Phase II

Textile Transformation Nova Scotia



Part 2 of 3

Donation Etiquette Analysis

by **Charlotte Genge** and **Dr. John Fiset**

October 2026

NACTR

Read the other reports at www.nactr.ca

Textile Transformation Nova Scotia (TTNS) Phase II

Textile Waste Characterization Study, Donation Etiquette Analysis, & End-Use Pathways Brief

Prepared for:

The National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling (NACTR)

Prepared by:

EnsembleCo Consulting

In collaboration with:

The University of Alberta, Department of Human Ecology,

and the Salvation Army Thrift Store

This project was undertaken with the financial support of:
Ce projet a été réalisé avec l'appui financier de :

Environment and Climate Change Canada | Environnement et Changement climatique Canada

Funded by:

Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC),

Divert NS,

Greenspring BioInnovation Hub,

and Mitacs

With community partner:

Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM)

Acknowledgements

The project team gratefully acknowledges the contributions of our sorting staff: Brigid, Chris, Gloria, Johanna, Mel, Kalliope, Michelle, and Shawn. Thank you to Ryan and the staff of the Salvation Army Distribution and Recycling Centre for their support throughout data collection. Extending gratitude to Tonny, Sasha, Joel, and Royden for their ongoing support in finalizing this work. Finally, thank you to Hailey for the design of the final product.

Report Authorship

This volume brings together three deliverable reports plus the master document prepared under TTNS Phase II. Authorship, contributions, and reviewers for each report are listed below.

No.	Report	Authors	Reviewers & Contributors
0	Master Report	Charlotte Genge	Dr. John Fiset, Sasha Barnard
1	Waste Characterization Study	Charlotte Genge, Claire Theaker-Brown, Dr. John Fiset	Dr. Rachel McQueen, Tonny Colyn, Sasha Barnard
2	Donation Etiquette Analysis	Charlotte Genge, Dr. John Fiset	Dr. Rachel McQueen, Claire Theaker-Brown, Tonny Colyn, Sasha Barnard
3	End-Use Pathways Brief	Charlotte Genge	Dr. John Fiset, Tonny Colyn, Sasha Barnard

Suggested Citations

Readers citing this volume as a whole may use the following reference:

EnsembleCo Consulting. (2026). Textile Transformation Nova Scotia (TTNS) Phase II: Textile waste characterization, donation etiquette analysis & end-use pathways brief. Prepared for National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling.

Readers citing an individual report should use the corresponding reference below:

Genge, C., Theaker-Brown, C., & Fiset, J. (2026). Waste characterization study. In Textile Transformation Nova Scotia (TTNS) Phase II. Prepared for National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling.

Genge, C., & Fiset, J. (2026). Donation etiquette analysis. In Textile Transformation Nova Scotia (TTNS) Phase II. Prepared for National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling.

Genge, C. (2026). End-use pathways brief. In Textile Transformation Nova Scotia (TTNS) Phase II. Prepared for National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling.

This report is one of three integrated deliverables produced through **TTNS Phase II**. Together, the reports examine Nova Scotia's textile system from material, behavioural, and market perspectives. The overall project context and relationship among the reports are presented in the **TTNS Phase II Master Report**. The present **Donation Etiquette Analysis** focuses specifically on how donor behaviours influence the quality and rewear potential of post-consumer textiles.

Table of Contents

0.0 **Executive Summary** 06
1.0 **Introduction** 08
1.1 Donation Behaviour Context 09
2.0 **Methodology** 12
2.1 Survey Sampling Approach 12
2.2 Waste Characterization Data Collection 13
2.3 Subject Matter Expert Interview Structure 13
3.0 **Findings** 14
3.1 Survey 14
3.2 Observed Donation Quality from Waste Characterization Study 26
3.3 Interviews 27
3.4 Results of Mixed-Methods Approach 30
4.0 **Discussion** 31
5.0 **Recommendations** 33
5.1 Limitations 38
6.0 **Conclusion** 39

Figures

Figure 1: Waste hierarchy for textiles, adapted from *Walsh et al., 2026* 09

Figure 2: Donation Etiquette Analysis methodological framework 10

Figure 3: An overview of the Donation Etiquette survey respondent sample 15

Figure 4: Survey respondent profile 17

Figure 5: Donation behaviours exhibited by the sample (n=1,607) 16

Figure 6: Non-donation behaviours exhibited by the sample (n=1,607) 18

Figure 7: The most and least frequently donated textile categories as reported by survey respondents 19

Figure 8: Intrinsic motivations for donating as reported by survey respondents 19

Figure 9: Extrinsic motivations for donating as reported by survey respondents 20

Figure 10: Dimensions of donation etiquette found through analyzing open-ended survey question (n=1,572) 22

Figure 11: Donation etiquette practices reported from Likert-scale survey questions 24

Figure 12: Condition grade outcome by donation stream 27

Figure 13: Comparison of condition grade data from the present study with that of *Sterling et al., 2026* 29

0.0 Executive Summary

The quality of Nova Scotia's textile recovery system is shaped well before garments reach a sorting facility, beginning with the decisions donors make about what and how they donate. Most Canadians report a strong understanding of appropriate donation practices, however, preventable contamination, inadequate preparation, and misconceptions about what charities can reasonably manage, continue to limit the share of donated textiles suitable for rewear.

This report examines how donation behaviours shape the quality and resale potential of post-consumer textiles, drawing on a national survey of 1,607 respondents, observations from the 4,664 donated items assessed in the **Waste Characterization Study**, and interviews with experts working across the textile collection and resale sector. Together, these sources provide the first comprehensive evidence base for donation etiquette in Canada.

Why this matters

Rewear delivers the highest environmental and economic value in the textile circular economy. Every preventable stain, moisture-damaged garment, or unsuitable donation reduces the likelihood that an item will be reworn or resold, and adds pressure to charities already managing rising donation volumes and shrinking downstream markets.

Improving donation quality is therefore one of the fastest and most cost-effective ways to advance textile circularity in the province, and one that can begin immediately without requiring new infrastructure or policy change.

Key findings

Donors are motivated, but under-informed about what happens after they give:

Strong intent. Respondents reported **strong environmental motivation** for donating, with reducing landfill waste and "doing the right thing" the strongest drivers, and expressed high agreement with core etiquette practices such as donating clean, functional clothing and avoiding the donation of contaminated items.

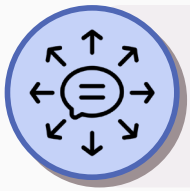
Donors define etiquette clearly. Open-ended responses showed Canadians overwhelmingly define good donation etiquette in terms of cleanliness, physical condition, usability, and thoughtful decision-making, offering a **strong foundation for a messaging campaign** to build on.

A post-donation knowledge gap. Respondents were considerably less familiar with what happens after donation than with what organizations accept; many viewed donation as the end of the process rather than **the start of a system** involving sorting, grading, resale, export, recycling, and disposal.

Collection context shapes quality. Donations from unattended community bins contained substantially higher proportions of low-quality material than donations received at staffed locations, with **bin-collected items graded E or F at roughly 2.4 times the rate of staffed-centre donations**.

Recommendations

The report identifies **behavioural-level ("BEH") priorities** for strengthening Nova Scotia's textile recovery system. The following recommendations are drawn from the full analysis; codes in brackets (e.g., BEH-1) correspond to the numbered recommendations in the report:



Deliver a coordinated, province-wide donation etiquette campaign with consistent messaging.
(BEH-1, BEH-6)



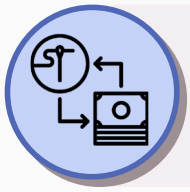
Support future Extended Producer Responsibility policy through public education that reinforces shared responsibility across consumers, charities, and producers.
(BEH-2)



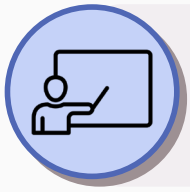
Use community collection events and partnerships with schools, libraries, and municipalities to reinforce best practices over time.
(BEH-3)



Build standardized sector data and reporting on disposal volumes, rejection rates, and downstream losses to track progress and strengthen the case for change.
(BEH-4)



Explore repair-to-resale infrastructure for Grade D1 items as a complementary, sector-level investment.
(BEH-5)



Expand public education on what happens to donated textiles, and the impact of better donation etiquette, to close the post-donation knowledge gap.
(BEH-7)



Reform donation bin practices through clearer signage and the enforcement of a Code of Conduct to help reduce the quality gap between donation bins and those received at staffed donation centres.
(BEH-8)

Improving donation quality is not a standalone solution to Nova Scotia's textile waste volumes, but it is one of the **fastest, lowest-cost interventions available** while larger investments in sorting infrastructure and recycling capacity are developed.

1.0 Introduction

The issue of post-consumer textile waste in Nova Scotia, and across Canada more broadly, is growing rapidly and requires urgent attention. Although textiles have not traditionally been considered a priority waste stream by many municipalities because of well-established donation and diversion networks, growing disruptions and uncertainty in downstream textile markets are calling the long-term viability of these systems into question. Even where effective collection systems exist, the success of textile reuse depends heavily on the quality of donated items. Garments that arrive clean, functional, and suitable for resale can remain in circulation for many years, whereas preventable damage, contamination, or poor donation decisions may shift otherwise reusable textiles into lower-value recycling, recovery, or disposal pathways. Understanding these behaviours is therefore an important component of improving textile circularity.

To address these concerns, the National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling (NACTR), supported by Divert NS and Environment and Climate Change Canada, conducted the **Textile Transformation Nova Scotia (TTNS) Phase I: Landscape Scan**. Importantly, Phase I identified donation etiquette, defined as the socially acceptable practices that shape behaviour in the context of textile donation, including how items are prepared, where they are donated, and how donation decisions are made, as a potentially important mechanism influencing the quality, usability, and ultimate fate of donated materials. Building on this finding, one component of **TTNS Phase II** was designed to explore donation etiquette in greater depth. Specifically, the present **TTNS Phase II Donation Etiquette Analysis** generates the quantitative and behavioural data needed to better understand how donation practices affect the reuse stream and the extent to which preventable donor behaviours contribute to otherwise reusable garments becoming waste.

Thus, the purpose of the present analysis is to examine textile donation habits of the general public and their effect on reuse potential by addressing the central research question:

How do donation behaviours contribute to preventable textile waste?

The analysis combined multiple complementary data sources. First, a random sample of textile donations collected through The Salvation Army Thrift Store network was assessed, with donations representing all solid waste-resource management regions of Nova Scotia. Second, a national survey was administered to examine public attitudes, behaviours, and awareness related to responsible textile donation practices. Finally, interviews with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in the textile collection, sorting, and thrift retail sectors were conducted to establish industry-informed definitions of donation etiquette and identify the practices most likely to preserve or diminish textile rewearability and reuse potential. Together, the findings of this analysis help quantify preventable textile loss and provide critical insights into consumer awareness.

1.1 Donation Behaviour Context

A central principle of textile circularity is that not all diversion pathways deliver the same environmental, social, or economic value. Circular economy frameworks generally prioritize strategies that keep products in use at their highest value for as long as possible before lower-value recovery options are considered (**Figure 1**, adapted from *Walsh et al., 2026*).

The circularity framework applied in this report is drawn from **Fashion for Good's Sorting for Circularity initiative**, a multi-stakeholder project developed in collaboration with industry partners, civil society organizations, and academic advisors *(Walsh et al., 2026)*. This sector-specific framework was selected over broader circular economy models, such as the R-strategies framework (also known as the R-ladder; *Malooly & Tian, 2023*), for two reasons. First, it was built from and for the textile sorting and reuse industry, grounding its categories in the operational realities of how post-consumer garments move through collection, sorting, and diversion systems. Second, it reflects a collaboration across industry, NGO, and academic stakeholders, lending it both practical credibility and broader legitimacy as a sector reference.

At the top of this hierarchy is prevention, and rewear falls into this tier. **Rewear** refers to a set of activities that extends clothing lifetime, allowing garments to continue to be used as clothing in their original form, either by the original owner or by another user through donation, resale, repair, swapping, gifting, or redistribution *(Walsh et al., 2026)*, ostensibly reducing the demand for new items. Rewear preserves the greatest amount of embedded environmental and economic value within a garment, including the labour, energy, water, and raw materials required for its production.

Extending the life of clothing through continued wear has been identified as one of the most effective ways to reduce the environmental impacts associated with textile production and consumption *(Walsh et al., 2026)*. The **TTNS Phase II** framework, therefore, places strong emphasis on preserving textiles within rewear pathways wherever possible. The project proposal specifically identifies "scaling up garment reuse" and "keeping garments in circulation for as long as possible" as foundational priorities for Nova Scotia's emerging circular textile system *(Genge, 2025)*.

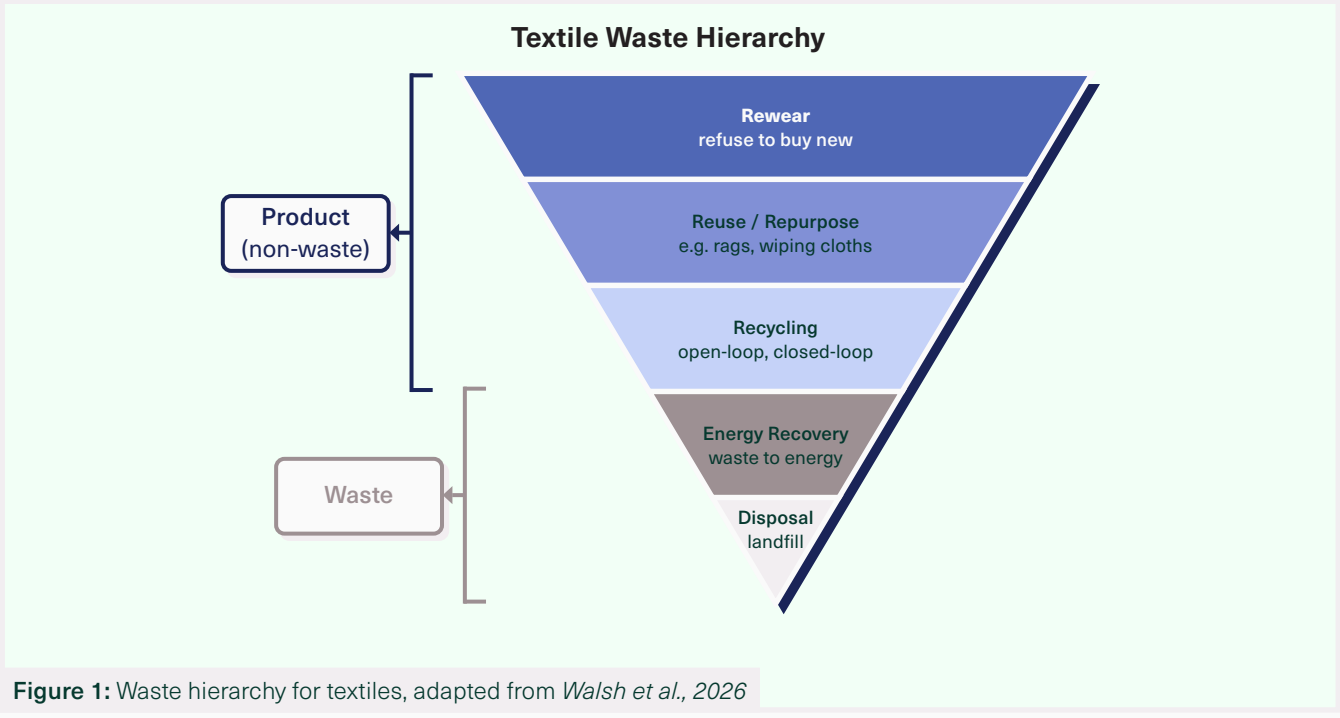


Figure 1: Waste hierarchy for textiles, adapted from *Walsh et al., 2026*

The second level of the hierarchy is **reuse**, or using clothes again, encompassing secondary applications for textiles that are no longer suitable for direct wear. Examples include converting textiles into industrial wiping cloths, cleaning rags, craft materials, and more. While reuse extends material life and diverts textiles from landfill, it generally represents a lower-value outcome because the garment requires additional processing and no longer functions in its original intended form.

The third level is **recycling**, which involves mechanically, chemically, or otherwise processing textiles into raw material feedstocks for new products such as nonwovens (e.g., insulation, carpet underlay, padding, foam, felt, acoustic paneling), furniture and automotive stuffing, animal bedding, yoga props, recycled yarn, and more. Recycling remains an important diversion pathway, particularly for unwearable textiles; however, it is often associated with fibre degradation, downcycling, contamination challenges, high processing costs, and underdeveloped or saturated end-markets.

The fourth tier is **recovery**, which includes waste-to-resource and other energy recovery operations. Finally, the lowest level is disposal in a landfill. It also includes incineration without energy recovery.

For this reason, preserving garment quality before donation is critically important. Once garments become contaminated through mildew, moisture exposure, odours, stains, pet hair, or preventable damage, they may lose their rewear potential and instead enter lower-value reuse, recycling, recovery, or disposal pathways. Importantly, this report approaches textile waste not solely as an infrastructure problem but also as a **behavioural and systems-level issue**. Improving donation practices, therefore, represents an important opportunity to strengthen textile circularity, reduce pressure on charitable organizations, and support future reuse-focused policy development in Nova Scotia and in Canada. It must be noted, however, that research shows that unless overproduction is reduced at the producer level, the benefits of rewear and reuse remain limited *(Walsh et al., 2026)*.

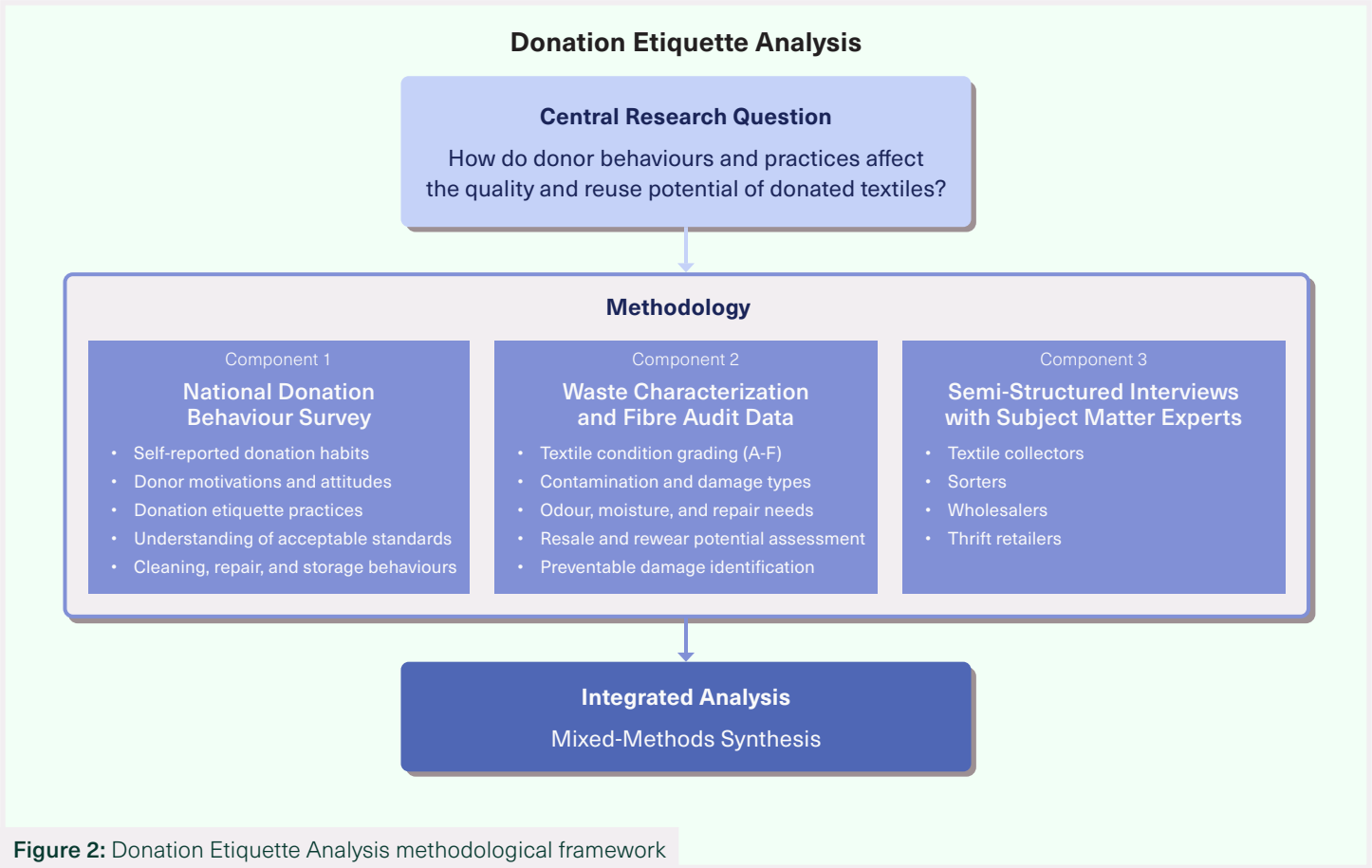


Figure 2: Donation Etiquette Analysis methodological framework

This analysis employed a mixed-methods research design integrating survey-based behavioural research, quantitative textile sorting data, and interviews with SMEs to examine how donation practices contribute to preventable textile waste within charitable and for-profit reuse systems (**Figure 2**). The approach was designed to connect the physical condition of donated textiles with the behaviours, motivations, attitudes, and decision-making processes that influence donation quality and reuse outcomes.

The analysis combined three primary methodological components:

- A national donation behaviour survey
- Integration of waste characterization and fibre audit data, including defect and contamination observations
- Semi-structured interviews with textile collection, sorting, recycling, thrift retail, and wholesale experts

The survey component examined self-reported textile donation habits, motivations, and attitudes toward charitable donation, cleaning and repair behaviours, donation etiquette practices, and public understanding of acceptable textile donation standards or best practices.

Observational analysis was conducted concurrently with the **TTNS Phase II Waste Characterization Study**.

During the sorting process, project staff assessed surplus and excess stock (ragout and rejects) and raw donations (credential) given to The Salvation Army Thrift Store and documented textile condition, contamination, damage types, odour, moisture, repair needs, and overall resale potential. Particular attention was paid to identifying forms of damage that may have been preventable through alternative donation behaviours, such as laundering, repair, proper storage, or separation of unusable items prior to donation.

Importantly, the waste characterization data was used within this report only insofar as it informed behavioural analysis related to donation quality and preventable textile loss. Detailed fibre composition trends, regional material composition, and broader waste stream analysis are examined more comprehensively within the **TTNS Waste Characterization Study**. A complete report of the methodology on how the item condition was determined, and definitions of each grade can be found in **Section 2.3 - Condition of the Waste Characterization Study**.

Analysis Methodology



National Donation Behaviour Survey

Integration of Waste Characterization and Fibre Audit Data

Semi-Structured Interviews

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Survey Sampling Approach

The Donation Behaviour Survey was created in Qualtrics and was administered nationally using a combination of organic and paid recruitment methods, with particular emphasis placed on obtaining responses from Nova Scotia residents. Participation was open to Canadian residents, regardless of their prior experience with donating clothing or other textiles, with the goal of capturing a broad range of perspectives.

The **survey instrument** was specifically designed to examine behaviours that influence textile reuse outcomes and the preservation of rewearability. Specifically, it explored donation practices that may affect whether garments remain suitable for continued use, including:

- Laundering items prior to donation,
- Separating wearable and unwearable textiles,
- Assessing garment condition before donation, and
- General donation decision-making practices

The survey also explored public understanding of donation etiquette, which was defined within the instrument as "a set of socially acceptable practices that define behaviour in the context of textile donation." By examining these behaviours alongside textile condition data collected through the material audit and incorporating expert perspectives on responsible donation practices, the study sought to better understand how preventable damage, contamination, and donor decision-making contribute to textile loss within charitable reuse systems.

Survey recruitment consisted of both organic and paid approaches. **Organic recruitment** included distribution through:

- Partner organization email newsletters,
- Social media channels,
- Community networks, and
- Word of mouth sharing

To improve participation and geographic representation, **paid advertising** was conducted through Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram). Recruitment was implemented in three stages:

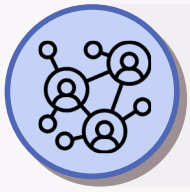
- May 4 - June 3, 2026: Advertisements were targeted primarily to residents of Nova Scotia
- Final week of data collection (May 28 - June 3, 2026): The target audience was expanded to include all Atlantic Canadian provinces to improve regional representation
- Final two days of data collection (June 2 - June 3, 2026): Advertising was further extended to residents of the Yukon and Northwest Territories after monitoring indicated that no responses had yet been received from those jurisdictions

A list of survey questions can be found in **Appendix B1 in the Master Report.** A sample survey advertisement is provided in **Appendix B2 in the Master Report.**

Summary: Survey Sampling Approach



Survey Instrument Design
Formulated to examine behaviours that influence textile reuse outcomes and the preservation of rewearability



Organic Recruitment
Distributed through email newsletters, social media channels, community networks, and word of mouth



Paid Advertising
Promoted on Meta platforms to improve participation and increase geographic representation

2.2 Waste Characterization Data Collection

Observational analysis from the survey above was conducted concurrently with the **TTNS Phase II Waste Characterization Study**, an in-person analysis of 4,664 total items donated to Nova Scotia thrift locations. The research period, which spanned February to April 2026, yielded robust data on textile condition, contamination, damage types, odour, moisture, repair needs, and overall resale potential. Particular attention was paid to identifying forms of damage that may have been preventable through alternative donation behaviours, such as laundering, repair, proper storage, or separation of unusable items prior to donation. Other data collected, including detailed fibre composition trends, regional material composition, and broader waste stream analysis are examined more comprehensively within the **TTNS Phase II Waste Characterization Study**.

Items were sourced from two distinct samples of textiles from Nova Scotia's seven solid waste-resource management regions (SWR). **Sample 1** was composed of pallet boxes containing unsold, excess, and surplus donated items from Salvation Army Thrift Stores. These items would typically be routed to the "bale stream", meaning they are baled and sold to brokers who sort and export items to overseas commodity markets. These are the items that would be at risk of being sent to landfill if export markets were disrupted. **Sample 2** was composed of pallet boxes containing raw, unsorted donations to Salvation Army Thrift Store locations. The items remained in their original donated state. Also included in **Sample 2** was a sub-sample of items collected from community donation bins operated by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Great Halifax; this sub-sample served to provide a comparison in product quality between donation streams (in-store donations versus unstaffed donation bin drop-offs).

In total, 4,664 textile items were assessed across Sample 1 and Sample 2. The sampling design sought to ensure roughly equal representation from each of Nova Scotia's seven SWR, with approximately 300 items examined per region within each sorting exercise. Additional information about the sampling approach and the province's SWR is provided in **Section 2.0 - Methodology of the Waste Characterization Study**.

Data was collected using manual forms in **Sort 1** and via an electronic form in **Sort 2**, with photographs taken of each item in both sorts for future reference.

During data collection, trained research team members assessed the condition of each garment before assigning a grade (A, B, C, D1, D2, E, and F). Grades A, B, and C indicated immediate resalability; D1 and D2 denoted resale potential pending minor (D1) or major (D2) repair interventions; E was assigned to items with fibre recycling potential; and F was applied to contaminated items with no likelihood of value recovery.

A full explanation of the grading system is available in the **Section 2.3 - Condition of the Waste Characterization Study**. Research team members also recorded the presence and severity of specific defects; examples include staining, odour, holes, missing components (e.g., buttons or zippers), pilling, stretching, fibre degradation, moisture damage, and other factors affecting resale potential.

2.3 Subject Matter Expert Interview Structure

To add practical context to the survey and sort data, interviews were conducted with thrift collection and retail organizations to assess preferred donation behaviours. 12 interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, drawing from the same pool of interviews conducted for the broader End-Use Pathways Brief; organizations interviewed are listed in Appendix B3. Interviewees were asked to define good donation behaviour or donation etiquette in their own words, and were asked about the types of items organizations most frequently find themselves unable to resell or redirect.

Interviews were conducted remotely via video conference, typically lasting around 30 minutes. Responses were reviewed thematically to identify areas of convergence and divergence across organization types and regions, and findings are integrated throughout the results and recommendations sections to provide operational grounding for the survey and sort data.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Survey

In total, we received 1,680 English responses and 14 French responses for a total of 1,694 responses. After evaluating responses for potential bots, we removed 87 responses from the final dataset (5.5%) for a total of 1,607 valid responses.

Of the 1,607 respondents, 1,573 (97.9%) reported **donating, selling, repurposing, repairing, or disposing of textiles within the past 12 months**. The sample also consisted largely of individuals who regularly engage with the second-hand sector. Thrift store shopping was common among respondents, with 93.6% reporting that they had shopped at a thrift store at least once during the previous year, and almost one-quarter (24.8%) reported **shopping at thrift stores more than 20 times**. As a result, the findings reflect the perspectives of people who are highly familiar with textile reuse, donation, and second-hand shopping practices.

The majority of respondents resided in:

- **Nova Scotia** (n=658, 41%),
- **Alberta** (n=315, 20%), and
- **Ontario** (n=274, 17%).

The survey sample was predominantly composed of women. Nearly nine in ten respondents identified as women (89.7%), while 6.2% identified as men and 2.9% identified as non-binary or a third gender. A further 1.2% preferred not to disclose their gender. **Figure 3** shows an overview of the sample.

Respondents represented a broad range of age groups, although the sample skewed older. The largest proportion of respondents were:

- **65 years of age or older** (29.3%), followed by
- **55-64** (17.8%),
- **35-44** (17.4%), and
- **45-54** (14.9%).

Respondents aged **25-34** accounted for 12.9% of the sample, while those aged **18-24** represented 5.7%.

An additional 2.0% of respondents **preferred not to disclose their age**. Overall, 64.4% were aged 45 years or older, indicating that the survey sample was composed primarily of middle-aged and older adults.

Respondents were generally well educated. The largest proportion reported holding a

- **Bachelor's degree** (32.5%), followed by a
- **Master's degree** (19.0%),
- **Trade/technical/vocational training** (11.4%), and
- **some college credit** without a degree (10.8%).

Smaller proportions reported having a **professional degree** (6.7%), **high school diploma or equivalent** (6.4%), **doctorate degree** (4.9%), **associate degree** (4.3%), or **some high school** with no diploma (0.9%). An additional 3.0% **preferred not to disclose their educational attainment**.

Overall, 63.1% of respondents held at least a bachelor's degree, while 74.7% had completed some form of post-secondary credential.

In terms of the maximum distance that respondents were willing to travel to donate clothes,

- over half (53%) were **willing to travel more than 11 kilometers**, and
- 15% were **willing to travel more than 20 kilometers**.

This is of note because 68% of respondents indicated that they were within 5 kilometers of the nearest textile donation location (store or bin).

Respondents reported a wide range of annual household incomes. The largest income category was

- **$61,000-$90,000** (16.0%), followed closely by
- **$31,000-$60,000** (15.4%) and
- **$91,000-$120,000** (13.5%).

Approximately one in ten respondents reported household incomes of **$0-$30,000** (9.9%), **$121,000-$150,000** (9.2%), or **$176,000 and above** (10.2%).

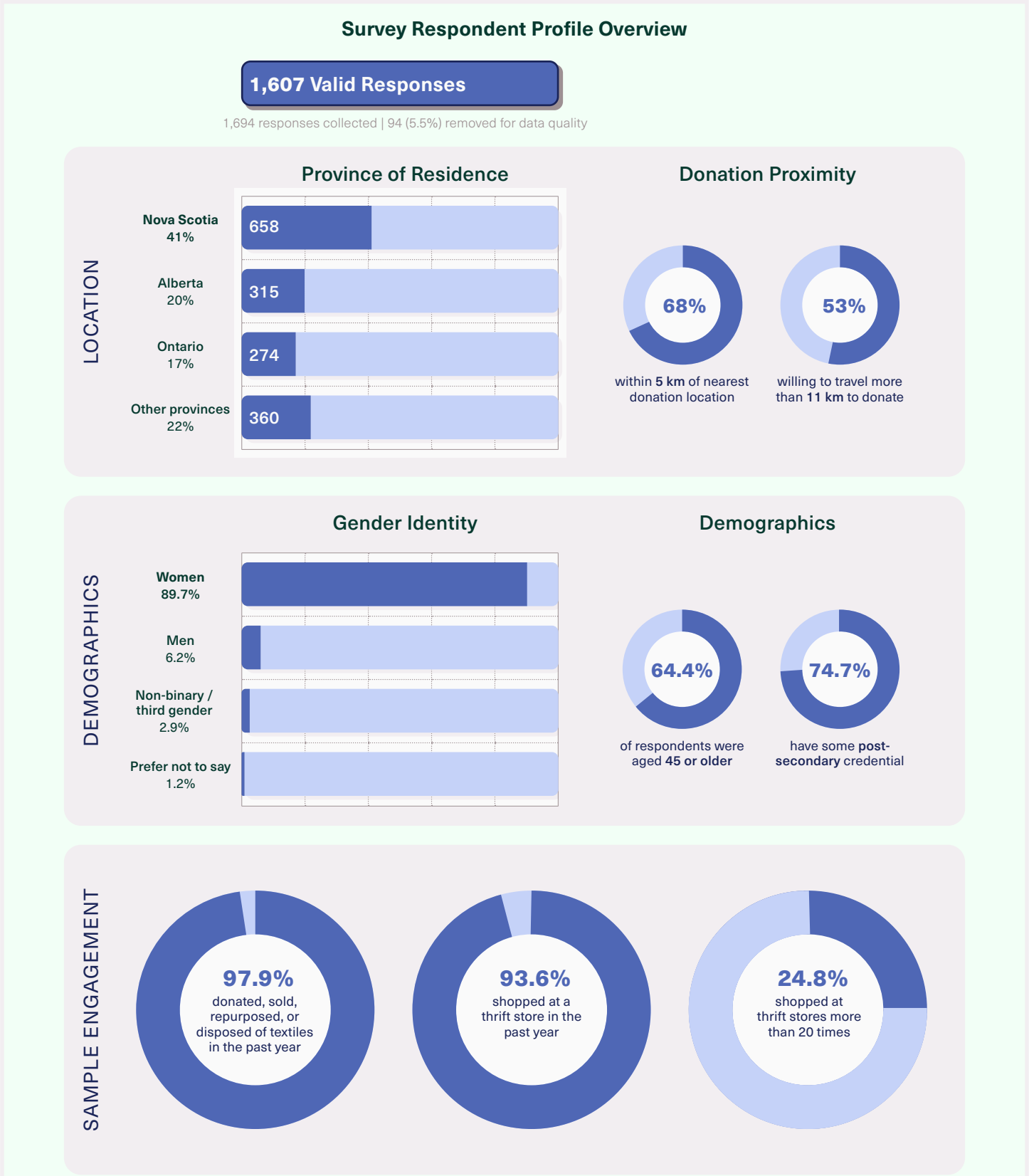


Figure 3: An overview of the Donation Etiquette survey respondent sample

Smaller proportions reported incomes between **$151,000 and $175,000** (5.6%). A substantial proportion of respondents (20.2%) **preferred not to disclose their household income.** Among those who provided an income estimate, 45.2% reported annual household incomes above $90,000, while 20.0% reported incomes of $30,000 or less, suggesting that the sample included respondents from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Finally, respondents reported living in households with an **average of 2.01 adults** (SD=0.83), including themselves, and **0.81 children** (SD=1.02). **Figure 4** outlines the respondent profile of the sample.

Most respondents reported using each donation method at least once in the past year.

Handing items directly to store staff was the most common behaviour (78.3%), followed by

dropping items off at a thrift store donation centre (64.3%).

Nearly half of respondents (46.5%) had **placed items in a donation bin**, while

35.2% had **donated through a community collection event or drive.**

Mailing donations was relatively uncommon, with only 1.7% reporting having done so.

Frequent use (8 or more times) was also highest for **handing items directly to staff** (15.7%) and **dropping items off at a donation centre** (9.4%), while all other methods were used regularly by fewer than 5% of respondents.

Figure 5 shows specific donation behaviours and their popularity among respondents.

Respondents reported engaging in a variety of non-donation behaviours to manage unwanted clothing and textiles over the course of the past year (**Figure 6**).

The most common practice was **giving items to family members or friends**, with 89.4% of respondents having done so at least once.

Similarly, 87.9% reported **mending or repairing** items, while

78.6% had **discarded textiles in the trash**, and

77.5% had **repurposed items for another use.**

Reselling clothing was less common but still reported by 41.8% of respondents.

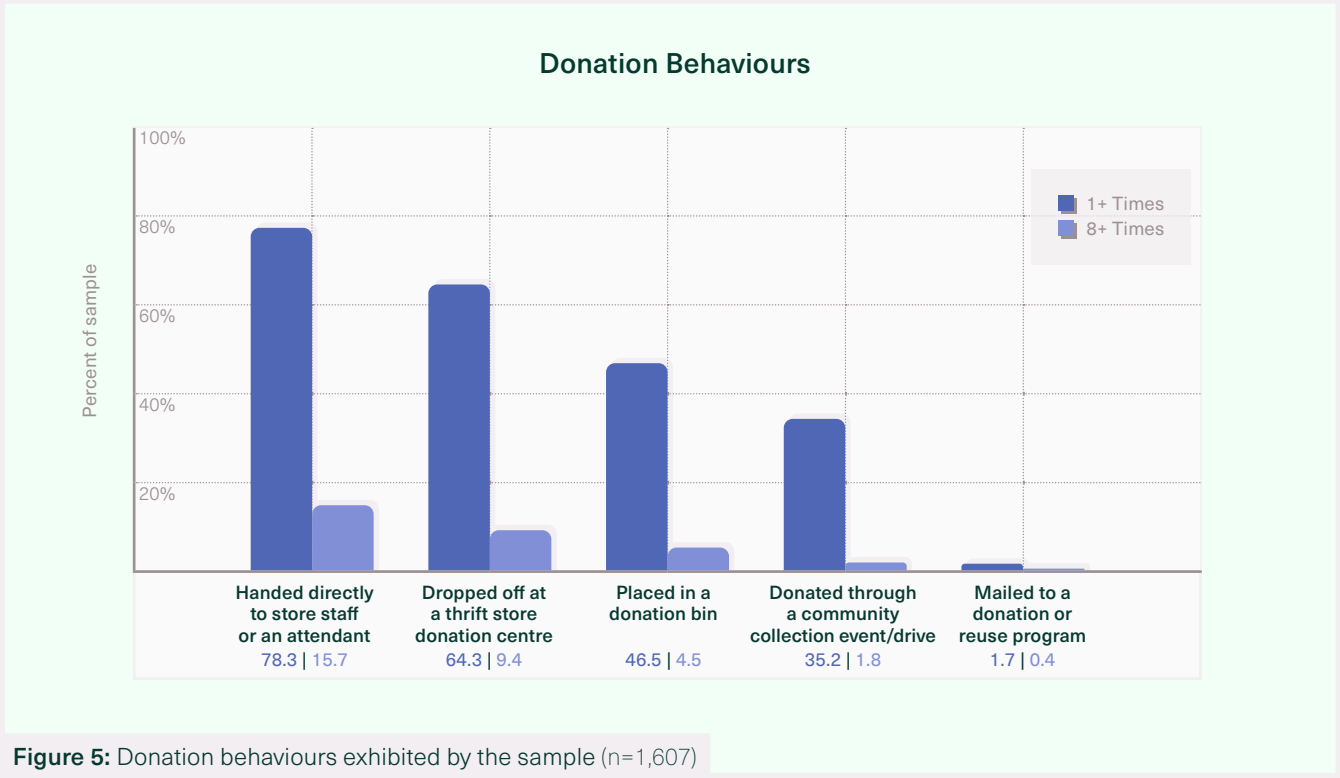


Figure 5: Donation behaviours exhibited by the sample (n=1,607)

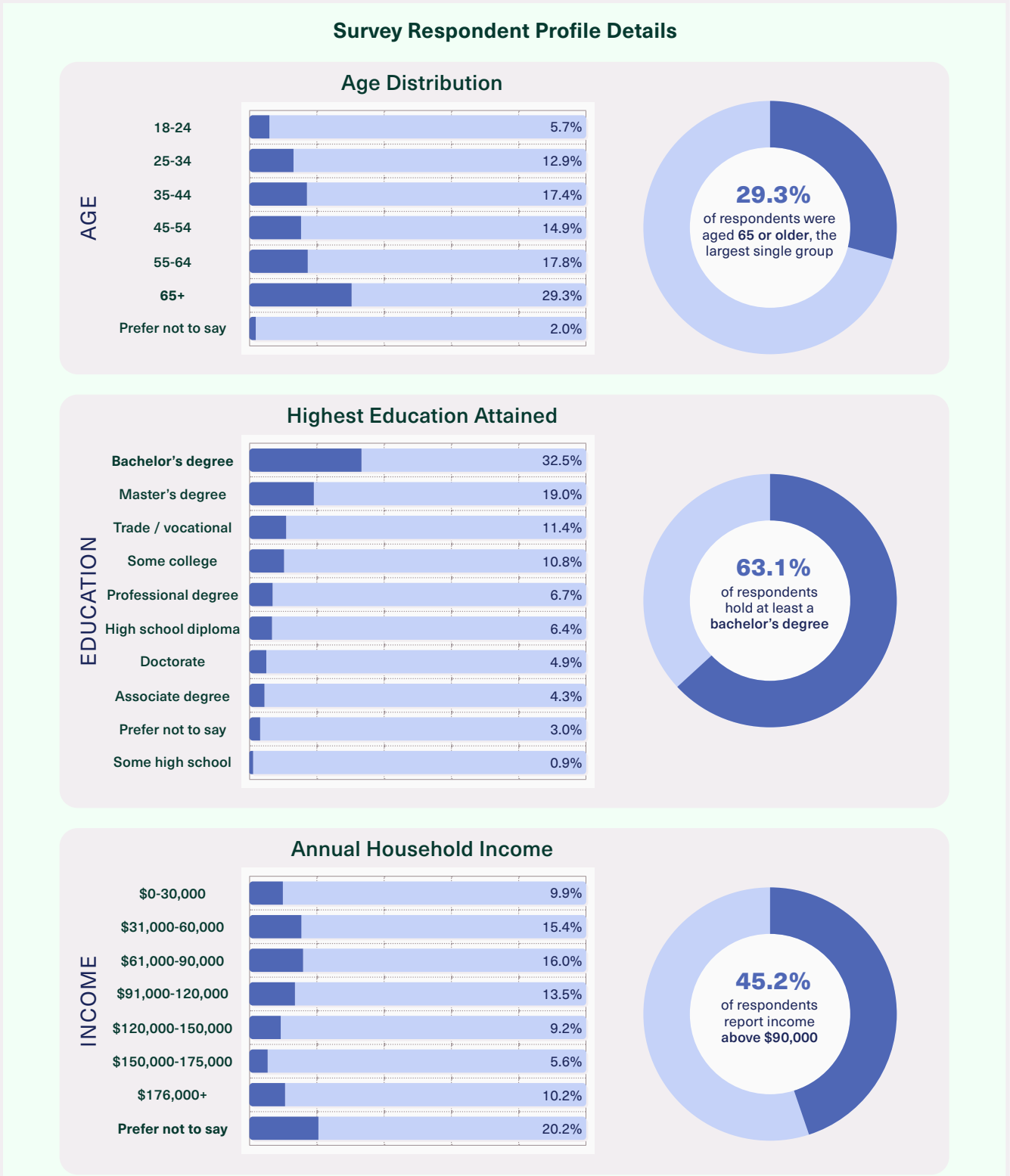


Figure 4: Survey respondent profile

Frequent engagement in these behaviours (eight or more times) was highest for:

mending or repairing items (14.7%) and

giving items to family or friends (13.0%), followed by

repurposing (11.4%),

reselling (7.7%), and

discarding items in the trash (6.7%).

These findings suggest that respondents commonly rely on a range of reuse and life-extension strategies in addition to donation, although disposal through the waste stream remains a widespread practice.

The most frequently donated textile categories are shown in **Figure 7**, and were

pants (n=1,307; 81.3%),

t-shirts (n=1,297; 80.7%),

shirts (n=1,267; 78.8%),

sweaters (n=1,195; 74.4%), and

footwear (n=1,122; 69.8%).

In contrast, the least frequently donated categories were:

scarves (n=512; 31.9%),

socks (n=422; 26.3%),

bras (n=330; 20.5%),

soft toys (n=310; 19.3%), and

underwear bottoms (n=139; 8.7%).

Despite the sample consisting largely of individuals who regularly engage with the second-hand sector, the results suggest that important knowledge gaps remain. Respondents reported a relatively strong understanding of **what charities can and cannot accept** (M=5.45, SD=1.29), indicating that most felt reasonably confident about donation guidelines. However, the understanding of **what happens to textiles after they are donated** was notably lower (M=4.54, SD=1.54). This finding suggests that even among frequent thrift store shoppers and active participants in textile reuse, there is still considerable opportunity to improve public education about the post-donation journey of textiles and the realities of sorting, reuse, recycling, and disposal within the second-hand sector.

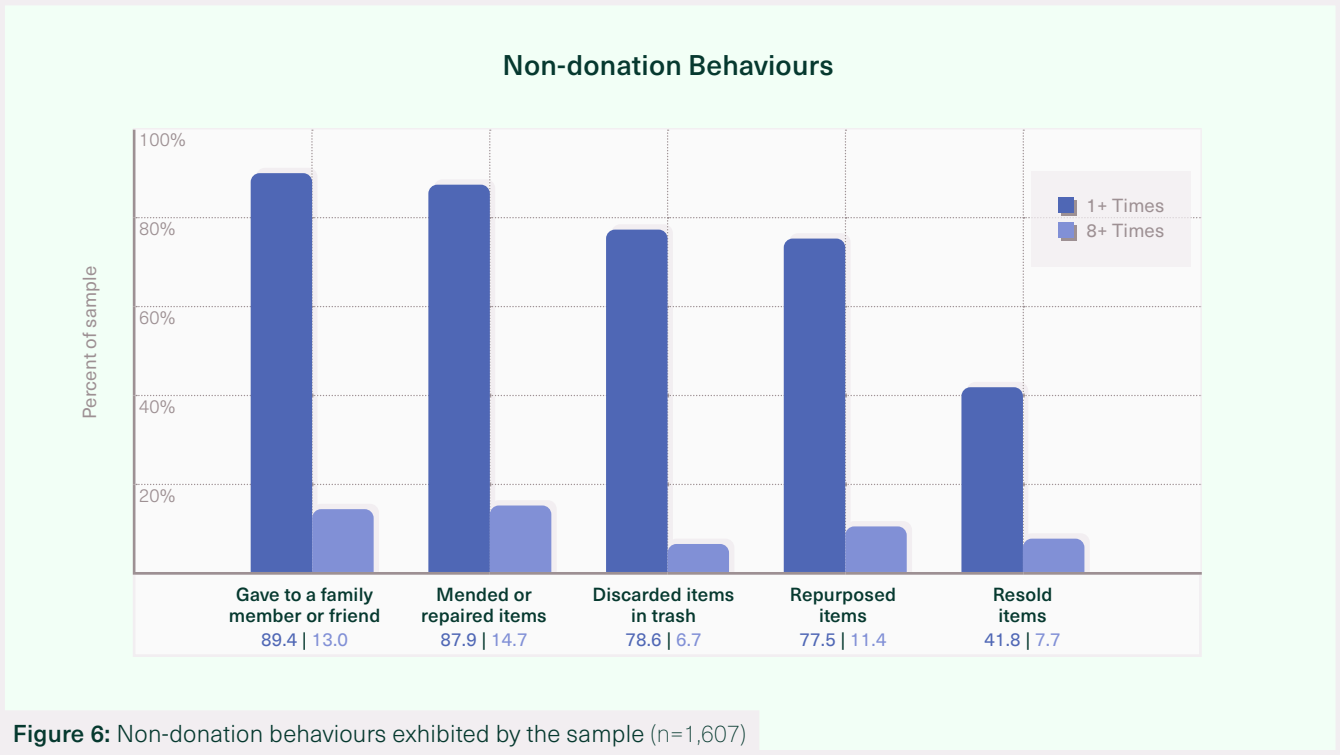


Figure 6: Non-donation behaviours exhibited by the sample (n=1,607)

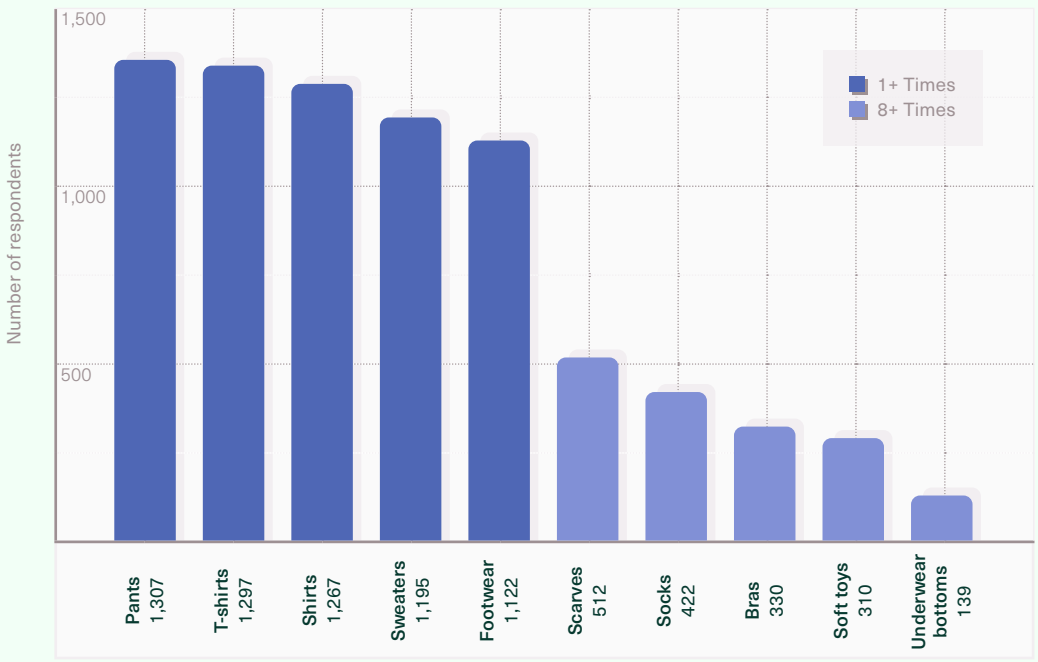


Figure 7: The most and least frequently donated textile categories as reported by survey respondents

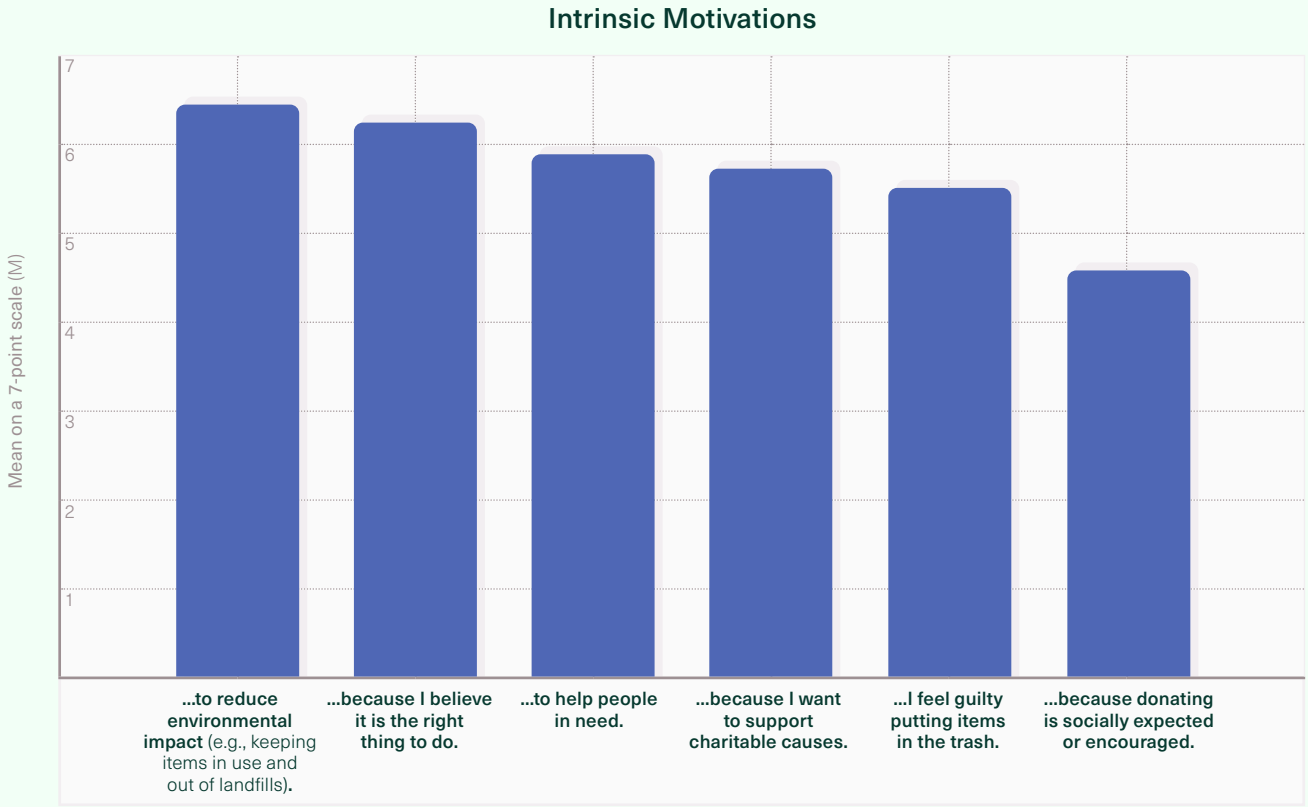


Figure 8: Intrinsic motivations for donating as reported by survey respondents

To better understand why people donate textiles, respondents were asked about both intrinsic motivations (i.e., motivations driven by personal values, beliefs, and emotions) and extrinsic motivations (i.e., motivations driven by practical considerations, convenience, or external rewards).

Among the intrinsic motivations, respondents expressed the strongest agreement with:

reducing environmental impact by keeping items in use and out of landfills (M=6.40, SD=1.07),

followed closely by the belief that **donating is the right thing to do** (M=6.23, SD=1.13).

Socially oriented motivations were also important, including:

helping people in need (M=5.87, SD=1.32) and

supporting charitable causes (M=5.71, SD=1.36).

Respondents also agreed that **feelings of guilt** associated with throwing items in the trash motivated their donation behaviour (M=5.49, SD=1.66).

The lowest-rated intrinsic motivation was donating because it is **socially expected or encouraged** (M=4.60, SD=1.64).

Intrinsic motivations are shown in **Figure 8**.

Extrinsic motivations received more mixed levels of support. The strongest extrinsic motivation was **decluttering the home** (M=6.16, SD=1.08), indicating that practical household management is an important driver of donation behaviour.

Respondents also moderately agreed that donating is the **easiest or most convenient way to get rid of unwanted items** (M=4.92, SD=1.78).

In contrast, they were less likely to donate because they were **already visiting a thrift store to shop** (M=3.83, SD=1.94), and **incentives such as coupons, discounts, or tax benefits** received the lowest level of agreement overall (M=3.12, SD=1.95).

Extrinsic motivations are shown in **Figure 9**.

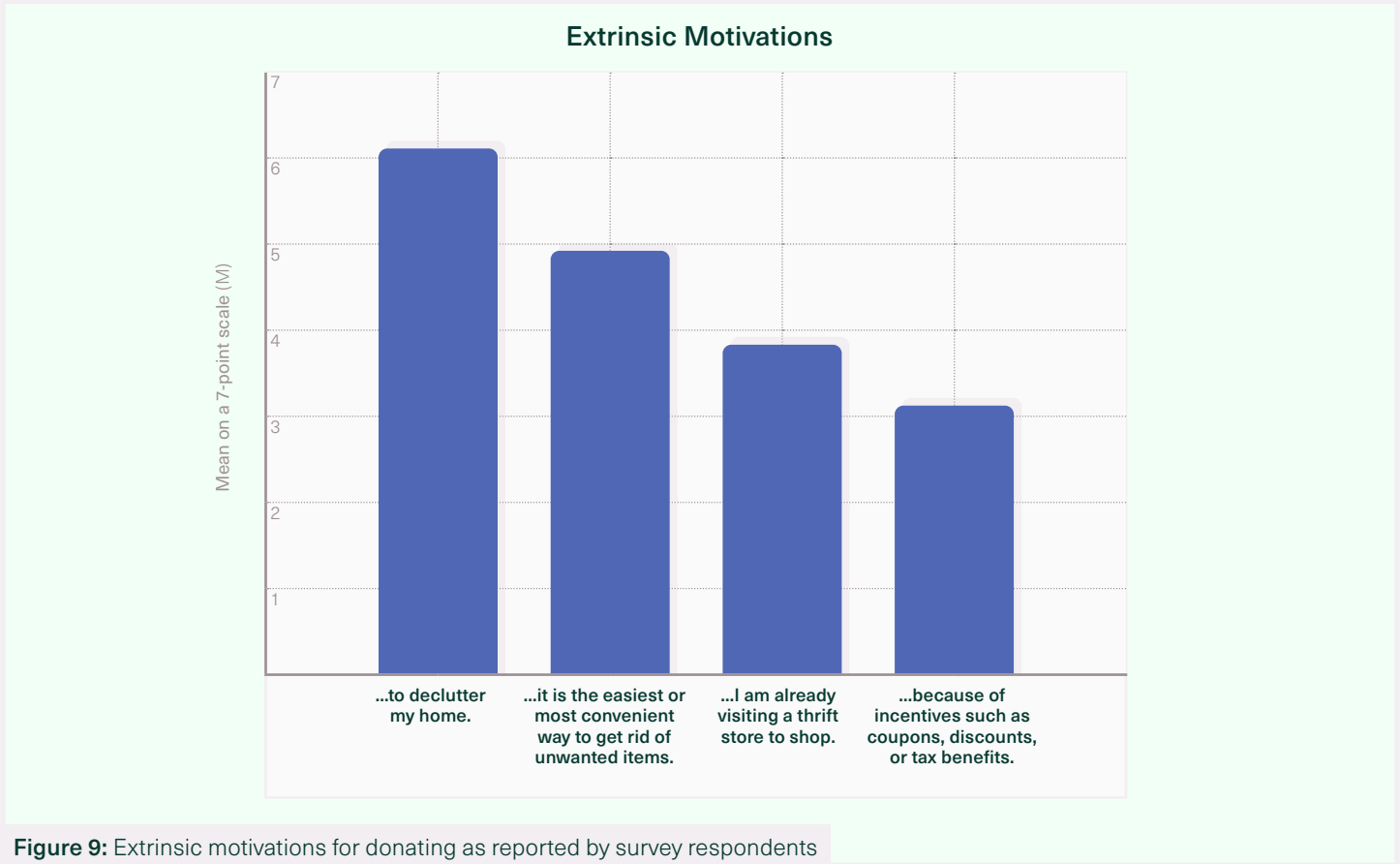


Figure 9: Extrinsic motivations for donating as reported by survey respondents

Overall, the findings suggest that textile donation is motivated primarily by intrinsic factors. Environmental stewardship, moral responsibility, and the desire to help others received consistently high levels of support, while incentives and other external rewards were comparatively weak motivators. Although practical considerations such as decluttering and convenience clearly play a role, respondents appear to view textile donation as more than a simple disposal activity. Rather, it is a behaviour that allows them to align their actions with their environmental values, social concerns, and personal sense of responsibility.

Respondents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of various awareness-raising and educational strategies designed to improve textile donation practices on a 7-point scale (1=extremely ineffective; 7=extremely effective). Ratings were remarkably similar across all approaches on the 7-point scale.

Partnerships with schools, libraries, and community organizations received the highest rating (M=5.58, SD=1.12), closely followed by

municipal initiatives (M=5.56, SD=1.17) and

word-of-mouth promotion (M=5.51, SD=1.22).

The remaining strategies, including

signage (M=5.49, SD=1.16),

marketing campaigns (M=5.46, SD=1.01),

clear instructions (M=5.46, SD=1.34),

donation incentives (M=5.36, SD=1.28), and

information resources (M=5.33, SD=1.21), received similarly favourable evaluations.

Overall, the narrow range of mean scores suggests that respondents viewed all of these awareness-raising approaches as relatively effective, with no single strategy standing out as substantially more important than the others.

In the open-ended section of the survey, participants were asked to identify the most important considerations related to donation etiquette.

Specifically, they were asked:

"Based on the idea of donation etiquette, which we define as a set of socially acceptable practices that define behaviour in the context of textile donation, what do you think people should keep in mind when donating clothing and other textiles?"

In total, we received 1,572 eligible responses. The open-ended responses were analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach. The lead author and a research assistant independently reviewed and coded all responses.

Consistent with an iterative coding process, an initial set of codes was developed after reviewing a subset of responses and was subsequently refined as additional responses were analyzed. New codes were created when novel themes emerged, while existing codes were combined, expanded, or subdivided to better reflect patterns observed in the data (see **Figure 10**).

Upon independently completing the coding process, the two coders met to compare their coding decisions. In instances of disagreement, the coders discussed their interpretations and revisited the coding definitions until full consensus was reached.

In total, thirteen codes emerged from participants' responses regarding textile donation etiquette (See **Appendix B3 in the Master Report**). These codes were subsequently grouped into four second-order themes that capture how individuals conceptualize appropriate donation practices.

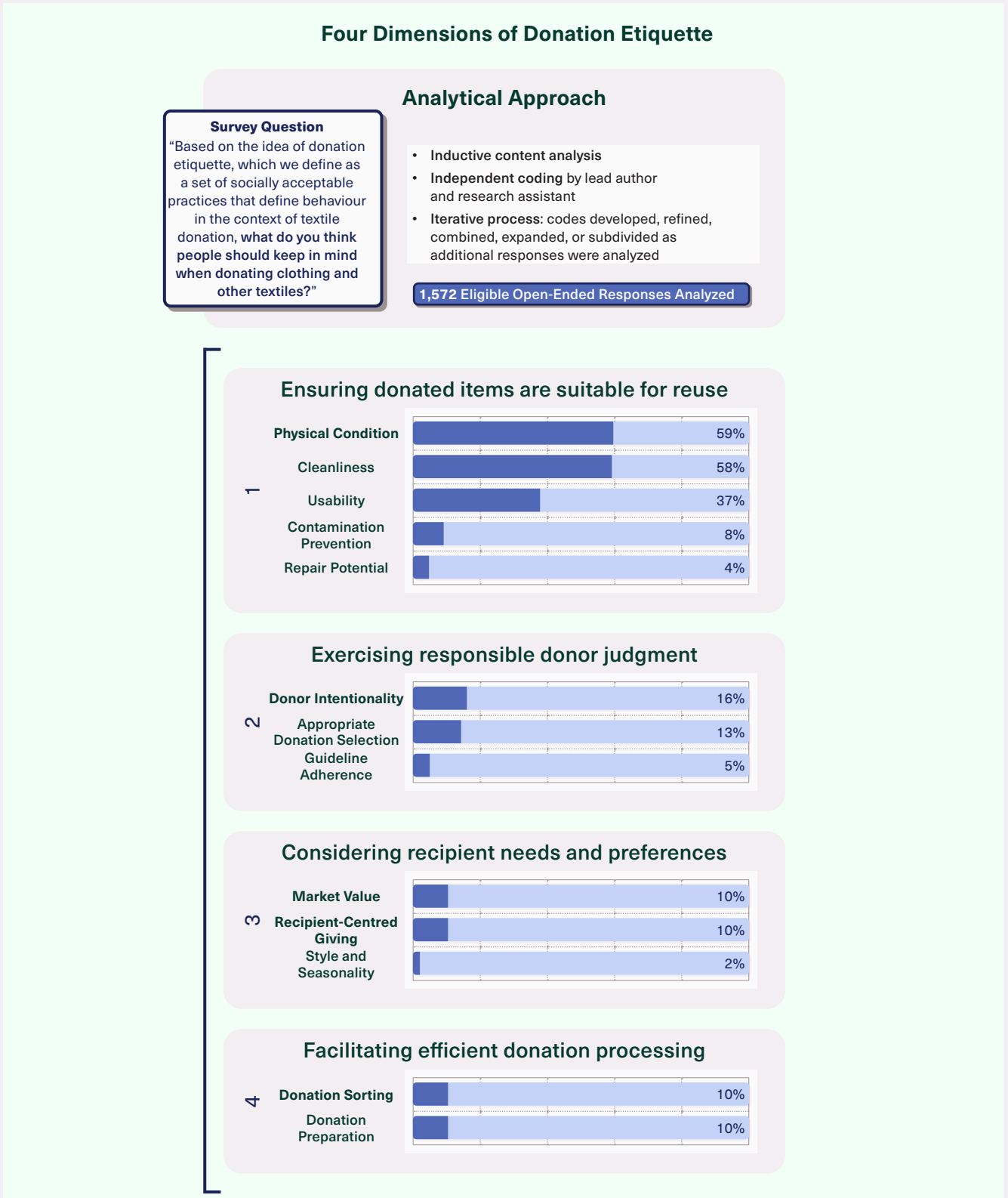


Figure 10: Dimensions of donation etiquette found through analyzing open-ended survey question (n=1,572)

The most prominent of these themes concerned **ensuring that donated items are suitable for reuse**. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of donating items that were:

in good **Physical Condition** (n=944, 59%),

the **Cleanliness** of items (n=923, 58%), and

their **Usability** (n=583, 37%).

Participants also highlighted the importance of

Contamination Prevention (n=127, 8%), emphasizing that donors should avoid donating contaminated items and protect donations from damage, as well as consider the

Repair Potential (n=63, 4%) of damaged items before donation.

Together, these findings suggest that respondents viewed donation etiquette primarily through the lens of maintaining the quality, safety, and functional value of donated textiles.

The next second-order theme focused on **exercising responsible donor judgment**. Participants emphasized the importance of thoughtful decision-making throughout the donation process, reflecting the view that donation is an intentional act that requires consideration and responsibility. This theme included references to:

Donor Intentionality (n=258, 16%), which captured the importance of considering where, how, and why items are donated;

Appropriate Donation Selection (n=210, 13%), which emphasized excluding unsuitable items from donation streams; and

Guideline Adherence (n=85, 5%), which reflected the importance of following the policies and accepted practices of receiving organizations.

Collectively, these responses suggest that participants viewed donation etiquette not only as a matter of item quality but also as a function of the donor's willingness to make informed and responsible decisions throughout the donation process.

The third second-order theme focused on **considering recipient needs and preferences**.

This theme included references to:

Market Value (n=163, 10%), which captured considerations related to item quality, desirability, and resale potential;

Recipient-Centred Giving or following the "Golden Rule" (n=161, 10%), which reflected the belief that donors should consider whether they themselves would be happy to receive the item; and

Style and Seasonality (n=42, 2%), which reflected the importance of donating items that align with current fashion trends and seasonal demand.

Finally, the fourth second-order theme focused on **facilitating efficient donation processing**. Participants highlighted the importance of preparing donations in ways that reduce the burden on receiving organizations and improve the efficiency of sorting and redistribution activities.

This theme included references to:

Donation Sorting (n=72, 5%), such as separating reusable and non-reusable items or organizing different categories of donations, as well as

Donation Preparation (n=67, 4%), including bagging, folding, checking pockets, and otherwise preparing items for collection and handling.

Following the open-ended questions, participants responded to 17 statements related to textile donation etiquette. These items were drawn from a variety of sources, including charity and thrift store websites, blogs, educational materials, and practitioner-oriented articles discussing recommended donation practices.

To facilitate interpretation and comparison with the qualitative findings, the items were grouped into the same four themes that emerged from the thematic analysis: ensuring that donated items are suitable for reuse, exercising responsible donor judgment, considering recipient needs and preferences, and facilitating efficient donation processing.

Responses indicated particularly strong agreement with behaviours related to ensuring that donated items are suitable for reuse (see **Figure 11**).



Figure 11: Donation etiquette practices reported from Likert-scale survey questions

Respondents strongly agreed that they:

- **do not leave donations unattended outside** when bins are full or donation centres are closed (M=6.69, SD=0.80),
- **do not donate items with stains, odours, or animal hair** (M=6.58, SD=0.91); and
- **do not donate items with rips, tears, pilling, or stretching** (M=6.17, SD=1.15).

Respondents also reported:

- **laundering or cleaning items before donation** (M=6.11, SD=1.33) and
- **checking that items are functional** (M=6.04, SD=1.29).

These findings closely mirror the qualitative results, where cleanliness, physical condition, and usability emerged as the most frequently discussed aspects of donation etiquette.

Items related to exercising responsible donor judgment received more moderate levels of agreement. Respondents reported:

- **separating non-wearable items from those that could be reused** (M=5.87),
- **encouraging others to donate textiles** (M=5.48, SD=1.68),
- **caring about which organizations receive their donations** (M=5.47, SD=1.62), and
- **being intentional about where they donate** (M=5.31, SD=1.66).

Verification behaviours received lower ratings, including:

- **confirming what organization a donation bin supports** (M=5.03, SD=1.91),
- **donating to different organizations depending on the items being donated** (M=3.89, SD=1.82), and
- **contacting organizations to confirm they can accept specific items** (M=3.41, SD=2.06).

These findings suggest that while respondents generally value responsible donation practices, fewer engage in more time-intensive information-seeking behaviours.

Items related to considering recipient needs and preferences received the lowest overall ratings. Respondents reported only moderate agreement that

- they **donate high-end or brand-name items** (M=3.78, SD=1.41) and that
- they **only donate items appropriate for the current season** (M=3.30, SD=1.67).

This contrasts somewhat with the qualitative findings, where participants frequently emphasized the importance of considering the needs of recipients and donating items that others would value.

Finally, respondents expressed strong agreement with behaviours intended to facilitate efficient donation processing.

- **Checking pockets and removing personal items before donating** received one of the highest ratings in the study (M=6.43, SD=1.04), followed by
- **ensuring that donation bags are not overloaded** (M=5.48, SD=1.54), and
- **folding items before donation** (M=5.45, SD=1.82).

These findings suggest that respondents recognize the importance of preparing donations in ways that reduce the burden on receiving organizations.

Overall, the quantitative findings align closely with the themes that emerged from the open-ended responses (see **Appendix B3 in the Master Report**). Respondents expressed the strongest agreement with behaviours related to maintaining the quality, cleanliness, and usability of donated textiles, as well as preparing donations in ways that facilitate efficient processing.

In contrast, items related to considering recipient needs and preferences consistently received the lowest ratings across the four themes. Taken together, these findings suggest that respondents primarily understand donation etiquette as ensuring that donated items are clean, functional, and suitable for reuse, while placing comparatively less emphasis on tailoring donations to the specific needs, preferences, or circumstances of recipients and receiving organizations.

3.2 Observed Donation Quality

To complement the self-reported findings from the donation behaviour survey, we also present findings from the analysis of donated textile samples. We assessed two distinct samples of textiles from seven SWR in Nova Scotia.

Sample 1: Pallet boxes consisting of unsold, excess, and surplus donated product from The Salvation Army Thrift Stores located throughout Nova Scotia. These items typically end up in the "bale stream", meaning they are baled and sold to brokers, who then sort and export items to overseas commodity markets. These are the items that would be at risk of being sent to landfill if export markets were disrupted.

Sample 2: Pallet boxes consisting of raw, unsorted/unprocessed donations to Salvation Army Thrift Store locations in each of the seven SWR. The items remained in their original donated state. An eighth "region"/box was included in the **Sort 2** data, consisting of items collected from community donation bins operated by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Halifax.

In total, 4,664 textile items were assessed across the two samples. The sampling design sought to ensure roughly equal representation from each of Nova Scotia's seven solid-waste management regions, with approximately 300 items examined per region within each sorting exercise. Additional information about the sampling approach and the province's SWR is provided in **Section 2.0 - Methodology of the Waste Characterization Study**.

When assessing the condition of a garment, a grade between A - F was assigned to the item, with grades A-C indicating immediate resale potential, D1 and D2 denoting minor or severe repair interventions needed before resale can be considered, and E and F denoting end of life. A full explanation of the system is available in the **Section 2.3 - Condition of the Waste Characterization Study**.

In addition to assigning an overall condition grade, project staff recorded the presence of specific defects and contamination issues observed during the sorting process. Defects were grouped into categories including staining, odour or mildew, structural damage, missing components (e.g., buttons or zippers), pilling, stretching, fibre degradation, moisture damage, and other factors affecting resale potential.

The survey and sorting datasets were analyzed in tandem to identify potential relationships between self-reported donation behaviours and the defects observed within donation streams. Findings from both datasets were subsequently contextualized through consultations with subject matter experts from the textile collection, sorting, reuse, wholesale, and thrift retail sectors to ensure that the study's interpretations of donation quality, rewearability, and donation etiquette aligned with industry practice and operational realities. For example, survey questions examining laundering practices, donation of stained or damaged items, storage behaviours, and understanding of donation etiquette were compared against the prevalence of contamination, repair-related defects, and other quality issues identified during sorting.

While causal relationships cannot be established from observational data alone, integrating these data sources and validating interpretations through expert consultation enabled the study to identify common behavioural patterns, misconceptions, and knowledge gaps that may contribute to preventable textile loss and reduced rewearability within charitable reuse systems. This approach also helped identify areas where public perceptions and behaviours may be misaligned with industry expectations regarding acceptable donation practices and textile quality standards.

3.2.1 Condition

To better understand the quality of textiles entering Nova Scotia's reuse system, each item in the sample was assigned a condition grade between A-F based on its overall state and potential for continued use.

Because the study examined three distinct donation streams, including surplus and excess product ("ragout" and "rejects") that had already passed through the charitable reuse system (**Sort 1**), raw unprocessed donations ("credential") received directly from donors at store locations (**Sort 2A**), and raw unprocessed donations collected through donation bins (**Sort 2B**), the results are presented both separately and in aggregate to facilitate meaningful comparisons across streams.

Figure 24 in **Section 3.5 - Condition of donated items of the TTNS Phase II Waste Characterization Study** presents the distribution of condition grades across all 4,664 items assessed. It is recreated here as **Figure 12** for ease of reference.

Across the combined sample, 46.7% of items (n=2,178) **received a grade of C or higher**, indicating that they were immediately rewearable and suitable for resale with little or no intervention. These findings compare favourably with those reported by *Walsh et al. (2026)*, who found that only 37% of 8,280 garments sampled from second-hand markets across four European countries showed no observable damage. While the methodologies are not directly comparable, both studies suggest that a substantial proportion of textiles circulating through reuse systems remain suitable for continued wear. An additional 19.4% of items (n=906) **received a D1 grade**, indicating that they remained recoverable but would likely require minor cleaning, stain removal, repair, or refurbishment before they could be resold. This finding highlights a significant opportunity to increase textile reuse through relatively modest interventions, as nearly one in five items fell just below resale standards and could potentially be returned to the reuse market through minor cleaning, repair, or refurbishment rather than being diverted to lower-value pathways.

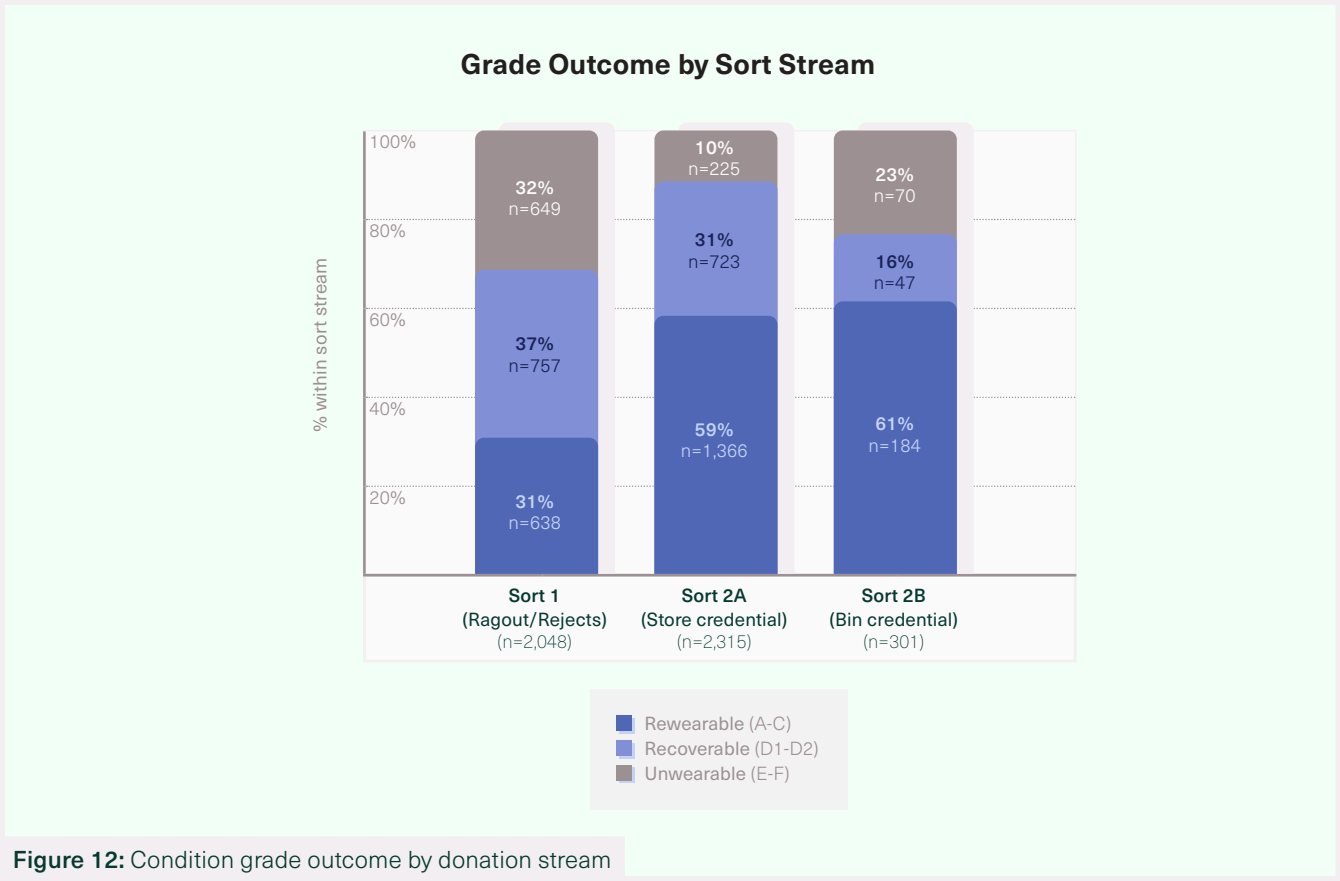


Figure 12: Condition grade outcome by donation stream

While these results point to opportunities for recovering additional value from textiles through minor interventions, they also highlight the scale of the challenge facing the sector. Overall, over half of the items (53.3%; n=2,471) were **not immediately suitable for resale**, having received a grade of D1 or lower. This finding is particularly important because the current textile management system has limited scaled pathways for recovering value from these materials. As a result, many of these items are directed toward wholesale markets, export channels, or disposal rather than being repaired, refurbished, or otherwise prepared for re-entry into local reuse markets. 15 items received an "Unknown" grade and were not included in the grading analysis.

When the results are separated by sorting stream, several noteworthy patterns emerge (see **Figure 12**). Most notably, the proportion of D1 items remained remarkably consistent across both **Sort 1** and **Sort 2**. Approximately one in five items in each sample required only minor intervention before they could potentially re-enter the reuse stream. This consistency is particularly interesting given the fundamentally different nature of the two samples. **Sort 1** consisted primarily of surplus, excess, and unsold inventory (ragout and rejects) that had already passed through the charitable retail system, whereas **Sort 2** consisted of raw, unprocessed donations (credential) received directly from donors, either at store locations (**Sort 2A**) or through unattended donation bins (**Sort 2B**). One possible explanation is that D1 items represent a category of textiles that charities frequently lack the resources, infrastructure, or economic incentive to process.

Minor stains, missing buttons, pilling, wrinkles, or **small repairs** may render an item unsuitable for immediate placement on the sales floor. Even when such items do make it onto store shelves, these defects may reduce their attractiveness to consumers, making them less likely to be purchased. As a result, many D1 items remain fundamentally wearable but struggle to successfully move through the reuse system.

The comparison between raw donations received directly at stores and those collected through community donation bins also produced notable differences.

Figure 12 compares the distribution of condition grades between these collection methods.

The most striking finding is the substantially higher proportion of non-recoverable material found in community donation bins. Nearly one-quarter (23.3%) of items collected from donation bins **received a grade of E or F**, compared with only 9.7% of items donated directly to stores or donation centres.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while a substantial proportion of donated textiles remain suitable for continued wear, a considerable share of the stream requires some degree of cleaning, repair, or refurbishment before it can successfully re-enter reuse markets. They also suggest that the quality of donations may vary considerably depending on how and where items are donated, providing important context for understanding the behavioural drivers of preventable textile loss.

Common D1 Defects

Preventable / Repairable Issues that Reduce Resaleability



Minor Stains | Missing Buttons | Pilling | Wrinkles | Small Repairs

Finally, in comparing this data with data collected from other regions in Canada, we see a high degree of agreement. *Sterling et al. (2026)* found that, in their sample of raw thrift store donations from across three provinces (Alberta, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, n = 9,333), **54.8%** (n=5,112) of items were suitable for immediate resale (grades A-C). Of the items determined to be unsaleable, **23.9%** (n=2,228) were given a grade of D1, while **19.0%** (n=1,774) were given a grade of D2. Finally, a relatively low proportion of the sample was given a grade of E (2.1%, n=197) or F (0.2%, n=22). The findings are compared in **Figure 13**.

There is a high degree of alignment between the A-C grade category and the D1 category between the two studies. This suggests that the overall proportion of resaleable items donated to charity thrift stores is relatively constant across the four Canadian provinces. It also suggests that a similar volume of items requiring minor repair or maintenance intervention, such as laundering, is present in the donation stream across samples.

There is a larger variation amongst the lower grades, with NS reporting a lower percentage of D2 items in the sample but a larger volume of grades E and F. This could be due to differences in sorter interpretations between D2 and E categories. However, these discrepancies are of little practical importance, since most of these items are rejected for reuse *(Berry, 2022; Sterling et al., 2026)*.

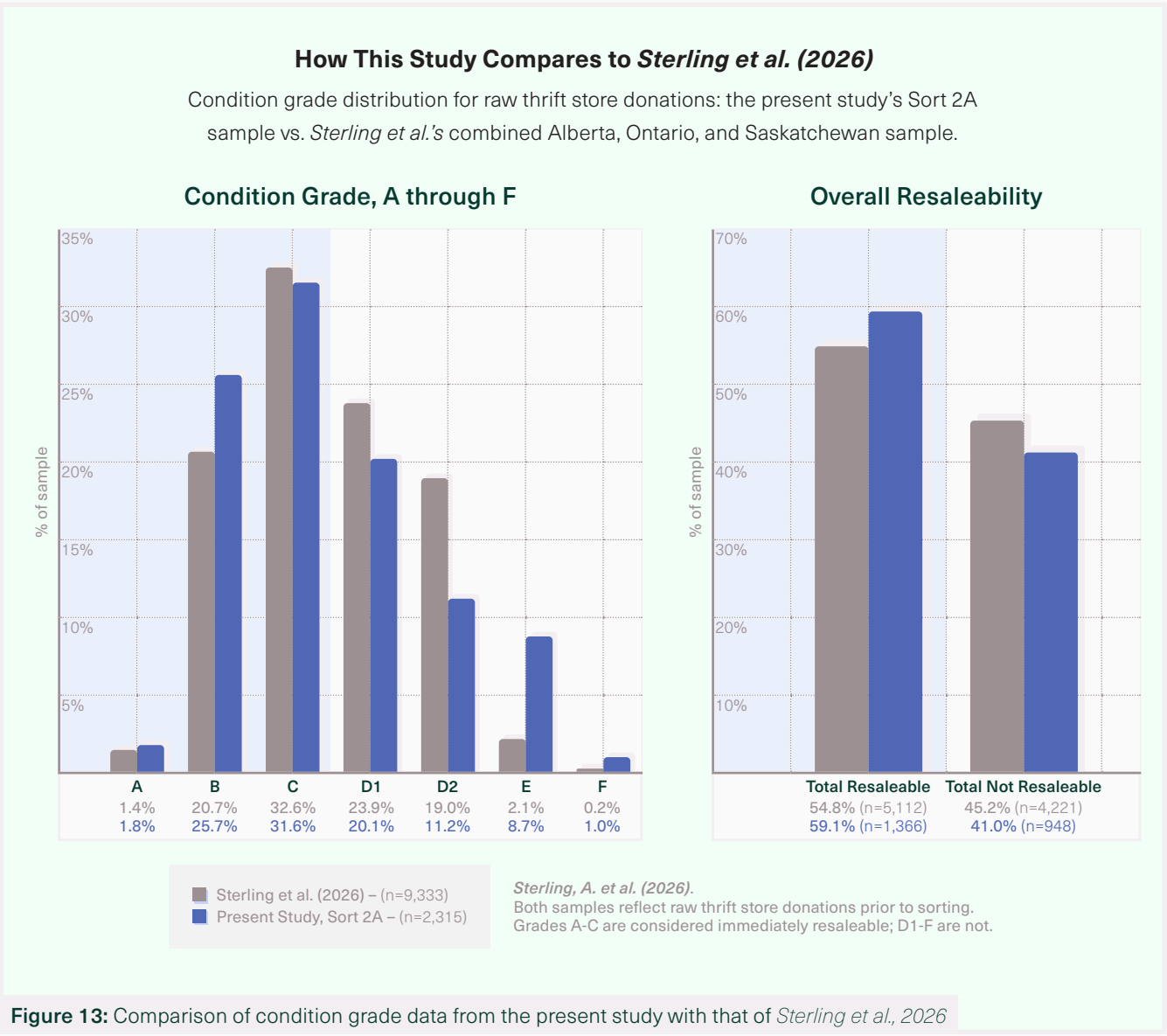


Figure 13: Comparison of condition grade data from the present study with that of *Sterling et al., 2026*

3.3 Interviews

Finally, to add practical context to the survey and sort data, interviews were conducted with thrift collection and retail organizations to assess preferred donation behaviours. 12 interviews were conducted with organizations across Canada, a full list can be found in **Appendix A10 in the Master Report**.

Experts whose work is directly related to the collection and resale of post-consumer textiles overwhelmingly identified donation quality and donor education as critical factors influencing the success of textile reuse systems. Across interviews, stakeholders consistently linked poor donation practices to increased contamination, higher processing and disposal costs, and reduced diversion outcomes.

When asked directly to describe, **"What does good donation behaviour, or 'etiquette,' look like to you?"** The following key messages emerged:

- **Donate only reusable items**
- **Keep donations clean and dry**
- **Do not leave items outside**
- **Separate textiles from breakables**
- **Charities are not disposal services**

These perspectives help contextualize the differences observed between store-based donations and donations collected through community bins that were mentioned above. Many interviewees reported that community donation bins are frequently used as disposal sites for unwanted textiles and other household waste. Unlike staffed donation centres, where donations are made in a monitored environment and may involve some degree of interaction with personnel, donation bins provide a highly convenient and anonymous drop-off option. The absence of these social cues and accountability mechanisms may increase the likelihood that individuals use bins to dispose of items they know are unsuitable for reuse.

Consistent with these observations, the sample analysis found a substantially higher proportion of unusable material in donation bins than in donations received directly at stores. Together, these findings suggest that collection method can influence donation quality and underscore the importance of both public education and collection-system design in supporting responsible donation practices and maximizing textile diversion.

Interview Results: Key Good Donation Etiquette Messages



4.0 Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that donor behaviour plays an important role in determining whether textiles remain suitable for resale. Many of the issues observed in the sample, including contamination, staining, odours, moisture damage, and the mixing of reusable and non-reusable items, are consistent with behaviours that can occur before donation. The results therefore highlight the importance of donation etiquette, particularly practices such as ensuring items are clean, dry, and wearable, and separating textiles intended for resale from those that are no longer suitable for continued wear. Consequently, efforts to improve textile diversion should focus not only on downstream processing and recycling infrastructure, but also on supporting donors in making informed decisions that help preserve the circular potential of textiles before they enter the charitable collection system.

A key part of empowering donors to make higher-quality donations is considering the messaging used to attract donations, and whether that messaging aligns with collection organizations' present operational goals and capacity. Since the emergence of charitable thrift retail in the late nineteenth century, organizations such as The Salvation Army have worked diligently to promote the message that clothing should always be donated rather than discarded *(The Salvation Army, May 7, 2024)*. Many donors have been taught for decades that thrift stores and textile collection organizations are an appropriate destination for virtually all unwanted clothing, including items that are stained, damaged, or otherwise unsuitable for resale.

This approach has offered several advantages. It simplified public messaging, maximized diversion, and reduced the likelihood that potentially reusable items would be discarded because donors incorrectly assumed they were unacceptable. When reliable downstream markets were in place for surplus, unsold, and lower-quality materials, it made sense for organizations to receive all unwanted textiles before determining internally how best to extract their value, whether through resale (domestic or export), reuse, recycling, or recovery.

However, the context in which these organizations operate has changed dramatically. The rapid growth of fast fashion has led to unprecedented volumes of clothing entering the resale system, much of it of low material and construction quality prone to damage.

While encouraging donation remains important, the sheer quantity of textiles now being generated places significant operational and financial pressure on collection and resale organizations, particularly smaller charities and social enterprises that lack the scale, infrastructure, and downstream market access available to larger operators.

For these organizations, processing, sorting, storing, and disposing of unsaleable materials can represent a substantial burden. This creates a challenging tension for the sector. On one hand, introducing additional barriers or restrictions on donations risks discouraging participation and undermining decades of successful public education efforts. Convenience remains one of the strongest motivations for donation, and donors generally do not engage in detailed information-seeking behaviours before deciding where to take unwanted textiles. On the other hand, accepting all materials positions organizations to perform a waste-management function without compensation.

This raises an important policy question: should organizations that collect and manage end-of-life textiles be expected to bear the associated costs themselves, or should they receive support for the environmental services they provide?

One potential solution is an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework for textiles, under which producers would contribute financially to the collection, sorting, recycling, and disposal of post-consumer textiles. This could create an operationally sustainable way for charities and social enterprises to maximize diversion rates without assuming end-of-life costs.

The challenge, therefore, lies in improving donation quality while avoiding confusion or discouraging participation altogether.

Complicating matters further, collection organizations vary considerably in their capacity to process and recover value from non-rewearable materials. Some have access to downstream markets that provide revenue streams, while others incur disposal costs; in other words, one organization's trash may be another's treasure, making it difficult to develop a universal message regarding what should and should not be donated.

Future efforts to improve donation etiquette will need to balance the goals of:

- **maximizing textile diversion,**
- **preserving high-value circularity opportunities,** and
- **recognizing the differing capabilities of organizations across the collection and reuse sector.**

Whether through enhanced donor education, expanded repair and refurbishment initiatives, improved sorting infrastructure, or policy mechanisms such as EPR programs,

the objective should be to improve textile outcomes while maintaining a system that remains accessible and convenient for donors.

Summary: Donation Etiquette Goals



Maximizing Textile Diversion



Preserving High-Value Circularity Opportunities



Recognizing the Differing Capabilities of Organizations Across the Collection and Reuse Sector

5.0 Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are identified with the prefix **"BEH"** to distinguish them from recommendations presented in the other **TTNS Phase II** deliverables.

Master Recommendation Key

Waste Characterization Study
MAT = Material

Donation Etiquette Analysis
BEH = Behaviour

End-Use Pathways Brief
MKT = Market

Recommendation Summary

HIGH PRIORITY

BEH-1 **Coordinated sector messaging updates**
Developing a standardized framework could lead to more consistent donor expectations.

BEH-2 **Textile EPR framework advocacy**
Engaging governments and advocacy groups could shift costs from charitable organizations.

BEH-3 **Donation etiquette education through community collection events**
Organizing collection drives could improve donation quality and normalize thoughtful sorting.

BEH-4 **Sector data and reporting infrastructure**
Building standardized reporting could improve benchmarking and best-practice sharing.

MEDIUM PRIORITY

BEH-5 **Repair-to-resale infrastructure for D1 items**
Exploring investment in accessible repair could reduce costs and create new potential revenue.

BEH-6 **Pre-donation self-assessment tools**
Developing visual guides could improve donor understanding of item suitability.

BEH-7 **Post-donation journey transparency**
Developing transparent public communications could improve visibility of donation consequences.

BEH-8 **Donation bin reform**
Enforcing NACTR Donation Bin Operator Code of Conduct could reduce low quality donations.

BEH-1 Coordinated Sector Messaging Updates

Priority: High ▲

Audience: NACTR and Member Organizations

The charitable textile reuse sector is under significant strain, absorbing growing volumes of donated material of which an increasing share is unsaleable. Because the sector helped establish the longstanding "donate anything" norm, individual charities have little incentive to challenge it alone, since donors can simply redirect unaccepted items elsewhere. NACTR is uniquely positioned to coordinate a sector-wide messaging reset that improves donation quality without disadvantaging any single member or discouraging donation participation overall.

Evidence from TTNS

- Volumes of donated material continue to grow, and an increasing proportion of what arrives at collection points is unsaleable.
- This study identified four dimensions of donation etiquette: suitability for reuse, responsible donor judgment, recipient needs and preferences, and efficient donation processing.
- Survey findings show donors are strongly motivated by reducing environmental impact and helping people in need, supporting a quality-as-generosity message frame.
- Survey respondents identified partnerships with schools, libraries, community organizations, and municipalities as the most effective awareness-raising channels.

Recommended Actions:

- Develop a consistent national messaging framework, draft language, signage standards, and condition guidelines that member organizations can adapt to their own donor communications.
- Organize messaging around the four donation etiquette dimensions, allowing individual charities to tailor emphasis to their capacity and donor base.
- Frame donation quality as a form of generosity tied to environmental impact and helping people in need, rather than as a list of restrictions.
- Partner with schools, libraries, community organizations, and municipalities to deliver messaging through the channels donors trust most.

Expected Outcomes:

- Consistent donor expectations across member organizations without competitive disadvantage to any single charity.
- Reduced intake of unusable materials and lower sorting and disposal costs for members not equipped to process high volumes.
- A credible baseline (TTNS Phase II data) for evaluating the effectiveness of a funded campaign or pilot.

BEH-2 Textile EPR Framework Advocacy

Priority: High ▲

Audience: NACTR, Provincial Governments, Stewardship Organizations, and Future PROs

NACTR member organizations currently absorb the disposal costs of products they did not produce, a burden that longstanding public messaging encouraging unconditional donation has helped create. A textile EPR framework would shift financial responsibility for end-of-life management to producers while compensating collection and processing organizations for the environmental services they already provide.

Evidence from TTNS

- 53% of assessed items were not immediately suitable for resale.
- Charitable collectors currently absorb the costs associated with managin E- and F-grade materials, rather than producers.
- Longstanding public messaging has encouraged donors to believe thrift stores and charitable collectors will accept virtually any item, regardless of condition.
- Export markets are becoming less reliable as fast-fashion donation volumes rise, increasing pressure on domestic disposal costs.

Recommended Actions:

- Use TTNS Phase II evidence, including the 53% resale-ineligibility finding and E/F-grade management costs, to advocate nationally for a textile EPR framework.
- Pursue near-term municipal or provincial cost-sharing arrangements to offset transportation and disposal costs for unsaleable material while a full EPR framework is developed.
- Engage provincial governments, stewardship organizations, and future Producer Responsibility Organizations (PROs) as advocacy partners.

Expected Outcomes:

- Financial responsibility for end-of-life textile management shifted toward producers.
- Reduced disposal costs currently absorbed by charitable collectors.
- Near-term cost relief through municipal or provincial cost-sharing while EPR is developed.

BEH-3 Donation Etiquette Education Through Community Collection Events

Priority: High ▲

Audience: Secondary Schools, Post-Secondary Institutions, Municipalities, and Active Industry Partners

Donors need clear, practical guidance on what makes an item suitable for reuse and how to prepare donations responsibly. Structured community collection events, delivered in partnership with schools and municipalities, offer a low-risk way to build this understanding using a model already proven for other recycling behaviours.

Evidence from TTNS

- High schools, colleges, and universities are settings where participants are more likely to make independent clothing decisions and engage directly in donation behaviour.
- The TTNS Phase II grading framework (A-C, D1-D2, E-F) provides a ready-made tool for tracking whether education improves donation quality over time.
- The four donation etiquette dimensions identified in this study provide a ready-made messaging foundation for event materials.
- School-based blue-bin recycling education demonstrates that clear sorting rules and repeated participation can normalize source-separation behaviour.

Recommended Actions:

- Organize periodic textile collection drives in high schools, colleges, and universities in partnership with municipalities and active industry partners.
- Distribute pre-event materials covering item suitability, condition assessment, sorting rewearable from unwearable items, packaging, and collector information.
- Use the TTNS Phase II A-C, D1-D2, E-F grading framework to evaluate condition and contamination levels at participating events.
- Pilot the model with several institutions before broader adoption.

Expected Outcomes:

- Improved donation quality among participating institutions over time.
- A tested, low-risk model for broader adoption across the province.
- Normalized thoughtful textile sorting akin to established recycling habits.

BEH-4 Sector Data and Reporting Infrastructure

Priority: High ▲

Audience: NACTR and Member Organizations

NACTR member organizations collectively manage enormous volumes of textile material, but no standardized way currently exists to track disposal volumes, rejection rates, processing costs, or downstream losses across the sector. Building this reporting capacity would strengthen the case for EPR, support benchmarking, and provide the longitudinal data needed to evaluate future interventions.

Evidence from TTNS

- No standardized way currently exists to track or report disposal volumes, rejection rates, processing costs, or downstream losses across NACTR's membership base.
- TTNS Phase II data provides a starting baseline for sector-wide measurement, but this baseline does not yet extend beyond a single snapshot.
- Quantifying the disposal costs the sector absorbs annually would strengthen NACTR's case for EPR.

Recommended Actions:

- Build standardized sector-wide reporting on disposal volumes, rejection rates, processing costs, and downstream losses.
- Use this reporting to benchmark member organizations against industry averages and identify best practices.
- Extend the TTNS Phase II baseline into an ongoing measurement practice rather than a one-time snapshot.

Expected Outcomes:

- A quantified, defensible case for EPR based on sector-wide disposal cost data.
- Improved benchmarking and best-practice sharing among member organizations.
- Longitudinal data to evaluate future policy and campaign effectiveness.

BEH-5 Repair-to-Resale Infrastructure for D1 Items

Priority: Medium ▲

Audience: NACTR, Member Organizations, and Active Industry Partners

D1 items are fundamentally wearable and often need only minor intervention to reach resale quality, but member organizations typically lack the staffing, time, space, and downstream incentive to make those investments themselves. This is a system-wide gap in available pathways, not a processing issue specific to individual organizations, and is best addressed through sector-level investment.

Evidence from TTNS

- No standardized way currently exists to track or report disposal volumes, rejection rates, processing costs, or downstream losses across NACTR's membership base.
- D1 items are fundamentally wearable and could often be restored to resale quality through relatively minor interventions.
- Unsold D1 items create a recurring storage, handling, and disposal cost for member organizations.

Recommended Actions:

- Explore sector-level investment in accessible repair infrastructure for D1 items, potentially through partnerships with vocational training programs, social enterprises, or community repair initiatives.
- Pilot the model with one or two member organizations, evaluated against the D1 baseline established in this study.
- Track reductions in storage, handling, and disposal costs, and potential revenue generation, to build the case for broader adoption.

Expected Outcomes:

- Reduced storage, handling, and disposal costs associated with unsold D1 items.
- A potential new revenue stream from repaired, resold items.
- More items retained in the rewear market rather than export or disposal channels.

BEH-6 Pre-Donation Self-Assessment Tools

Priority: Medium ▲

Audience: NACTR and Member Organizations

Donors are already receptive to quality-focused guidance, but currently lack clear, accessible, and consistent prompts throughout the donation process. Low-cost self-assessment tools can close this gap at both the point of preparation at home and the point of giving.

Evidence from TTNS

- Survey respondents already view physical condition, cleanliness, and usability as central to donation etiquette.
- Donors are receptive to quality-focused guidance but currently lack clear, accessible, and consistent prompts throughout the donation process.
- Low-cost tools, such as visual guides, checklists, and QR-linked resources, can be deployed digitally, at staffed donation centres, and on community bin signage.

Recommended Actions:

- Develop low-cost, donor-facing tools such as a visual quality guide, a rewearability checklist, or QR-linked resources.
- Deploy these tools through digital channels, at staffed donation centres, and on community bin signage.

Expected Outcomes:

- Improved donor understanding of item suitability at the point of donation.
- Higher average donation quality with minimal cost to member organizations.

BEH-7 Post-Donation Journey Transparency

Priority: Medium ▲

Audience: NACTR and Member Organizations

Survey data show donors understand far less about what happens to textiles after donation than about what charities accept, a knowledge gap that likely reinforces the misconception that donating an unsuitable item is still better than discarding it. Making the sorting, reuse, recovery, export, and disposal journey visible would improve individual donation decisions and build public support for policy change.

Evidence from TTNS

- Survey data shows understanding of what happens to textiles after donation was substantially lower than understanding of what charities accept.
- This knowledge gap likely contributes to the misconception that donating an unsuitable item is still better than discarding it.
- Donors who do not understand that poor-quality donations may still be landfilled, or that charities bear the disposal cost, are not equipped to act on their stated values.

Recommended Actions:

- Develop transparent public communications describing the sorting, reuse, recovery, export, and disposal journey of donated textiles.
- Use this transparency to build public support for policy changes, including EPR, that NACTR members need.

Expected Outcomes:

- Improved individual donation quality as consequences become visible to donors.
- Stronger public support for EPR and related policy changes.

BEH-8 Donation Bin Reform

Priority: Medium ▲

Audience: NACTR, Donation Bin Operators, Municipalities

Community donation bins produce a disproportionately high share of low-quality material, likely because their anonymity reduces donor accountability. Unlike many donation-quality challenges that depend on changing entrenched donor habits, bin misuse is a governance and design issue that can be addressed more quickly through targeted policy and operational changes.

Evidence from TTNS

- 23.3% of items collected from community donation bins received an E or F grade, compared with 9.7% of items collected from staffed donation centres, approximately 2.4 times higher.
- The anonymity of donation bins may reduce donor accountability, making lower-quality disposal through this channel more likely.
- Bin misuse is a governance and design issue that may be addressed more quickly through targeted policy and operational changes than habit-dependent challenges.

Recommended Actions:

- Enforce the NACTR Donation Bin Operator Code of Conduct (NACTR, 2026), including clear signage specifying acceptable items, consequences for misuse, and organizational contact information.
- Require that municipal textile collection service providers be NACTR members or maintain formal partnerships with NACTR members.

Expected Outcomes:

- Reduced share of low-quality, E/F-grade material collected through bins.
- Reduced dumping at bin sites.
- More consistent Code of Conduct enforcement across all municipal collection points.

5.1 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the findings of this work. First, the survey relied on self-reported data and is therefore subject to recall bias and social desirability bias. **Respondents may not accurately remember their donation behaviours or may overreport behaviours perceived as socially desirable, such as laundering items before donation, while underreporting behaviours perceived negatively, such as donating stained or damaged items.** As a result, reported donation practices may not perfectly reflect actual behaviour. Additionally, while the survey was administered nationally, recruitment efforts intentionally emphasized Nova Scotia to support the objectives of the TTNS project. As a result, the findings may overrepresent attitudes, behaviours, and donation practices common within Nova Scotia relative to other regions of the country.

Second, the grading system was developed to assess the physical condition and rewearability of textiles rather than their market desirability. **While Grades A through C were classified as immediately rewearable and suitable for resale attempts, this does not necessarily mean that an item would be accepted for sale or purchased by consumers.** For example, many socks, undergarments, promotional items, and low-value goods may receive grades indicating excellent physical condition but are rarely placed on retail sales floors due to operational policies or limited consumer demand. Consequently, the study's estimates of rewearability should be interpreted as indicators of physical suitability for reuse rather than guaranteed resale potential.

Third, the degree to which observed defects were preventable was not systematically coded during data collection. Although the analysis differentiates between conditions that were likely influenced by donor behaviour (e.g., contamination from dust or pet hair) and those more likely associated with normal wear or end-of-life garment degradation (e.g., fabric failure or tearing), **these classifications were developed retrospectively during the analytical phase rather than being formally recorded in the field.** As a result, some judgment was required when estimating the extent to which observed defects may have been attributable to donor behaviour.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that many condition issues, including stains, tears, odours, moisture damage, and other forms of deterioration, can arise from multiple sources. **In many cases, it is difficult to determine with certainty whether a defect occurred before donation, during storage, transportation, handling, or subsequent processing. This limitation is particularly important given the study's objective of examining the relationship between donor behaviour and textile quality outcomes.** Future research would benefit from the development and application of a dedicated preventability coding framework to more systematically distinguish between avoidable and unavoidable forms of textile degradation.

Finally, although the study integrated survey findings, observational data, and expert interviews, the methodology does not allow causal relationships to be established. **The analysis can identify associations between reported behaviours and observed defects, but it cannot definitively determine whether a particular behaviour directly caused a specific condition outcome.** The findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative of potential behavioural contributors rather than direct evidence of causation. Similarly, while interviews with textile collection, sorting, recycling, wholesale, and thrift retail experts were used to contextualize findings and establish industry-informed definitions of donation etiquette, these perspectives reflect professional experience and operational realities and may not fully represent the views or practices of all organizations operating within the textile reuse and recycling sector.

6.0 Conclusion

The findings of the TTNS Phase II Donation Etiquette Analysis confirm what many charitable textile collectors have long observed on the sort floor: a substantial proportion of donated textiles cannot be resold, and a meaningful share cannot be diverted from landfill at all. Of the 4,664 items assessed across sort streams in Nova Scotia, 53% were not immediately suitable for resale, and 18.3% were graded E or F, representing textiles at the end of their useful life with no viable reuse or recycling pathway. Items collected from unattended donation bins showed disproportionately high rates of end-of-life material, with 23.3% graded E or F compared to 9.7% at staffed donation centres, a gap that reflects the absence of donor-facing guidance and oversight at the point of collection. These figures are not anomalies of the Nova Scotia context. Comparison with *Sterling et al. (2026)*, whose dataset of 9,333 items across Alberta, Ontario, and Saskatchewan found 54.8% resaleable and similar distributions across D1 and D2 grades, suggests that the patterns observed here are consistent across the Canadian charitable textile sector.

The survey component of this study adds an important dimension to these findings by revealing that poor donation quality is not primarily a problem of donor indifference. Respondents reported strong intrinsic motivations for donation, including a desire to reduce environmental impact and contribute to community need, and most expressed genuine commitment to donating items in good condition. The challenge is one of knowledge and habit rather than intent. Donors understand what organizations accept at a higher level than they understand what happens to textiles after donation, and many operate under the assumption that donating an unsuitable item is still preferable to discarding it, a misconception with real cost consequences for member organizations. The four dimensions of donation etiquette identified through inductive content analysis of 1,572 open-ended responses provide a structured framework for translating donor motivation into consistent, quality-conscious behaviour.

The four dimensions of donation etiquette are:

- **Ensuring that donated items are suitable for reuse,**
- **Exercising responsible donor judgment,**
- **Considering recipient needs and preferences,** and
- **Facilitating efficient donation processing.**

Taken together, these findings make the case that improving donation quality is achievable through coordinated effort, and that the returns on that effort are significant. Reducing the proportion of non-resaleable intake lowers sorting and disposal costs for member organizations and lowers contamination rates thereby keeping more textiles circulating within the reuse economy. Charitable textile reuse organizations have sustained this work for over a century, and behaviour change at the scale required does not happen quickly. The recommendations put forward here are grounded in that reality: they prioritize supporting member organizations in continuing to do this work effectively while building the infrastructure, policy conditions, and public understanding needed to manage the volumes of unwearable material that will persist even as donation quality improves.

The recommendations arising from this analysis are designed to be pursued in combination rather than in isolation. Messaging, infrastructure, policy, data, and education interventions each address a different point in the donation lifecycle, and their effects are cumulative. NACTR is well-positioned to lead and coordinate this work as a policy advocate for a sector that currently absorbs significant public environmental costs without commensurate public support. The evidence gathered through TTNS Phase II demonstrates the scale of the challenge, confirms the consistency of the national pattern, and documents the goodwill donors already bring to the process. Translating that goodwill into measurable improvements in donation quality, and advocating effectively for the policy conditions that allow the sector to manage the material that falls outside the reuse stream are the central tasks ahead.

This project was undertaken with the financial support of:
Ce projet a été réalisé avec l'appui financier de :

Environment and Climate Change Canada | Environnement et Changement climatique Canada

Textile Transformation Nova Scotia Phase II

0 Master Report

1 Waste Characterization Study

2 Donation Etiquette Analysis

3 End-Use Pathways Brief

To read all reports, visit www.nactr.ca