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MATTRESSES IN SECOND-HAND STORES AND CUSTOMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEM

Study conducted in five different second-hand stores with customer interviews to identify attitudes towards purchasing used mattresses

Keywords: Recycling, behaviour, second-hand stores, retail

ABSTRACT

The research note is based on fieldwork conducted in five different second-hand stores in North Zealand. The purpose was to gain insight into customers' views on used mattresses and the determining factors involved in the decision-making process of purchasing or not purchasing used mattresses. Appearance (hygiene), comfort (quality), price, and availability were the factors most highly weighted by customers in their considerations of buying used mattresses. 9 out of 16 interviewed customers would not buy a used mattress in thrift stores, meaning just under half could consider purchasing a used mattress. Younger customers appeared more positive towards buying used mattresses, while older customers were more skeptical.

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND METHOD

Does the citizens buy used mattresses from second-hand stores? Why/why not? This note is part of the DTU project: Mattress Recycling and Reuse Systems, M-RRS. The purpose of this note is to uncover the general public's attitudes toward purchasing used mattresses, discussing their advantages and disadvantages. The note forms the basis for understanding the factors that play a role in the decision-making process regarding purchasing/not purchasing used mattresses. Additionally, the fieldwork provides insight into both the physical storage/sales situation, an enhanced understanding of the customer segment that buys second-hand, and how they perceive used mattresses.

Data collection is based on qualitative interviews with 5 store employees and 16 semi-structured interviews with customers. A series of questions were posed to the customers in the stores, which all customers went through, along with the opportunity for more in-depth questions. Customers were asked how often they shop in second-hand stores and the reasons for doing so. Subsequently, whether they have ever bought a used mattress, and the reasons for this, often leading to longer conversations with considerations and arguments for and against the reuse of a mattress. Finally, customers were asked if cleaning, and of course a guarantee of a clean mattress would change their attitude towards buying a used mattress. The more in-depth interviews were transcribed, and physical settings and activities were documented through observations, photos, and video in the stores with prior permissions.



Kirppu Loppe Supermarket in Hillerød. Rows with customers' rented stands, primarily selling clothes and smaller items.



Røde Kors store in Bagsværd. In the area of the store with furniture, this is where a mattress would also be placed.



Kirksens Korshær store in Hillerød. Storage room in the basement, where larger furniture and mattresses are stored until there is space in the store.

THE SECOND-HAND STORES

We visited the following thrift stores: Kræftens Bekæmpelse (Hillerød), Kirkens Korshær (Hillerød), Kirppu Loppe Supermarked (Hillerød), Blå Kors (Rødovre), and Røde Kors (Bagsværd). The stores were chosen to investigate stores with a certain degree of diversity in terms of size and ownership/organization. Kirppu Loppe Supermarked stands out from the others, as it consists of booths that citizens can rent. Here, citizens pay a fee to rent the booth to sell their goods for a selected period. The remaining stores are the classic, well-known second-hand stores where citizens can donate their items, which the store resells to donate the money to charity.

The visits revealed that three out of five stores sell used mattresses. Kirppu Loppe Supermarked and Kræftens Bekæmpelse do not sell used mattresses, both due to lack of space, and for Kræftens Bekæmpelse, also due to hygiene considerations. Kirkens Korshær, Blå Kors, and Røde Kors receive and sell used mattresses in their stores. When a mattress is received, employees assess whether the mattress is in a condition to be sold. The evaluation is based on the mattress's visual appearance and condition. The mattresses are not refurbished/cleaned by the staff. As there is a VAT exemption for the sale of goods from thrift stores, it is a prerequisite that received goods are not upcycled, so the store does not compete with VAT-paying stores (1). Additionally, the stores often experience mattresses staying in the store for a long time, and therefore they sometimes have to take the mattresses to the recycling station. Therefore, careful consideration is given to which mattresses are accepted, as otherwise, it becomes an additional expense to transport the mattresses to the recycling station.

CUSTOMERS IN THRIFT STORES

Even though one would assume there to be relatively similar socio-economic conditions for customers due to the locations of the stores, we encountered a broad representation of customer types in the stores. The age range was from 15 to 80 years old, predominantly elderly people, likely due to the timing of our visits. After the interviews, our impression was that the elderly generation was skeptical about purchasing used mattresses, while the younger generation was somewhat more positive. The difference might naturally stem from the need for more support in mattresses with age, potentially differing gender-specific needs, but perhaps also because younger generations, in general, are more inclined towards recycling than older ones, inheriting issues from the climate crisis (3).

"It's different with used mattresses than used clothes. Mattresses can smell, and there can be different fluids in them that you can't see."
Elderly man in Røde Kors, Bagsværd

"I bought a bed where the mattress was part of the purchase, so I essentially bought a used mattress. I would definitely look for permanent stains and see if those that were there could be removed. I am very sensitive to smells, so I would check that too. Kirppu is different because here you get the smell from people's own homes. The clothes here at Røde Kors are washed, so there are no smells here. My considerations would also focus on 'how comfortable is it to lie on?'"
Sara, 20 years old, Røde Kors, Bagsværd



Photos from Blå Kors, October 2023, illustrating the sale of mattresses over three hours. The mattresses were from a manufacturer's stock, discarded due to dirt on the outer plastic cover.

Through the interviews, we learned that customers primarily judge mattresses based on four criteria that influence their desire to purchase used mattresses:

Appearance (including hygiene): Customers were skeptical about the appearance of mattresses. Visible stains were a major factor that would dissuade anyone from choosing the mattress. Another concern was the 'invisible stains' within the mattress foam. Additionally, visible wear and tear would affect their willingness to make a purchase.

Comfort (including quality): Many claimed that a used mattress might result in reduced comfort due to its quality and condition. Particularly, elder customers rejected used mattresses due to the need for increased comfort. In general, customers demanded a quality guarantee when purchasing a used mattress.

Price: Particularly younger customers were focused on the price when buying a used mattress and the advantages within. For a young person moving away from home for the first time, purchasing a used mattress is more economically feasible.

Availability: Two individuals had bought used mattresses from family members and neighbors, due to 'convenience': the ease and quickness of the purchase, finding the mattress easily accessible. Collecting the mattress from a neighbor and carrying it home was an easy solution, according to the individual.

KEY FINDINGS

Among the 16 interviewed customers in thrift stores, 9 would not buy a used mattress, while 7 would. Despite very clear stances among those who would not buy a used mattress, it suggests that there is a certain market for the sale of used mattresses. Extending the lifespan of a product is crucial in a circular economy, as it's usually cheaper and more sustainable than recycling. Therefore, the result is interesting and will be further investigated.

Half of the interviewed customers stated that they would be more interested in purchasing a used mattress if it was chemically cleansed. The mattress would then have a cleanliness guarantee, which would influence customers' perceptions of the mattress. Hygiene is a significant factor that could influence customers' attitudes toward buying used mattresses but is not solely enough to persuade them. A low price played a role for some, and comfort and quality are equally important factors for customers as appearance (including hygiene). Particularly, older individuals focused a lot on comfort and were uncertain whether a used mattress would meet their expectations for mattress quality. Gender and cultural factors could also naturally play a role in the desire to purchase used mattresses. These dimensions will also be included in the project's forthcoming investigations.

Literature

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