognised by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Hirschman (1986) as 'transferability'.

Conclusions are the 'so what of the story' and therefore it was essential that the reader was left with a sense of clarity and confirmation as analysis drew to an end (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 146). To achieve this, attention was paid to the following: data and analysis, existing literature, methodology, theory and practice and wider societal implications – ensuring that a conclusion was clear in relation to each (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). Supporting this was the process of reviewing and editing the written data, ensuring each theme was presented and discussed distinctly in addition to ensuring interconnections between themes were clear to the reader. *Table 9* depicts a 15-point checklist of criteria for conducting thematic analysis. This worked as a useful guide while working through each phase of thematic analysis.

Table 9: A 15-point checklist for conducting thematic analysis

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
Analysis	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
Overall	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Written report	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – ie, described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), pp96.

The final section of this chapter presents the researchers methodological reflections.

3.4 Methodological reflections

This section discusses several methodological reflections made throughout data collection and data analysis. Firstly, the method, specifically the chosen sample and the use of phenomenological interviews, is considered alongside the decision to harness a phenomenological methodology. This is followed by a reflection of data analysis, drawing on journal data entries made throughout phases 1-6 of (reflexive) thematic analysis. Finally, points of difference amongst the sample are acknowledged. By reflecting on these methodological issues with full transparency, I hope to satisfy any methodological issues or concerns and offer clarity and support for future research.

Method and methodological reflections

Firstly, while purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants, it became apparent, through data analysis, that all participants were very much 'pro-sustainability'. In other words, they were individuals who placed considerable importance on practicing sustainable consumption behaviour, considering the environmental and societal impact when making consumption decisions. The findings obtained from these consumers may well contrast to a sample of participants who, for example, are less 'pro-sustainable'/less environmentally conscious. This is an avenue for research to explore and something which is discussed in greater detail in the discussion chapter (5.0). Irrespective, findings effectively identify three themes which explain how renting fashion items informs an individual's sense of self - via a sense of *elevation*, *advocacy* and *surrogacy*.

The decision to use phenomenological interviews as a means of collecting data aligns with the ontological and epistemological assumptions (i.e., social constructionism and interpretivism). Furthermore, it supports the aim of the research and subsequent research questions. Using phenomenological interviews has afforded rich, in-depth insight into the lived experiences of consumers most likely to rent fashion items in the strive towards a CE – offering the 'potential for change in the socially-created world' (Kvale, 1985: 195). Data collection took place over the summer; therefore, consideration of participants' availability was crucial to ensure that data were collected in a timely manner. Conducting the interviews via Microsoft Teams, as opposed to in-person, granted greater flexibility when it came to scheduling interviews. The UK school holidays meant that many women were juggling work with child-care. Participating in an interview remotely meant that they were able to more easily fit the interview around such demands, e.g., in their lunch break, or after work. Consequently, no extra time was required of participants beyond the interview i.e., to travel, nor were any additional costs incurred by them (e.g., for fuel or train fare/childcare).

While Teams was valuable in the timely collection of data, it is important to identify its limitations. Specifically, the issues with sharing additional material – between participant and researcher. One participant (Lola) attempted to ‘share’ some photos of her rented dress; however, issues with her Teams application meant she was unable to do so via the ‘share your screen’ function. Moreover, difficulty logging into her email (via her phone) meant she was unable to send the photos to the researcher directly. Unlike face-to-face interviews - where supplementary material/information can be shared relatively easily, Teams is subject to the application functioning effectively. While this did not detract from the rich insight Lola, or any of the other participants, provided – with the ability to share ‘extra’ content online not a requirement of the online interview - being able to easily share additional material through a more traditional, face-to-face format is something future research in this area should consider.

In an attempt to build rapport with participants, I engaged in friendly ‘small talk’ at the start of each interview – asking participants how they were, how their day was going and, in some instances, conversing about their holiday (with many participants having been/about to go on holiday). Although this appeared to put most participants at ease, some participants remained quite reserved (despite being reassured of the informality and semi-structured nature of the interview). Moreover, a few other participants were distracted - perhaps by the presence of others in their location or by their phone and/or laptop (particularly the case for those who were doing the interview in their lunch break or while working from home). As a means of countering this, and to ensure the participant remained present and focussed on the interview, I kindly redirected them back to the topic in accordance with the ‘loosely structured’ interview guide.

While these participants were still willing to recall their experience, it became apparent that they were more responsive when I guided them through the interview – through greater probing and reassurance. This differed to the

majority of participants who were happy to recall their experiences without needing many prompts. For instance, Michelle, when asked if she could take me through her rental experience, did so for over 15 minutes – equating to over two and a half pages of written transcript. Similarly, Stacey and Anna, also ‘led’ their interviews with very few prompts. Their dialogue ranged from half a page to over 3 pages worth of written transcript. These instances more closely represent the second central concept of phenomenology, *emergent dialogue* as discussed in section 3.2.2 (Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1990; Pollio et al., 1997). While questioning was not wholly a-priori (Thompson et al., 1989), phenomenology remains an appropriate methodological approach because it stands that ‘no one question is ever critical to an understanding of the overall interview’ (Pollio et al., 1997: 3). Moreover, EP provided the empirically rigorous methodology necessary to understand the phenomena through individuals lived experiences (Thompson et al., 1989; Pollio et al., 1997).

Finally, it is important to reflect upon how the ‘robustness’ of the data was assessed. While the practice of reflexivity proved effective in establishing *dependability*, a “members check” could have been applied as a means of assessing the *credibility* of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). To conduct a members check, the researcher presents the interpretation to the participants under study (Kvale, 1983; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). By doing this, the researcher can check ‘how accurately participants realities have been represented in the final account’ (Creswell and Miller, 2000: 125). While this approach is criticised by positivist researchers who deem it inappropriate to consult with the subjects under study, interpretivists argue that it is an effective means of ensuring accurate interpretation is recorded (Kvale, 1983; Hirschman, 1986). Upon reflection, implementing a members check is something that could have further strengthened the ‘robustness’ of the data (Kvale, 1983; Hirschman, 1986). Notwithstanding, as PI, I was satisfied with the robustness of the data and confident that a rigorous scientific process had been followed and diligently recorded.

Considerations for thematic analysis

The decision to harness (reflexive) thematic analysis proved effective in analysing the interview data at each of the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Throughout data analysis, I kept a reflexive journal consisting of short handwritten notes – dated, they clearly indicated the phase of data analysis (e.g., Entry 6, 06/06/23 – phase 2). Reflexivity involves ‘a disciplined practice of critically interrogating what we do, how and why we do it, and the impact and influences of this on our research’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 5). Braun and Clarke (2022a: 19) recommend keeping a reflexive journal to document thoughts throughout analysis for ‘subsequent reflection, interrogation, and meaning making’. They stress that we must acknowledge that our assumptions as researcher inevitably influences our research, making it imperative to reflect on *how* (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). The practice of reflexivity was crucial throughout the six phases, as a novice to thematic analysis, it provided me with a means of critically reflecting on decisions I made and how these decisions informed my interpretation of the data. This was invaluable when it came to writing up findings and having to justify my methodological decisions. Crucially, the reflexive journal was illustrative of interpretative research, recognising interpretation can be made at various points throughout the process and therefore must not be assumed to be value-free (Hirschman, 1986; Morse, 1994; Denzin, 2001; Gummesson, 2003).

Reflexivity: reflecting on the six phases of thematic analysis

Journal entries were made from 7th of July 2022 (early analysis of the pilot study) to the last entry, entry 22, on the 24th of July 2023. There were a few reflections which emerged consistently across multiple data entries – indicating particular importance; my ‘active’ role as researcher, the iterative nature of thematic analysis and the importance of ‘provisionality’, i.e. remaining flexible in letting things go (i.e., initial codes and potential themes).

At phase two of data analysis, I reflected on the ‘trickiness’ in knowing what to code, i.e. what data was relevant and ‘worthy’ of being assigned a code. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) clear guidelines are to code anything that may be relevant, in the knowledge that you can always delete it or combine it later in analysis. Recognizing this, I assigned codes to *any* data that I deemed relevant – later to be omitted and/or combined in subsequent rounds of coding (as discussed in 3.3.4). Further, to ensure that relevant data was coded, I printed out and attached the research questions to the wall above my desk so I could easily glance at them when coding. Important to note is that I did alter the process of coding during phase two (journal entry 11 and 12) – something which Braun and Clarke (2022a: 66) endorse as they recognise that there is no ‘one coding technology’ and thus, as researcher, you must ‘do what works best for you’.

This shift in coding involved replacing hand-written lists of codes with codes displayed in an Excel spreadsheet (as discussed in 3.3.4). This helped to not only code in a more visual way, being able to quite literally ‘see’ the codes marked by ‘x’s (if they were present in a transcript), but it also helped to code consistently and capture meaningful data (dismissing more factual/ informative data that did not provide sense-making). While the use of NVivo may have been beneficial in assisting coding - presenting a more time efficient option, manual coding allowed me to become fully immersed in the data at all levels (from the more focused, refined level data to the broader level data) (Terry et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021; 2022a). This was a crucial consideration recognizing that ‘good coding (coding that is more complex and nuanced) is often the result of a deep and prolonged engagement with the data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). Thus, while the use of NVivo was considered, manually coding was deemed a more valuable means of analysing and interpreting meaning behind the data.

It was particularly crucial at this stage to acknowledge that ‘subjectivity is at the heart of reflexive thematic analysis’ – that my positioning was shaping *how* I was engaging with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 12). At phase two,

this meant that coding was based on what data I, as researcher, deemed meaningful. Subjectivity is recognised by Braun and Clarke (2022a: 19) as a vital tool in reflexive practice. They argue that a reflexive journal is ‘one of the most important practices you’ll undertake on your research journey’ as it permits you to not only critically reflect on your role in the research process but also provides a means of sharing your sense-making with others (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 19). The reflexive journal made for a clear log of my thought processes throughout data analysis and the underlying assumptions that were (inevitably) applied to the analysis – strengthening the *dependability* of the research (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

In entry 18 (23rd February 2022), I highlight the importance of carrying out the pilot study. These initial three interviews were invaluable in testing out the interview guide which was subsequently refined. Early-stage thematic analysis of the pilot study data (as discussed in 3.3.4) initially occurred at phase 3 of data collection – generating 269 codes across the three transcripts. The initial construction of 8 themes, later lowered to 3, provided ‘tentative themes’ which I successfully shared at a conference (Academy of Marketing, 2023), a symposium (MMU Faculty of Business and Law Doctoral Symposium, 2023) and as part of an MMU PGR blog post (in exchange for receiving the £500 Research Support Award).

A final point to make with regards to the reflexive journal is the importance of iteration. As mentioned previously, iteration is the process of moving between the data, ‘zooming in’ – analysing data at a more focused, refined level before ‘zooming out’ - analysing data at a broader level (Spiggle, 1994; Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021; 2022a). It became apparent, particularly towards the latter stages of thematic analysis (phases 5/6), how important *hermeneutic endeavour* was - as a central concept of phenomenology (Thompson et al., 1989). Confidently moving between the data, analysis, and the literature was essential to ensure that the “parts” related to the “whole” (Terry et al., 2017). This included re-reading key literature to enhance sense-making (Bardhi and

Eckhardt, 2012; 2017; Loussaïef et al., 2019; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023) and revisiting the literature review chapter. Largely written the year prior to data collection (2022), it was important to re-examine literature in light of data analysis. It should be noted here that while the literature review supported this iterative process, ‘things’ (i.e., codes) could still emerge from the data which were different to/from existing published work.

Points of difference: between the participant sample

Finally, it is important to address the points of difference that exist between the participant sample. To note, two participants were inadvertently (paid) ambassadors for a rental platform at the time of their interview. Kelly was an ambassador for Loanhood²² and Kira was an ambassador for By Rotation²³. As to be expected, they were particularly enthusiastic about promoting renting fashion, being sent items to rent and share on their Instagram platform. This was inadvertent as this only came out during their interview. Interestingly, while Kelly was asked to consider being an ambassador by the founder of Loanhood (a P2P platform), Kira applied to be an ambassador after seeing By Rotation advertise the role on their Instagram (a B2C platform). Despite their recognised role, both Kelly and Kira described engaging in *advocacy* outside of their ambassadorship – such as via word of mouth (to friends and family) and at in-person events - where they persuaded others to rent from not just the platform they endorsed, but any renting platform. Moreover, Kelly shared how she was asked to be ambassador *because* of her pre-existing Instagram content promoting circular fashion. While paid ambassadorship is an important point of difference to acknowledge, this was only the case for two participants and they both demonstrated a desire to advocate *beyond* their ‘formal’ role of ambassador.

²² Loanhood - UK based fashion rental app <https://www.loanhood.com>

²³ By Rotation – UK P2P fashion rental service (Elle, 2021)
<https://byrotation.com>

A further reflection is on the decision to not include five interviews I conducted with 'non-renters' in this study. These interviews were conducted with five participants who had *not rented* but otherwise met the set criterion to take part, i.e., female, over 18 years old and living in the UK. The interviews were conducted over the spring/ summer of 2022 and were also conducted via Microsoft Teams. However, these interviews did not identify any (new) information that did not already exist within the literature, nor did they reveal any salient information about why these women had not (yet) rented. Furthermore, they did not respond directly to the research questions – which focus specifically on exploring the *lived experiences of renting* as an access-based form of consumption. For these reasons, the interview with 'non-renters' are not included within the findings.

The next, and final, section of this chapter provides a summary of the methodology and methods, reiterating the justification for an interpretivist, specifically an EP, approach, and the importance of the chosen sample.

3.5 Conclusion

Interpretivist consumer researchers are interested in 'how consumers perceive themselves and their relations to the outside world and the products they consume' (Levy, 2005: 344). The current study harnessed an interpretivist approach to understand and interpret the phenomena of fashion rental. To obtain the necessary in-depth insight, a phenomenological methodology was employed. Moreover, EP was applied to explore consumer's lived experiences of renting fashion and to determine if, and subsequently how, renting informs their self-concept. Accordingly, phenomenological interviews were conducted with twenty-four female consumers - as the most likely demographic to rent fashion items in the UK. Phenomenological interviews afforded a conversational approach to obtaining detailed insight into their lived experiences – supporting the interpretivist epistemology underpinning the study. Interviewing consumers who had rented fashion items was essential in

responding to the research questions. Through (reflexive) thematic analysis, it was possible to identify if/how renting, as a liquid consumption experience, informs consumers' sense of self. The next chapter reveals the findings of the study, notably the three themes: *elevation*, *advocacy* and *surrogacy*.

4.0 Findings

The implementation of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) reveals three main themes that suggest renting fashion contributes to an individual's self-concept: (1) *Elevation*, (2) *Advocacy*, and (3) *Surrogacy*.

The first theme, *elevation* (4.1), provides insight into how renting fashion items affords participants the opportunity to enhance their sense of self, renting items that elevate the way they *look* and *feel*. *Advocacy* (4.2) captures participants' desire to promote renting as a more sustainable way of consuming fashion (with this act of advocacy, promoting fashion rental to other consumers, underpinning their ethical/moral credentials, and informing their self-concept through their behaviour). The final theme, *surrogacy* (4.3), reveals how participants view themselves as custodians of their rented item, and as such feel responsible for protecting and preserving its condition. The following sections present each theme in turn, establishing their relevance to the current literature and revealing unique insights that furthers the currently scant understanding of liquid consumption and the self-concept. When taken together, these three themes offer a cogent understanding into the phenomenon of fashion rental and, in doing so, provide valuable insight for marketing practitioners.

4.1 Elevation

The first theme *elevation* is broken down into four constituent sections (4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3 and 4.1.4). While each sub-section offers individual insight into how renting contributes towards the self-concept, when taken together they

provide a coherent narrative that tells the story of *elevation*. The first section, '*To look and feel good*' (4.1.1), demonstrates how renting elevates the way participants view themselves (externally) and feel about themselves (internally). This is followed by '*Rent for an event*' (4.1.2) which suggests that participants have a preference to rent for special occasions, affording them the opportunity to flaunt their most elevated *self*. The third section, '*Rent to treat yourself*' (4.1.3), suggests that participants view renting as a treat-like experience, harnessing an elevated sense of *self* when wearing their rented item. Finally, '*Rent to be the best version of yourself*' (4.1.4) illustrates how renting affords consumers the opportunity to experience their best *self* - in a way that buying and owning cannot.

Theme definition

The first theme of *elevation* reveals how renting elevates the way participants *look* - by choosing to rent high-end, expensive items, they accomplish a version of themselves that they consider to not be possible through traditional means (buying and owning) due to financial constraints. Moreover, participants reveal how renting *feels* like a treat, eliciting excitement, and a sense of experience - enhancing the way they *feel* in their item. Furthermore, the feeling of being a good, ethical consumer elevates their sense of self - as they wear their rented item like a badge of honour (and are keen to tell others that their item is rented). The self-concept is formed through the elevation consumers accomplish – owing to the act of renting and consuming/displaying the rented item itself.

4.1.1 *To look and feel good*

All participants reveal a shared desire to both look good and feel good in their rented item. The importance of looking good is evident in their appeal for '*an extra special look*' (Clare) and '*something 'a bit out there*' (Sasha). While most participants demonstrate a desire to rent a single statement item - clothing *worn on* the body (e.g., a dress), some participants share a preference for

renting an accessory - an item *carried on* the body (e.g., a bag). Bella, who rented a Sleeper Bambola mini bag, boasts how she was able to accessorise the item with different outfits. With various birthday celebrations planned, including a restaurant dinner, fancy cocktails, and attending a nightclub, she praises the bag for offering a '*bold and striking look*' - demonstrating the versatility that renting affords in providing consumers access to an item that can elevate/complement other items they already own. This directly supports the notion that solid-liquid consumption can co-exist and consumers can seek enjoyment from accessing items that they can complement with items they already own (Rosenberg et al., 2023). When discussing if she would rent again, Kate shares:

'I think I probably would consider renting everything, like if there were certain accessories, like if I have a statement piece in my wardrobe and wanted to rent accessories that are really good...like my friend recently rented a designer bag and she had it for a month, so she incorporated it into a lot of different outfits because she knew she had it for a set amount of time'.

The majority of participants demonstrate how renting a single statement item can offer a feeling of *elevation*. Renting a statement dress, Etta shares, '*that dress I wore to Graduate Fashion Week, I can't²⁴ stop thinking about...I literally felt amazing*'. This type of rental permits consumers to enhance themselves through a stand-alone, quality piece that may or may not be complemented with accessories they already own (i.e. jewellery or bag). Cilla shares her preference for renting statement items in the future: '*and I think if I had a wedding or something to go to, like a proper event, I would look to rent a nice, a really nice dress*'. Whereas Stacey explains why she would *only* look to rent statement items:

²⁴ To remain faithful to participants, I have retained the use of contractions within direct quotes.

'I'm open to everything, I probably wouldn't do jewellery...I've seen places like Hurr²⁵ do it but again for me, it just comes down to price, like why would I rent a pair of Chanel earrings, like my friends aren't going to be like oh they're Chanel, like we don't care about stuff like that, but I think stand out pieces like dresses for events'

In both instances, either renting clothing or renting an accessory, participants consistently reveal how the item's appearance enhances the way they *feel* about themselves. This desire to *look* good, while simultaneously seeking intrinsic pleasure, signals to the expression and sense of identity that fashion celebrates (Jain et al., 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023). Furthermore, it indicates that consumers access items for their signalling value, supporting previous access-based fashion literature (Baek and Oh, 2021). Hattie recalls, *'I felt amazing...it was so nice to just wear like a really nice dress'*. Equally, Lola shares how she felt in her rented dress:

'For me, it was nice knowing I was wearing an expensive dress. I felt like oh I'm a bit cool today, I'm wearing this really trendy piece. It definitely elevates the way you feel on the day and how cool you feel on the day'.

Alongside the importance of an item's appearance in elevating how participants *feel*, analysis sheds light on how environmental consciousness equally contributes towards a sense of *elevation*. By choosing to wear a rented item, as opposed to purchasing a new one, Bella reflects on how renting contributes to her sense of wellbeing through her ethical consciousness :

'...it's like this really nice bag and I feel like I've done something good for the world, like I feel like I've used something, it's really colourful and bright and bold in the pictures so I'll remember that and then I'll remember that I've done a good thing, and I think anyone, as a human being, good or bad, would feel satisfied with themselves. Yeah, I

²⁵ Hurr – UK rental platform comprised of P2P, preowned and brand rentals (Elle, 2021) <https://www.hurrcollective.com>

definitely felt good about passing it on and doing something that was a little bit good, even though it was tiny, really, really small’.

These insights signify the power fashion rental has on an individual’s ability to ‘*get their fashion fix*’ (Selena) and *feel* good about it – something which cannot be achieved when buying new: ‘*if I’d bought something and I didn’t wear it, I’d feel guilty*’ (Ramona). While the importance varies between participants and the degree to which they consider environmental concerns their primary motivation for renting, each participant displays an enthusiasm for contributing towards a circular fashion industry and subsequently a Circular Economy (CE) – supporting current access-based fashion literature (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Jain et al., 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023). Most importantly, this finding goes beyond supporting previous research by revealing how wearing an item that is more environmentally conscious makes participants *feel* better about themselves - signalling to circularity discussed in wider research (Lawson et al., 2016; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Rovanto and Bask, 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022).

4.1.2 Rent for an event

Notably, the vast majority of participants share their desire to rent for special events (e.g., weddings and graduations) which they consider a ‘traditional’ excuse for purchasing something new. Some participants in particular voice their concerns for being seen in the same outfit more than once. Arguing this is a socially constructed concept, one of the younger participants (under 35 years), Vivian, shares her view:

‘...there’s just an unspoken thing about like girls’ appearance and how they have to be wearing new things and how they have to appear etc. And I feel like a lot of the time guys have just not felt the same pressure...it’s one of those things, like once you wear it, you feel like you can’t wear it again’.

Vivian's opinion is consistent across the dataset, including older participants (over 35 years), Michelle and Anna. Michelle reveals: *'I do think there is a sexist thing to the fashion side...women are expected to turn out different looks [on] every single occasion'*. Similarly, Anna recalls the frustration she felt trying to find a suitable dress for her best friend's wedding. Comparing this to her husband's experiences, Anna notes:

'...it's so fucking different for men. So, he just literally rented a skinny tux on the high street in Stockport like two days before we went, but that was always what he was always going to do, dressed in a black tie you know, so it's just so much easier for men to fit in, certainly at a black-tie event'.

This is reinforced by the view that social media can make people *'reluctant to wear something more than once'* due to the fact *'there's always photos online'* (Gina). A gendered reading of fashion rental thus emerges from the dataset, with the female participants turning to fashion rental to maintain their fashionable credentials (without the cost of outright owning new items, to be worn on just one occasion). Sharing a similar view, Kate notes how renting can be used to overcome concerns participants had of not being seen wearing an item of clothing more than once:

'...the way social media works now, I think it is changing slowly, but I remember growing up and there was a time when it was like, oh, you don't want to be seen in the same outfit twice and I feel like that's when renting really comes in handy'.

Participants unvaryingly display enthusiasm for renting as a solution to the wear once phenomenon, as Rose explains: *'I don't need the expensive dress sitting in my wardrobe gathering dust'*. This supports the previous finding that consumers are motivated to engage in fashion rental as a way of eliminating the throwaway fashion mindset that currently exists within the industry (McNeill and Venter, 2019; Rosenberg et al., 2023). Equally, Hattie expresses how

renting can alleviate feelings of guilt triggered by solid consumption and, in doing so, this finding nods to the work of Kang and Park (2023):

'I didn't want to buy something that was going to sit in my wardrobe, I just hate that, it just makes it feel really weird...I just hate the fact that there's so many clothes everywhere and I didn't want to be part of the problem. So, for me, wearing, borrowing something, I think it's that thing of like, I guess I feel guilty like if I'd bought something and I didn't wear it, I'd feel guilty. And I knew that, yeah, if I borrowed a dress and then I could return it, there was no guilt there for me'.

This permission to, as Selena describes, *'wear new, without buying new'* is a view shared by all participants. The conscious desire to slow fashion consumption is communicated by all: *'I definitely don't want to keep populating my wardrobe with clothes that I know I will probably only wear once'* (Vivian). In doing so, participants gesture to the reduced burden of ownership that access-based consumption affords – supporting previous research (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Schaefers et al., 2016; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022; Rosenberg et al., 2023). Moreover, findings reveal that most participants view renting as an opportunity to experience luxury fashion for a *'fraction of the price'* (Kelly) - lending support to Belk's (2010) view that the Sharing Economy (SE) provides consumers with opportunity to access luxury items that they would not have been able to do during the 'solid' era of ownership. All participants convey a desire to wear something that is of higher quality than they can afford to buy, expressing their motivation for renting (over buying and owning) as a way of *'getting something [you] love but can't afford'* (Etta). Sharing her experience of renting a Kurt Geiger bag, Kelly reveals *'it gave me the chance to have this gorgeous bag that I definitely couldn't have spent maybe 300 something or 400 [pounds] on for a weekend'*.

In addition, the majority of participants share the idea that renting lends itself to loud, extravagant items rather than to basic, more day-to-day pieces that are, as Michelle considers ‘...*staple items*’. Sasha stresses, ‘*I would refrain from renting, obviously, like plain, I don’t see the appeal of renting like a top*’ – indicating the futility of renting a basic item that does not make a statement. Similarly, Kira reveals, ‘...*I’m trying to recoil from it and buy some more basic pieces. So renting is like my option to wear...like the loud stuff*’. Seemingly, unlike ‘solid’ ownership – where consumers may feel ‘tied in’/ ‘stuck with’ a bold, statement item (because there is sunk costs here i.e., an expensive outlay), with renting, consumers can experiment with their style/fashion with greater fluidity: if they rent something bold, and find it is not for them, they can return the rented item, with little harm done. These findings are synonymous with the current literature and further evidence how access-based consumption offers the means to achieve an elevated sense of self (Lawson et al., 2016; Schaefers et al., 2016., Tariq, 2017; Lang, 2018; Jain et al., 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022). Moreover, these findings offer support to Rosenberg et al.’s (2023: 30) finding that, with the co-existence of solid and liquid consumption, consumers choose to access ‘bold’ and ‘unique’ items that can be complemented with basic items that they own – considered a ‘solid core’.

In addition, some participants display a desire to rent items that will impress. Conducive to wanting to rent for an event, Etta recalls how she felt that she needed an item/outfit that made an impression: ‘*but like events, where I know that I’d only wear a piece that is such like a stunning piece that everybody’s going to remember type of thing*’. Ivie, who rented a graduation-style dress, recalls: ‘*I wanted to be in a dress that no one else had seen and would almost be like a conversation starter*’. Also renting a dress for her graduation, Sasha shares: ‘*I wanted it to look luxurious...I want it to look like I want to look expensive, I want to look nice, this is one of the biggest days of my life*’. She goes on to explain how the dress was ‘*perfect*’ and fulfilled her expectations – highlighting the power of renting in satisfying consumer desires.

4.1.3 Rent to treat yourself

A novel finding, and one that is absent in the existing literature, is the discovery that each participant views renting as a treat. Traditionally, renting has been linked to consumers who lack the funds to buy and own items outright - referred to as 'flawed consumers' in the context of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Blackshaw, 2016; Davis, 2016; Jacoben and Poder, 2016; Caldwell and Henry, 2020; Hewer, 2022). The current findings indicate that pleasure and fulfilment, sought through the consumption of fashion, can be achieved at a lower cost and without the need to buy and own, as Polly explains: *'And I was like, I'll treat myself this weekend and wear a really lovely dress'*. Kelly recalls her wish to wear a designer brand to an event, viewing renting as a fitting opportunity to do so: *'because I am renting it and, you know, it's like a treat yourself, luxury occasion, I would like to have a brand'*.

Similarly, Clare shares how she viewed her birthday as an occasion that warranted spoiling herself: *'and I was like, it's my birthday, I'll treat myself'*. She shared her aspiration to experience the indulgence of a Chanel bag - a brand which she loves and considers *'timeless and to go with everything'*. However, Clare knew it was something she would never be able to afford to buy and therefore pursued renting as a means of fulfilling her desire. The devotion to fulfil her aspiration of styling a Chanel bag, albeit for a one-off event and without legal ownership, demonstrates how renting can contribute to an individual's self-concept - in this case affording Clare a means of being able to experience her most elevated *self*. Thus, while renting was considered something that the lower classes/ less well-off *had* to do - because they lacked the funds to buy and own items outright, it appears that for these participants, renting presents the opportunity *'to express personal style'* (Michelle) – i.e., the opportunity to wear/style an expensive, designer item that they would not be able to afford to buy or, that they would not feel is ethically acceptable to buy and only use once.

The notion of treating oneself appears to feed into pre-existing motivations for renting that exist within the literature, notably, reduction in price, reduced burden of ownership and environmental concerns (Baek and Oh, 2021; Jain et al., 2021; Mukendi et al., 2021). However, the previous research fails to offer a more nuanced insight into how this informs the self-concept. These findings offer more sophisticated insight into the growing phenomenon of fashion rental and further enhances the limited pool of literature (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Jain et al., 2021). While the aforementioned benefits of renting appeal to consumers, it is the intrinsic benefits of renting (i.e., the ability to treat yourself) that appears to enthruse consumers and contribute towards their desire to look and feel elevated. The ability for consumers to experience luxury and access high-end fashion is something that has not been possible until the emergence of access-based consumption - signalling the value of liquid modernity and subsequently liquid consumption (Bauman, 2000; Belk, 2010; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Belk, 2020).

Extending this is the treat-like feeling that accompanies the entire rental process. Most participants depict the rental experience as really exciting, as Romona comments: *'and it was really fun looking through the website and choosing'*. This discovery offers support to previous research that demonstrates the fun and pleasurable experience consumers seek when engaging in liquid consumption (Rosenberg et al., 2023). Polly recalls her initial rental experience:

'And I got [a] blue and white striped dress that buttoned down with a big puff sleeve for my birthday. So, I was like, I'll rent it, and everyone gave me loads of compliments and I put it on my social and tagged Hirestreet, they were really happy and yeah, really easy, sent it back, boom, done, happy days, really affordable'.

Most participants highlight the notion that renting is an easy and enjoyable process, as Kelly reflects:

‘So, it was for my birthday. I’d started like a month before kind of working out what I was going to wear, just because I was excited about it. And I was doing some searches, I think you can just, you know, search, like filter through handbags, like the price range, the time scale. So, I found that really easy because it’s nice to be able to go, I want this because of the colours, on this particular week, from these brands...I didn’t really have a preference of brand, I wanted colours. So that was really easy to find something, filter it and then, yeah, the communication with the rental [company] was just super easy’.

Similarly, Cilla highlights how *‘positive’* and *‘seamless’* the rental process was for her - implying the ease of access-based consumption, seemingly contradicting the assertion that lack of convenience is a potential barrier to renting (Jain et al., 2021). This, supplemented with the pleasurable gift-like experience, provides support for the notion that renting feels like a treat. This provides evidence that access-based consumption is well-received and considered a suitable alternative to buying and owning – challenging previous research that suggests consumers are deterred from renting fashion due to the negative connotations attached to wearing someone else’s clothing (Hazée et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021).

However, it is important to highlight that not all experiences were positive. Unfortunately for Anna, due to the rental company going ‘bust’ - between her placing the order and the date it should have arrived, she never actually received the items (a designer dress and a Chanel bag). For Michelle, Melanie and Ivie, while they received their items, they did arrive damaged - and for Michelle and Melanie, so much so that they were unable to wear the item to their planned event. For Michelle, her rented dress arrived with a broken zip, leaving her unable to try on and subsequently wear the dress. She describes the experience as *‘stressful’* and *‘disappointing’*, particularly because it was her first rental experience, and she was excited to wear a Vampires Wife dress – something which she shares was a brand she *‘could never afford to buy’* and therefore it felt like a treat. Similarly, Melanie was left feeling *‘disappointed’*

when her rented item turned up with '*threads coming loose off the sleeves*', making the dress unsuitable to wear. She explains how she was seeking a '*standout piece*' to wear to her graduation, even spending time ensuring the dress was of the correct measurements before committing to payment. Differing slightly is Ivie, who, despite her rental dress arriving '*full of fake tan marks on the inside*', wore the dress to her event. She explains how she was left feeling '*annoyed*' after the renter had clearly advertised that the dress would arrive having been dry cleaned.

Most interestingly, despite their disappointing experiences, Michelle, Melanie, and Ivie share their optimism to rent again in the future: '*but no, it wouldn't totally put me off, it just was really disappointing*' (Michelle). Melanie states she would even try renting from the same rental platform again, '*it was disappointing, but it hasn't put me off because I'll either try from Hurr again or a different platform*'. This finding contradicts the notion that consumer contamination concerns are a barrier to consumers engaging in access-based consumption (Argo et al., 2006; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hazée et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021). Instead, this finding reveals that, despite receiving a faulty item and it negatively affecting their rental experience, the consumers in this sample are not deterred from renting again and still very much consider renting a good alternative to consuming fashion. This is also the case for Anna who still think renting is '*a good idea*' and remains open to giving it another go. Crucially, this insight was possible to establish because of the existential phenomenological approach employed; providing participants the opportunity to describe their lived experiences (positive or negative), and, in doing so, contribute towards the growing pool of literature surrounding liquid consumption (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023).

4.1.4 Rent to be the best version of yourself

All participants view renting as an opportunity to experiment with style – something which previous fashion rental research has also identified as a motivation for consumer engagement (Loussaïef et al., 2019; McNeil and Venter, 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Jain et al., 2021). Joan, for example, boasts the benefits renting affords her:

‘...it’s quite nice because you can go and try things on...maybe stuff that you wouldn’t normally try on and it’s like styles that you would probably think that’s never going to look good but then you put it on and it’s like oh actually yeah’.

Here, the value of renting is communicated as an outlet for consumers to try out different versions of themselves, departing from their typical style. In doing so, they support findings from more recent research that suggests consumers access fashion for identity experimentation purposes (Rosenberg et al., 2023). Sharing her appreciation for renting, Stacey reveals: *‘that’s what I use it for, so I can have new clothes but not physically inject them into my wardrobe space forever’* - signalling to previous research that portrays renting as a way for consumers to ‘build their own infinite closet’ (Baek and Oh, 2021: 171). Moreover, most participants reveal that renting is less risky than buying – feeling at ease knowing that they can send the item back if it does not suit them – contradicting previous research that suggests consumers may be deterred from accessing products as they struggle to relinquish the concept of ownership (Lang, 2018). As Beatrice explains:

‘Something else that was quite interesting is I think because I knew I wasn’t going to be wearing them again; I got stuff that I maybe wouldn’t normally hire. So, I was like, I like that, but I don’t know how it’s going to look. But then I thought, well, it doesn’t matter, because I’m not buying it, so I’ll just hire it anyway and just see. So, the pieces that I’ve had, have actually, I would say, like I have had like slightly different styles to what I’d normally do, because there’s less risk’.

Most intriguing, and more importantly novel, is the discovery that most participants rent items that are inconsistent with their usual style – affording them the opportunity to, as Clare describes, feel *‘their most bougee self’*. The majority of participants reveal their desire to rent fashion items that are more extravagant, more lavish, and more expensive than items they would ordinarily buy/own: *‘I’m probably never going to buy something like this because it’s quite elaborate’* (Polly). Melanie shares how she came to choose her rental dress, *‘I was looking for something that was like, a bit different, something that was a bit ‘out there’ that I wouldn’t buy myself, that I wouldn’t want to wear more than once, because it was a standout piece’*.

This insight directly contradicts Loussaïef et al.’s (2019) finding that consumers rent items synonymous with their identity. Rather, the current findings indicate that most participants seek fashion, be it statement clothing or accessories, that do not align with their identity – in an attempt to alter both the way they *look* and the way they *feel*. Returning to Clare’s experience with the Chanel bag, it is clear that this type of luxury item was not something that she considered part of her self-identity, but rather the opposite - an item that she would never be able to afford. Despite this, Clare wanted to experience the luxury that the brand represents and in doing so exploit a more sophisticated identity: *‘I knew I wanted to do it, and I knew I wanted to be my most bougee self and have this real Chanel with me’*. For Clare, the Chanel bag afforded her the chance to experience an elevated *self* – if not only for a finite period (her birthday event).

This departure from a consumer’s self-identity specifically contradicts Loussaïef et al.’s (2019) findings that consumers foster a temporary extended self when accessing fashion, whereby they consider the rented item ‘theirs’. The current study offers a contrasting finding. Similarly to how Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) suggest that consumers do not foster an extended self when accessing cars, participants in the current study uniformly acknowledge that the rented item is ‘not theirs’ and therefore must ensure they look after it and preserve its condition – something which will be discussed later in the chapter

(4.3). Ivie expresses, *'I was very aware that it was rented'*, while Sasha states, *'no, it was not mine... I was wearing the dress; the dress was not wearing me'*. However, despite participants acknowledging that the rented item was not *theirs*, they insist they did not feel uncomfortable or awkward wearing the item: *'I knew they [the rented items] weren't mine but I also didn't feel like I was wearing somebody else's clothes'* (Vivian). The findings that renting contributes towards a consumer self-concept through a means of *elevation* contradicts one of the four conditions of liquid consumption - 'when relevance of the *self* is high, consumption will be more solid' (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017: 587). Rather, the current findings demonstrate that relevance to the *self* can be high when engaging in liquid consumption.

The work of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) surrounding liquid consumption has provided the current research with a solid conceptual framework to elaborate upon. And, while their research is crucial to understanding access-based consumption, their postulation that consumer identity is *low* when consumers engage in access-based consumption is negated by the current findings (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). All participants in the current study avoid identification with their rented item, which, while supportive of Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) finding, differs in that it appears they do so *because* they want others to know the item is rented and 'not theirs'. This is evidenced in the instances where participants receive complements on their item, as Selena illustrates:

'...usually I get a lot of amazing comments when I've rented something and it's always nice to be like, I've rented it, you can too. I think that's the thing with rental, it's not this kind of it doesn't have to be elitist. It doesn't have to be as kind of, you know, like you're the only person that can wear this, it's showing that actually, you could wear it too, after me. And it's like, it changes the narrative around fashion'.

Interestingly, most participants note the importance of renting items that are superior to items they could easily buy and own, as Anna describes when

asked why she would choose to rent luxury fashion items: *'And yeah, that would be it, I would be upgrading'*. Similarly, Rose demonstrates this in her decision to choose higher-priced (rental) items:

'...the dress I got was quite an expensive brand, so I think that it was worth it. But equally, I definitely thought that some of the dresses for what they're worth, it wasn't worth doing the renting because it was like you could probably buy it for like an extra tenner'.

Similarly, Melanie emphasises the importance of renting an item *'that is better than what you own'*. She argues *'you don't want to rent something that you could buy for a fraction of the price, and it be the same quality'*. Most interestingly, Melanie chose an item that she felt she would not get attached to:

'which is also why I went for something quite 'out there' because you're potentially less likely to get attached, because you know in your head that this is a party or moment dress'.

Melanie goes on to explain, *'if I'd rented something that is a basic, like a LBD²⁶ that fitted perfectly, tried it with multiple outfits, I probably would feel a bit like, ah gutted'*. This is a crucial finding, offering further insight into the avoidance of identification displayed by the whole sample.

Unlike Loussaïef et al. (2019), who discovered that some consumers access fashion to transform their self-concept, the current study suggests that many participants engage in renting to experiment with fashion that is inconsistent with their self-identity, but that does not alter their self-concept altogether. Ivie shares:

'Like, the first dress I rented is not my style. I usually like, I like a print and that was very bold for me. And it was never, that wasn't the style of dress, they had like this little collar, I'd never worn anything like that so

²⁶ Little Black Dress (LBD) is the term used to describe a classic black dress that affords style and elegance to every woman (Medium, 2016).

that was a little bit of a risk because I did not know how that would suit me. But it was fine, and it was really nice’.

Similarly, Tessa shares how renting affords her the opportunity to experiment and try out conflicting styles, with no intention to alter to her self-concept, she shares her desire to only wear it once:

‘I think the nicest thing for me about renting is, the thing I kind of touched on earlier, is that you can rent something that you might, I don't know, that might be slightly different to your usual style, more exciting or a bit more experimental and maybe wouldn't buy that item. But it's nice for a one-off occasion, so I almost think you are the better version of yourself’.

Despite most participants not wanting to own their rented item, or to even wear it again, two participants did go on to purchase one of their rented items, Ramona (a pair of trousers) and Tessa (a top). Both participants rented the item with the intention of wearing it once and it was only *after* wearing the item and recognising that it could be a valuable addition to their ‘solid’ (owned) items, that they went on to purchase it. Necessary to highlight is that purchasing a rented item is not considered the ‘norm’ within the rental platform sphere – with few rental companies offering the option to buy items at a reduced rate. Both Ramona and Tessa reveal that they only went on to buy the item because they felt it was something they would wear over again and thus, it was a ‘considered purchase’ (Ramona) – aligning with Rosenberg et al.’s (2023) notion of a fluctuating balance between liquid-solid consumption. Notwithstanding this point of difference, the majority of participants in the current study did not go on to purchase their item and showed no desire to own their rented item – or, even to wear it again.

Most participants exhibit a desire to temporarily alter their identity to *look* and *feel* good (for an event and as a treat) but with no desire to exercise renting as a means of shifting their self-concept. This is an intriguing finding,

suggesting renting allows for the temporary trial of a different *self*, without permanence or incurrence of cost (which, arguably, solid consumption would bring). It is clear that *elevation* offers rich insight into how renting can contribute towards a consumers' self-concept. Participants uniformly share how renting affords the opportunity to *look* and *feel* good. In doing so, they contradict Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) notion that use-value dominates access-based consumption and determines the consumer object relationship. Instead, findings lend support to Baek and Oh's (2021) belief that consumers engage with renting for its signalling value. Moreover, findings offer novel insight into how *elevation* derives from multiple aspects of the rental process, including the item itself, the way the item makes them feel, the experience of renting and the fact that the item is a more sustainable decision. By choosing to rent items that are loud, elaborate and 'out there', each participant is able to elevate themselves and alter the narrative surrounding the growing liquidity of society.

4.2 Advocacy

The second theme, *advocacy* (4.2), establishes participants' desire to promote renting as a more sustainable way of consuming fashion. The theme is separated into two constituent parts - each offering insight into how renting informs consumers' sense of self through: (1) '*openly sharing rental experiences*' (4.2.1) and (2) '*influencing/persuading others to rent*' (4.2.2). '*Openly sharing rental experiences*' (4.2.1) demonstrates the transparency participants exhibit - and deem of great importance - when renting; while '*influencing/persuading others to rent*' (4.2.2) conveys participants' shared desire to encourage renting - promoting the benefits of renting to both those close to them (i.e., family and friends) and strangers.

Theme definition

The theme *advocacy* demonstrates consumers' desire to influence others to rent by actively promoting such behaviour both verbally (through word of

mouth) and via social media (posting pictures and/or tagging items on Instagram). Participants view it as their responsibility to advocate renting, openly sharing their rental experience with others – adopting the role of renting ‘ambassador’. Participants place less importance on the item they rent, and more importance on ensuring they explicitly *tell* others that it is rented. As such, it appears that the *act* of renting (and subsequent advocacy) contributes to a consumer’s self-concept (as much as, or more than, wearing a rented item itself).

4.2.1 Openly sharing rental experiences

All participants share the view that renting is *‘not as openly discussed as it could be’* (Kate) and that many consumers have *‘surprisingly little awareness’* (Ramona) of renting considering the benefits participants felt renting affords. It appears to be for this reason that participants believe *‘it is important to be as transparent as possible’* (Kate) when renting (i.e. being open and honest about what is rented and where from). In ensuring complete transparency, participants collectively believe they can raise awareness and *‘spread the word’* (Bella). They do this in one of two ways; responding to compliments on their rented item by disclosing to others that the piece is rented, as illustrated by Rose:

‘Yeah, a few times people would be like ‘oh wow, that’s really nice’ and you’ll be like, oh I rented it, and I like to tell people, I always think that’s how I found out’.

Other participants deliberately approached people (e.g., at events they attended) to tell them that aspects of what they were wearing are rented: *‘we told everyone, literally everyone...we were going around the whole time like, we rented these’*. Most participants report engaging in both strategies:

‘Kind of a bit of both I think, I was like Oh my God, look at my bag, I rented it, everyone can rent a bag like this, you should rent a bag like

this but also, they were like oh nice bag and I was like thank you, it's rented' (Clare).

This finding directly contradicts previous research that suggests consumers prefer to remain anonymous when renting (Battle et al., 2018), informed by much stigma that surrounds renting (rather than owning) items. By openly sharing their rental experience(s) with others, participants demonstrate a desire to '*start a conversation*' (Stacey) and show that '*there is a way for us to slow down the way we are producing and consuming fashion*' (Selena). Moreover, this insight supports previous research that suggests consumers view environmental benefits as an important reason to engage in access-based consumption (Lawson et al., 2016; Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022).

Furthermore, participants demonstrate a shared desire to lessen the stigma attached to renting (i.e., not being able to afford to buy and own items outright) by ensuring that other people know that *their* item is rented - and not something they own. Stacey explains:

'The whole point is me talking about it and letting people know there's other things out there and if you don't tell them where it's from then they think how has she been able to afford that House of Sunny dress? I haven't, I've rented'.

Similarly, Ivie reveals how transparency is important when sharing rental items online - ensuring consumers are not deceived/under the illusion that such items are owned:

'I follow [an influencer] and she dresses lovely...she wears like beautiful stuff, all designers, she posts them and says [I] rented this for this holiday and has these nice bags and dresses - and she says, I rented them from this place, and I got this and got this. So, I think that's pretty good because I think otherwise people believe that they're earning that much money and that they are buying these things'.

While Clare explains that she was *'having such a good time'* that she forgot to post about her rented Chanel bag on Instagram - she does reveal, *'I would 100% be posting everywhere, especially now I have this thrifty Insta²⁷, because I'd be like look what I got.'* Likewise, Hattie shares her views on transparency when renting:

'Yeah, Oh my God definitely. I think it's so important that people are doing that, and I feel like that's what probably, fingers crossed, the next wave of influencers is going to be, like, oh look at this that I've rented'.

Like many participants, Lola believes that social media plays an important role in normalising renting fashion:

'I think the perception of renting in the fashion industry needs to be pointed out in the media and social media, like people need to talk about it a bit more'.

Gina does just this and deliberately tags the rental company in her Instagram story so *'the company could then share it on their story as well'* - demonstrating her way of assuring transparency while simultaneously promoting fashion rental platforms. Tessa reveals how she is *'trying to make it normal'* by being *'quite vocal about it on social media'*. Once again, Gina and Tessa's experiences highlight the shared desire for transparency when renting - in an attempt to *'encourage it as another option'* (Kate) for everyday consumers.

Some participants, however, acknowledge that they may be *'in an eco-chamber'* (Kelly) or *'a little bubble'* (Kira) - especially with regards to Instagram - where they are immersed in sustainable fashion content, created by individuals who are equally as positive about renting. Kira describes:

²⁷ Instagram - participant refers to it as 'Insta'

'Once I step out of that and I see kind of what the other people in my sphere are doing, especially on social media, I can see that it's [renting] just not even a consideration for so many people'.

Similarly, Cilla shares how *'baffling'* she finds it that Instagram is dominated by *'people doing hauls every day'* - promoting fast fashion and the wear once phenomenon. Cilla's bemusement is representative of the entire sample, who feel that because *'fast fashion is just so dominating'* (Beatrice) many people are either *'not aware [renting] is an option'* (Stacey) or have *'never heard of it'* (Ramona). It appears that participants attempt to overcome this issue by ensuring that, when they rent, they are open and honest about it - seemingly self-appointing themselves the role of renting 'advocate'.

Furthermore, some participants explicitly refer to renting as *'really cool'* (Sasha). Lola shares that, for her, renting is *'such a cool concept'* and therefore it is important that consumers share their experiences and raise awareness. This is an intriguing finding as it suggests that participants have no wish to hide the fact they rent, but rather that they are proud that what they are wearing is rented and they want others to benefit from this alternative way of consuming fashion. This signals to the sense of pride which will be discussed in the next section (4.3.2), whereby participants demonstrate a desire for others to equally enjoy the experience renting affords.

Hattie reveals that there are *'some really cool circular start-ups'* - candidly sharing that *'there is always going to be those times where you just want to wear something once'*. Here, Hattie draws attention to the significant advantage of renting - problematizing the wear once phenomenon that currently exists within the fashion industry (Pederson et al., 2018; Colucci and Vecchi, 2021; Meng and Leary, 2021). This discovery, alongside participants' desire to keep *'spreading the word'* (Sasha), refutes the notion that renting can be a social risk - with consumers looked down upon for not being able to afford to buy items and, instead, are forced to/have no other option but to rent items (Schaefers et al., 2021). While participants place considerable emphasis on

transparency, there also appears to be a more personal agenda attached to this theme. That being, consumers seemingly want others to know that they rent/ have rented – by openly and actively sharing their experiences, they not only display a desire to promote the benefits of renting but to be viewed (by others) as a good/ ethical consumer.

Interestingly, Bella expresses her wish for the way we consume fashion to change – moving away from the trend driven culture that, as previously mentioned, dominates the industry - and towards *‘an expression of yourself, rather than what’s cool and following what everyone else is wearing’* - echoing Selena’s insistence for everyday consumers to alter *‘the narrative around fashion’*. The discovery that participants openly share their rental experiences aligns with recent research that identifies consumer preference for talking about ‘access itself rather than the objects’ (Rosenberg et al., 2023: 35). However, the current research acknowledges consumer’s desire to continue to rent despite some negative experiences, with participants remaining *‘positively orientated towards the whole thing’* (Anna) – demonstrating how they do not wish to revert back to solid consumption, as suggested by Rosenberg et al. (2023).

The assertion that transparency is paramount when renting is consistent across the dataset, with participants sharing how if they rent again - which they each insist they will - they will *‘scream it from the rooftops’* (Vivian). Despite not being a regular user of social media, Ramona reveals: *‘I would be more likely to tag [the item] if it was rented, because it would be something that I would want to spread the word about’*. Bella, having only rented once, shares: *‘I would definitely tell people to do it and encourage them to do it, tell them about the experience and tell them it’s something different’*. Similarly, Beatrice shares: *‘I definitely would say where I got the dress from’*. It appears that the desire to continue advocating renting is consistent regardless of age, with Bella - one of the younger participants, and Beatrice - one of the older participants, both suggesting that they would be transparent about future

rental experiences to others. This is a prominent finding as it firstly highlights the concept of *advocacy* irrespective of age, and secondly because it emphasises participants' intentions to continue advocating renting - assuring that they have not simply shared their initial experience because of the novelty, but rather it is something they will '*always do*' (Beatrice).

The findings do, however, support one of the additional barriers to renting - that being the lack of accessibility (Jain et al., 2021). Some consumers share their concern for the limited availability of sizes on rental platforms, most likely because '*it's not in the mainstream, so not everyone knows about it*' (Kelly). Clare explains how she thinks it is specifically difficult to rent mid to plus sizes: '*I kind of fit between that size 16, 18, 20 range, I find there's less like everywhere*'. She goes on to say that for her, accessing the sizes she needs can be tricky: '*I guess the sizes, it can be difficult to find things in your size and especially if you like something and there's only one of it because only one person is renting it*'. Likewise, Kate emphasises the need to be '*making it more accessible and talked about*', arguing '*it needs to be a bigger discussion because if it's only a small portion of the market at the moment, it's going to be a small selection of sizes*'. Sharing a similar view, Stacey comments:

'I think there's an element of size...there's not as many of the bigger sizes and also, accessibility for that I definitely think, because obviously if they'd just started out as a rental brand and only bought 100 items, they're only going to be able to get small, medium and large - they're not going to be able to justify spending on the other sizes at that point, so I do think, currently, because they're starting off, they're not big enough to suit all needs. I do think they will be in time and more people need to start using them, showing off about them and it will get to that point'.

Stacey attempts to justify the lack of accessibility that currently exists within the rental sphere, and, in doing so, emphasises the importance for renting to be talked about. By making rental more mainstream, Stacey indicates that there

will be more money for rental companies to expand and subsequently hold greater stock - benefiting a greater range/variety of potential consumers. Furthermore, this finding reaffirms participants' uniformly shared desire to ensure transparency when renting - to raise awareness and make it more accessible. It appears that participants place considerable importance on ensuring other people know that the item they are wearing/styling is rented - and not *theirs* - supporting the discovery that participants do not foster a temporary extended self when renting items (as discussed in 4.1.4) - contradicting previous research (see, for example, Loussaïef et al., 2019). Rather, participants are adamant that other people know the item that they are wearing is not theirs and subsequently not a part of their (permanent) extended self - but rather an item they have access to that permits them to *feel* their best *self* (signalling to the sense of *elevation* discussed in 4.1).

4.2.2 Influencing/ persuading others to rent

The shared desire displayed by participants to tell others that they have rented appears to be formed by two motivations: firstly, to promote renting as a more sustainable way of consuming fashion and secondly, to highlight the benefits of renting to consumers. These two motivations advocate both the social benefits (i.e. the social obligation to consume more sustainably) and the personal benefits of renting (i.e. the ability to access luxury items in an affordable way). It appears to be for these reasons that consumers try to influence/persuade others to rent. All participants acknowledge that *'the environment is being exploited by the fashion industry'* (Kelly) and therefore needs to adjust the way in which it operates. Tessa shares:

'I think that the problem with fashion is there's so many different kinds of environmental negative outcomes related to it, so everything from production to manufacturing and the shipping'.

Clare highlights the magnitude of issues surrounding fast fashion among participants: *'fast fashion just really grinds my gears because it's made so cheaply...and sold so cheaply'*. Likewise, Michelle voices her outrage at the *'sheer volume of overproduction and waste'* she feels that the industry is accountable for. Furthermore, while many participants do *'think the fashion industry is changing'* (Beatrice), they equally believe that there is *'still so much more to be done'* (Kelly). The shared view among participants was that they personally need to *'try to educate'* (Stacey) more people about the impact of the industry. This appears to be a driving force for participants to promote renting and move away from the *'buy, buy, buy'* (Polly) culture that participants feel currently surrounds the fashion industry. Hattie illustrates:

'I think people need to understand how big the carbon footprint of their clothing is and what goes into that...and I think if people could see the kind of journey and the map of even just a T-shirt of where it's been to get to us, I think, you know, that might kind of help them to see that, okay, I don't need to buy that dress, I'm going to rent one from someone'.

This is an intriguing insight from Hattie, with valuable inferences for marketing practitioners with regards to the need for greater awareness around the true journey clothing goes on before it reaches the end consumer - with this being of considerable importance if consumers are to move away from the traditional buying and owning, and more importantly, if consumers are to understand *why* they need to move away from this. Polly reiterates this point when she says that *'Lots of that education is definitely needed'*.

Analysis reveals that some participants promote the environmental implications of renting through social media - revealing how they *'set up a sustainable fashion account'* (Stacey) in the hope to *'make an impact on sustainability'* (Polly). Stacey reveals how she has a whole Instagram account *'focused on cost'* - in an attempt to *'show people how sustainable fashion is affordable'* and how *'renting fashion could be better for our future'*. Similarly, Vivian shares that, for her, utilising social media to share her experiences and

showcase the advantages of renting is *'a really wonderful thing'*. Sasha reveals how by tagging the rental company in her Instagram story, *'they gained like 15 followers'*. She goes on to explain:

'I'm just spreading the word, trying to influence more because obviously, not to sound big headed, but I do get a lot of messages from girls about my style and stuff like that, so I knew me posting that [picture] would result in some engagement from people who would want to be wearing the same kind of stuff that I'm wearing and so if I've shared that, it's like I know that those girls are going to go to the platform and try and find things'.

It appears to be the younger participants within the sample that utilise Instagram to promote renting (19 to 25 years) - aligning with recent statistics that report 18–24-year-olds as the average age of female Instagram users (Datareportal, 2023). While social media is revealed as an effective way of *'spreading the word'* (Sasha), most participants promote the environmental benefits of renting in-person - most typically to *'friends and family'* (Stacey), who, as Lola reveals, are *'usually quite surprised by it'*. Polly shares:

'Like most of my friends that aren't in the sustainability world, they just don't think about it, they don't think Oh God, it's made out of polyester, it's going to last the next 150 years, they don't think of that - they're like yeah but I'm going to wear it and I'm going to keep it forever, and I'm like, you're going to wear it like once or twice, to a wedding or something - do you really need that or could you rent it or have you looked at something that's more natural that you could potentially recycle at the end of life?'.

Here, Polly demonstrates her passion for promoting renting and its benefits to the environment, encouraging her friends to question how they could consume more sustainably. Kelly shares this view, adding: *'I think that consumers have a lot more power than they think they have'* and therefore can be very *'influential'*. This is a view upheld by many participants who believe that, while

achieving a CE is a systemic issue and therefore *'the responsibility of everyone'* (Clare), it is also the responsibility of individual consumers.

Sasha recalls her experience of promoting renting at an in-person, roundtable event. She describes how she *'spoke about sustainability'* and the changes she thinks need to be made - stressing that *'more events like that could be really beneficial'* - again, offering valuable insight for rental companies. This shared sense of *advocacy* that participants display when they promote the benefits of renting is closely linked to the work of Cherrier (2009) on voluntary simplicity, specifically the 'hero identity' - whereby consumers attempt to advocate sustainability through public means - something which all participants disclose doing, and more importantly, express as being an important part of the rental process. It is the *act* of renting that is as (if not more) important than the rented fashion items themselves – exhibiting how renting, rather than owning, fashion items contributes to a consumer's sense of their self-concept.

In addition to advocating the benefits renting has on the environment, participants demonstrate their shared desire to promote the benefits of renting for consumers - closely linked to the sense of *elevation* discussed earlier in the chapter (4.1). The sense that participants view renting as granting access to luxury items which would ordinarily be out of their reach (primarily due to restricted finances) extends to the theme of *advocacy*. Clare demonstrates this as she recalls, *'I was showing it to everyone, I was like look at my bag²⁸, it's so pretty'* - followed by *'it's rented'*. The view that renting *'is the answer'* (Anna) to achieving a sense of *elevation* in a more sustainable way is consistent across the dataset. Kelly demonstrates this collective view:

'Obviously we've talked about waste, but I think economically, [renting] does make sense, if you literally know you're going to wear something

²⁸ Chanel bag

once maybe twice, renting something for the weekend or for a holiday, I think it just makes sense’.

Polly supports this view and highlights the benefit renting has for consumers who seek new outfits to wear to events - something also previously discussed throughout the theme of *elevation* (4.1.2):

‘I think millennials²⁹ have adopted [renting] a little bit earlier than Gen Z³⁰ and we’re seeing that because of the wedding peak, so when you get to your kind of late 20s, 30s, you’re going to weddings, you’re going to hen parties every single weekend and you’re spending so much money on weddings - like five or six weddings in a year, it’s ridiculous - and then there’s the hen parties, that’s dresses and combination of travel as well’.

Describing renting as *‘the best thing ever’*, Ivie reveals how she promoted renting as much as she could when she attended her graduation:

‘We were telling our friends who were on our course, and they were all like, we’ve never heard of this...because they were such nice dresses and everyone was saying, I love this, where is it from, so I told them I had rented it and there were so many people that were like, ‘I didn’t know you could do that’.

Vivian shares a similar experience, and she similarly took the opportunity to promote renting at an event with all her friends:

‘The very first time I rented, that I completely forgot, was like a few months before my birthday, it was our friend’s birthday and he had like a black-tie event, and I rented a dress and I remember like, everyone who even mentioned the word dress, I was like, oh, mine is rented’.

²⁹ Millennials - also known as Generation Y, are the generation of consumers typically born between 1980 - 1994 (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

³⁰ Generation Z - the generation of consumers following millennials, typically born between 1995 - 2010 (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

Most notably, some participants explicitly share how promoting renting influences the way they feel about themselves: *'I want to promote sustainability and the more I do that, the more I feel like it's boosting my own sense of self purpose'* (Selena). Kelly similarly shares stories of how in promoting fashion rental systems, she feels good about herself:

'And then other people would be like, oh wow, cool bag and I'm like, I'm renting it for the weekend, I know because I'm like a sustainability nerd, that to me, I was like yeah, I'm renting it!'

Likewise, Lola shares how advocating renting makes her feel influential/like she is making a difference:

'And also maybe there is a part of me that, knowing that I say that I rent, and I am one of the few that rents, or one of the first people that will rent, it's almost as if I'm trendsetting - so there's a part of me that thinks hell yeah, I'm setting a trend for you, like I'm letting you know about this thing'.

All participants reveal how they have tried to influence others to rent, persuading them to *'just give it a go'* (Bella). Kelly even recalls how she *'badgered'* her family, encouraging them to rent: *'you need to start renting, it's really good'*. Rose draws on her own experience in promoting fashion rental systems to others:

'There's been a few times where people have been like 'Oh my God, I need a new dress for this' and I'm like, oh have you looked at renting? Like I've had good experience, so yeah. I've sort of made people aware of the option'.

By drawing on personal experiences of renting, rental companies could offer credibility and reassurance that renting is a safe and exciting option. Moreover, this could have particular relevance for promoting renting to consumers who may be nervous to try renting for the first time or be sceptical about the prospect of wearing an item of clothing worn by someone else - problematizing the hygiene concerns that some participants recognise may be a deterrent to renting (discussed later in 4.3.2) and that currently exists within the existing

literature (Argo et al., 2006; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hazée et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021).

Joan reveals that she has '*told loads of people*' about renting and highlights the opportunity renting affords in being able to experience '*stuff that you wouldn't normally try*' - gesturing to the concept of *elevation* and the discovery that participants enjoy renting items that are antonymous with their usual self (4.1.4). Most notably, the majority of participants reveal being successful in persuading others to rent, as Beatrice illustrates: '*I have recommended it to loads of people. A couple of people have hired stuff on the basis of my experiences and how have much I enjoyed it*'. Beatrice reveals how she too chose to draw on her own positive experience of renting when recommending it to other people. At the same time, Beatrice signals to the notion of renting as an experience - also aligning with the theme of *elevation* (4.1).

Furthermore, Kelly demonstrates how having a conversation - something highlighted by all participants as imperative, if renting is to become more mainstream - can be enough to resonate with people and get them to engage in renting:

'One of my friends actually rented something for her birthday recently because we've been talking about renting, and she was saying about how she's trying to consume a bit more consciously and she's definitely someone who would buy a dress for an occasion and never wear it and she's got a wardrobe full of lovely dresses she's worn once, so she actually rented something, which is really cool'.

Similar to Kelly, Tessa reveals:

'One of my friends who is probably the least environmentally conscious has rented things that I've been like even more excited about it because I didn't think she'd be that kind of bothered. So, I don't think it's necessarily always the people that you think would do it'.

This insight from Tessa strongly signals to the sense of pride participants describe feeling (discussed in 4.3.2), knowing that, based on their recommendations, others can rent and enjoy the experience. Moreover, Tessa's revelation of feeling '*even more excited*' because her friend chose to rent - despite being described as not an environmentally conscious person - supports the view that although participants gained pleasure from renting themselves, advocating renting to others afforded heightened pleasure. However, it is important to recognise that participant's attempts at influencing others to rent was not always successful. Selena, for example, shares how, despite her encouraging her friends to rent fashion items, they appear reluctant:

'To be honest, most of my friends and that, they're really interested in [renting] but they don't bloody do it, so as soon as I crack my friends, I'll feel like I've really introduced something, but they hear me going on about it all the time, all the things that I wear, they're always complimenting it, and I'm like it's rented and there's a bit of a resistance, a resilience that you constantly have to keep going and I've talked about sustainability for years to my friends and there's only one that's just kind of suddenly clicked on about it, so yeah, they are supportive but in terms of their own consumer behaviour, I'm still working on them'.

Interestingly, by claiming '*as soon as I crack my friends, I'll feel like I've really introduced something*', Selena implies that being successful in influencing her friends to rent is of great importance to her in - aligning with Tessa and Sasha's experiences. This is an intriguing finding that could be explored further by considering if/how the importance of advocating varies depending on the subject, i.e. strangers versus friends. Furthermore, participants report how there may be a generational difference with regards to influencing others to rent, with '*particularly younger generations*' (Kelly) perceived to be more accepting and '*more willing to do the research*' (Kelly).

A small number of participants share how they have been met with resistance when trying to persuade family members to rent. Michelle (37 years old), one of the older participants in the sample, shares how she thinks renting is less accepted by older consumers:

'I don't know if it's a generational thing...I think maybe my generation and a bit younger are more open to it than, for example, my mum's generation'.

Furthermore, Kira shares how her parents and grandparents are dismissive about the idea of wearing clothes worn by somebody else:

'It's just like when I talk to like my parents or my grandparents, I think they still don't understand it, so, it's more of a new generation thing. Even all my friends I talk to, they seem to understand it because it's like on social media and are exposed to it whereas my grandparents and parents obviously still have the idea of what charity shops meant and the culture maybe like twenty-thirty years ago'.

While Kira references her family's scepticism for wearing items purchased from charity shops, and therefore not specifically renting, her experience stands to demonstrate a generational difference with regards to second-hand fashion and the stigma attached to not being able to afford to buy items outright. Furthermore, with Kira's grandparents potentially being of a similar age to Michelle's mum, it suggests there could be a demographic of consumers who are opposed to the idea of renting, or at least may struggle to accept it.

Further, Kelly shares the differences between her younger family members (i.e., her sister) and her older family members (i.e., parents and grandparents) - supporting the view that there may be a '*generational gap*' when it comes to the acceptance of renting:

'I think the only barrier would be, when I think about my mum and my auntie or particularly my gran, from a technology standpoint. So I think that's maybe a barrier, and I think it's very, like my sister, naturally, she

downloaded the app, that's absolutely fine but my mum was like, oh, how do I do that, how do I upload it...so, I think that, yeah, with younger members of my family and my cousins, they're definitely a lot more open to it because they're a lot more used to Depop³¹ and when I say, Loanhood³², it's like Depop but for renting, it's easier for them to get what that means but explaining that to, you know, like my 80 year old Gran, she's like Depop, what!'

Moreover, Stacey shares her concern that rental companies are failing to target the demographic of consumers who are most likely to benefit from renting fashion:

'I definitely think it's a block and targeted for the younger market at the moment. I don't think there is many, even older generations, or working generations, 30s and 40s. I work a lot with people in their 30s and 40s and they are people who wouldn't even think to do that, they'd just go and buy something new, so I definitely think it shouldn't just be targeted at the under 25s, it needs to be targeted at those going to offices, that would be the perfect opportunity for them to rent'.

Interestingly, Michelle also reveals potential gender differences when it comes to renting:

'At the same time, my dad is used to renting stuff. We're Scottish, he wore a kilt to the wedding, but as he has got older, he doesn't quite fit into the kilt he's had for the majority of his life, so he rented a kilt, and I was thinking there weren't any questions asked about that, so why it is fine for a guy to rent a suit but not for [a woman]?'.

Likewise, Anna expresses her frustration at the lack of acceptance surrounding women renting. Comparing it to her husband's experiences of renting, she feels that renting is more commonplace for men and more widely accepted:

³¹ Depop - a P2P e-commerce company, whereby users can buy and sell clothes

³² Loanhood - UK based fashion rental app <https://www.loanhood.com>

'It's just so much easier for men to fit in...so, yeah, he [husband] rented and then that's what I mean, that's what we would normally do, like whatever you know, if it's kilts, we will rent kilts'.

Interestingly, Michelle and Anna are two of the older participants within the sample - indicating that renting for women over 35, for example, may carry a certain stigma. With this said, these accounts offer valuable insight for marketing practitioners with regards to demographics and targeting consumers.

It is clear that the 'love' (Kelly) participants feel for renting is matched by their desire to promote the benefits of renting for consumers and the environment. Taking into consideration the finding that it is the *act* of renting that appears to be as (if not more) important than the item(s) rented, it can be argued that renting informs a consumer's self-concept through a sense of *advocacy*. Etta encapsulates this when she says: *'I really want everybody to get involved with it'*. The view that *'the more people that are doing it, the more normal it becomes'* (Polly) is upheld by all participants - both with regards to people actually renting *and* people talking about renting and exerting complete transparency. By doing this, participants believe, it will make renting more accessible - offering a greater range of sizes and options - and pave the way for a more sustainable future for fashion and the environment.

4.3 Surrogacy

The third and final theme, *surrogacy*, is divided into two parts; *'Protect and preserve'* and *'Sense of pride in surrogacy'*. The sections are separated into two distinctive findings to demonstrate how participants *act/engage* with their rented item (discussed in 4.3.1) and how they *feel* because of that (discussed in 4.3.2). Taken together, these subsections identify the 'surrogate consumer' - offering a new concept to the field of consumer research. Specifically, *'Protect and preserve'* (4.3.1) demonstrates how participants take extra care of their rented items, protecting them from instances that may cause damage

(e.g., drink spillages). Whereas '*Sense of pride in surrogacy*' (4.3.2) reveals the pleasure participants experience throughout the rental process and how renting, as opposed to owning, fills them with a sense of purpose – feeding into a sense of *advocacy*.

Theme definition

The second theme of *surrogacy* represents consumers' awareness that items they rent are *not theirs* but rather they are responsible for that piece for a fixed period. Participants reveal the need to be especially vigilant when wearing rented items, ensuring that they are returned to the legal owner in the same condition as they received it. Here, the self-concept appears to be formed through a consumer's role as 'surrogate': caretaker of the item/ensuring it is kept in pristine condition, allowing the potential of fashion rental systems to overcome consumer 'disgust' at renting, rather than owning, fashion products. Surrogacy, in the context of access-based consumption, can describe a consumer who has access to another consumer's possession, acting as custodian and protecting the item for a fixed period.

Surrogate consumer

A surrogate consumer, therefore, safeguards the item they have rented. Their practices involve protecting the item from potential harm/damage and preserving its condition. Acknowledging that it is their responsibility to take care of the rented item, a surrogate consumer displays a sense of pride in their role as caretaker (and wishes to pass on the item to other consumers in near pristine condition, so they, too, can enjoy renting it). Furthermore, they experience a sense of fulfilment in knowing that the item will be 'passed on' and appreciated by others – they view the item as a vessel that can be enjoyed by many different people, for many different reasons, in many different ways.

4.3.1 Protect and preserve

All participants demonstrate awareness that the rented item is not ‘theirs’, but rather they are in possession of it for a fixed period. Most participants disclose renting items for a few days - typically representative of most rental platforms, *‘I had it for three or four days over the weekend’* (Kelly). Subsequently, the majority of participants report feeling a sense of responsibility towards ensuring the rented item is returned in the same condition as they received it. These participants reveal engaging in actions that protect and preserve the item, taking extra care by *‘being more conscious of it’* (Polly). This considered, a categorisation of care is identified – with participants either engaging in, or avoiding, certain actions to safeguard their rented item which was:

1. Kept in constant sight
2. Not worn until the day of the event
3. Where possible, collected and returned in person from the owner (in the case of Peer-to-Peer (P2P))
4. Shield from danger
5. Avoided wearing the item while ‘getting ready’ (e.g. painting nails)
6. Being particularly vigilant around food and drink

Beatrice highlights the risk that accompanies renting, highlighting how: *‘There’s always the risk that you’re going to drop like wine down it or, you know, something like that and ruin it’*. Revealing similar concern is Hattie, who rented a Stella McCartney dress: *‘So I mean, like when I painted my nails, I made sure that I didn’t paint my nails in the dress’*. She explains how the pressure to protect the dress was enhanced because of its high-ticket value – signalling to the sense of *elevation* discussed in section 4.1, where all participants display a preference for renting high-end, luxury items. Similarly, Stacey recalls how she adopted a heightened vigilance when renting *‘because when I did have that Gucci bag, I was like Oh my God, looking after it, but it does put a bit of extra pressure on...’*.

Kelly's experience is also representative of the high-ticket items that participants place significant value on. Recalling the stress she felt when renting a Kurt Geiger bag, Kelly shares:

'I will say that I think I was a little bit stressed with it because you know a high-ticket item that wasn't mine. I have a couple of higher end things like a handbag and stuff that even when I have it, I'm still like oh my goodness but at least if you know something happened to it, it's my problem'.

Experiencing similar, Clare recalls how she tried her best to physically protect the item from any potential damage: *'I think we did bottomless brunch, and I sat with it behind my back and the whole time I was like, don't spill anything on it'*. Clare continues to recall: *'I was just like, wine, I cannot spill pornstar martini on it, I need my deposit back'*.

This extra pressure that most participants report experiencing is indicative of adopting a role throughout the rental process, whereby they are not merely users of the item, but *custodians* who have a duty of care and responsibility – synonymous with the role of a surrogate³³. Moreover, by sharing how renting makes them feel, participants suggest that renting is more than wearing the item itself but the experience as a whole – where they are enveloped in the role of the surrogate from when they receive the item until they return it. Kelly explains:

'I think it was always in my mind that this is for the weekend, this is mine, but for three days. So I think I was very mindful of that, particularly with the bag like I said, because I was a little bit worried: I was like this isn't mine, be extra, extra, extra careful'.

³³ Surrogate (adjective) is used to describe a person or thing that takes the place of, or is used instead of, somebody/ something else (Oxford Learner Dictionary, 2023).

Rose supports the suggestion that wearing a rented item made her take extra care: *‘the fact it feels expensive is nice, but I was a little bit nervous because it was, I was more conscious than I would be usually about people spilling drinks or food on me or something like that’*. While Kelly signals to the uniformly shared view that renting is an experience, comprising all aspects of the rental process, Rose signals to *elevation* by highlighting the treat-like aspect of renting and the subsequent pressure of protecting such a high-ticket item (as discussed in section 4.1.3).

While Rosenberg et al. (2023: 37) similarly reveal that most consumers *‘often exert great care for borrowed garments compared to their possessions’*, they also identify the burden of access-based consumption felt by some consumers – who gradually revert back to solid consumption. In contrast, the current study suggests that the greater care and responsibility required to protect items does not deter participants from renting again, nor does it diminish their enjoyment of the item - with every participant revealing their desire to rent in the future: *‘Yeah, I think 100% I will keep renting’* (Lola). Rather, the current findings suggest that participants are encouraged by their role as surrogate to contribute towards a more sustainable way of consuming fashion, *‘It’s a lot better for you and for the planet so why would you not give it a go?’* (Hattie).

Importantly, participants demonstrate how they approach renting for higher level/ethical reasons: *‘to be sustainable...I just hate buying something and wearing it once’* (Joan). Stacey claims that renting offers her the opportunity to *‘reduce the space and carbon footprint of [her] wardrobe’*. By choosing to rent items, as opposed to buying them, Selena highlights the extension of product life that contributes towards a CE: *‘it feels amazing, wearing this piece, knowing what you’ve done and knowing it’s rented and then sending it back and having more life’* (Selena) - supporting previous research that bares environmental implications as a motivation for consumers to rent (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020) and supporting the notion of *advocacy* (4.2).

Rosenberg et al.'s (2023) study explores clothing libraries, whereby consumers are required to wash their items before returning them. However, in the current study, most participants were specifically told not to wash the item but rather to '*just send it back as it is*' (Sasha). While this could be considered less of a burden than that expected from clothing libraries, the majority of participants clearly evidence the pressure and concern they felt wearing the rented items in spite of not being required to wash/clean them before they were returned.

An interesting finding comes from Kira who explains how the need to protect an item varies depending on its type, namely whether it is clothing (an item *worn on* the body) or an accessory (an item *carried on* the body) – something previously highlighted in 4.1.1:

'I feel like with clothes it was fine, like it's okay, like my jacket obviously isn't really going to get dirty, like I was outside walking about...I know logistically that if I was renting it to somebody and say they got like a drink spilled on it, I would just say, I need a dry-cleaning fee, I'd hope that the people were as sensible and as calm about it as I was but obviously with a bag it is a lot more responsibility to make sure it's on you at all times'.

Kira adopts the view that if you look after the rented item which is not yours/that you are essentially borrowing, then renting should be a smooth and enjoyable process – as outlined in the categorisation of care. Furthermore, Kira signals to the responsibility a consumer has when renting, specifically when renting an accessory, rather than a piece of clothing – resonating with Clare's experience. This finding suggests that the type of item indicates the level of care and responsibility - which participants evidently adopt – by ensuring care and attention is paid to protecting accessories such as bags, which may be more likely to get lost or stolen. Cilla and Hattie reveal their thoughts on renting items widely considered accessories, signalling to the pressures they associate with preserving their condition; '*you'd be so worried damaging a bag*'

(Cilla), *'I think the pressure of wearing some expensive high heels is a bit much'* (Hattie). Cilla and Hattie demonstrate awareness of what would be required of them (as surrogates of the item) if they were to rent such items (i.e., that great care and responsibility needs to be taken).

A further way of avoiding damage is revealed by a small number of participants who share how by having rental insurance (i.e., insurance taken out to cover accidental damage of the rented item through their use), they were able to feel slightly more at ease. Vivian offers in-depth insight into her experience:

'I have this huge fear of stains, which is so unfounded because I've never had a stain that I couldn't get rid of, but I'm always like, oh, I can't spill anything, I can't spill anything even though I know it will be fine. But when you check out, I don't know if it's mandatory, I'm pretty sure it's mandatory, it's like a six-pound insurance and if even if you spill something, like as long as you obviously don't rip the garment but if it's just a stain or like a spill or whatever, they don't mind, it's covered by insurance and by cleaning fee that's included in that'.

Similarly to Vivian, Melanie reveals how for her, paying an additional fee provided a sense of security:

'There was an additional fee that I paid, not very much, in case you did spill anything, which is quite a nice piece of mind...like an insurance, which works if it's a stain you can't get out'.

While it seems that a sense of reassurance was achieved from the insurance added to items, this was not expressed by most of the sample – who did not disclose having insurance. There are various ways to rent, and as such there are a range of options available to consumers in terms of what is offered and/or included in the overall price, namely dry cleaning, insurance, and deposit. Insurance options vary between rental platforms/services, with regards to what they cover. While it is encouraging to discover that there are multiple ways of engaging in renting, it appears there is opportunity for refinement, with specific

attention paid to cost. Stacey expresses her preference for platforms which offer all fees included:

‘So, personally, I like it when it’s all there and it’s like I don’t worry if I spill red wine on it or something, I think that’s kind of what it needed, or like if the button’s snapped, something that they know can happen, which I think it can happen because just because they’re higher quality pieces and with more wear they break’.

Similar to Stacey, Ivie shares how having all the fees included makes for a preferred way to rent: *‘but prepaid, you had your postage and stuff, and it just felt a bit easier because it came with all the postages and packaging already done’*. Etta also shares how having the cost clearly stated assists the experience:

‘What I liked about Hurr as well is that the initial price you see when you scroll is the price that you go into pay. You know, like when you book a flight and then you add your luggage etc...but when you do Hurr, like the initial price is like the insurance, the dry cleaning, and the delivery, like everything which I really like because then you’re not like, oh shit, I’ve got to pay £7 now for dry cleaning and stuff like that’.

Furthermore, about a third of participants claim that despite renting affording access to luxury, it is *‘still quite expensive’* (Tessa) and could benefit from being made more affordable. Clare shares:

‘The only thing was it gets quite expensive because I think I paid for the postage for it to be sent to me, then you pay for the bag, then you pay for the postage back...so it gets quite expensive. I don’t know if it gets like that on other apps, but I might start looking at other apps...’.

These findings provide opportunity for rental platforms and marketing practitioners to enhance the overall experience that renting seemingly affords – with a particular focus on the price, additional fees, and initial display of cost that consumers see when engaging with them.

Standing alone as the only participant who has experience of causing actual damage to her rented item is Selena:

'I wanted to wear something for NYE³⁴, I thought it would be a perfect opportunity to try it out and yeah, it was all fine, I received the item, loved it, the only issue I had, was I ended up sitting in chocolate cake and was so worried about it, I was like omg, I don't know what to do, am I supposed to wash it, and I contacted the company and said I'm so sorry, I sat in bloody chocolate cake, what am I going to do? And they got back to me and were lovey and were like this is why we dry clean all our items, do not worry, just send it back as it is. So, yeah, it was a really positive experience, and I think I actually ended up speaking to the owner of the company because it was quite a small one at the time and it just felt really sociable, and it was a new concept, and we were all like learning and yeah it was just overall really positive'.

Selena's experience gestures to the importance of communication when renting, as well as offering insight into the experience of causing damage to a rented item - rather than the potential for damage which most participants describe. With most participants revealing their desire to look after rented items, a smooth and easy line of communication is seemingly crucial – something recently flagged by Lee et al. (2024). In profiting from such rich consumer insight, practitioners can ensure they offer quick and direct communication with consumers, offering reassurance and countering consumer concerns surrounding 'what ifs?' in relation to damaged items – addressing convenience and lack of accessibility as barriers to renting (Jain et al., 2021). This could be particularly important for first time renters, like Rose, who reveals how she felt nervous renting for the first time: *'I think it's quite scary, I think first time you do it because it's so different'*. This feeds into *advocacy*; the finding that consumers are willing to advocate for renting, being open and transparent in communicating their experiences (as discussed in 4.2.1). Crucially, consumers take care of their item because they believe it's the right thing to do, and not just to get their deposit back.

³⁴ New Years Eve

4.3.2 Sense of pride in surrogacy

Importantly, most participants feel that they would not feel any less excited about renting if it was to become *'the new normal'* (Gina) – continually viewing renting as an exciting and sustainable way to consume fashion. Kate explains:

'I think it's a nice idea of everyone being able to explore different brands and having them available to them, because I imagine there would still be a scale, in terms of the brand and stuff so people would only choose what's in their bracket, I guess'.

Similarly, when asked how she would feel if renting was to become the norm/more widely adopted, Ramona reveals: *'I think I'd be on board, I mean, it would just mean that there would be way more availability'* – suggesting that there are only advantages to be had from the fashion rental market growing in popularity. Therefore, there is opportunity for marketing practitioners to ensure that renting is as accessible as possible - still offering luxury, but ensuring that it is as affordable as possible, taking into consideration the best ways to offer rental and its additional costs (e.g., postage to/from consumers; extra labour involved in cleansing items, post use).

Most notably, the discovery that participants carry no contamination concerns when renting is consistent across the dataset – with the exception of swimwear, which some participants would avoid renting as this is considered *'of intimate nature'* (Selena). It is perhaps for this reason that swimwear is not available on most rental platforms and does not fall under the category of a stand-out, statement piece that participants would choose for an event (as discussed in section 4.2). Even so, this element which emerged from the data problematizes previous research that suggests how contamination concerns are a substantial barrier to engaging in access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hazée et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021).

A small number of participants, however, share the view that perceived hygiene concerns may deter people from renting. Nonetheless, they argue

how renting is no different than buying second-hand items which seems to be growing in popularity, as Ivie shares:

'I guess there's obviously worry, like people have worn it before, or it might be dirty and stuff. But like you get the same situation when you go to a second-hand shop, charity shop, vinted and stuff'.

Adopting a similar view, Selena likens renting fashion to Airbnb – the sharing platform for accommodation that is widely used and accepted by consumers throughout the world:

'You'll go and stay in someone else's bed at Airbnb, so I bet when I told you you'd sleep in someone else's bed, a stranger's bed, that you don't know, you'd have been like, 'oh no that's disgusting', but everyone does it'.

Similarly, when asked how she feels knowing that the item has been worn by someone else, Sasha reveals:

'Sometimes I'll buy something from the charity shop, and I won't even wash it before I wear it and I know that's bad...I don't really have issues with that, the same way I would, you know, borrow my mum's and my friends' clothes'.

Gina expresses no concern for wearing a rented dress, arguing that *'you don't know what it's touched in a factory'*. Here, she shares the view that when you buy fashion items (in the more traditional sense, such as from a brick-and-mortar store or online) you have no knowledge of what they may have come into contact with before they reach you as the consumer – signalling to the lack of transparency that is typically associated with the traditional linear model employed within the fashion industry (Rahbek et al., 2016; Colucci and Vecchi, 2021; Remake, 2022; Circle Economy, 2023). Gina says that for her, *'it is not a problem'* that the dress she rented could have been worn by someone else, and therefore has no issue with renting. While it is important to highlight that renting may still involve items that have originally been sourced and produced through a linear model, by renting them, consumers are extending the product's

life and keeping it in use for longer – one of the key principles of the CE (EMF, 2017; 2022).

It is clear that some participants feel the hygiene issues associated with wearing clothes worn by someone else may be a barrier towards renting - however, participants' shared attitudes, and moreover their lived experiences of renting, demonstrate that there is no cause for concern and that any issues/perceptions of contamination are unfounded – or in the case of Ivie, who received her item covered in tan marks – can easily be dealt with through clear communication from the rental platform/owner of the item. Important to note is that Ivie's experience is not representative of the sample. While Ivie rented her item through Hurr, the item was a peer listing and therefore it was the responsibility of the owner to ensure the item's condition was up to standard. This stand-alone example clearly demonstrates the importance of upholding quality standards in fashion rental – with an emphasis on the need for a standardised process to exist, particularly across rental platforms that host individual listings.

Stacey shares her preference for renting from a rental company, as opposed to a peer, offering better quality standards:

'I've loved it so far, I think some have been a bit of a dud and have not been as good and it tends to be the peer to peer, you know because the quality isn't checked as well or something but then the ones that are B2C they have been much better',

It is important to highlight that analysis of the in-depth interviews reveal a number of renting options that are available to consumers. Across the full dataset, participants offer insight into three different rental options:

1. Renting from an e-commerce platform i.e. Rotaro³⁵

³⁵ Rotaro - UK rental and resale service, which holds stock centrally (Elle, 2021) <https://www.rotaro.co.uk>

2. Renting from a P2P i.e. Loanhood³⁶
3. Renting an item directly from the owner of an item that is listed on an e-commerce rental platform i.e. Hurr³⁷

With the above in mind, the importance of communication between the rental platform/owner of the item and the participant is uniformly shared by all participants. Notably, Polly reveals how knowing the person on the other side of the rental platform encourages you to take greater care of the item: *'It's like you're wearing someone else's clothes, you're much more likely to take care of it because you know that person on the other side of the app'*. Moreover, Selena shares the sense of community and experience that renting can afford - directly contradicting previous research by offering a counter to the notion that consumers choose to remain anonymous when engaging with renting (Battle et al., 2018):

'There's a bit of a relationship building, like I know, you become friends with people you might rent from, or at least you know them in a certain capacity and it's quite nice as well and I think a lot of the time what I have experienced is people like the idea of rental but until they do it, they don't understand the experience. And then as soon as they get it, they're sold, because they see that rental brings an added value or experience to just going out and buying a top off the high street'.

Most participants who rented from a P2P service (see Table 4) reveal how they felt reassured by seeing information about the owner of the item i.e. biography, feedback, and reviews:

'The woman had lots of really good feedback so I was just like I feel more inclined to choose that one because there were a few choices I

³⁶ Loanhood - UK based fashion rental app <https://www.loanhood.com>

³⁷ Hurr - UK rental platform comprised of P2P, preowned and brand rentals (Elle, 2021) <https://www.hurrcollective.com>

could have picked, like her good feedback and saying she was quick, she was nice whatever, I felt safer renting off her' (Ivie).

By checking out the owner of the item, participants are seemingly put at ease and are reassured that the owner of the item is similar to themselves and therefore a 'good' person to rent from. Moreover, some participants share that seeing the rented item on a real person - either the owner of the item or another renter - *'makes a big difference'* (Kate) and alleviates contamination concerns:

'So, I think I have noticed that not all of them have real life pictures but the one's that I chose did, so I think some of them were like the stock image. This is just like By Rotation³⁸ stock images, which I don't like as much, I prefer to see it... I really like that about it because for me, like it gives you a kind of trust about the condition' (Kelly).

This sense of congruency between the owner of the item and the renter is an interesting concept that could be explored further within the domain of P2P rental.

Offering further insight into the sense of togetherness and connection that renting seemingly affords is Kira's initial rental experience:

'So because I was in London...I actually went to collect it because I think for my first rental, I was like, oh, I don't want to send it in the post, I don't want it to get lost, so I went and I collected it from a lady and she kind of like, brought it to me and did it that way...I was in central London, I just got the tube to Hammersmith, took the jacket from her, took her phone number, yeah it was so, so cool'.

Here, Kira emphasises the apprehension she felt for her first rental and the subsequent action she took to try and eliminate damage – as outlined in the categorisation of care. In doing so, she claims to have felt reassured:

³⁸ By Rotation – UK P2P fashion rental service (Elle, 2021)
<https://byrotation.com>

‘And I think it’s just put a bit of peace in my mind because obviously, it’s my first rental and these pieces, it’s like I’m renting pieces I can afford but obviously it is not something say like I damaged or lost it, it’s not really something I can really fork out the money for, so obviously I’m taking quite good care of it and it put that extra layer of security on’.

While Kira’s experience is not representative of the entire sample, some participants do report how they felt ‘*overwhelmed*’ and ‘*worried*’ about their initial rental experience (Rose). Similarly to Kira, Michelle took action to alleviate the apprehension she felt when renting for the first time: ‘*I had bought another couple of dresses with me as backup, which turned out to be a smart decision, just because it was my first rental*’. However, while Bella reveals her initial confusion around the rental process, having never rented before, she praises the timely assistance offered by My Wardrobe HQ³⁹ - demonstrating how apprehension and uncertainty towards renting can be eased by effective communication from the rental provider:

‘I was a bit confused about which day I send it back, so I did just drop an email, and they literally responded within an hour or something ridiculous, just explaining, she was really lovely, really encouraging, she just explained you have to send it back on the 4th day, so it cleared it up and that was fine’.

A further point to make here is the difference between how participants view ‘risk’ with regards to sizing. Most participants ‘risked’ their rented item fitting – ordering the item in the size that they consider themselves to be. This is compared to a few participants who put ‘contingencies’ in place to ensure the item would fit. Kira, for example, purposefully rented a House of Sunny dress because she knew that their garments fit her well (having purchased from the brand before). Taking this one step further was Rose who rented a dress the week before her graduation ceremony, as a ‘trial-run’. For some participants,

³⁹ My Wardrobe HQ – UK based rental and resale platform (Elle, 2021)
<https://www.mywardrobehq.com>

it appears that the risk of an item not being 'right' for such a special occasion necessitates them to form contingencies - including checking measurements beforehand (such as Melanie) or, in Rose's case ordering, and even paying, twice to rent a dress. This difference feeds into the issue raised by some participants of item visibility, specifically the use of stock images as opposed to *actual* images on rental platforms (acknowledged later in 5.4).

Despite points of difference between how participants *felt* about their initial rental experience, all participants share the view that renting makes them *feel* good about themselves. Participants all share the view that renting is '*something to be proud of*' (Etta), rather than be ashamed of – opposing current research that suggests there may be a stigma attached to access-based consumption (Argo et al., 2006; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hazée et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021). Joan shares how she felt *after* renting for the first time, '*I felt actually quite proud that I'd rented it*' (Joan). Moreover, Etta shares how she thinks a stigma around renting may exist, but for her, renting offers a sense of fulfilment:

'At the end of the day, you're saving the environment, everybody wants to be more sustainable, and you can get pieces that you couldn't necessarily afford for a fraction of the price and you're not being like chuck [this] away....I just think everybody should do it, I think it's the best thing ever'.

This sense of fulfilment resonates with issues around surrogacy i.e., the surrogate is doing this (e.g., more usually carrying a baby) to help others out. In protecting the item and ensuring it maintains high quality, participants are helping the next renter to similarly enjoy the item and experience their most elevated *self*. For example, Joan reveals how a dress she rented for a wedding was later reserved by a friend who had seen her in the dress and subsequently wanted to rent it herself:

'Well, the person at work, she's actually renting that dress for something she's got on. She's hired a dress from the Little Green Dress, and I sent her a message saying, oh, you look lovely, and she said, I'm actually hiring the one that you wore'.

As one of the older participants in the sample, Joan shares how it may seem strange seeing someone else wearing the same dress that she had rented, but how she *'thinks it's quite nice'*. Interestingly, Bella, one of the younger participants, shares the same view, that the sense of sharing and community that renting affords is a positive and something that should be encouraged:

'I'm going to use it and have joy out of it and create memories then I'm going to pass it on and someone else is going to do that. So, it's like sharing the bag, sharing the love, the fun, and I don't even know how to describe it, but I really like that'.

Here, Bella is clearly signalling to the added satisfaction of returning the rented item, feeling encouraged that someone else will get to experience it. While this signals to a product's 'afterlife', traditionally understood with regards to the disposition of material possessions (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005; Türe, 2014), the afterlife of a rented item appears to be formed through a sense of storytelling, with each item having a history and a future. Mimicking the circularity that renting offers, each item appears to be 'passed on' and, with it, it's memories and experiences are captured and shared with others.

Most notably, participants seemingly look after the item to ensure that it is kept in good condition so it can be equally shared by another renter – conflicting recent research that claims consumers lack social obligation when renting fashion, demonstrating 'limited awareness of or concern for others' - failing to care for the item so that it can be enjoyed by the next consumers (Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024: 16). The current study reveals the opposite – that most participants are highly aware of others throughout their rental experience and

want to ensure the item is maintained so that the next renter can equally benefit.

In a similar vein, Ramona shares how she enjoys the sense of ‘passing on’ that renting affords:

‘I really don’t think about it when I get them, I think it’s kind of nice, it’s like when I get books from the library, it’s like, ‘oh these are from other people’, I don’t know it’s like we’re all connected by an item’.

This sense of connectedness and sharing signals to much of the research surrounding the ease of access-based consumption (Belk, 2010; 2013; 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Belk, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Leung et al., 2021; Belk, 2022; Scaraboto and Figueiredo, 2022). Furthermore, the sense of sharing and connection to others offers support to Belk’s (2014: 1599) suggestion that consumers who engage in collaborative consumption (i.e., renting) display a self-concept that is influenced by the goods that they choose to share with others, evolving consumer identity to become *‘you are what you share’*.

On a different note, the discovery that renting contributes towards a consumer self-concept through the role of surrogacy contradicts Bardhi and Eckhardt’s (2017) argument that liquid consumption is more likely to be associated with low relevance to the *self*. Similar to the theme of *elevation*, the theme of *surrogacy* likewise refutes this suggestion, demonstrating that, by adopting the role of the surrogate, renting, as an access-based mode of consumption, has high relevance to the *self*. Participants’ sense of self is formed through their role as surrogate, viewing their role as one of care and responsibility, they take pride in ensuring the item is protected so it can be passed on to other(s) and equally enjoyed.

Surrogacy offers a novel finding, setting it apart from previous research (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Jain

et al., 2021; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). Findings from the current research demonstrate that while renting can induce apprehension (when initially renting) and an added pressure (in ensuring items are protected) it remains an exciting and elevating experience – so much so, that even when faced with contamination concerns (e.g., Ivie’s problem with fake tan marks on her rented item), participants remain positive about the phenomenon. The uniformly shared desire to continue renting, despite some of the pressures that renting elicits – such as extra vigilance - contradicts Rosenberg et al.’s (2023) finding that consumers revert to solid consumption when faced with the burdens of accessing. Furthermore, it conflicts with Trujillo-Torres et al.’s (2024) finding that consumers who rent fashion items do not demonstrate a desire to protect the item so that its value can be maintained and passed on to the next renter.

It is evident from participants’ lived experiences that renting contributes towards their self-concept through a sense of *surrogacy*, namely through the desire to protect and preserve rented items and the sense of pride felt in adopting the role of surrogate – nodding to the sense of guardianship felt when owning vintage fashion items (Abdelrahmen et al., 2020). As such, this research offers a new concept to the field of consumer research, the ‘surrogate consumer’, distinguishing it from the currently limited findings that exist within the access-based fashion literature. Furthermore, the concept of *surrogacy* provides an interesting area for further research to explore, in addition to offering rental platforms and marketing practitioners’ areas for further work and refinement.

This chapter has revealed that renting, as an access-based form of consumption, does inform the self-concept, however not in the way that was expected (i.e., that consumers ‘hide’ the fact that they rent fashion items, due to the ‘stigma’ of wearing an item worn by another person/stigma of lacking funds to own items outright). Rather, findings reveal that consumers rent items to achieve a sense of *elevation* that cannot be obtained through the traditional means of buying and owning (i.e., solid consumption) – with the *act* of renting

and subsequent *advocacy* appearing to be as important, if not more so, than the item rented. Moreover, thematic analysis reveals that the self-concept appears to be formed through a consumer's role as 'surrogate'; acting as custodian/caretaker of the rented item, the surrogate consumer protects and preserves its condition so that it can be 'passed on' and enjoyed by others. Evidently, while each theme demonstrates *how* renting fashion items informs a consumer's sense of self, it is the relatedness between these themes that reveals the overall narrative and responds to the research questions. The next chapter discusses the findings in more depth, drawing out the meaning behind the key themes; how they relate to the literature; and how they respond to the research questions.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter reveals the meaning behind *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy*, by explaining the relevance of each theme in relation to the research questions. In doing so, this chapter identifies the importance of the findings for both theory and practice. The chapter begins by summarising the key findings (5.1) before interpreting each theme in relation to the existing literature (5.2). Next, limitations and recommendations for future research are discussed (5.3) and practical application of the research is addressed (5.4). Finally, a conclusion to this chapter, and the doctoral thesis, is offered (5.5).

5.1 Summary of the key findings

This project sought to explore consumer attitudes, motivations, and engagement towards renting fashion items. Moving away from the bulk of traditional consumer research and its orientation towards the centrality of ownership ('solid' consumption), this research addresses the urgency for a shift towards studying elements of the Circular Economy (CE). Crucially, it responds to calls for greater research to investigate whether liquid consumption experiences contribute towards a consumer's self-concept (Belk,

2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Antanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021). Drawing on a novel combination of the theory of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) and the self-concept (Belk, 1988), alongside Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) solid-liquid conceptual framework, this research explores the phenomenon of fashion rental through a unique lens. The research has been guided by the following research questions:

1. *Why do female consumers choose to rent, over buying, fashion items?*
2. *Does renting, rather than owning, fashion items contribute to a consumer's self-concept?*
3. *How can marketers encourage other consumers to engage with fashion rental systems, in the strive towards a CE?*

By utilising an existential phenomenological approach, this research captured the lived experiences of 24 female consumers who have rented fashion items. Existential Phenomenology (EP) has provided a rigorous methodology to explore a currently scant area of consumer research by identifying *how* renting, as an access-based form of consumption, informs the self-concept. In support of the search for meanings and motives behind renting fashion items, this research has been guided by a social constructionist ontological perspective (Chowdhury, 2014; Creswell and Poth, 2016). To understand and interpret such meaning, an interpretivist epistemological position has been followed (Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001). Phenomenological interviews with 24 participants have revealed rich insight into consumer attitudes and motivations towards renting fashion items. Employing thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse this data reveals three key themes that demonstrate how renting informs a consumer's sense of self: *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy* (see *Table 10*). Theme definitions are (briefly) presented for a final time below before each theme is interpreted in relation to the existing literature (5.2) Then, before moving on to limitations of the study (5.3), the research questions are explicitly addressed and returned to (5.2.5).

Elevation

Elevation reveals how renting elevates the way participants *look* - by choosing to rent high-end, expensive items, they accomplish a version of themselves that they consider to not be possible through traditional means (buying and owning) due to financial constraints. Moreover, participants reveal how renting *feels* like a treat, eliciting excitement, and a sense of experience - enhancing the way they *feel* in their item. Furthermore, the feeling of being a good, ethical consumer elevates their sense of self - as they wear their rented item like a badge of honour. The self-concept is formed through the elevation consumers accomplish – owing to the act of renting and consuming/displaying the rented item itself.

Advocacy

Advocacy demonstrates consumers' desire to influence others to rent by actively promoting the phenomenon both verbally (through word of mouth) and via social media (posting pictures and/or tagging items on Instagram). Participants view it as their responsibility to advocate renting, openly sharing their rental experience with others – adopting the role of renting 'ambassador'. Participants place less importance on the item they rent, and more importance on ensuring they *tell* others the item is rented, supporting their ethical self-concept. As such, it appears that the *act* of renting (and subsequent *advocacy*) contributes to a consumer's self-concept.

Surrogacy

Surrogacy represents consumers' awareness that the items they rent are *not theirs* but rather they are responsible for the item for a fixed period. Participants reveal the need to be especially vigilant when wearing rented items, ensuring they are returned to the legal owner in the same condition as they received it. Here, the self-concept is formed through a consumer's role as 'surrogate': a caretaker of the item/ensuring it is kept in pristine condition, allowing the potential of fashion rental systems to overcome consumer

‘disgust’ at renting, rather than owning, fashion products. *Surrogacy*, in the context of access-based consumption, can describe a consumer who has access to another consumer’s possession(s), acting as custodian and protecting the item for a fixed period, before it is passed on (in near pristine condition) to the next user/custodian.

Table 10: Highlights the key themes and their constituent parts (as discussed in 4.0)

Elevation (4.1)	Advocacy (4.2)	Surrogacy (4.3)
To look and feel good (4.1.1)	Openly sharing rental experience (4.2.1)	Protect and preserve (4.3.1)
Rent for an event (4.1.2)	Influencing/persuading others to rent (4.2.2)	Sense of pride in surrogacy (4.3.2)
Rent to treat yourself (4.1.3)		
Rent to be the best version of yourself (4.1.4)		

5.2 Interpretation of findings against existing literature

This section unpacks each theme in turn – *elevation* (5.2.1), *advocacy* (5.2.2), and *surrogacy* (5.2.3). Assessing each theme in relation to the existing literature, possible explanations for contrasting findings are offered. Prior to discussing each theme, it is important to highlight the findings in relation to the enabling theories. Firstly, the findings bolster the notion that liquid consumption affords consumers greater freedom and flexibility to access items ‘that would otherwise be out of reach’ (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017: 113). In doing so, it affirms the value of liquid modernity that is prominent within the consumer literature (Bauman, 2000; Belk, 2010; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Belk, 2020; Atanasova et al., 2024). Secondly, the findings advance the seminal work of Belk (1988) by revealing that liquid consumption does appear to have high relevance to the *self*, informing the self-concept through a sense of *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy*. While this contradicts one of the four conditions of

liquid consumption - asserted by Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) - this study's findings demonstrate that access-based consumption does in-fact have high relevance to the *self*.

5.2.1 Elevation

Findings reveal that renting provides consumers the opportunity to achieve their most elevated *self* by selecting items that are more elaborate and more extravagant than items they would ordinarily buy and own. This supports the sense of experimenting that the current, albeit limited, access-based fashion literature reveals as a motivating factor for engaging in renting, i.e. being able to 'try out' different styles (Loussaïef et al. 2019; McNeil and Venter, 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Jain et al., 2021). Additionally, it affirms wider access-based consumption research that bares environmental implications as a motivating factor for engaging in liquid consumption (Lawson, 2011; Lawson et al., 2016; Tariq, 2017; Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Christodoulides et al., 2021). Moreover, it solidifies the recent notion that solid and liquid consumption can co-exist, with consumers renting both statement clothing and accessories that can be paired with/complemented by items they already own (Rosenberg et al., 2023) – as discussed in section 4.1.1. This co-existence lends support to Bauman's (2000) critics, who argue that solid structures still exist in liquid society, as well as liquid conditions retaining the ability to re-solidify (Elliot, 2013; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2020a).

This study's findings advance existing quantitative research by examining the phenomenon from a qualitative perspective (Jain et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research reveals the *actual* behaviour of consumers who rent fashion – as opposed to (quantitative) research which has identified consumer's motivations to engage/willingness to adopt renting (Pantano and Stylos, 2020) as well as behavioural intentions in hypothetical contexts (Baek and Oh, 2021). Moreover, this research furthers the currently scant area of qualitative

research by identifying *how* renting informs the self-concept and in doing so, directly responds to the calls made for further research in this area (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021). Crucially, *elevation* contradicts the findings of Loussaïef et al. (2019) who, with the exception of this thesis, undertake the only study that explores access-based fashion consumption through the theoretical lens of the self-concept. Such contradictions are examined below.

Firstly, this project's findings refute Loussaïef et al.'s (2019) suggestion that consumers rent fashion items that are synonymous with their sense of self. *Elevation* reveals that consumers seek to rent items that are inconsistent with their identity, i.e. they select items that do not align with their typical self-concept. This may possibly feed into the multiplicity of the *self* (Ramarajan, 2014; Belk, 2024). Specifically, it lends insight into Belk's (2024: 571) recent claim that 'what we call "self" is really "selves"'. By renting items that are superior to items they would ordinarily buy/own (i.e., items which are more expensive, and more extravagant), consumers consciously avoid forming an attachment to their rented item. By only renting items that display an elevated *self*, consumers make a clear and deliberate departure from their typical self-identity. Thus, it could be suggested that *elevation* lends support to Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) earlier work that demonstrates how consumers fail to foster an extended self when renting cars (referring to the Zipcar study, outlined in section 2.1.4). However, this study's findings differ from Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) with regards to the reasons *why* consumers fail to form an attachment to a rented item.

The current study suggests that despite not forming an attachment – and subsequently not viewing the item as 'theirs' – consumers feel comfortable wearing their rented item(s). Moreso, they feel a sense of pride in wearing an item that belongs to someone else, and that has been a part of someone else's elevated experience (as discussed in 4.3.2). This 'sense of pride' resembles

the work of Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005), who, through their exploration into the movement of meaningful possessions to strangers, found that that some women 'share stories' of their wedding dress (i.e., their meaningful possession) with potential new owners – charged with positive meanings (from happy memories associated with the dress). These women hope that the next owner will likewise experience 'the magic of the dress' (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005: 819). Evidently, Lastovicka and Fernandez's (2005) study explores *material possessions* and the story sharing between *seller* (previous owner) and *buyer*, however, there is an intriguing synergy between their study and the current findings. The notion of 'sharing stories' (between those who *were* in possession of an item and those who *will be/could be*) resonates with this current project's findings: the item acts as a vessel, to be 'passed on' and enjoyed.

On the contrary, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012: 889) recognise that consumers fail to form an attachment to rented cars because they view the car as offering 'instrumental utility rather than connection'. In other words, they feel that while the car provides a degree of functionality (i.e., getting them from one location to another), it fails to offer any connection to their sense of self. As such, Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) suggestion that liquid consumption has low relevance to the *self* is problematised by the current findings which indicate that it is through consumers' conscious desire to avoid attachment to rented items that their self-concept is informed. Therefore, the current research not only contradicts the conceptual understanding offered by Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) but advances it by establishing that liquid consumption does in-fact have high relevance to the *self* (see *Table 11*). This newly emerging relevance to the *self* is illustrated in the conceptual model (*Figure 1*). Worth highlighting is that Bardhi and Eckhart's (2012) study does not focus on *one* category of cars – in fact, it does not reveal the type/s of (Zip)cars accessed by participants, and thus it is not possible to determine whether differences in the category of car, for example, higher-end compared to practical brands, may be more likely to contribute to a consumer's self-concept. It could be argued that slightly different findings could have emerged if this was considered

Table 11: Contrasting insights: current study vs. existing literature

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012):	Current study:
<i>Car sharing (Zipcar)</i>	<i>Fashion rental</i>
The primary motivation for consumers engaging in car sharing is use value/ functionality.	Primary motivations for consumers engaging with fashion rental are access to luxury items (otherwise out of reach, due to financial constraints) and environmental concerns.
Zipcar users perceive car sharing as a contagion risk due to the shared nature of the service (with hygiene concerns and feelings of 'disgust' presenting a barrier to renting cars).	Consumers feel a sense of pride in knowing someone else has worn/used the item they are renting – highlighting a sense of 'togetherness' and downplaying contamination/ 'disgust' concerns.
Zipcar users avoid identification with their rented car – not wishing for others to know the car is 'not theirs'.	Fashion rental consumers avoid identification with their rented item – proudly revealing to others that the item is 'not theirs' and actively telling others it is rented.
Zipcar users lack a sense of <i>stewardship</i> towards their rented car – suggesting little consideration for others who may rent the car after them.	Fashion renters view their fashion consumption as a form of <i>guardianship</i> – taking extra care in <i>protecting</i> and <i>preserving</i> their rented item so that it can be equally enjoyed and experienced by others – characterising them as a 'surrogate consumer'.
Zipcar users avoid adopting a sense of brand community.	Consumers feel a sense of 'togetherness' and community as items are shared and rented out – adding value to the rental experience.
Avoiding identification of the rented car as well as the brand itself, Zipcar users demonstrate a desire to 'hide' the fact they have rented a car.	Consumers place greater emphasis on the <i>act</i> of renting – and advocating renting to others – than they do on the actual item rented; suggesting that transparency is crucial in ensuring that others are not misled into believing one can afford such a luxury, or extravagant item.
Car sharing has low relevance to the <i>self</i> .	Fashion rental has high relevance to the <i>self</i> .

A final difference to Loussaïef et al. (2019) is regarding the *role* of the self-concept and consumer motivations. As discussed, the theme of *elevation* reveals that consumers engage in renting to elevate the way they *look* and *feel* without wishing to alter their self-concept. This conflicts with the current notion that consumers rent items to temporarily alter their self-concept, or to gradually transform their self-concept over-time (Loussaïef et al., 2019). With regards to possible explanations for this difference, it could be that consumers use renting for different reasons and, as such, renting informs their self-concept in different ways. As suggested by Loussaïef et al. (2019: 270), it could be that women use renting as a means of redefining their sense of self as they adapt to transitions in their life - 'such as maternity or professional life cycle' - again, something which could tie into the multiplicity of the *self*. Equally, a consumer's reference group, such as the involvement of family and/or friends in the consumer's decision making (Solomon et al., 2019), could influence how renting informs their *self*. Important to note is that Loussaïef et al.'s (2019) study was conducted in France and therefore cultural differences may have played a role in consumer engagement - such as what is considered a 'luxury' or 'expensive' garment, and subsequently the influence on identity.

5.2.2 Advocacy

Advocacy reveals consumers' desire to promote renting (and associated benefits), while simultaneously persuading others to rent, instead of buying, fashion items - signifying that renting informs the self-concept through a sense of *advocacy*. Considering this, *advocacy* is discussed in relation to the existing literature, addressing both similarities and differences. Like *elevation*, this theme lends support to existing literature, by revealing environmental concerns as an important motivation for engaging in access-based consumption (Lawson et al., 2016; Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2022). Furthermore, it highlights renting as an effective way of eliminating the 'wear once phenomenon' (Pederson et al., 2018; McNeil and Venter, 2019; Colucci and Vecchi, 2021; Meng and Leary, 2021). In doing so, it gestures to consumer resistance - as consumers reject

the current norms of marketplace, i.e., mainstream fashion (specifically fast fashion) and *choose* to 'live with less' (Cherrier, 2007: 7).

The connection between *advocacy* and recent consumer research is important to acknowledge. Rosenberg et al. (2023), for example, realise that consumers who rent fashion items appear to obtain greater satisfaction through *talking* about the experience of access-based consumption (i.e., the clothing library), more so than the access-based item itself. *Advocacy* evolves this notion, revealing that it is the *act* of renting that appears to inform the self-concept, rather than use of the actual item (i.e., a dress or handbag). Participant's sense of self appeared to emerge from their environmentally savvy consumption behaviours (which they were keen to disclose to others), alongside temporarily wearing high-end designer pieces. Therefore, it can be assumed that encouraging renting is an important part of this liquid consumption experience – nodding once again to the sense of consumer freedom that liquidity affords and the free-will associated with *choosing* to voluntarily simplify (Leonard-Barton, 1981; Etzioni, 1998; Bauman, 2000; Zavestoski, 2002a; McDonald et al., 2006; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). By openly sharing with others not only what item they have rented but *how* they have rented it - including the intricacies of the rental process (as seen in *Figure 1*) – consumers harness the opportunity to advocate.

While it is encouraging to observe synergies between *advocacy* and recent consumer research (Rosenberg et al., 2023), there is a discrepancy that is important to address. As mentioned throughout the theme of *elevation* (4.1) and subsequent discussion (5.2.1), consumers in this study rented items that are inconsistent with their typical identity and in doing so, avoided forming an attachment with such items. Contrastingly, Rosenberg et al.'s (2023) study reveals the growing attachment some consumers feel (i.e., consumers become attached to items they have accessed and subsequently go on to purchase). While consumers in this doctoral research acknowledge that purchasing a rented item defeats the point of restricting clothing consumption,

participants in Rosenberg et al.'s (2023) study did not consider it a betrayal of a liquid lifestyle. However, Rosenberg et al.'s (2023) participants only adopted this view if the (rented) item purchased was *basic, highly versatile and aligned with a minimalist wardrobe*, i.e., an item that could be worn with a range of other items/for multiple occasions.

In contrast, the current study finds that consumers place greater emphasis on the *act* of renting – and advocating renting – than they do on using/wearing the actual item that they have rented. This difference could be due to the varying means of accessing fashion. Most of the participants in the current study rented single, statement items (either clothing or an accessory) that they had no desire to keep, whereas consumers who rented from clothing libraries (in the case of Rosenberg et al., 2023) did so on a membership (subscription) basis, and thus may have been more likely to rent a combination of statement *and* more basic pieces. However, once again, this highlights the importance of conducting further research in understanding, and distinguishing, the various methods and contexts of accessing fashion.

It should be noted the connection between renting and minimalism. As discussed in the literature review (2.3), the work of Wilson and Bellezza (2022) has led to the identification of three dimensions of minimalism:

1. Number of possessions (*reduced buying*)
2. Sparse aesthetic consumption
3. Mindfully curated consumption (*de-cluttering*)

Both '*Number of possessions*' and '*Mindfully curated consumption*' are apparent amongst most participants in the current study. Through sharing their experiences, participants reveal how they voluntarily reduce their consumption and in doing so, '*feel lighter*' and less '*weighed down*' (by possessions). An example shared by many participants is the decision to not buy any new clothes, shoes, or accessories for a fixed period – typically, 6 months. Participants described this as a reflection process, whereby they reflected on

their consumption behaviour to reduce consumption habits and de-clutter their physical space. This is synergistic with the philosophy of voluntary simplicity, specifically the practice of self-determination and self-reflection (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Kozinets, 2000; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). And while anti-consumerism is not an essential aspect of consumer minimalism – in the same way that it is for voluntary simplicity (Wilson and Bellezza, 2022), it can be observed in the shared desire to *reduce-buying* and *de-clutter* that is evident amongst many of the consumers who rented.

Crucial to address is the parallel between socio-economic status and renting. With participants in the current study all considered relatively economically stable (either in full-time employment or full-time further education), it raises the question of whether renting operates as a status symbol. It could be that consumers who rent are *not* concerned with social status for two reasons. Firstly, because they are stable and secure – considered ‘free’ in liquid society, they are able to view liquid consumption (such as renting) as an exciting and liberating concept that affords them flexibility and social mobility. Secondly, because their lower-level needs have been met (as per Maslow’s hierarchy of needs), they are free to concentrate on realizing their most authentic *self*. This is something which Zavestoski (2002a) claims can only be achieved through non-materialistic means such as greater engagement with interpersonal relationships and community activities. It appears that through self-appointing the role of advocate, consumers are in control of determining their most authentic *self*.

Furthermore, the sense of community and sharing that consumers describe feeling, e.g., meeting like-minded consumers online and at in-person events (such as sustainability discussion panels) reflects Zavestoski’s (2002a) viewpoint as well as Cherrier’s (2007) reasoning behind ‘collective identities’. In doing so, *advocacy* supports the view that liquid modernity favours the ‘free’ within society (Bauman, 2000; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). This links particularly closely to the issue of voluntary simplicity

and choice (Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002a; Huneke, 2005). Notably, the assumption that voluntary simplicity is a movement ‘primarily of the well-off’ (Huneke, 2005: 529). As per Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it is thought that only those consumers whose lower-level, physiological needs have been met are ‘free’ to simplify (Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002a). This bares resemblance to consumers in the current study, who, as individuals with their basic needs met (i.e. safety, security, and support), can voluntarily simplify and pursue their most authentic *self* – without compromising their lower-level needs. This is disparate to consumers who may lack the resources to buy (and own) items and who are thus forced to simplify (or go without) - representative of involuntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton, 1981; Etzioni, 1998; Makri et al., 2020).

Thus, while prior research suggests that access-based (or liquid) consumption has benefits for frugal consumers/those on lower incomes (Schaefers et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023; Atanasova et al., 2024), this study’s findings reveal that this may not be the case for fashion rental. Recognising the privilege of the participants, it could be that low(er)-income consumers are already being stigmatised and thus are perhaps not wanting to opt in to a (fashion rental) system that is also stigmatised or stereotyped – which would support previous research surrounding access-based consumption and social-risk (Battle et al., 2018; Schaefers et al., 2021). With renting appearing to be a pleasure the affluent/middle-class can exploit, it stands to reason that participants’ disinterest in the potential “social risk” of renting - and their desire to advocate - is because, for them, renting is a *choice*. Rather, they consider *transparency* crucial in ensuring that others are not misled into believing they can afford such a luxury, or extravagant item. Inconsistent with the traditional form of ownership, access-based consumption appears to reflect the desire for a sustainable identity, whereby environmental consciousness and concern for others supersedes traditional markers of social status (i.e., material ownership).

The idea that the 'self' is informed by the desire to advocate demonstrates how consumers can express their identity through non-materialistic means, reducing consumption in pursuit of a more authentic *self* (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002a; McDonald et al., 2006; Cherrier, 2009; Black and Cherrier, 2010; Lim, 2017). Specifically, *advocacy* signals to Cherrier's (2009) identification of the 'hero identity'. As an expression of consumer resistance, the 'hero identity' characterises those with the desire to make a positive change to the world (Cherrier, 2009). *Advocacy* reflects this ideology as consumers seek to challenge the fashion industry for its exploitative nature and harmful effects to society and the environment. Consumers view it as *their* responsibility to raise awareness. While this aligns with Kang and Park's (2023) finding that consumers are motivated to rent because they view it as a "coping strategy" – a means of alleviating the 'guilt' they associate with solid consumption, the current research advances this; identifying that not only are consumers motivated to rent to *feel* good, but to encourage others to rent as a more sustainable means of consuming fashion. As such, it appears that the *act* of renting and subsequent *advocacy* contributes to a consumer's self-concept.

The next section discusses the third and final theme, *surrogacy*, in relation to the existing literature. Subsequently, it presents *Figure 1* - a conceptual model identifying the surrogate consumer.

5.2.3 Surrogacy

Surrogacy demonstrates another way in which renting informs the self-concept, advancing the limited existing literature. Moreover, it offers a novel concept to the field of consumer research, with opportunity for further research to explore if/how *surrogacy*, and subsequently the 'surrogate consumer' exists in other contexts. It is important to acknowledge that while the term 'surrogate consumer' has been earlier used by Solomon (1987) to describe individuals

who interact in the marketplace on behalf of other consumers - collecting market data, evaluating alternatives, and conducting transactions - the notion of *surrogacy*, and the surrogate consumer, that has emerged from this research describes something quite different – with different meanings and implications.

As discussed, Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) earlier work surmises that consumers avoid identification when renting cars (i.e., they do not experience a sense of perceived ownership and therefore do not consider the car 'theirs') because they do not wish to associate, or be associated, with the car they are renting and, in doing so, fail to form an attachment with this product type. Further to this, their analysis shows that Zipcar users lack a sense of *stewardship* towards their rented car. That is, consumers do not see the need to take extra precautions with the car they rent as they would if it were their own (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Conversely, the current research reveals that, while consumers avoid identification with their rented fashion item, they do not try and 'hide' the fact that it is rented - proudly revealing to others that the item is 'not theirs' and that they take extra care in *protecting and preserving* it.

Critically, it is the desire to look after the rented item - so that it can be equally enjoyed and experienced by others - that characterises the 'surrogate consumer'. This is distinctly different from someone who is merely careful with a rented item so that they can get their deposit back/avoid additional costs due to damage. It is important to highlight that Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) study exploring rental cars is somewhat dated and could benefit from being re-examined considering the current study's findings; and, possibly within a wider context of vehicle rentals - acknowledging that car category, or *type*, may influence a consumer's self-concept (as previously suggested; 5.2.1).

Crucially, *surrogacy* problematizes contamination concerns that are well documented in the access-based consumption literature. This responds to calls for research to make original contribution in interpretivist marketing and consumer research studies by challenging existing assumptions (Lucarelli et al., 2023). While existing literature notes hygiene issues as a potential barrier of access-based consumption (Argo et al., 2006; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hazée et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023), the notion of *surrogacy*, and more specifically the ‘surrogate consumer’, demonstrates how consumers in-fact downplay such concerns. With participants sharing *how* they care for their rented item, a categorisation of care has been identified which offers a clear guide for others to follow (see *Figure 1*). It is through the concept of *surrogacy* that issues around disgust and concern for contamination are eliminated. The ‘surrogate consumer’ demonstrates how caring for a rented item ensures the value of the item is upheld - supporting the sense of responsibility highlighted by Abdelrahmen et al. (2020), whereby consumers interpret their fashion consumption as a form of *guardianship*.

Noteworthy to mention is the comparison to more recent research exploring liquid consumption. Rosenberg et al. (2023) argue that consumer engagement with renting, as a form of liquid consumption, is triggered by a desire which fluctuates over time - indicating that solid and liquid consumption can co-exist. They contend that the burdens of access-based consumption (i.e. the need to wash clothes prior to returning them) steers consumers back to engaging in solid consumption - where such pressures and time constraints are relieved. The current study presents a counter finding, suggesting that, despite the extra pressure of protecting a rented item, the consumers in this study are undeterred from renting in the future. Moreso, they feel a sense of pride knowing that they are doing something good for the environment by choosing to rent an item they know they will only wear once (but, that multiple others will go on to wear/consume) – indicating a desire to contribute to the elimination of the ‘wear once phenomenon’.

Despite the level of care and attention required to protect rented items, consumers still view renting as an important mode of consumption. Nonetheless, there are notable differences between the conditions placed on rented items depending on the *type* of rental. Specifically, whether conditions have been established by the owner of the item (in the case of P2P rental) or the rental company (in the case of B2C). Additionally, current findings conflict with recent qualitative research that claims consumers lack social obligation when renting (Dion et al., 2023; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). *Surrogacy* reveals that most consumers in this study who rent fashion items are highly aware of others throughout the rental process. Consumers share a desire to ensure that the rented item is maintained so that it can be enjoyed by the next consumer. This demonstrates an awareness that renting is an interconnected experience that involves not just the individual, but others who are likewise seeking value from the items they choose to rent. Consumers recognise that it is *their* responsibility to care for the item while they are in possession of it – a finding which clearly differs from Trujillo-Torres et al. (2024).

Notwithstanding, Trujillo-Torres et al. (2024) acknowledge the importance of social obligation when renting and the need for renting to be viewed as an interconnected, social experience. Specifically, they emphasise the role of the *consumer*, noting that because customer journeys are shared in access-based consumption, consumers are reliant on each other taking care of items. Trujillo-Torres et al. (2024) suggest that it is the “not knowing” if others have taken care of an item that can cause consumers to avoid renting (and subsequently results in a barrier to access - as stated in 2.1.3). Further to this are the challenges this has for rental platforms who have little control over the item once the consumer receives it. The notion of *surrogacy* problematises this - revealing that the consumers in this project engaged in a categorisation of care; in making it their priority to look after the rented item, *surrogacy* presents valuable insight for marketers.

Trujillo-Torres et al.'s (2024) sample, however, consisted of mostly consumers with an 'unlimited' membership', whereby they could rent multiple items a month - with general mishap and repairs covered. Contrastingly, the majority of consumers in the current study rented only one item at any given time. This could possibly explain the differences in prioritisation of care for those who rent multiple items simultaneously and those who rent a single item. This is an intriguing discrepancy and one that could benefit from further research by exploring *surrogacy*, social obligation, and rental types (i.e. subscription versus single-item rental). Though the current research differs from both Rosenberg et al.'s (2023) and Trujillo-Torres et al.'s (2024) findings, it does add to such ongoing conversations surrounding access-based consumption and highlights the need for further research.

Differences considered; *surrogacy* does offer support to Belk's (2014) suggestion that consumers who engage in collaborative consumption display a self-concept that is influenced by the goods they choose to share with others. Belk's (2014: 1599) proposition that 'you are what you share' can be observed in the 'surrogate consumer' who reveals a sense of fulfilment in *protecting* and *preserving* their rented items. By providing insight into the connectedness/togetherness that can be achieved through the sharing of goods with others, this finding directly addresses Belk's (2014) thinking. It appears to be the *act* of renting and subsequent *sharing* with others that informs their self-concept. With pregnancy and childbirth considered an end in itself amongst many surrogate mothers (i.e., they have little desire to bring up the child), a 'surrogate consumer' similarly demonstrates a lack of attachment - with no desire to own the item, they are happy returning it to the legal owner (Van Zyl and Van Niekerk, 2000; Van den Akker, 2003; Morewedge et al., 2021). Like surrogate mothers, who make sure the unborn child gets what it needs/is protected, surrogate consumers are careful custodians of the item. Accordingly, a 'surrogate consumer' can be described as:

'A consumer who safeguards an item that they have temporary possession of (e.g., through renting), and who protect such items from

harm to preserve its condition - while simultaneously experiencing a sense of fulfilment in knowing that the item will be passed on and enjoyed by others. Crucially, a surrogate consumer feels that renting is more than wearing the item itself, but the experience as a whole – harnessing the role of surrogate from when they receive the item until they return it’.

Here marks an appropriate juncture in which to recognise the distinct differences between curatorial consumption and *surrogacy*; and in doing so, emphasise the contribution of the ‘surrogate consumer’ to consumer research. As highlighted in the literature (2.1.3), curatorial consumers, as possessors of items such as family heirlooms/vintage garments, view their role as one of guardianship; responsible for ensuring the meanings and associations attached to such items are ‘passed on’ to new owners (McCracken, 1990; Abdelrahmen et al., 2019; 2020). Taking this into account, there is noticeable synergy between curatorial consumers and surrogate consumers – that being the role of custodian/caretaker they adopt towards a material object which they are in possession of. Nonetheless, there are distinct nuances which set these concepts apart.

Firstly, curatorial consumption is characterised by the *ownership* of a material good, with consumers having sole legal possession (Curasi et al., 2004). Contrastingly, surrogate consumers represent individuals who *access* items with no desire to keep them or have them for any extended period of time. Secondly, curatorial consumers protect their item to preserve both its physical condition (avoiding material damage), *and* the meanings/stories attached to it (through its previous owner/s). On the contrary, surrogate consumers protect their (rented) item and maintain its condition so that other consumers (subsequent renters) can experience the item in its pristine condition, able to equally enjoy the physical item while making their own memories with it. Surrogate consumers recognise that the item they rent does not have a former

life (singular) but rather former lives (multiple) – with the same item meaning different things to different renters.

Moreover, surrogate consumers consider it wasteful to keep an item they would not use/wear more than once. They *feel* good having been able to experience the item and make memories in a way that does not contribute to overconsumption or textile waste. Unlike curatorial consumers who care for (owned) items so that they retain their original meanings, surrogate consumers care for (accessed) items so that others can access them in pristine condition. This considered, the surrogate consumer offers a distinct concept to consumer research. Before presenting a conceptual model identifying the surrogate consumer, *Table 12* is offered as a means of illustrating the differences between themes identified in the literature (surrounding access-based consumption/renting) and the themes to emerge from the current study.

Table 12: Points of difference between the existing literature and the current study

Access-based consumption: <i>main themes within the literature</i>	Points of difference: <i>emerging from findings</i>
Motivations for renting include: • reduced burden of ownership • utility/ functional use • convenience • financial benefit • environmental concerns Consumers view renting as a social risk; worried how they will be perceived by others (not being able to afford to buy and own the item outright), they feel embarrassed or try and hide the fact they have rented.	<i>Elevation</i>: consumers rent to treat themselves; they view renting as a treat-like experience that makes them look and feel good - accomplished through the item itself <i>and</i> the act of renting. <i>Advocacy</i> – consumers demonstrate complete transparency when renting; they believe it is the consumers responsibility to be open about the fact they have rented. More than this, they advocate for renting by sharing their experiences with others, influencing/ persuading others to rent.

Contamination concerns are a significant barrier to renting – hygiene concerns and feeling ‘grossed out’ (especially by items that are worn close to the skin) deter consumers from engaging in access-based consumption.

Surrogacy: findings problematise such concerns, with consumers protecting and preserving rented items; engaging in a categorisation of care to ensure that items are kept in pristine condition so they can be ‘passed on’ – feeling a sense of pride/fulfilment in knowing that the item they have cared for will be enjoyed by others.

Consumers rent fashion items that are synonymous with their self-identity.

Consumers purposively rent items that are inconsistent and distinctly different from their ‘typical’ self-identity – in an attempt to (temporarily) alter their sense of self.

Consumers renting fashion items foster a temporary extended self when renting; they view/ make the item ‘theirs’ or, they get attached to the item and go on to purchase it.

Consumers fail to foster a temporary extended self when renting with no desire to own it and happy to return it at the end of the rental period.

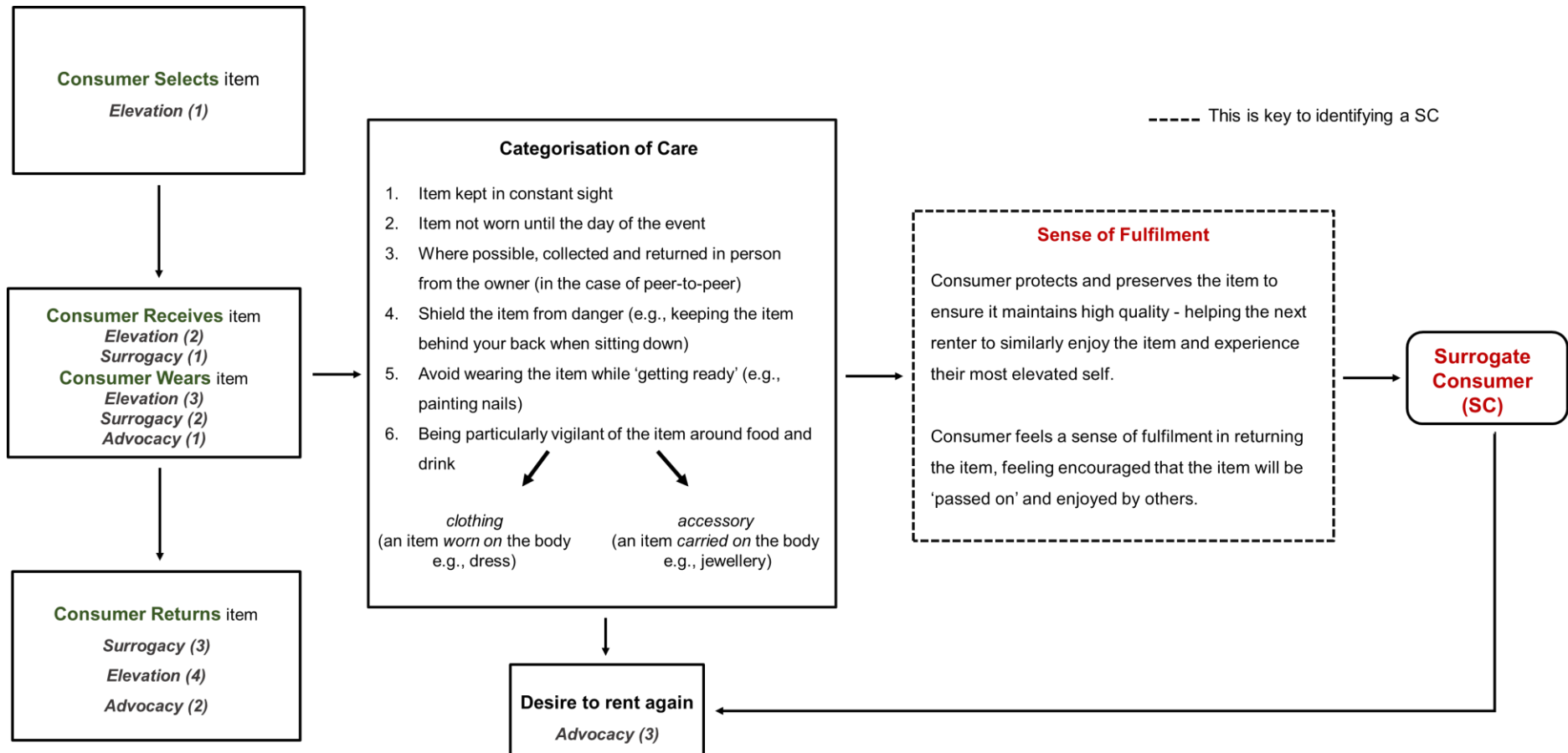
Some consumers rent fashion items to gradually transform their self-concept.

Consumers rent items to (temporarily) trial different (contrasting) versions of themselves with no desire to permanently alter their self-concept.

5.2.4 The surrogate consumer

It is through the novel combination of theory – Bauman’s (2000) liquid modernity and Belk’s (1988) self-concept – and the existential phenomenological approach harnessed, that the surrogate consumer has emerged. The conceptual model presented below (*Figure 1*) highlights the stages of renting (*selecting, receiving, and returning*) besides features key to identifying the surrogate consumer. Furthermore, it shows how *elevation, advocacy, and surrogacy* interconnect - revealing how fashion rental, as a liquid consumption experience, informs the self-concept.

Figure 1. Conceptual model identifying the Surrogate Consumer



Selecting refers to the processes consumers engage in as they select their item – using rental apps and platforms to browse for a high quality, statement piece of clothing (or accessory) that will elevate their sense of self - typically for an event/special occasion. There are various ways consumers can go about selecting a rental item (as highlighted in 1.2 and again in 4.3.2): from a Peer-to-Peer (P2P) platform, a Business-to-Consumer (B2C) platform or, a peer listed item on a B2C platform. Irrespective of this, it is the process of browsing and subsequently selecting an item - that is more extravagant, more lavish, and more expensive (than one they could afford to buy and own) - that appears to elevate their sense of self (*elevation 1*).

Once the consumer receives the item, they are then in possession of it for a fixed period of time (this will vary depending upon the type of platform they have rented it from). Typically arriving gift-wrapped and, in some cases, including a personalized message, consumers enjoy *receiving* and unwrapping their item. It appears to be this 'treat-like experience' (as consumers refer to it) which contributes towards an elevated sense of self (*elevation 2*). Crucially, it is at this stage (receiving the item) that a surrogate consumer acknowledges that the item is 'not theirs'; rather, they recognize that they are custodian/caretaker of it for a fixed period of time (*surrogacy 1*). It is when *wearing* the rented item that consumers can further experience their best *self* – with the item elevating the way they look *and* feel, they can (temporarily) accomplish a heightened sense of self (*elevation 3*). Recognizing their role as caretaker/guardian of the item – it is here that the surrogate consumer becomes especially vigilant, carefully protecting and preserving the item from any potential harm (*surrogacy 2*). Determined to ensure renting becomes mainstream, consumers wear their rented item like a badge of honour – practising complete transparency (*advocacy 1*).

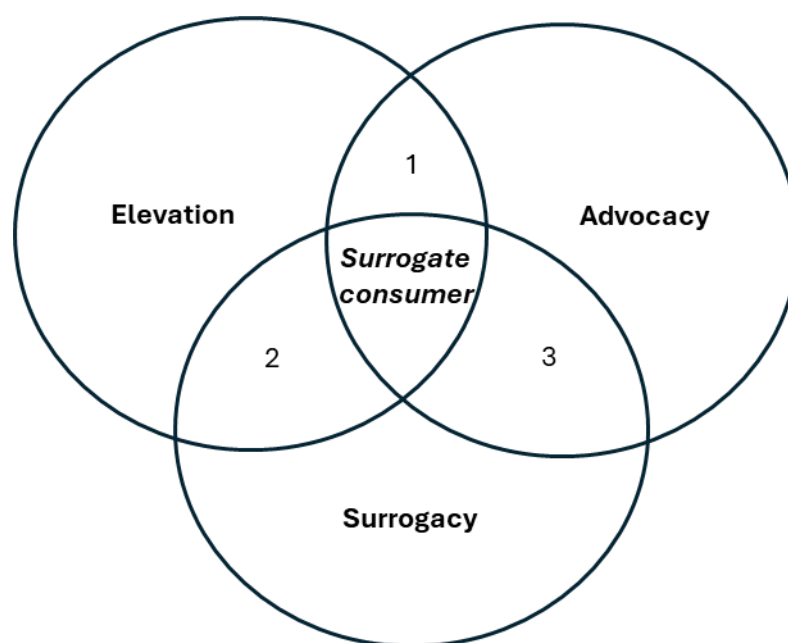
The *categorisation of care* illustrates the actions that a (surrogate) consumer engages in to ensure quality protection of their rented item. As highlighted in *Figure 1* (and previously in 4.1.1), the *type* and *level* of care varies depending

on whether the item is a piece of *clothing* (an item *worn on* the body, e.g., dress, shoes) or *an accessory* (an item *carried on* the body, e.g., jewellery, hat). Crucial to identifying a surrogate consumer, is the *sense of fulfilment* they feel knowing that in protecting the item and preserving its condition, it can be passed on for others to enjoy. This is distinctly different from a consumer who takes care of their item as to not lose their deposit/incur additional cost. Surrogate consumers view the item as a vessel – connecting them to consumers who will go on to use the item. This sense of connection is synergistic to positive experiences reported amongst surrogate mothers – who describe forming friendships with intended mothers (i.e., the mothers who will take the baby home and raise it) that lasts long beyond childbirth (Van den Akker, 2003; 2007). Surrogate consumers want to be a ‘part of the solution’; excited to rent again despite the precarious responsibility involved in caring for someone else’s possession (*advocacy 3*).

Finally, consumers return their item - they do so via the method agreed with the rental platform/legal owner (again, this will vary, depending on where they have rented the item from). With no desire to keep their item, surrogate consumers are happy returning it. They ensure the item is returned on time and in the same condition as it was received (which, more usually, is pristine) (*surrogacy 3*). It is here that a surrogate consumer’s sense of self once more becomes *elevated* - as they feel a sense of being a ‘good’, ethical consumer (*elevation 4*). Upon *returning* their item, consumers enjoy sharing their rental experience/s with others: through word of mouth and online (social media), they ‘spread the word’ to family, friends, and strangers (*advocacy 2*). Adamant that they will continue to rent, consumers are undeterred from the extra pressures associated with looking after something which they do not own (such as those identified in the categorisation of care). They view it as *their* responsibility to emphasise the benefits of renting (fashion) for both consumers and the environment – self-assigning themselves the role of ‘ambassador’ (*advocacy 3*).

While *Figure 1* principally identifies the ‘surrogate consumer’, it also demonstrates the interconnection between *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy* in the context of fashion rental. A further figure is presented below to illustrate this – alongside a breakdown of the associations between themes.

Figure 2. Illustrates the interconnected relationship that exists between the three themes



1. Both the rented item itself *and* the experience of renting elevates consumers' sense of self: they look *and* feel good – and demonstrate a desire to advocate this. Consumers feel a sense of pride in advocating for renting: promoting the benefits for consumers (the sense of elevation it can accomplish) *and* the environment (eliminates the wear once phenomenon; reducing overconsumption and textile waste)
2. Surrogate consumers want others to experience elevation through the same rented item – engaging in a categorisation of care, they protect and preserve its condition so that this is possible. Surrogate consumers experience a sense of fulfilment (connection and togetherness) knowing that, by protecting the item, other consumers will be able to equally enjoy it.

3. Surrogate consumers are undeterred by the extra pressure(s) involved in protecting the rented item, instead they are excited to rent again in the future, knowing that through their role as surrogate, items will be kept in circulation for longer.

5.2.5 Returning to the research questions

Before discussing the limitations of the study, it is fitting to return to the research questions to specifically address each in-turn.

1. *Why do female consumers choose to rent, over buying, fashion items?*

The findings reveal that female consumers choose to rent, over buying, fashion items to achieve a sense of *elevation*. This is something which consumers suggest cannot be accomplished through the more traditional means of buying and owning (i.e., solid consumption). Rather, renting affords them opportunity to access items that are more extravagant, more lavish, and more expensive than items they would ordinarily buy/own. These consumers all feel passionate about the ethical/ environmental issues surrounding fashion consumption, which is revealed as an important factor in their decision to rent, as opposed to buy. It appears to be the rented item itself *and* the act of renting that makes consumers *look* and *feel* good, granting them opportunity to experience their best, or most elevated, *self*. Renting permits consumers in this study a means of wearing items that are inconsistent with their identity, giving them opportunity to (temporarily) alter their sense of self without making any permanent changes to their self-concept. Crucially, this finding differs from Loussaïef et al. (2019) – the only other study to have specifically explored fashion rental and the *self* - and presents insight that may feed into the multiplicity of the *self* (Belk, 2024). Furthermore, this finding contradicts Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) assumption that access-based consumption has low relevance to the *self*. Rather, findings suggest that access-based consumption has high relevance to the *self* and in doing so, advances theoretical understanding surrounding liquid consumption and identity.

2. *Does renting, rather than owning, fashion items contribute to a consumer's self-concept?*

In response to the second research question: yes, renting does appear to contribute towards a consumer's self-concept, based on this study's findings. However, not in the way that was expected (i.e., existing research suggests that consumers likely 'hide' the fact that they rent fashion items, due to the 'stigma' of wearing an item worn by another person/stigma of lacking funds to own items outright, synonymous with earlier rental systems). Rather, it is through a sense of *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy* that renting fashion appears to inform the self-concept. With *elevation* providing insight into how renting affords consumers the opportunity to enhance their sense of self, as previously stated, *surrogacy* reveals how participants view themselves as custodians of their rented item, responsible for protecting and preserving its condition so that it can be 'passed on' for others to enjoy. While *advocacy* illustrates the desire to promote renting as a more sustainable means of consuming fashion, in harnessing full transparency, consumers openly share their experiences and persuade others to rent. Taken together, these three themes shed light on the phenomenon of fashion rental and in doing so, provide valuable insight for marketing practitioners. Crucially, the notion of *surrogacy* and 'the surrogate consumer' present an original contribution to the field of consumer research. This new concept - or modified, if you consider Solomon's (1987) early conceptualisation - has emerged through the novel combination of liquid modernity and the self-concept. Advancing much of the existing literature, *surrogacy* problematises contamination consumers as a significant barrier to consumers engaging in renting. Principally, it is consumer's behaviour *alongside* the rented item that contributes towards their self-concept; how they interact with the item (protect and preserve it from harm) *and* how they advocate for fashion rental.

3. *How can marketers encourage other consumers to engage with fashion rental systems, in the strive towards a CE?*

Finally, this research presents opportunity for marketers to more effectively encourage consumers to engage with fashion rental systems. *Advocacy* reveals that the act of renting appears to be as important, if not more so, than the item that has been rented - providing unique insight into what consumers value when engaging in fashion rental. The 'treat-like experience': starting when consumers initially browse and select their item (see *Figure 1*) and continuing through to when they receive it and subsequently wear it, is something that consumers deem considerably valuable. This sense of *elevation* – achieved through the experience, as well as the item itself, is something that marketers need to consider when promoting renting. Moreover, *advocacy* reveals that consumers regard transparency an essential aspect of renting fashion. They view it as *their* responsibility to be open and honest about the items they have rented, as to not 'trick' people into believing it is an item they can afford to buy and own. More than this, they believe transparency is crucial if we are to move away from mass-overconsumption and textile waste and towards a more sustainable future for fashion. This poses considerable opportunity for marketers who can draw on the notion of advocacy/ ambassadorship to communicate the ethical implications of renting – alongside the categorisation of care; downplaying the contamination concerns that currently deter consumers.

In responding to the research questions, the research findings make important contributions to consumer research. The next section discusses limitations of the study and makes recommendations for future research (5.3) before proposing practical applications (5.4).

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

The current study offers findings that both advance existing research and offer original insight. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight the study's limitations and identify possible areas for further research. The following section will thus address limitations of the study (5.3.1) before making recommendations for

future research (5.3.2); with emphasis on advancing the key themes identified, *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy*.

5.3.1 Limitations of the study

Firstly, is the issue of socio-economic status associated with this study. As previously discussed, in this chapter (5.2.3) and earlier in the literature review (2.1) - it is understood that renting more usually benefits low(er) income consumers who may lack funds to own items outright (Schaefers et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023; Atanasova et al., 2024). While this may be true, the research findings allude to a possible “social risk” or ‘stigma’ that may be attached to renting, specifically for these low(er) income consumers. Acknowledging the privilege of the participants who have taken part in the current study (who were middle-class, in full-time work or full-time further education), it is apparent that, for them, renting has very much been a choice. This is likely different from consumers who rent *because* they have no other choice – in other words, they are limited to renting due to financial constraints. This is discussed earlier in the chapter with connections made to (in)voluntary simplicity and the distinction between the ‘free’ and the ‘flawed’ within liquid modern society.

Therefore, while the research findings suggest that consumers are driven to be as open and honest about renting as possible (given any opportunity, strike up conversation with friends, family, strangers to encourage them to rent) – this sense of *advocacy* may be viewed as exclusive to financially stable (typically middle-class) consumers who rent through choice. With renting promoted as a more accessible means of consuming fashion, it would be fruitful to explore how/if ‘other’ consumers (e.g., the lower-middle/working class), view renting to determine if/how renting can be made more accessible and viewed as less of a “social risk”.

Secondly, most participants claim that renting is ideal for particularly millennial consumers who seek “new” for an event (such as a wedding or graduation – as discussed in 4.1.2). While participants in the current study range from 19 years – 45 years old and therefore provide insight into the key target demographic, i.e., 25–34-year-olds (Retail Insight Network, 2019; Henninger et al., 2021), it does neglect to offer insight into how older consumers view/practice renting. This presents a gap for future research to explore older age consumers – who, with more disposable income, may harness different attitudes/intentions towards renting fashion. Equally, as women who are not digitally native (unlike many of the participants in the current sample), potential issues around digital exclusion and/or technological accessibility could be considered (given that much fashion rental takes place online, within online platforms). Exploring the needs of different consumer segments could be beneficial for marketing practitioners, who, with greater insight, could effectively target a wider audience – in the strive towards the adoption of renting as a circular business model.

In a similar vein, with the current research exploring the lived experiences of women who have rented, it fails to offer insight into the experiences of men. While females remain the target consumer segment of much fashion rental (Henninger et al., 2021) and were thus chosen as the sample for the current project, it could be beneficial to explore the attitudes and behaviours of other consumer groups who *choose* to voluntarily simplify (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). With existing research focussing on female rental behaviour (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Pantano and Stylos, 2020; Baek and Oh, 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2023), examining the experiences of men who choose to rent could offer unique insight into this growing area of consumer research. Furthermore, by exploring the lived experiences of men, greater insight into how the self-concept is informed by access-based consumption may become apparent and in doing so, bolster the current findings.

While not a limitation of the study, it is important to highlight the lack of clarity within fashion rental. This has emerged throughout data analysis, with many participants describing varying ways of renting fashion and as such, numerous ways of *experiencing* renting. As something that has been discussed in both the findings chapter (4.0) and the discussion chapter (5.0), the various modes of renting are something that need to be acknowledged as a factor that may influence consumer experiences and their customer journeys (Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). With some participants rented directly from the owner of the item (P2P) and others rented directly from the rental platform (B2C), there were some who rented directly from the owner of the item *through* a rental platform (with the platform acting as 'host'). While the current study did not differentiate between the method of renting when recruiting participants, further research could address the multiple contexts of renting fashion by specifically gathering data from a sample who have shared the *same* experience.

A further limitation is that the sample of participants recruited are clearly very pro-sustainability and as such, may be more passionate than others about the issues associated with the fashion industry. By exploring other consumer segments (as outlined above) insight could be gathered into the attitudes and motivations of consumers who may not share the same concerns about sustainability. Likewise, it could be that despite having a positive attitude towards renting fashion, some consumers are unable to engage in this practice due to lack of resources/stability. Insight gained from such research would further develop the anti-consumption literature surrounding voluntary simplicity and socio-economic status (Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002a; Huneke, 2005).

Participants were also asked to describe, in detail, past experiences – thus, it could be argued that a potential limitation lies in their ability to recall. However, Existential Phenomenology (EP) recognizes that it is the participant's *interpretation* of their experience, as the unit of analysis, that offers insight into a phenomenon (Thompson et al., 1989; Pollio et al., 1997). It is through the existential phenomenological approach that the researcher was guided *by* the

participant; as they made sense of, and interpreted, their experience. The application of EP supports previous research that has embraced this interpretive technique to study consumer behaviour (Thompson et al., 1989; Belk et al., 2003; Kaufman-Scarborough and Cohen, 2004; Karanika and Hogg, 2010; Russell and Levy, 2012; Roux and Belk, 2019; Rosenberg et al., 2023). On account of this, issues around participant recall could be considered irrelevant. Moreover, while the findings show that consumers have a strong desire to rent again, it could have been worthwhile to adopt a longitudinal approach to see if participants in-fact continued renting; and, whether issues such as *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy*, remained persistent themes - something which could be explored in further study.

Worth addressing are the varying levels of renting experience (see *Table 4*). Evidently, there is heterogeneity within the participant sample – with some participants having only rented once while others had rented upwards of 30 times. It could be argued that differences in frequency of rental experiences may have influenced the findings. However, this study set out to explore the phenomenon of fashion rental in an attempt to gather insight into a relatively new, and under researched, social phenomenon. Therefore, it was perhaps inevitable that the sample would consist of consumers with varying levels of renting experience. Despite needing to address these differences, it is not concerning that such differences exist amongst the participants. The findings that have emerged have done so through an existential phenomenological approach, with participants describing their experience, or experiences, in depth – offering their interpretation of fashion rental. The three themes to emerge: *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy*, effectively respond to the research questions and present a basis for future consumer research to build upon.

Finally, as discussed in the methodology (specifically 3.4) a decision was made to not include five interviews conducted with ‘non-renters’. Recognising that these interviews did not identify any (new) information (that did not already

exist within the literature) - nor did they reveal any salient information about why these women had not (yet) rented - they were not deemed pertinent to include. Furthermore, they did not respond directly to the research questions – which focus specifically on exploring the *lived experiences* of female consumers who *have* rented fashion items, and if/how such liquid consumption experiences inform their self-concept. Therefore, including these interviews would not have helped our understanding. However, it is recognised that future research should explore the motivations of non-renters, in attempt to understand how to nudge them towards more sustainable consumption decisions.

With the above limitations considered, it is felt that the current study provides strong insight into the value of renting and its contribution to a consumer's sense of self. In doing so, the findings extend the theory of the self-concept (Belk, 1988) by identifying how the *self* is informed by access-based (fashion) consumption - responding directly to calls made for further research to examine liquid consumption experiences and the role of identity (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Antanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021). Furthermore, the research findings advance the conceptual understanding of liquid consumption, expanding upon Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) solid-liquid framework, specifically the condition of *relevance to the self*. Critically, this study provides fruitful areas for further research alongside strong implications for theory and practice. Accordingly, future research suggestions are discussed next.

5.3.2 Recommendations for future research

This research provides potential areas for further research to explore. Firstly, future research should explore the true impact of renting in the shift towards a CE. With findings revealing that renting is favoured for more special/significant events (i.e. a wedding, birthday, or graduation), rather than every-day consumption, it raises the issue of scalability. *If renting is a solution to the wear*

once phenomenon, what is the solution for the more every-day consumption of fashion? Further research could explore what needs to happen/could happen to nudge consumers towards more every-day renting experiences. With high street fashion brands such as Primark and H & M revealing their intentions towards circularity, there is scope for further research to address how such brands – regarded as “fast fashion”, and thus considered detrimental to the planet - are approaching the shift towards circularity that is so urgently needed (McKinsey and Company, 2023; Global Data, 2024; Independent, 2024; Mintel, 2024).

Secondly, it could be valuable to explore the behavioural changes of renters over time – possibly through a longitudinal approach, gathering insight into *how* renter behaviour changes, and *why* (something previously highlighted in 5.3.1). Such insight could provide marketers with an understanding of how consumer trends influence sharing consumption practices and how to retain consumers (Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). Similarly, further research could explore how access-based fashion consumption relates to life-stage, addressing the suggestion made by Loussaïef et al. (2019) and advancing more recent research that recommends this as a worthwhile area of research (Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). By considering different consumer segments and the various influences upon their decisions, marketers could more effectively target consumers and position renting towards their desired identity (Morewedge et al., 2021).

Advancing beyond the individual consumer and exploring liquid consumption in relation to family could also offer important insight for the solid/liquid consumption literature (Caldwell and Henry, 2020). Exploring solid/liquid consumption in relation to family dynamics could offer rich insight for marketers into how best to encourage and support families in shifting towards liquid consumption. For example, single-parent families on a reduced income may favour solid consumption for its stability and security e.g., car, furniture, clothes. However, with support and guidance, they could benefit from the

greater flexibility and reduced burden of ownership that liquid consumption seemingly affords – something which Atanasova et al. (2024) allude to in their remarks over liquid security. Similarly, exploring liquid consumption in relation to romantic relationships could be an intriguing line of research, i.e., couples who live together and engage in shared consumption behaviour.

Considering how inconspicuous consumption became the new conspicuous consumption (i.e., new way of signalling status) (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Currid-Halkett, 2017; Belk, 2020; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Thompson and Kumar, 2020; Atanasova and Eckhardt, 2021); *could it be that renting is the new inconspicuousness?* In other words, *could social obligation, and environmental knowledge be the new currency of consumption - with liquid consumption a social marker, as opposed to a social stigma?* Further research exploring this would be beneficial and could potentially build upon the work of Sekhon and Armstrong (2020) and the notion of inconspicuous anti-consumption. Moreover, further exploring liquid consumption and socio-economic status would advance the current voluntary simplicity literature – specifically socio-economic status and *authenticity* (Etzioni, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002a; Huneke, 2005) as well as the dynamics of social-status and distinction in a liquid modern era (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Atanasova et al., 2024).

Finally, further research should seek to explore the various means of accessing fashion. As highlighted throughout, consumers can rent fashion items a variety of ways, including B2C (i.e. Rotaro⁴⁰), P2P (i.e. Loanhood⁴¹) and P2P *through* an e-commerce rental platform (i.e. Hurr⁴²). Based on consumers' experiences in the current study, each mode of renting offers

⁴⁰ Rotaro - UK rental and resale service, which holds stock centrally (Elle, 2021) <https://www.rotaro.co.uk>

⁴¹ Loanhood - UK based fashion rental app <https://www.loanhood.com>

⁴² Hurr - UK rental platform comprised of P2P, preowned and brand rentals (Elle, 2021) <https://www.hurrcollective.com>

varying items and experiences as well as guidelines. As such, it would be beneficial to understand how such variations influence consumer behaviour – including attitudes and motivations – in relation to consumer engagement and/or behavioural intentions (in the case of non-renters). By examining the processes involved in each rental option, consumers could make more informed decisions about what type of rental is best for them and subsequently marketers can understand which target consumer group is most likely to engage with their model. Such exploration could harness a mixed method approach, using secondary data (such as social media, website, forums, and blogs) alongside qualitative data to support comprehensive understanding (Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). Advancing this, research could explore the “other side of renting” – gathering insight into those consumers who *choose* to rent out their clothes and if/how this relates to their sense of self. Such research could adopt a similar methodological approach to the current research, exploring attitudes and motivations through consumers’ lived experiences. This would not only offer insight into liquid consumption but also the notion of sharing and the Sharing Economy (SE) (Belk, 2013; 2020; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023).

The final section offers recommendations for practice and discusses how insight gathered from the findings can be harnessed by rental companies and marketing practitioners.

5.4 Practical application

This research poses multiple practical applications for marketing practitioners and rental companies. Firstly, importance should be placed on ensuring that renting offers an elevated experience for consumers. As discussed in section 4.1, consumers value renting for the treat-like experience it affords - from browsing the rental website and selecting the item to the excitement waiting for the item to arrive, before finally receiving the item in the post. This considered, rental companies should focus their attention on providing such a

treat-like experience. This could include ensuring that the rental website/platform interface is easy to navigate, with clear details of who to contact and how to raise any concerns – something participants consider an important aspect of the rental experience and of particular importance for first time renters. A further issue raised by some participants is the importance of item visibility - with consumers wishing to see *actual* images of the rented item (as opposed to stock images), including close-ups e.g., inside a bag. Consumers claim that seeing close-up images of the *actual* item makes them feel more confident about the quality of the item – reducing apprehension around quality and overcoming any contamination concerns. Moreover, it supports uncertainty around item sizing – providing some reassurance to consumers of what the item may look like on someone with a similar body shape/ size.

Further, companies could maintain consumers' excitement with “countdown” messages in the lead up to receiving their rented item – demonstrating not only a clear line of communication between the consumer and the company but adding value to the overall experience. This treat-like experience should be continued through to the arrival of the item, where personalization and gift-like packaging would elevate the experience. Such actions would not only benefit the consumer, but the company. With consumers placing significant emphasis on *advocacy* - eager to advocate renting to others - they are more likely to provide positive reviews about not only the item, but the experience as a whole. In doing so, companies can build/maintain a strong brand reputation - with an emphasis on the access-based customer journey (Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024) – and support the drive for a more sustainable fashion industry.

A further application is based on the key finding that consumers seek items that are inconsistent with their typical self-identity. As discussed in section 4.1, consumers rent items that are more extravagant, more elaborate, and more expensive than items they own - or would choose to buy and own. This is

important insight for marketing practitioners, who can be better informed on the types of items consumers are interested in renting. With the benefit of renting clearly associated with higher quality, luxury items, companies can keep this in mind when choosing which items to list. Offering rental items at a lower price-point may not be a worthwhile strategy, as consumers argue that they would *'just buy the item'* and so, the rental item needs to be better than what they own. Consumers make it clear that it is the feeling of a "treat" – something they cannot go out and buy - along with the luxury and higher-quality of the item that make renting an elevating and worthwhile practice.

The lack of accessibility that currently exists within the rental sphere has emerged as an area for improvement. Specifically, consumers share the worry that renting is largely inaccessible due to limited sizing availability. Some consumers share their frustration with platforms who only cater for smaller sizes (i.e., UK sizes 8-12), excluding mid-size and larger sized consumers (i.e., UK 14 upwards). However, consumers are aware that the only way for renting to be made more accessible is for it to become mainstream. By making rental more mainstream, consumers highlight the advantage for rental companies to expand and subsequently hold greater stock - benefiting a greater range/variety of potential consumers. This raises the importance of *advocacy* – something which all participants demonstrate a strong desire to do. That considered, marketing practitioners should capitalise on consumers interest in advocating renting, making it more accessible for consumers and subsequently more profitable for companies (Sekhon and Armstrong, 2020).

It is important that rental companies think carefully about *how* they promote the issue of cleanliness/protection of rented items. Through sharing their liquid consumption experiences, consumers have demonstrated the importance of caring for, and protecting, rented items – ensuring the value of the item is upheld so others too can seek value and feel their best *self*. Rental companies could draw on the categorisation of care identified (see *Figure 1*) - guidance created by consumers, for consumers - and potentially offer a rental "buddies"

scheme; pairing first-time renters with seasoned renters who could help ‘guide’ them through the rental process with specific focus on protecting the item. This would also support consumers’ desire to feel part of a community – connecting with other renters, sharing tips/advice - all while ensuring that the rental items are cared for and kept in circulation.

Furthermore, since participants appreciate the added value of community, companies could offer a “club” for renters, aimed at bringing consumers together while promoting renting. This could provide opportunity for consumers to connect with others and share experiences – once again, something which could be particularly beneficial for first time renters and that could help forge a sense of collective identity (Cherrier, 2007). Rental companies could partner with reputable brands/chains and offer discounts for each item rented e.g., 50% off drinks at X⁴³ with your first rental. In doing so, they could reach greater customers while providing existing customers with the value they consider important – a sense of sharing/ togetherness. By targeting reputable chains (e.g. hospitality/ entertainment), it offers not only a space for consumers to share experiences but caters to the target demographic – females who reside in urban areas and/or have accessibility into city spaces (Henninger et al., 2021). The sense of sharing and community that is highlighted in 4.3 could help marketers to retain a loyal customer base (of existing customers/ possibly now “ambassadors”) who work *with* the company to advocate for a more sustainable future for fashion. It is clear how important *advocacy* is to consumers and taking on the responsibility of promoting renting and its benefits. Supporting consumers with greater involvement could be advantageous to the consumer, the company, and the overall agenda of a circular fashion industry (EMF, 2017; 2021; WRAP, 2021; EMF, 2024).

⁴³ X – being an entertainment/ hospitality chain that rental platforms could partner with.

Finally, while application of this research is important for implementation within the fashion industry, there is potential for *surrogacy* to have relevance across a range of access-based consumption - presenting an exciting prospect and area for further research. For example, specific rental services such as toy hire (Whirli⁴⁴) or more generic services that offer a range of rental products such as Fat Llama⁴⁵ could benefit from the notion of *surrogacy* and the categorisation of care (see *Figure 1*). Albeit, such a classification of care may vary between industries, with different consumer demographics apparent e.g., rental toys may require a certain set of guidelines compared to the care of rental tools (such as drills, saws etc). With that said, the concept of *surrogacy* provides useful insight for companies and marketers from a diverse range of industries who can draw on such insight to ensure that rented items are protected, maintained, and kept in circulation for longer.

It is important to recognize that achieving a CE requires a systemic shift from a range of actors including companies and brands, government, policy makers, educators and consumers (EMF, 2017; De Angelis et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2018; McKinsey and Company, 2020; Saha et al., 2020; Tari and Trudel, 2023). Alongside practical suggestions - for rental companies/ marketers, this research has implications for policy makers/ stakeholders. Organisations such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and Textile 2030 can utilise key insights from this study to support their collective mission to reduce overconsumption and textile waste. Considering the importance consumers place on transparency and *advocacy*, such organisations could work in conjunction *with* consumers and other stakeholders (i.e., educators) to strengthen the

⁴⁴ Whirli (toy rental website) https://whirli.com/how-it-works?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Generic_-_Toy_Subscription&utm_content=118865452983&gclid=Cj0KCQjwhL6pBhDjARIsAGx8D5-7C0tZiP54bGLOZu4nPMVyzcXX-y--NpvGjW7a830Aj5b9MJtDKWYaAg3aEALw_wcB&gad=1

⁴⁵ Fat Llama (rental website) <https://fatllama.com/how-it-works>

collaborative action needed to drive change within the textile industry. Running events/ discussions in schools, universities and workplaces, whereby consumers are invited to share their (lived) experiences, have open conversations and educate others about the benefits of renting could offer another means of helping to encourage greater uptake of renting.

Findings demonstrate that, through renting, consumers can experience their most elevated *self* while contributing to a better planet and society. Consumers' overt desire to advocate provides useful insight to marketing practitioners, rental companies and stakeholders/ policy makers who can draw upon findings to more effectively encourage consumers to engage in fashion rental systems - in the strive towards a CE. Identification of the 'surrogate consumer' presents a new concept to the field of consumer research – advancing literature surrounding liquid consumption. Alongside the conceptual model identifying the surrogate consumer, a categorisation of care is identified (*Figure 1*) which can be used to help overcome issues of contamination that currently act as a barrier to consumer engagement. Upon a thorough discussion of the findings and in responding to the research questions, recommendations for future research have been identified and practical application discussed. Next, the final section of this chapter is presented: the conclusion (5.5).

5.5 Conclusion

This section concludes the final chapter of this doctoral thesis. Accordingly, it reveals the 'so what of the story' (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 146). Drawing upon the novel combination of two seminal theories; Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity and Belk's (1988) self-concept, alongside Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) conceptual framework, this research has explored the phenomenon of fashion rental through a unique lens. An existential phenomenological approach has been successfully applied to obtain in-depth insight into the lived experiences of 24 female consumers who have rented fashion items. Thematic

analysis of the phenomenological interviews has revealed three key themes: (1) *Elevation*, (2) *Advocacy* and (3) *Surrogacy* – each demonstrating *how* renting informs a consumer's self-concept. In doing so, it responds to the research questions as well as the recent calls for further research to explore if/how liquid consumption experiences contribute towards the self-concept (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Antanasova and Eckhardt, 2021; Morewedge et al., 2021).

Realising that renting does inform a consumer's sense of self, this research directly contradicts Barhi and Eckhardt's (2017) original claim that access-based consumption has low relevance to the *self*. In light of this, it has been recommended that Bardhi and Eckhart (2012) revisit their initial study, exploring car sharing, and review the solid-liquid consumption framework - specifically the four conditions of access-based consumption (of which *relevance to the self* is one). Furthermore, in finding that consumers rent items contrasting to their usual self-concept - as a means of achieving their *most elevated self* - this research disputes the only study, to my knowledge, that has explored fashion rental and the *self* (Loussaïef et al., 2019). More than this, it makes the connection between the practice of renting, as an access-based form of consumption, the self-concept, *and* the CE, with implications for wider research surrounding anti-consumption, voluntary simplicity, and consumer identity. As something which Loussaïef et al. (2019) neglected to do, this research offers nuanced insight into access-based consumption, the self-concept, and the CE.

Consumers' desire to influence others towards making positive changes to the world is not a new concept within consumer research. Cherrier's (2009) 'hero identity' typifies consumers who have a desire to raise awareness and influence others to adopt a voluntary simplistic lifestyle. While it is important to acknowledge the synergy this has with the notion of *advocacy* that has emerged from the findings, there are distinct differences. First, the notion of *advocacy* suggests that consumers recommend renting to others as *one way*

of reducing consumption, specifically the consumption of fashion - referred to by consumers as a 'solution to the wear once phenomenon'. This is different to a 'hero identity' which represents consumers who try and persuade others to adopt a *lifestyle*. Second, consumers achieve a sense of elevation through their *advocacy* attempts and self-assigned role as rental ambassador. Therefore, unlike a 'hero identity' which rests solely on the premise of a consumer desiring outward change, *advocacy* appears to be characterised by the feeling of being 'a good ethical consumer'. Finally, consumers seemingly view *advocacy* as an important part of their role as 'surrogate', and thus, as a novel concept that has emerged through this research, *surrogacy*, and its connection to *advocacy* presents original insight to consumer research and poses an intriguing avenue for further research to explore.

Prior research has identified contamination concerns as the most significant barrier to consumer's engaging with access-based consumption (Argo et al., 2006; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hazée et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2021; Khalek and Chakraborty, 2023). With no avoiding the fact that renting means shared items, marketers face the difficult task of how best to promote this liquid form of consumption. Through the notion of *surrogacy*, and the subsequent identification of the 'surrogate consumer', such concerns are problematised. Acting as custodian/caretaker of the rented item, the surrogate consumer protects and preserves its condition so that it can be 'passed on' and enjoyed by others. This is notably distinct from curatorial consumption, which is characterised by the (legal) ownership of material possessions and the subsequent preservation of the meanings attached to them – as discussed in the previous chapter (5.2.3). The surrogate consumer is thus presented as a novel concept to the field of consumer research. Alongside this, a conceptual model and a categorisation of care is offered, posing an exciting opportunity for further researchers to build upon - not only within the context of access-based fashion, but access-based consumption more broadly. Moreover, marketers can draw on *surrogacy* to overcome issues of contamination and promote the circular business model of 'renting' more effectively.

In drawing this chapter to a close, implications of this research for theory, practice, and policy, are stated once more. The theoretical contribution of this research is two-fold; it advances understanding surrounding liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), extending the theory of the self-concept (Belk, 1988). It offers nuanced insight into the self-concept and the CE, something which previous research has failed to address (Loussaïef et al., 2019). Furthermore, it demonstrates that renting does inform the self-concept, but not in the way that was expected, but via a sense of *elevation*, *advocacy*, and *surrogacy*. In doing so, it introduces the phenomena of the 'surrogate consumer'.

For practice, this research presents rental companies and marketing practitioners with rich insight into the motivations, attitudes and engagement of consumers who rent fashion items. Utilizing these findings, they can more effectively target consumers and guide them in the shift away from ownership and towards access-based consumption. And for policy, this research contributes to the work being carried out by organisations and foundations - such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF, 2017; 2024) and Textile 2030 (WRAP, 2021; 2023), in the effort to make fashion circular. Further, insight obtained through this research can be used to support policymakers and other stakeholders who call for urgent change within the fashion industry (IPCC, 2018; UN Environment, 2018; EAC, 2019; UK Parliament, 2022; UKRI 2022; 2023; Circle Economy, 2023; PACE, 2024).

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7.0 Appendix

Appendix A: Participants background

Lola

Lola is 27 years old and lives in London. She grew up in Sydney, Australia and moved to London three years ago to pursue a career in marketing. Her favourite fashion brands are Mowl and Imger. Lola has recently set up her own fashion rental company, Cupio Closet, where she combines her passion for sustainability, fashion and marketing. She runs this alongside her day-to-day corporate job. She has rented two dresses – one from By Rotation and the other from Hurr and has a designated Instagram account where she promotes sustainable fashion and her rental platform.

Clare

Clare is 29 years old and lives in London with her partner. She has recently started a new job as a live-in carer for individuals with physical disabilities. She loves thrifting - regularly visiting charity shops, purchasing from Vinted and hosting clothes 'swap' parties at her house. Clare rented a Chanel bag for her birthday event (a meal out with friends) and recalls an amazing experience. Despite having only rented once, Clare is keen to rent again – most likely for her upcoming 30th birthday. She uses a designated Instagram account to promote her love for thrifting and second-hand bargains.

Stacey

Stacey is 25 years old and lives in London with friends. After studying marine biology at university, she has gone on to pursue a career in travel - now co-founder of a start-up travel company. She became particularly interested in sustainability when she was a student and now regularly uses Vinted and shops in second-hand stores. She uses Instagram to show others how 'affordable' and 'easy' it is to dress sustainably – in an attempt to challenge the assumption that sustainable fashion is expensive. Her favourite fashion rental service is We are the Devout although she is excited to rent brands such as Chloe and Chanel in the future.

Kate

Kate is 25 years old and lives in London. After completing her A Levels, she went straight into acting before taking on a more freelance role in film production. She regularly uses Vinted and Depop and has rented twice - a 'two-piece' (top and skirt) for her work Christmas party and a gifted dress for

a fancy-dress birthday event (a LBD which she styled into Audrey Hepburn). Kate loved both her rental experiences and is eager to rent again – she believes that renting is the perfect answer to the wear once phenomenon.

Selena

Selena is 34 years old and lives in London. She is co-founder of the rental platform, Loanhood, and is also undertaking a full-time PhD exploring digital fashion and identity. She is a proud advocate of slow fashion and a regular user of second-hand platforms such as Depop and Vestiaire Collective. She has rented between 10 – 20 times and strongly believes that renting is the perfect business model for this day and age. She continues to rent - both from her own platform and others and sees renting as an opportunity for the next generation to become sustainable consumers.

Bella

Bella is a 20-year-old full-time student, studying paramedic science in Sheffield. She has previously used Depop – both to buy and sell items and is keen to try Vinted and thrifting (in charity shops). She chose to rent a designer handbag for her birthday weekend; a striking, blue bag that would match various outfits that she had got planned for different events. She very much enjoyed the experience and telling her friends that she had rented it. She was impressed with the rental platform, My Wardrobe HQ, who replied quickly to her email queries ahead of receiving the item.

Gina

Gina is a 34-year-old pharmacy advisor. She lives in Scotland with her husband and three young daughters and considers herself environmentally conscious. As a proud consumer of pre-loved fashion, she enjoys sharing her recent purchases/ bargains with friends - particularly with the school mum's (at the school gates during school pick-up). She mainly uses Instagram and Facebook to search for/ browse pre-loved and thrifted fashion items. She has rented two items to-date and has had positive experiences with both – sharing the items on Instagram via 'tags' in an effort to promote renting.

Michelle

Michelle is 37 years old and lives in Berlin. Originally from Scotland - where she grew up and where many of her family still live, she now enjoys living in Germany working as a translator. Most recently, she has been enjoying 'sharing' clothes with friends and meeting up to 'swap' clothes for an event/ occasion. She has rented one item - a Vampires Wife dress from Hurr, for a

family wedding in Scotland. She saw the wedding as a good opportunity to try renting for the first time – making sure to read lots of reviews before selecting the dress. Despite a bad first experience – the dress being faulty – she remains optimistic to rent again in the future. She strongly believes that as consumers we have a responsibility to take better care of the clothes we consume.

Ramona

Ramona is 27 years-old and lives in London. She works as a medical writer - a job she recently started after completing her PhD. She has rented a total of 10 items and intends to continue. As well as renting, Ramona enjoys discovering pre-loved clothes through apps such as Depop and Vestiaire Collective. Her fashion consumption largely consists of professional wear (for work) and vintage clothing – with statement tops and blouses her favourite items to rent. She very much enjoys the process of searching for rental items on various platforms – describing it as ‘guilt-free browsing’. She would love to see more people renting and for it to become the ‘norm’.

Etta

Etta is 23 years old and a recent graduate from MMU, where she studied fashion. Originally from Wales, she is living in Manchester following her studies. Discovering renting via an Instagram ad, she has since rented two items from Hurr: a dress (for Graduate Fashion Week) and a ‘two-piece’ (for graduation). As a fashion student, she has studied sustainability within the context of fashion in great detail. She strongly believes that while a systemic shift is needed to make fashion more sustainable, as consumers, it is our role to spread the word and educate others – something which she prides herself on doing.

Cilla

Cilla is 27 years-old and lives in Bristol in a house share with friends. She has recently become a chartered executive solicitor. She very much enjoys second-hand shopping – on her own and with her housemates and has recently challenged herself to 1-year of only buying second-hand clothes. She recalls having rented 4 or 5 times over the period of lockdown, following the coronavirus pandemic. All of her items were rented from We are the Devout – a subscription-based rental platform. On reflection, she thinks it was quite an expensive platform and so would look at other rental platforms in the future.

Kelly

Kelly is 22 years-old and lives in Southampton. She is currently studying for her master's degree. As well as renting items, she rents out her own fashion items to others. She also engages in pre-loved and second-hand fashion consumption – through apps such as Vinted and Depop. She recalls around 2 years ago making a conscious decision to change the way she consumes fashion. She has rented three times – having had positive experiences with each item she has rented. She is keen to rent again and very much enjoys promoting renting - along with sustainable fashion more generally, on her Instagram account and to friends and family. She has also become a recent ambassador for the start-up company, Loanhood.

Rose

Rose is a 23-year-old paramedic and lives in London with friends. Since recently graduating, and starting work, Rose has had more money to invest in higher-quality (more expensive) fashion items – moving away from the cheaper (usually fast fashion) items that she tended to consume as a student. Rose is keen to continue making positive sustainable fashion choices and avoid impulsive purchases. She has rented two items - both for special occasions, and despite having a negative experience with one - a dress she rented for graduation, she is open to renting again in the future.

Tessa

Tessa is 27 years-old and lives in London with her boyfriend. Having studied geography at university, she is now creative partner at an environmental charity. She considers herself to be very environmentally conscious. She is continually reducing her consumption/ making changes and replacing old consumption habits with more sustainable ones - including more recently persuading her boyfriend to try Vinted for the first time. She is passionate about raising awareness of sustainable consumption – something she does through her work and personal life. She has rented between 15-20 times - a mixture of statement items and more day-to-day items.

Polly

Polly is 37 years old and lives in York with her husband and young daughter. Having had various jobs in different industries, including owning a restaurant, she is now co-founder of the fashion rental start-up, Loanhood, which she runs with her best friend. She is an avid fashion lover and has rented between 30-40 times. She believes she will continue to rent – referring to renting as ‘a normal part of her fashion consumption’. She has also rented her own items

out to others via the Loanhood app – believing renting holds the potential to help fashion become truly circular.

Kira

Kira is 19 years old and a student, studying in London where she house shares with fellow students. She has recently become an ambassador for By Rotation following her growing interest in sustainable fashion. She is passionate about buying second-hand/ pre-loved fashion and enjoys exploring charity shops with her friends at the weekend – claiming that ‘searching’ for items (especially unique or vintage) is part of the fun. She has rented 5 items in total, including those she has rented through her role as ambassador. She is keen to continue renting and very much wishes for others to get involved.

Ivie

Ivie is 23 years old and lives in Manchester. She has recently graduated as a fashion student from MMU. Ivie enjoys buying pre-loved fashion and has rented two items – one from a rental platform and the other through a P2P listing. While unfortunately she had a negative experience with one of the items - a dress she rented for graduation, she remains optimistic about renting and is keen to rent again. She believes that renting is not as popular as it could, or should, be and she thinks this is due to a lack of consumer understanding.

Joan

Joan is 49 and lives in Scotland with her husband. She works as an early years practitioner at a local school. In her spare time she enjoys going out with friends and seeing her grandchildren. She has rented once before - a dress for a wedding, from a local start-up rental company: Little Green Dress. She describes having had a great experience and is excited to rent again – although she recognises this will probably be for another event/ special occasion where she can select an item that she would never usually buy.

Hattie

Hattie is 36 and lives in Teesside. She is a lecturer at Teesside university and is currently undertaking a professional doctorate. She is passionate about fashion and sustainability – the focus of her PhD and her teaching. She enjoys pre-loved, second-hand and vintage fashion and has rented once before – a dress for a black tie (work) event. She very much enjoyed the experience and is open to renting again. She strongly believes that the fashion industry needs

to change for the better although she acknowledges that positive steps are being made.

Melanie

Melanie is 23 years-old and lives with her family in London. She has recently graduated as a graphic designer and started her first job at a sustainable jewellery company. She considers herself to be very sustainable – in all aspects of her life. She likes to support small, independent businesses - rather than large cooperations – where she can discover unique items. She enjoys thrifting and charity shopping and is 6 months into a 2-year challenge to not buy anything new (other than essentials such as underwear). She has rented once from Hurr, a dress for her graduation. Despite the item not being in very good condition, she was satisfied with the service – with the company giving her a full refund.

Beatrice

Beatrice is 41 years-old and lives in Maidenhead with her husband and three children. She is a strategy and business partner at a clinical trials company. She has rented four times in total, all from Hirestreet. Each item rented has been for an event, which she thinks will be her motivation for renting in the future. She has suggested renting to lots of friends, with some having gone on to rent following her recommendation. She considers the process of renting just as enjoyable as wearing the item and is excited to rent again in the future.

Sasha

Sasha is 21 years old and lives in Brighton. Having just graduated from university, she is currently working full-time as a waitress while she searches for a graduate position. She is passionate about sustainable fashion; she shops second-hand - in charity shops and via Vinted and avoids buying unnecessary items. She makes conscious decisions around her consumption and when she does buy something new, she weighs up the longevity of the item and questions if she really needs it. She has rented once, a statement dress for her graduation. Sasha believes there is a future for renting, although she thinks it best caters for special events/ occasions.

Vivian

Vivian is 22 years old and lives in London. She works as a content and community specialist for a technology start-up. She enjoys buying clothes from apps such as Vinted and Depop as well as selling her own items through these platforms. She has rented three times; all from the rental company, Rotaro –

although she is excited to try out different platforms in the future. She very much enjoys experimenting with her style and finds renting a great way to do so at no cost to the environment. Amongst the items she has rented is a jumpsuit (for her graduation), a dress (for her birthday) and a 'two-piece' (for a work event).

Anna

Anna is 45 years-old and lives in Manchester with her husband. She has a PhD and is an economic development specialist. She loves charity shopping, having done it for as long as she can remember. She considers herself to be a sustainable consumer, with emphasis on recycling, thrifting and pre-loved (such as eBay). She has two styles: smart dress and lounge/ yoga wear – claiming that if you don't see her in a very smart work dress, you will see her in loungewear. Despite not actually wearing the item she rented – due to the company going bust, she fondly recalls the experience of selecting a dress and a bag for a close friend's wedding. She is open to renting again.

Appendix B: Recruitment media – message to participants

Hello, I hope you don't mind me dropping you a message 😊

I am a current PhD research student at Manchester Metropolitan University and I am seeking participants for my study - offering a £20 "Love to Shop" voucher to each participant!

I will be interviewing participants to gain insight into their direct experiences of renting luxury fashion items.

In order to participate you must be over 18 years of age, have rented luxury fashion item(s) at least once and have a photograph(s) of you wearing an item(s) - this is to act as a prompt during the interview.

Participation will involve approx. a 1-hour hour Microsoft teams (informal) interview with myself.

If you are interested, please let me know by replying to this message. I will then need to email you a consent form and a participant information sheet which you will need to return to me within one week.

Apologies if this is not of interest to you and please ignore.

Amy 😊

Appendix C: Recruitment media – email to companies

To whom it may concern at XXX,

I am a second-year PhD researcher at Manchester Metropolitan University. I am currently in the process of recruiting participants for my research project. My research is exploring luxury fashion rental, the self-concept, and the circular economy. I am recruiting participants aged 18 years old or over, female, who have rented luxury fashion at least once and have a photo(s) of them fashioning their garment(s).

Through in-depth interviews with consumers, this research will provide first-hand insight into consumer acceptance, attitude, and motivations of renting luxury fashion items. Through understanding why consumers rent, why they avoid renting, or why they only rent in certain situations, findings will be invaluable to marketing managers, as they can adjust their marketing strategies to target consumers and assist them to engage in luxury renting as a sustainable form of fashion consumption.

I am adopting a two-phase approach to recruitment:

- 1.** As Principal Investigator, I will directly reach out to potential consumers via Instagram
- 2.** Via direct appeals to luxury fashion rental companies for their support in promoting the project

I am hoping you can support my recruitment of participants, in exchange for a written-up document of my findings upon completion.

Should you be able to support with this research, I would ask that you promote the study through a variety of social media posts (I can provide a short summary) and inform me of any potential interest from your followers.

I am more than happy to discuss further or expand on the research in greater detail.

Thank you so much for taking the time to consider my request and I very much hope we can work together on this necessary and timely area of research.

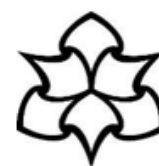
Many thanks,

Amy

Appendix D: Recruitment media – Cupio Closet’s call for participants



Manchester Metropolitan
University



Renting luxury fashion items

Renting luxury fashion items: An exploratory study of
access-based consumption and consumer behaviour

Protocol v2, 10/03/2022

Protocol authorised by:

Full name in print Role	Date	Signature
Professor Ben Kerrane Principal Supervisor		

Project Team

Principal Investigator	Amy Grace Ward PhD Research student Faculty of Business and Law Marketing, Retail and Tourism Department
Supervisory Team Principal Supervisor	Professor Ben Kerrane Faculty of Business and Law Marketing, Retail and Tourism Department
Secondary supervisor	Dr Saeed Najafi Tavani Faculty of Business and Law Marketing, Retail and Tourism Department

For general queries, supply of study documentation, and collection of data, please contact:

Name: Amy Ward

Project role: Principal Investigator

Address: MMU Business School, All Saints, All Saints Building, Manchester, M15 6BH

Tel: 01612472000

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Fax: n/a

Web address: n/a

Problems relating to this study should be referred, in the first instance, to the Principal Investigator.

Funder

This research project is self-funded by the Principal Investigator.

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1 BACKGROUND

This research is positioned within the field of consumer behaviour, specifically within the context of the Circular Economy (CE) and the fashion industry. The CE strives to protect the environment and effectively challenge concerns regarding climate change. The fashion industry is a significant and direct contributor to the current climate crisis and without change, economies will not be able to survive. However, this involves collaborative action from a range of actors, including companies and brands, government, policy makers, stakeholders, educators, and consumers (EMF, 2017; Donner and Vries, 2021; Business of fashion, 2021). This research will focus specifically upon the circular business model of 'renting'. This aims to contribute to the CE by offering products to consumers on a temporary basis, whilst ownership remains with the company (Lawson et al., 2016; Linder and Willander, 2017; Yang et al., 2021). This means that products stay in use for longer, are circulated back into the industry and positively contribute to the reduction of waste and pollution (Barreiro-Gen and Lozano, 2020).

'Renting' is considered an access-based form of consumption and is an interesting and timely area for further research. Access-based consumption is passing and short-lived, with consumers having temporary access to a product (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). In contrast, solid consumption is consistent with the traditional form of ownership. It is enduring and typically remains with the owner for an extended period of time (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020; Morewedge et al., 2021). Research into renting products is not a new area of research. However, findings are limited, and further research is needed to gain more in-depth insight into the phenomena and further develop the current conceptual framework (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020). Previous research has discussed the CE in relation to other contexts, such as the transport industry, offering insight, for example, into car-sharing as an access-based form of consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Shaefer et al., 2016). However, this cannot be generalised to the fashion industry as consumer motivations and attitudes may vary.

Additionally, research has shared consumer concerns with the shift from ownership to access-based consumption. Notably, consumers' fear of contamination discourages them to engage with access-based consumption. Contamination, i.e. consumers unfavorability towards a product they perceive to have been in close contact with germs and/or residue, can deter consumers from gaining access to products as they do not wish to contract this possible contagion (Haze et al., 2019). However, renting does allow consumers to seek variety and explore trends, while being able to return products and swap them for a different style (Lawson et al., 2016; Morewedge et al., 2021). Understanding consumers' motivations and attitudes towards renting is vital to companies to be able to create successful business models that run efficiently (Lawson et al., 2016). With that considered, it is important to conduct further exploratory research. As such, this project aims to explore consumer attitudes, motivations, and engagement towards renting luxury fashion items.

Furthermore, this project aims to explore the concept of access-based consumption and the role of the self-concept. The self-concept originates from work conducted by Belk (1988), exploring the association between possessions and the sense of 'self', with Belk's work having a major influence upon the field of consumer behaviour. Whereas Belk's (1988) work highlights the importance of ownership of products on the self-concept and the extended self, this project responds to calls for research which explicitly investigates whether access-based consumption (in this case, renting luxury fashion items) helps to contribute towards a consumer's self-concept (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020). Limited research has examined the self in relation to access-based consumption (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020), especially within the fashion industry, where the sense of 'self' is both fluid and dynamic (Loussaief et al., 2019). Further research is needed to fill this gap and offer new insight to the field.

2 RESEARCH QUESTION(S) AND OBJECTIVES

Research Question

What are consumer attitudes, motivations, and engagement towards renting luxury fashion products, in an attempt to contribute towards a CE? And does renting, rather than owning, luxury fashion items help contribute to the self-concept?

Research Aims

This project aims to explore the lived experience of female consumers who have rented luxury fashion items of clothing, specifically exploring whether renting such items helped to inform their self-concept. It responds to the work of Lamberton and Goldsmith (2020), who encourage further research which explores the link between renting, as a form of liquid consumption, and Belk's conception of the self-concept (more usually explored through ownership and 'solid' consumption). Furthermore, this project aims to explore the role that 'renting', as a PSS, has on the widely discussed topic of the CE and expand on previous research that has emphasised the effectiveness of circular business models (Yang et al., 2018; Barreiro-Gen and Lozano, 2020; Colucci and Vecchi, 2021; Burke et al., 2021; Donner and Vries, 2021; Patwa et al., 2021; Royanto and Bask, 2021).

Research Objectives

1. To explore consumer understandings of the CE and the proposed shift from the linear economy
2. To identify key consumer attitudes towards renting luxury fashion products as opposed to the traditional buying and owning of products as conventionally seen in the linear economy
3. To identify consumer motivations for renting luxury fashion products
4. To investigate how consumers engage with renting luxury fashion as a circular business model
5. To explore whether consumers feel that renting luxury fashion items helps to contribute towards their self-concept

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This project will harness a qualitative methodological approach which fits with the inductive and exploratory nature of the research problem, allowing for theory development and exploration into consumer attitudes and motivations within the

context of the CE. Moreover, an existential phenomenological approach is appropriate to allow for an in-depth insight to emerge into how consumers feel about the phenomena of luxury fashion, renting and the CE. This approach is effective in accounting cognitive experiences from within an individual's first-person point of view, giving them opportunity to describe their own lived-experiences, as experts in their own lives (Pietersma, 2000).

The method used to explore this will be semi-structured interviews, gaining in-depth insight from consumers. Prior to the interviews, a small-scale pilot study will be administered with 3 participants to test the interview guide. The pilot study is an important element of the research design, as it will improve the interview schedule and refine the questions to more accurately gather insight from consumers. Furthermore, it will be especially beneficial for the PI, as a novice to conducting qualitative data, it will reduce the risk of them encountering any problems while obtaining the data (Ismail et al., 2018). Subsequently, the semi-structured interviews will take place with 20-25 consumers, all of whom have rented a luxury fashion product at least once and thus have experience of engaging with the circular business model 'renting'. Interviews will be conducted via Microsoft Teams and around 1-hour long. Consumers will be asked to bring along a photos/s to the interview as a prompt to help them with their discussions. As a thank you for taking part in the study, each participant will be offered a £20 gift voucher.

Adopting a qualitative approach to this research will offer in-depth insight into the phenomena through an inductive and exploratory investigation. Furthermore, it will allow for theory building and conceptual development, as advised by Bhardhi and Eckhart (2017). It should supplement the current theoretical understanding surrounding liquid and solid consumption, in addition to access-based consumption and the CE, whilst offering an original contribution to the theory of the self-concept and the extended self. The chosen methods will offer enhanced understanding into the motives and attitudes of consumers regarding the research problem. The photographic evidence will offer novel contribution to the pre-existing empirical research within the field, in addition to providing complementary evidence towards this research study.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) will be employed to analyse the qualitative data. Thematic analysis can be used across multiple theoretical frameworks

and a range of data types (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is, therefore, an appropriate choice for the present research as it can be used within the Liquid framework (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) to effectively analyse the in-depth interviews.

4 SETTING

The in-depth interviews (both the pilot study and the 20-25 semi-structured interviews) will take place via Microsoft Teams, which is fully supported by MMU. An invitation link will be sent to each participant with a mutually agreed time and date. A reminder will be sent to the participant in the days leading up to the interview.

5 PARTICIPANTS

Three participants will be required for the small-scale pilot study (to test the interview guide) and subsequently 20-25 participants will be required for the semi-structured interviews.

5.1 Inclusion Criteria

The participants for this study will need to be 18 years old or over and female. They can have varying educational backgrounds and varying salaries and thus will potentially have a range of disposable income. If the participants have accessed and engaged with renting of luxury fashion at least once and have at least one photographic piece of evidence of them wearing their fashion item, they are eligible for the study.

5.2 Exclusion Criteria

Participants who have not engaged with rental of luxury fashion at least once will not be able to take part. Additionally, those under the age of 18 years old will not be able to participate.

6 STUDY PROCEDURES

6.1 Participant Recruitment

The PI will adopt two methods to identify and subsequently approach potential participants: via Instagram and via direct appeal to fashion rental companies. The social media platform, Instagram, will be used to identify potential participants. More specifically, luxury fashion rental company accounts on Instagram will be followed by the PI, in which they will assess their number of followers and purposely identify followers accounts who at first impression meet the set criterion for the study. The age restriction for Instagram is 13 years old or over (BBC, 2021) and as such the PI will consider a protocol to ensure that potential participants are both above the age requirement of Instagram and over 18 years old, and as such meet the eligibility criteria for the study. The protocol will consist of; firstly, checking the potential participant is 18 years old or over and excluding any participant who is under 18 years old and, secondly, utilising a snowball effect to harness further recruitment from participants. Upon successful recruitment, a Participation information Sheet (PIS) and consent form will be sent via email to each participant. Participants will be given 1 week to complete and return the consent form to the PI.

In addition to identifying and approaching potential participants directly, the PI will appeal to luxury fashion rental companies to ask for their help in recruiting participants. Specifically, the PI will contact luxury fashion rental companies that have been identified as renting luxury fashion to the target audience and appeal for participants via their network. This would offer greater chance of identifying and recruiting participants. In the instance that participants respond to the companies' appeal, the PI will gather the potential participants information and approach them, harnessing the same protocol process as outlined above – before sending them the PIS and consent form to be signed and returned within 1 week. Findings of the study, upon completion, will be offered to the fashion rental companies in exchange for their support in recruiting participants.

6.2 Consent

A PIS and consent form will be sent to all participants who actively want to take part in the study and who meet the eligibility criteria. These forms will be a Word document and will be sent to participants via email. Participants will be asked to read through the PIS and consent form, signing the consent form and returning it to the PI within 1 week. The participants will also be offered the opportunity at this stage to ask any potential

questions or share their concerns/ worries with the PI regarding their participation. If the PI has not heard back from the participant within 1-week, a reminder will be sent to the participant.

Both the PIS and Project Protocol form will be reviewed by the Principal Supervisor and secondary supervisor, as well as the MMU Ethics committee, and as such, there is no need to assess participant capacity – if the participant has signed the forms, they are able to take part.

6.3 Withdrawal Criteria

Participants are able to withdraw from the study, even if data collection has taken place, however they cannot withdraw once data has been anonymised. In the instance that a participant does wish to withdraw, they must inform the PI of this decision and should they desire, they are welcome to provide reason for withdrawal (but are not required to). Following this, the PI will provide the participant with a Right to Withdraw form to be signed. Subsequently, this will be used to indicate in the research records that a participant has withdrawn from the study.

In the situation that a participant must be automatically withdrawn, the same process will be taken as outlined above but rather the PI will explain to the participant the reason for their automatic withdrawal from the study.

7 INCIDENTS

The nature of the research does not offer opportunity for any distress/ discomfort or complaints. However, in the case that a participant should have any major concerns, I would firstly ask if they would like to continue with their participation or withdraw from the study. As the research only incorporates in-depth interviews and a photographic exercise, and is not complex or strenuous in its requirements of the participants, I do not foresee any major concerns occurring. However, in the spirit of pre-empting possible concerns, it could be that the in-depth interviews are perceived as too long/ discomforting. In this instance, I would offer a break(s) to allow participants to refresh and recompose. Again, ensuring they are happy to continue.

Any complaints or issues raised by participants will be anonymously recorded within the project documents.

8 DATA ANALYSIS AND HANDLING

Data within this project is that of the participants responses to the interview. It takes the form of the audio recording and the subsequent transcriptions (stored as electronic data), in addition to the hand written notes made by the PI during the interviews and directly after (paper based). Subsequently, NVIVO will be employed to help organise the audio recordings and transcriptions, ensuring for effective thematic analysis.

8.1 Sample Size

Previous research conducted within the field of consumer behaviour was used as a guide for selecting an appropriate sample size. Specifically, Loussaief et al. (2019) who conducted 28 semi-structured interviews, exploring the various access-based consumption practices within the fashion industry. Along with, Bazi et al. (2020) who conducted 25 semi-structured interviews to gain qualitative insight into luxury brands and social media. Based upon this recent qualitative research, it can be deemed appropriate to adopt a similar sample size for the current research problem.

8.2 Data Collection

Data collection will follow a five-phase approach:

1. Phase 1 consists of recruiting consumers. Participant's personal data will be collected and identified upon them signing the consent form. Identification categories collected will include: name, age, gender, occupation, educational background and number of times they have engaged in renting luxury fashion.
2. Phase 2 of data collection involves undertaking the small-scale pilot study, in which an initial interview guide will be formulated (informed by the literature review), with 3 pilot interviews conducted including the photographic exercise.

3. Phase 3 involves analysis of the pilot study data, and refinement of the interview guide and amendments, if necessary. This will include transcriptions of the audio recording of the pilot interviews and subsequent thematic analysis of the interviews.
4. Phase 4 involves undertaking the semi-structured interviews with 20-25 consumers, incorporating the photographic evidence that they will be asked to bring with them to the interview.
5. The final stage of the data collection will be thematic analysis of the interviews (Phase 5). This will involve transcribing each interview from the audio recording and thematically analysing each transcription. Data analysis will include the use of NVIVO. Identifying information will be removed by the PI at the time of transcription (destruction of the consent forms) and raw audio recording will be removed thereafter (keeping transcriptions) so no data can be linked back to the real names.

8.3 Data Handling

The data will be handled by the PI and stored on the secure MMU cloud service, OneDrive. This will be password protected and only the PI will have access. Any hard copy data will be secured in a locked cabinet in an MMU office. The PI has successfully completed the Data Protection and Research Integrity training on the MMU platform Moodle, as part of the mandatory training that must be undertaken as a PhD student. The PI is responsible for conducting thematic analysis of the data, including anonymising the data (i.e. anonymising the participant's names and identity by allocating them to a participant identification number). Prior to anonymisation, hard copy data will be kept in a secure, locked cabinet in a secure MMU office, separately from identifiable information (i.e. the participants identification number will be kept in a separate location to the list of participants names against their identification number).

8.4 Access to Data

Besides the PI, access will be granted to authorised representatives from the University to permit study-related monitoring, audits and inspections. The Principal Supervisor and secondary supervisor will have access to the anonymised data only.

8.5 Record Keeping

After the project is complete, data will be deleted.

9 REGULATORY ISSUES

9.1 Peer Review

A version of peer review has been undertaken, specifically, by the Principal Supervisor and secondary supervisor who have checked the PIS, Project Protocol form, Consent Form and Interview Guide, to ensure that all information is correct and appropriate.

9.2 Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for the current project is in the process of being obtained. This is through the online EthOS application system that is used by the Manchester Metropolitan University. Data collection will not take place until ethical approval has been granted. In the case that amendments need to be made to the application, this will be done in a timely manner and made a priority in the PhD project to ensure data collection can take place as soon as possible. Correspondence with the Principal Supervisor will take place to go over the amendments before re-submitting the application.

9.3 Insurance

n/a

9.4 Health and Safety

There are no significant health and safety risks associated with the current research project as the data collection will take place via Microsoft Teams.

9.5 Conflicting Interests or Competing Roles

There are no competing interests that may influence the study design, conduct or reporting of this project. Similarly, there are no competing roles that may influence the PI or participants behaviours.

9.6 Monitoring, Audit & Inspections

Monitoring of the research will occur, to ensure wellbeing of participants and that quality of data is maintained throughout the study (MMU, 2016 SOP12: Monitoring and Audit: online). Monitoring should be performed by the academic supervisor and will involve monitoring of and/or audit the following: consent process, protocol adherence and data quality (MMU, 2016 SOP12: Monitoring and Audit: online).

9.7 Protocol Compliance and Amendments

Any amendments to ethically approved documentation (e.g. Project Protocol, PIS, Consent Form, Invitation Letters/Advertisements and Interview Guide) will be re-submitted for further ethical scrutiny (MMU, 2020a SOP6: Ethics and External Approvals: online). The amendment would be made via EthOS and would include a description of the changes in addition to copies of all amended documentation. Data collection would not take place until the ethical amendments had been approved.

9.8 Data Protection and Confidentiality

The PI is the data controller and custodian. Only the PI, Principal Supervisor and secondary supervisor have access to the data, however the Principal Supervisor and secondary supervisor only have access to anonymised data. Participant's identities will be removed by the PI at the time of transcription (by destruction of the consent forms) with raw audio recordings deleted thereafter (phase 5 of data collection), so that no data can be linked to the real names of the participants. All online data will be stored on the secure MMU cloud service, OneDrive, which will be password protected and only accessible by the PI. Hard copies of data will be secured in a locked cabinet in a secure MMU office. Only the PI will have access to all the forementioned data storage locations. No data will be shared with a third party, other than the Principal Supervisor and secondary supervisor (anonymised only). The PI will be responsible

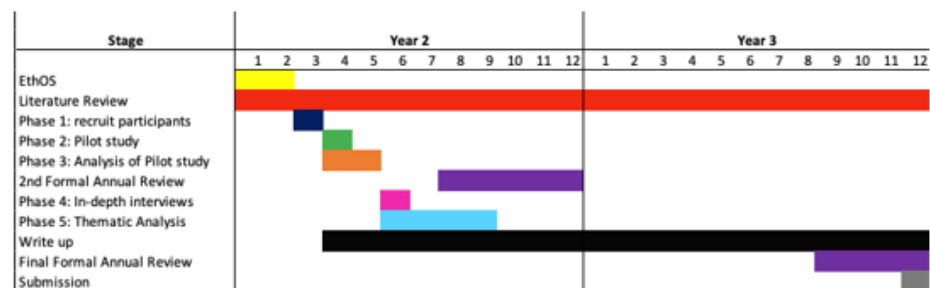
for destruction of the data and technical requirements will be followed. In the case of data breach, the PI is responsible for informing the Data Protection Officer.

10 DISSEMINATION POLICY

The PI owns the data arising from the study (Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)) and is the first author for the final report and any other publications. MMU encourages researchers to publish and disseminate results of high-quality research (MMU, 2020b: online). In accordance with these guidelines, results from this research intend to be published in a peer-reviewed journal as well as at academic conferences (using the anonymised data only). Findings will be made accessible through the MMU Research E-space Repository as well as displayed on the MMU PGR Research Blog webpage (this is in exchange for being awarded the internal funding for the research).

The outcome of the study will be made available to participants - this will be a document that describes the findings and is sent to all participants. Similarly, a document will be sent to any luxury fashion rental companies that helped to recruit participants. In addition, participants will be able to access the outcome should it be published (in this case participants would be signposted to the peer-reviewed journal and subsequent publication). There are no plans to make the anonymised dataset publicly available in Open Access.

11 PROJECT TIMELINE



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Participant Information Sheet

Renting luxury fashion items: An exploratory study of access-based consumption and consumer behaviour

1. Invitation to research

I would like to invite you to take part in the current research project. My name is Amy Ward, and I am a PhD student at MMU, based within the Marketing, Retail and Tourism department. I am also the Principal Investigator (PI) on this project. My research explores renting luxury fashion items as an access-based form of consumption (i.e. where you access a product for a temporary period of time only - in contrast to the traditional form of 'ownership'). I am specifically exploring the role of the self-concept and how access-based consumption relates to the Circular Economy (CE). I am self-funding the project, however some internal funding has been secured to contribute towards the data collection (MMU Research Support Award).

2. Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to take part in this research project as you meet the eligibility criteria. There are a maximum total of 28 participants partaking in this project. You have either been purposively selected by the PI and directly approached, responded to a rental fashion company message or you have been recommended by another participant.

I have chosen to recruit female participants, aged 18 years old or over as this sample is the most fashion conscious and will therefore be able to offer the greatest insight into the phenomena of renting luxury fashion. You have been invited because you have rented luxury fashion at least once before and therefore are able to discuss your experience in-depth during the interview. Furthermore, you have photographic evidence to support the discussions surrounding your experience.

3. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide. I will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which I will give to you. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time (without giving a reason) up until data anonymisation has taken place.

4. What will I be asked to do?

This project involves taking part in a 1-hour long in-depth interview via Microsoft Teams. The interview will explore your individual experiences of renting luxury fashion and its relation to your self-concept (i.e., your sense of identity), as well as your understanding of the CE. The

interview will be attended by yourself and the PI and will follow a semi-structured interview guide. This will involve you being asked open-ended questions that will guide the [interview](#), however the semi-structured nature will allow for opportunity to expand on responses and engage in further discussion. You will be sent an invitation link for the Microsoft Teams interview, scheduled for a mutually agreed time and date. You will also be sent a reminder email ahead of the interview.

You are expected to take part in the interview only and will not be required for further participation. The consent process consists of a consent form, which will be sent to you via email. You will be asked to read, sign and return the form within 1-week. You will have opportunity at this stage to ask any questions regarding your participation. To be able to fully participate in this research, you must have read the PIS (this document) and signed the consent form.

The Microsoft Teams interviews will be audio recorded. The audio will be accessed, stored, and analysed by the PI only, who will transcribe each participant recording and delete the raw audio after data analysis has taken place. Any publications and dissemination of the data will be anonymised and therefore cannot be traced back to you.

5. Are there any risks if I participate?

There are no potential risks to participating in this research project.

6. Are there any advantages if I participate?

As a thank you for taking part in this project, you will be awarded a £20 gift voucher. This is to credit your time and effort in providing meaningful insight and making this research project possible.

There are some important contributions to be made from this project. Firstly, this research will offer rich empirical data into the phenomena of renting luxury fashion and subsequently support and advance on current theory within the field of consumer behaviour. Secondly, it will offer practical insight for marketing practitioners, who will be able to more effectively devise marketing strategies to target consumers and assist them in making more sustainable consumption choices. Thirdly, this research will have implications for policy. Specifically, insight gained from this research can support work carried out by initiatives such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and WRAP Textile 2030 - who strive to improve society and the environment by transitioning towards a CE.

When you agree to participate in this research, we will collect from you personally identifiable information. Outlined below is information on how your personal data will be protected.

The Manchester Metropolitan University ('the University') is the Data Controller in respect of this research and any personal data that you provide as a research participant.

The University is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and manages personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University's Data Protection Policy.

We collect personal data as part of this research (such as name, email address, telephone numbers or age). As a public authority acting in the public interest, we rely upon the 'public task' lawful basis. When we collect special category data (such as medical information or ethnicity) we rely upon the research and archiving purposes in the public interest lawful basis. Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

Anonymised data will be accessible to my Principal Supervisor and Secondary Supervisor only.

If your data is shared this will be under the terms of a Research Collaboration Agreement which defines use and agrees confidentiality and information security provisions. It is the University's policy to only publish anonymised data unless you have given your explicit written consent to be identified in the research. **The University never sells personal data to third parties.**

I will only retain your personal data for as long as is necessary to achieve the research purpose (phase 5 of data collection - when anonymisation takes place).

Data handling, anonymisation and disposal

Data will be handled by the PI and stored on the secure MMU cloud service, OneDrive. This will be password protected, with only the PI having access. Any hard copy data will be secured in a locked cabinet in a secureMMU office. The PI has successfully completed the Data Protection and Research Integrity training on the MMU platform Moodle, as part of the mandatory PhD training.

The PI is responsible for anonymising the data (i.e., anonymising participant names and identities by allocating them to a participant identification number). Participant identities will be removed by the PI at the time of transcription (by destruction of the consent forms), with raw audio recordings deleted thereafter - so no data can be linked to real names/ identities. Prior to anonymisation, participant identification numbers will be kept in a separate location to the list of participant names. Only the PI will have access to the data storage locations.

The PI will be responsible for disposal of the data and technical requirements will be followed. In the case of data breach, the PI is responsible for informing the Data Protection Officer.

For further information about use of your personal data and your data protection rights please see the [University's Data Protection Pages](#).

7. What will happen to the results of the research study?

Results from this research intend to be published in a peer-reviewed journal in addition to being presented at academic conferences. Findings will be made accessible through the MMU Research E-space Repository as well as displayed on the MMU PGR Research Blog webpage (this is in exchange for being awarded the internal funding for the research). A document that explains the outcome of the research will be sent to all participants as well as any luxury fashion rental companies that helped with the recruitment process.

8. Who has reviewed this research project?

A version of peer review has been undertaken by the Principal Supervisor and Secondary Supervisor who have checked the PIS, Project Protocol form, Consent Form, and Interview Guide. In addition, peer review has been conducted by the MMU Ethics committee.

Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?

Principal Investigator	Amy Ward amy.ward3@stu.mmu.ac.uk 01612472000 MMU Business School, All Saints, All Saints Building, Manchester, M15 6BH
Principal supervisor	Professor Ben Kerrane b.kerrane@mmu.ac.uk 01612475421 6.10 Business School, Manchester Campus
Faculty Ethics	Dr Kevin Albertson k.albertson@mmu.ac.uk 01612473915 2-12 Sandra Burslem Building, Manchester Campus

If you have any concerns regarding the personal data collected from you, our Data Protection Officer can be contacted using the legal@mmu.ac.uk e-mail address, by calling 0161 247 3331 or in writing to: Data Protection Officer, Legal Services, All Saints Building, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6BH. You also have a right to lodge a complaint in respect of the processing of your personal data with the Information Commissioner's Office as the supervisory authority. Please see: <https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/>

THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT



CONSENT FORM

Renting luxury fashion items: An exploratory study of access-based consumption and consumer behaviour

Participant Identification Number:

		Please tick your chosen answer	YES	NO
1	I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet version , date for the above study.	☐	☐	☐
2	I confirm that I am 18 years old or over	☐	☐	☐
3	I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐	☐	☐
4	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without my legal rights being affected. After data anonymisation has taken place, I understand it may not be possible to delete my data because it will not be able to be identified.	☐	☐	☐
5	I agree to participate in the project to the extent of the activities described to me in the above participant information sheet.	☐	☐	☐
6	I agree to my participation being audio recorded for analysis. I understand that all audio recordings will be securely deleted after transcription and analysis.	☐	☐	☐
7	I understand and agree that my words may be quoted anonymously in research outputs.	☐	☐	☐
8	I wish to be informed of the outcomes of this research. I can be contacted at: _____	☐	☐	☐
9	I give permission for the researchers named in the participant information sheet to contact me in the future about this research or other research opportunities.	☐	☐	☐
10	I give permission for a fully anonymised version of the data I provide to be deposited in an MMU Open Access repository (E-space), so that it can be used for future research and learning.	☐	☐	☐
11	I understand and agree that data collected during the project will be shared with the Principal Investigators supervisory team (anonymised data only).	☐	☐	☐

Name of participant_____
Date_____
Signature_____
Name of person
taking consent_____
Date_____
Signature

When completed: 1 for researcher, 1 for participant to keep with the PIS
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Appendix H: (Initial) Interview guide

1

Interview Guide

- Introduce myself as PI
- Interview will be audio recorded: Teams & Phone

Warm-up

- Start by telling me a little bit about yourself (age, occupation, educational background, favourite luxury fashion brand you have rented)

Key for PI:
➤ Questions to ask ppt
- Probe ppt
○ Ask ppt (if they have not discussed in their narrative)

1. Circular Economy

"Firstly, I would like to start by discussing your understanding of the CE, as the overarching concept in this research project".

- Do you understand what I mean by the term 'Circular Economy'?
If they are unsure/ unaware of the concept – offer a brief explanation. CE = a regenerative & restorative model aimed to design out waste and pollution, keep products/ materials in use, regenerate natural systems (close loop)
- How realistic do you think it is to achieve a CE?
- How important is it to you to contribute towards a CE?
 - Does this vary depending on the activity i.e., cycling vs driving (to work) and recycling vs waste?
 - If so, can you explain why?
- How do you feel about the current fashion industry?
- Whose responsibility do you believe it to be to ensure achieving a CE?

2. Ownership of luxury fashion products (solid consumption)

"Now, I would like to move on to talking about the 'traditional' form of ownership. I'd like you to tell me about your experiences of owning fashion items, i.e., buying and owning products".

- Attitude towards ownership
- Motivations for ownership **could be their previous motivations or current motivations to still own certain items**
- Frequency of owning vs renting luxury fashion
 - Expand on division and why?
- Attitude towards others who own products
- Advantages & disadvantages of owning
- General consumer acceptance of moving away from ownership (LE) and towards accessing?

3. Renting luxury fashion items (liquid consumption)

"Now, I would like to move on to talking about 'renting', as an access-based form of consumption. I'd like you to tell me about your experience of renting luxury fashion items. Please do use your photographic evidence to help you talk about your experiences".

- Recall the initial experience of renting luxury fashion
 - why & when?
- Ease/ difficulty
- Finances/ change in spending habits
- Attitude towards renting
- Primary driver for renting luxury fashion
- The decision-making process - specifically the 'search process', or 'evaluation process' i.e. spontaneously rent with a moment's thought or spend 1x month evaluating items?
- Any disadvantages to renting?
- Expected future renting habits/ desire to continue to rent

- Do you use any other CBM to consume luxury fashion? i.e. Vinted, Depop
- Do you engage in renting for any other products (other than fashion)?
 - If so, which and why? Air b 'n' b, cars, toys?
- Do you consider there to be any significant misconceptions of renting that could result in consumer avoidance?
- What other incentives could there be to encourage consumers to rent? E.g. government/ companies

4. Self-concept (when accessing rented luxury fashion)

If I can just explain what the self-concept is...it is your sense of self – how you self-identify and more specifically how you attach/ represent yourself with a material object. Traditionally, material possession you own e.g. car/ clothes, but now we consider it in terms of how you attach/ represent yourself through things you access for a temporary period of time (if at all).

- How do you feel when you use (wear) one of your rented items?
 - do you receive any comments? If so, from who? How does that make you feel?
- What type of fashion items (if any) do you avoid renting and why?
- How luxury fashion brand is determined e.g. sources (internal/ external)
- Do you rent from different brands depending on the item e.g. work clothes
- Would you influence others to rent and is so how?
- Do you see it as important to actively advocate renting? Yourself or others (influencers)?
- What is your experience of sharing your rented items online i.e. social media?
 - Do you consider that an important element of the renting process?
 - Do you post pictures and tag the brands, and/ either or?
- If renting was used universally/ norm – would you change the perception you have of luxury items you rent and your behaviour?
- Do you think renting fashion items should not be inclusive to 'luxury' (as still highly priced to rent for short time) e.g. high street rental?

Round up and conclude

If you could offer one piece of advice to a fellow fashion consumer (to try and get them to rent instead of buy) – what would it be?

Thank you. Any questions? Any concerns, please do get in touch with me via my email. I will be in touch upon completion of the project with an update. I will send the voucher within a day. Do you know anyone else who has rented?

Appendix I: Data coding (round 1)

Id	Description	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	100	101	102	103	104	105	106	107	108	109	110	111	112	113	114	115	116	117	118	119	120	121	122	123	124	125	126	127	128	129	130	131	132	133	134	135	136	137	138	139	140	141	142	143	144	145	146	147	148	149	150	151	152	153	154	155	156	157	158	159	160	161	162	163	164	165	166	167	168	169	170	171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	181	182	183	184	185	186	187	188	189	190	191	192	193	194	195	196	197	198	199	200	201	202	203	204	205	206	207	208	209	210	211	212	213	214	215	216	217	218	219	220	221	222	223	224	225	226	227	228	229	230	231	232	233	234	235	236	237	238	239	240	241	242	243	244	245	246	247	248	249	250	251	252	253	254	255	256	257	258	259	260	261	262	263	264	265	266	267	268	269	270	271	272	273	274	275	276	277	278	279	280	281	282	283	284	285	286	287	288	289	290	291	292	293	294	295	296	297	298	299	300	301	302	303	304	305	306	307	308	309	310	311	312	313	314	315	316	317	318	319	320	321	322	323	324	325	326	327	328	329	330	331	332	333	334	335	336	337	338	339	340	341	342	343	344	345	346	347	348	349	350	351	352	353	354	355	356	357	358	359	360	361	362	363	364	365	366	367	368	369	370	371	372	373	374	375	376	377	378	379	380	381	382	383	384	385	386	387	388	389	390	391	392	393	394	395	396	397	398	399	400	401	402	403	404	405	406	407	408	409	410	411	412	413	414	415	416	417	418	419	420	421	422	423	424	425	426	427	428	429	430	431	432	433	434	435	436	437	438	439	440	441	442	443	444	445	446	447	448	449	450	451	452	453	454	455	456	457	458	459	460	461	462	463	464	465	466	467	468	469	470	471	472	473	474	475	476	477	478	479	480	481	482	483	484	485	486	487	488	489	490	491	492	493	494	495	496	497	498	499	500	501	502	503	504	505	506	507	508	509	510	511	512	513	514	515	516	517	518	519	520	521	522	523	524	525	526	527	528	529	530	531	532	533	534	535	536	537	538	539	540	541	542	543	544	545	546	547	548	549	550	551	552	553	554	555	556	557	558	559	560	561	562	563	564	565	566	567	568	569	570	571	572	573	574	575	576	577	578	579	580	581	582	583	584	585	586	587	588	589	590	591	592	593	594	595	596	597	598	599	600	601	602	603	604	605	606	607	608	609	610	611	612	613	614	615	616	617	618	619	620	621	622	623	624	625	626	627	628	629	630	631	632	633	634	635	636	637	638	639	640	641	642	643	644	645	646	647	648	649	650	651	652	653	654	655	656	657	658	659	660	661	662	663	664	665	666	667	668	669	670	671	672	673	674	675	676	677	678	679	680	681	682	683	684	685	686	687	688	689	690	691	692	693	694	695	696	697	698	699	700	701	702	703	704	705	706	707	708	709	710	711	712	713	714	715	716	717	718	719	720	721	722	723	724	725	726	727	728	729	730	731	732	733	734	735	736	737	738	739	740	741	742	743	744	745	746	747	748	749	750	751	752	753	754	755	756	757	758	759	760	761	762	763	764	765	766	767	768	769	770	771	772	773	774	775	776	777	778	779	780	781	782	783	784	785	786	787	788	789	790	791	792	793	794	795	796	797	798	799	800	801	802	803	804	805	806	807	808	809	810	811	812	813	814	815	816	817	818	819	820	821	822	823	824	825	826	827	828	829	830	831	832	833	834	835	836	837	838	839	840	841	842	843	844	845	846	847	848	849	850	851	852	853	854	855	856	857	858	859	860	861	862	863	864	865	866	867	868	869	870	871	872	873	874	875	876	877	878	879	880	881	882	883	884	885	886	887	888	889	890	891	892	893	894	895	896	897	898	899	900	901	902	903	904	905	906	907	908	909	910	911	912	913	914	915	916	917	918	919	920	921	922	923	924	925	926	927	928	929	930	931	932	933	934	935	936	937	938	939	940	941	942	943	944	945	946	947	948	949	950	951	952	953	954	955	956	957	958	959	960	961	962	963	964	965	966	967	968	969	970	971	972	973	974	975	976	977	978	979	980	981	982	983	984	985	986	987	988	989	990	991	992	993	994	995	996	997	998	999	1000
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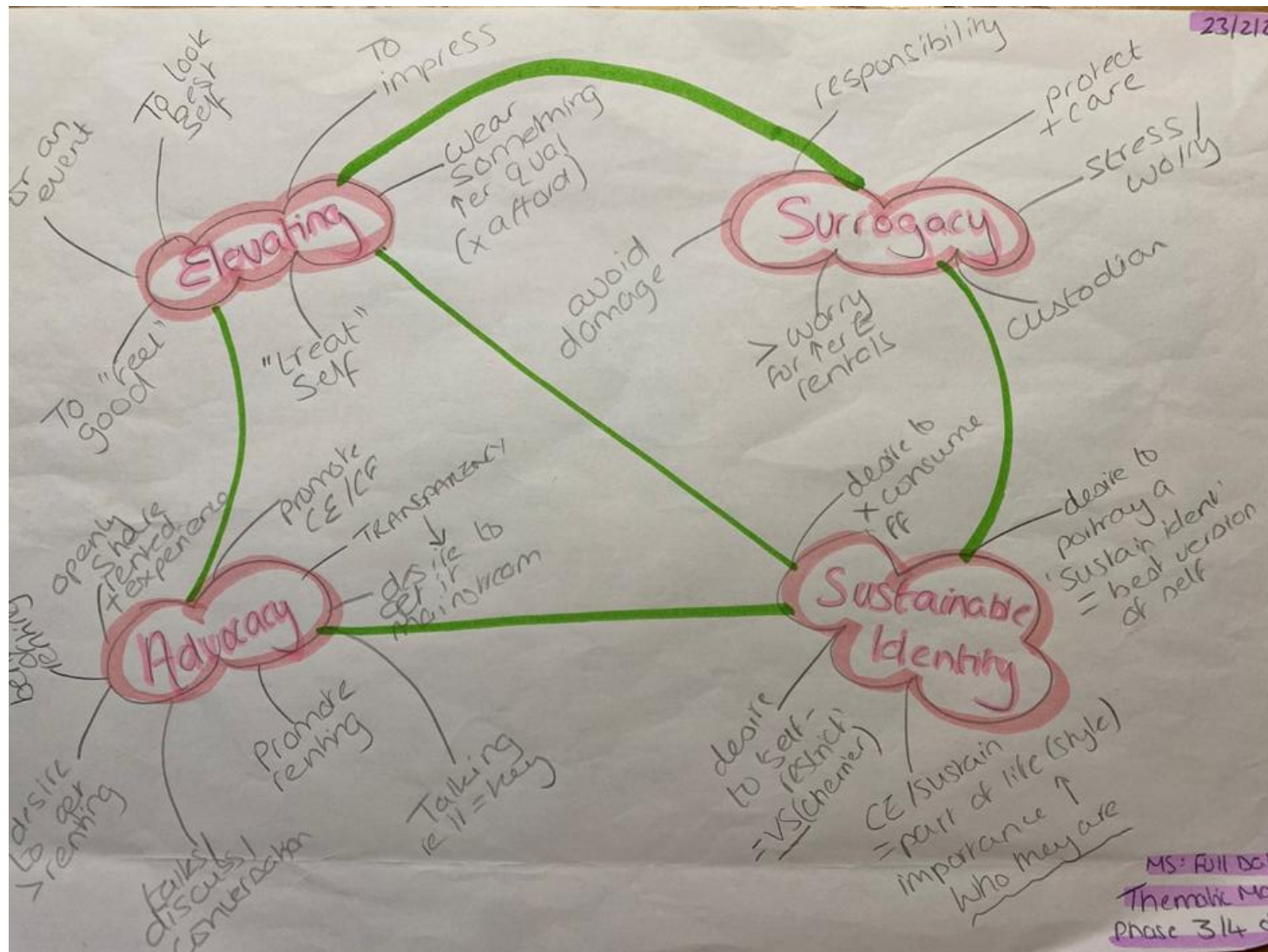
Appendix J: Data coding (round 2)

Code	Description	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	T15	T16	T17	T18	T19	T20	T21	T22	T23	T24	total ppts per code
1	positive rental experience	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	19
2	lacks understanding of CE	x																					5
3	sustainability is important to them	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	21
4	believes they should be trying to reach CE	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	17
5	greater education needed around importance of CE	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	6
6	engages in sustainable fashion consumption	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	20
7	makes considered fashion purchase decisions	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	8
8	engages with sustainable fashion media content	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	17
9	pressure to not be seen wearing same outfit twice	x																					6
10	renting is ideal for events	x																					13
11	renting affords access to items could not afford to buy	x																					11
12	fast fashion is more accessible but lower quality	x																					15
13	believes it is worth investing in higher quality purchases	x	x																				9
14	ppt rented for an event	x	x	x	x																		17
15	consciously rented an item knew would not want to wear again	x	x	x	x																		14
16	desire to rent an item of higher quality than items they own	x																					15
17	renting was an easy process	x	x	x	x																		14
18	positive attitude towards renting	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18
19	no concern that item had been worn by someone else	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	11
20	importance of positive reviews on choosing rented item	x																					5
21	importance of seeing the rented item modelled on a person	x																					7
22	renting affords versatility of styling items	x																					8
23	desire to rent again	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	16
24	motivation to rent again would be for events	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	15
25	rents to experiments with higher end brands	x																					7
26	sustainable aspect of renting is an added benefit	x																					4
27	openly shares with others they rent/ have rented	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18
28	is open about renting and has no shame	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	6
29	believes greenwashing is prevalent in the fashion industry	x																					15
30	received compliments on their rented item	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	31
31	transparency of renting is really important	x																					8
32	would be open/ does rent out their owned items	x																					3
33	enjoys renting being similar to shopping (browsing online)	x																					2
34	being sustainable becomes part of your identity	x																					11
35	sustainable living is a balance	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	6
36	fashion is a way of self-expression/ identity	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	3
37	concerns that sustainable fashion is an echo chamber	x																					7
38	renting is a whole experience	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	14
39	believes there may be a stigma/ apprehension around rental	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	4
40	renting affords a sense of community	x																					7
41	renting affords wearing new without buying new	x																					9
42	rents to experiment	x																					10
43	rents to seek something 'outside the box'	x																					2
44	telling others they can rent too	x																					6
45	rental is still quite in accessible (expensive)	x																					5
46	would avoid renting items of an intimate nature	x																					4
47	would not rent out something of theirs that held personal value	x																					7
48	persuades friends to rent	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	1
49	we need to change the way we choose fashion	x																					2
50	sought enjoyment and memories from renting	x																					6
51	felt really good renting and contributing to CE	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	13
52	renting is exciting	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	9
53	renting felt like a treat to self	x																					12
54	justified renting because it was an event	x																					7
55	rented seeking a luxury item	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	5
56	needed to be more careful with rented item	x																					7
57	renting reduces burden of ownership	x																					5
58	did not feel attached to the rented item	x																					7
59	renting is good value for money	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	8
60	renting solves the 'wear once phenomenon'	x																					10
61	importance of being able to try on rental before committing	x																					7
62	felt no difference wearing rented item to owned item	x																					3
63	renting affords access to unique items	x																					3
64	generational differences in rental acceptance	x																					5
65	disappointed with rental experience	x																					6
66	got too attached to the rented item	x																					2
67	rented to stop self from buying new clothes	x																					3
68	went on to go and buy rented item	x																					3
69	enjoys renting statement pieces	x																					6
70	rental feels guilt free	x																					3
71	believes there is room for rental to also offer more every day wear for longer use	x																					2
71	feels weighed down by physical possessions	x																					4
72	thinks it is nice sharing items between renters (re-worn)	x																					3
73	felt amazing wearing rented item	x																					7
74	desire for everyone to adopt rental	x																					2
75	thinks renting is something to be proud of	x																					1
76	rented to trial during covid	x																					6
77	worry about damaging rented items	x																					1
78	rented item felt really special	x																					5
79	stressed of damaging higher ticket rental	x																					1
80	felt like a flex saying it is rented	x																					3
81	was very aware the rented item was not 'theirs'	x																					7
82	makes others aware of rental as an option	x																					3
83	renting makes you a better version of yourself	x																					5
84	perceives rental item precious	x																					1
85	more likely to look after rental because it's someone else's	x																					3
86	renting as a way of 'try before you buy'	x																					1
87	believes it is important to promote renting	x																					7
88	rented because wanted to impress	x																					3
89	rented something that was not their style	x																					5
90	the rented item made the event more special	x																					1
total no of codes per ppt		34	27	33	24	21	38	34	23	48	31	37	34	29	45	31	32	30	33	34	38	16	

Appendix K: Data coding (round 3)

Cds	Description	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	T15	T16	T17	T18	T19	T20	T21	T22	T23	T24	total (avg per cd)
1	justified mental expense was																									22
2	tasks and handling of CE																									5
3	unavoidability of CE important to them																									24
4	Barbara was forced to try to reach CE																									20
5	greater need caption on side of accused imp. importance of CE																									5
6	emphasize the unavoidable nature of the situation																									23
7	realizes on side need faith in psychiatric decisions																									9
8	emphasize with certain knowledge faith in mind of a doctor's																									9
9	give some idea of how we were going to handle the matter																									7
10	meeting to talk about events																									15
11	meeting afforded access to the bar could not afford to buy																									20
12	that faith in is more aware of the fact that quality																									18
13	Barbara is it worth investigating in higher quality psychiatric																									11
14	justified for an event																									20
15	consciously or not, we know we would not want to go again																									18
16	obvious to meet on the of higher quality than the meeting is on																									10
17	meeting was an easy way to																									11
18	positive attitude towards meeting																									15
19	no one met that there had been was only so much as a law																									7
20	importance of a positive review on choosing meeting there																									6
21	importance of using the neutral of them, modeled on a paper																									7
22	meeting afforded a possibility of styling the mix																									6
23	decide to meet again																									19
24	motivations to come again could be for some reason																									22
25	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									9
26	unavoidable aspect of meeting is an need and been with																									10
27	equivalent choice with others they meet it was needed																									12
28	is a person about meeting and has no choice																									9
29	Barbara goes attending to give attention in that fashion industry																									9
30	emphasized going back to the fact that there																									10
31	transparency of meeting is really important																									9
32	was it a person if we meet that they would meet them																									10
33	why is meeting being a little bit, choosing (formal, informal)																									2
34	being a social media become part of your identity																									3
35	unavoidable being in a bar																									12
36	faith in is a way of self-expression of identity																									7
37	no one met that there had been was only so much as a law																									18
38	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									9
39	Barbara goes attending to give attention in that fashion industry																									9
40	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									10
41	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									9
42	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									9
43	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									12
44	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									2
45	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									3
46	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									10
47	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									2
48	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									10
49	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									1
50	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									1
51	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									9
52	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									9
53	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									11
54	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									4
55	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									9
56	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									15
57	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									7
58	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									5
59	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									10
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86	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									6
87	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									6
88	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									6
89	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									6
90	meeting to a way and means with higher need to handle																									6

Appendix L: Thematic map generated at Phase 3 of Data Analysis



Appendix M: Thematic map generated at Phase 5 of Data Analysis

