

Recommerce 2025:

Targeting the student marketplace for sustainable success



Introduction

As part of Europe's largest research and education network, InAcademia, presents the inside track on how technology can tap into student sentiment surrounding the booming second-hand market.

Aimed at digital marketers, CX leaders, CRM managers, data analysts and developers, 'Recommerce 2025' sets out often overlooked tactics for winning over the shrewdest of Gen Z buyers.





A changing retail landscape: Second-hand is no-longer second-class

In 2025, the European recommerce market is expected to reach ¹€120 billion , with Gen Z students at the forefront of this shift. Thrifty and eco-conscious, this demographic is driving the second-hand movement, valuing sustainability as much as affordability. Yet, retailers have struggled to make recommerce models

work—facing challenges in profitability, logistics, and quality assurance. While entrepreneurial individuals and innovative marketplaces initially led the charge, brands in fashion, homewares, appliances, and more are now catching up, spurred by advancements in technology and consumer demand.

As frontrunners find ways to address these challenges, elevating the customer experience must take centre stage. Prioritising the student populations that have been such a driver in the second-hand market's mainstream shift, is key to building loyalty among these savvy buyers in search of value and in support of a circular economy.

¹ In 2021, a European Cross-Border Commerce Report stated that the recommerce market was valued at €75bn and was anticipated to grow to €120bn by 2025 (+60%)



Vinted a European Success Story taking on the world

Looking at the epic rise of the Lithuanian platform, Vinted, its strategy is a simple one: to focus on getting the basics right. The company's CEO, Thomas Plantenga, makes no secret of the fact that the group's expansion plans are being realised by investing in operational improvements over flashy features. And it's a strategy that's working as Vinted is set to enter 18 new geographical markets and branch outside of the clothing category into electronics, in the coming year.

“Vinted is prioritising “unsexy” areas such as efficient shipping, payments and quality checks – crucial infrastructure for building trust in second-hand transactions.”

Vinted CEO, Thomas Plantenga, speaking to Sustainability Magazine (October 2024)

Following the lead of Vinted, this report hones in on how ambitious ecommerce enterprises - of all shapes and sizes - can implement ways to build on two of the most fundamental factors for delivering rewarding student shopping experiences - seamlessness and trust.

Recommerce as mainstream retail strategy: No going back

The growing penchant for pre-loved items is not a retail trend but a fundamental shift in how we value stuff. It may be dubbed 'reverse commerce' but there is no going back and brands are having to remodel because it's what customers want.

A recent report from one of the earliest to enter this space, eBay, found that 59% of global consumers had bought second-hand goods in the past year and shoppers aged 25-34 are leading the trend with 71% 'thrifting' - mainly for sustainability and affordability reasons. The research published in May 2024 also found that 70% of those surveyed were planning to buy items for resale in the next year.

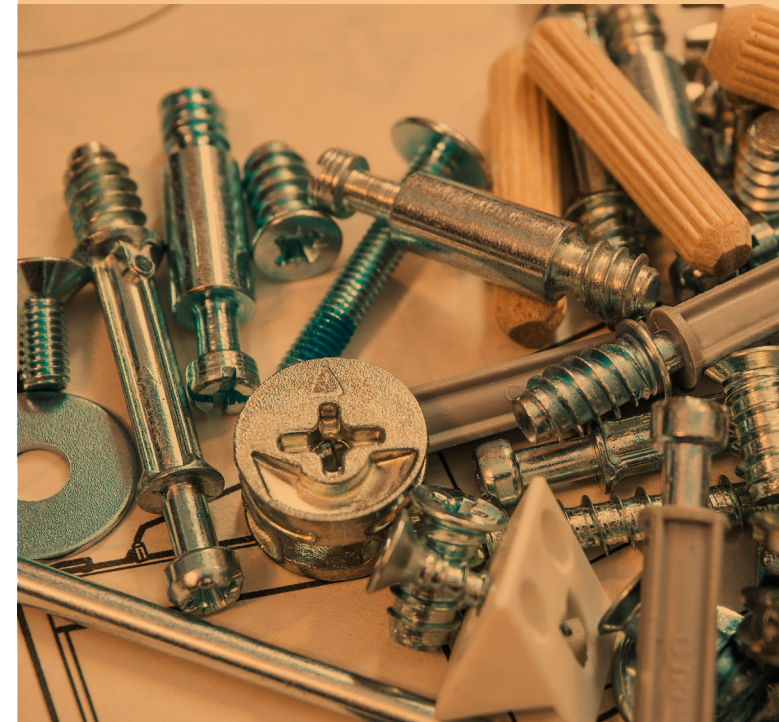
With 2025 tipped to see more widespread adoption and 2026-28 the acceleration phase, retailers that are yet to embrace this movement are already on the backfoot. Earlier adopters are taking differing approaches to making the model work for them through their physical and online stores:

- **Establishing their own resale channels.** Patagonia's Worn Wear program being a case-in-point.
- **Collaborating with existing resale platforms.** Take Burberry's partnership with The RealReal.
- **Investing in Resale-as-a-service (RaaS).** Brands are using software like ThredUp to navigate logistical challenges and offer second-hand products directly to consumers.
- **Cashing in on buy-back programs.** Encouraging customers to return their pre-loved purchases for store credit. IKEA's furniture exchange is a successful example.

Whatever the route being taken, the goal has moved on from finding ways to make it work - to making it work better and more efficiently.

"IKEA Preowned is part of a broader range of efforts by IKEA to reduce resource use and transition to a circular business. By keeping IKEA furniture out of landfills and finding them new homes instead, we hope to reduce waste and prolong the life of our products."

Tolga Öncü, retail operations manager for IKEA franchisee Ingka Group, speaking to Dezeen Magazine (August 2024)



Ultimately, the most forward-thinking of brands in this space are all about ensuring recommerce experiences match - or even surpass - traditional retail in convenience, quality, and trustworthiness.

Understanding how to appeal to these human sensibilities when targeting the student demographic relies on a deep understanding of the current zeitgeist and Gen Z's inspiring influence on both younger and older generations.

The recommerce business is expanding at a rate 16 times faster than typical retail, with substantial growth particularly in the last two years. This upward trajectory is projected to continue, with 66% of businesses anticipating further increases in turnover over the next three years.



Understanding the target audience: The student psyche on second-hand

Since time immemorial, the student community has been championing change. The very obvious pull towards pre-loved for this segment is the sustainability benefits. Multiple studies are out there evidencing environmental consciousness is important to younger generations and they're using their purchasing power to make a point - and a difference.

Affordability is another key concern of course. Many of the categories leading the way in recommerce - tech, books, fashion, media, furniture and furnishings - are necessary spending when you're moving away from home for the first time and throwing yourself into campus life. Being able to buy 'gently used' goods, at a fraction of the price of new, offers the feel-good factor. Second-hand shopping is seen as smart and responsible on all fronts.



According to research from eBay, 36% of Gen Z buy second-hand products out of concern for sustainability and the planet. While this age group were most likely to shop second-hand to save money, they were also more likely than older generations to do this for the environment. ²

² <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/gen-z-spending>

Moving beyond thrift

But, beyond the eco and financial upshots, there are other motivating factors to consider:

Uniqueness

Uniqueness and expression - sifting through pre-loved fashion is especially enjoyable. They want to create a look that's not the same as the racks of clothes on the high street. The search in itself is as satisfying as the resulting style and this group are happy dedicating time to stumbling upon hidden treasure.

Community

Community and belonging - peers and social influencers are held in the highest regard. Where they get their second-hand spoils from and who they share their finds with is heavily steered by social engagement. TikTok and Instagram are awash with content on 'thrifted hauls' and sustainable fashion. What's more, many European universities are proactively setting up initiatives to encourage a second-hand first mindset - aligning with sustainability goals and fostering responsible consumption.

Convenience

Highly digital and convenience driven - while there's certain enjoyment in scouring thrift stores, Gen Z is more at home online. They favour apps and digital marketplaces like Depop, Vinted, ThredUp and Recommerce. Quicker and easier access to pre-loved inventory is fuelling the growth in these shopping habits but with that comes more intense competition between platforms too.

Brands that can integrate innovative ways to speed up and provide a more seamless service will win-out. Especially as Gen Alpha students (those born 2013 onwards) start to enter the system and brands must meet the demands of the first group of truly digital natives with similarly strong values to the Z'ers that go before them.

ThredUp's CEO, James Reinhart, told FOX Business that the demand for second-hand clothing is surging and will continue to grow, even with reduced inflation. The second-hand apparel market is predicted to almost double in value to \$350 billion by 2028, according to ThredUp's yearly resale report, indicating that "the best years for resale are ahead."³

³ <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/gen-z-spending>

Reuse and recycling is becoming part and parcel of campus life

The European Universities Initiative - an EU-funded program - aims to foster alliances between higher education institutions to promote sustainability and innovation and amongst its many other activities involves students in projects related to the circular economy and recommerce.

Many institutions are also spearheading their own activities:

- **University of Cambridge's 'Hub':** This student-led organisation facilitates the resale and donation of second-hand items, including clothing and household goods, through events like swap shops and thrift sales.
- **Erasmus University Rotterdam - Sustainable RSM:** The Rotterdam School of Management's student association promotes sustainability through events like clothing swaps and second-hand markets.
- **University of Copenhagen's Green Campus Initiative:** This program includes student-driven projects such as flea markets and second-hand book sales to promote recommerce.



The impetus for brands: Getting recommerce right

As with any solid retail strategy, to make recommerce work, brands must start by really understanding the customer's wants and needs.

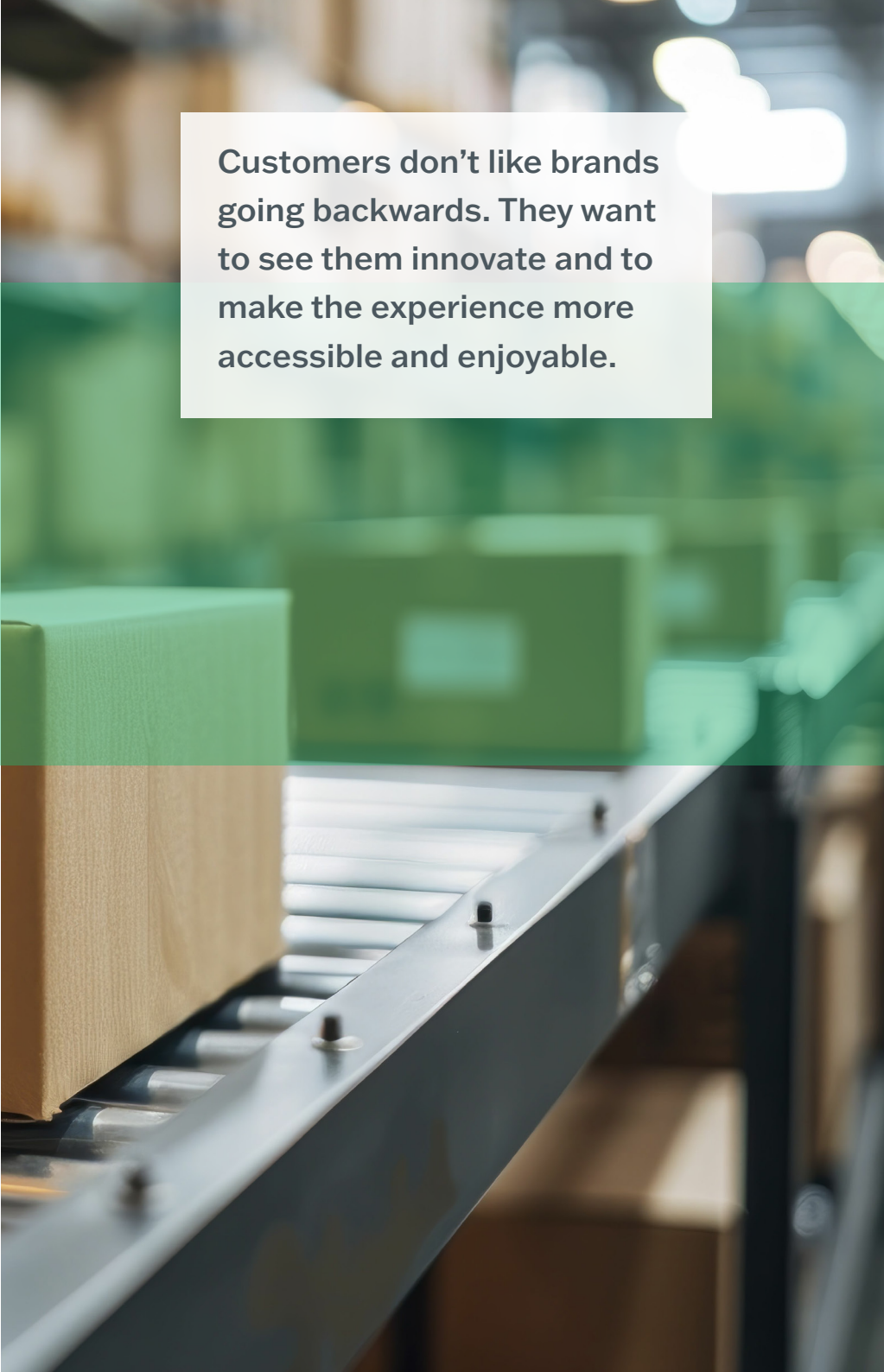
There is a tendency for established merchants to lean too heavily on the sustainability lever. This doesn't have the same authentic ring as a start-up with reuse at its heart.

Investing in the infrastructure to provide pre-loved options alongside new products can, of course, be part of a brand's sustainability story - showing a commitment to continual improvement - but dressing it up as an altruistic move is the wrong way to go about getting student buy-in.

Being transparent around recommerce processes and the chief drivers for the business is critical from the outset. This provides the foundations for trust and longterm brand loyalty among a discerning audience that's scrupulous about the brands they get behind.

Soon recommerce - as part of the broader sustainability agenda - will be treated as 'business as usual' in the same way as ecommerce is so engrained in our everyday lives.

So, eco benefits aside, brands need to be focused on the operational aspects that impact on the overall customer experience.



Customers don't like brands going backwards. They want to see them innovate and to make the experience more accessible and enjoyable.

Making recommerce work profitably and at scale relies on cracking three main concerns:



Value

Offering competitive pricing and perceived value for money. AI is increasingly being used to ascertain fair price points but the unique challenge that comes with recommerce is that customers can be both buyers and sellers, so brands need to consider what a 'good deal' looks like from both sides.



Quality

Establishing the means to get good quality inventory back for recycling or resale and rating the condition of items consistently and efficiently. Conducting satisfactory refurbishment and repairs and gaining the necessary certifications for the movement of electrical goods safely and/or the authentication of luxury wares, for example.



Convenience

Overcoming logistical challenges to get the stock in, listed, sold, packed and shipped out quickly. There's also nuances around returns policies and enabling this to consider. Making second-hand goods accessible and then ensuring the sale is as intuitive and quick as possible is as paramount as it is in a more traditional transaction.

Get it right and retailers have a lot of potential rewards to reap from recommerce. New revenue streams and the ability to reach customers with whom they may otherwise lack appeal. A reduction in waste and raw materials - with sufficient recycling schemes in place - can also bring cost savings and present opportunities to participate in the lucrative green economy.

But none of these benefits can be realised without first getting the fundamentals of value, quality and convenience in place to provide an exchange that people - let alone the most scrupulous of students - feel inclined to repeat.



Elevating the Customer eXperience: How recommerce brands can up their student game

As with the sustainability play, brands can become preoccupied with integrating impressive technology features into their platforms to entice a younger demographic. As is happening across the entire retail landscape, AI advancements are propelling hyper-personalisation and gamification is also being used to enhance engagement and reduce complexity of choice. Resale channels are starting to explore how these developments can bolster the growth that recommerce is already experiencing.

Any additional bells and whistles will only have the desired effect if a brand has succeeded in meeting students' most basic of expectations - seamlessness and trust.

With affordability very much front of mind for budget conscious students, promotions and discounts are a tried and tested tactic for attracting new customers and repeat purchases. But applying student discount and verifying eligibility comes with its own ecommerce complexities - before adding into the mix the specific challenges that resale presents.

Many consumer brands use platforms such as UNiDAYS and/or Student Beans to facilitate this transaction. This amplifies their student marketing reach but comes at a cost that may be prohibitive for some SMEs venturing into recommerce and means relinquishing some of the control bigger brands prefer to retain over their CX.

Technology exists that seamlessly integrates to complete ID checks in seconds and at the point of purchase.

Investing in being as user-friendly and as transparent as possible is the best approach for succeeding in the student marketplace.



Introducing InAcademia

InAcademia is the real-time, digital equivalent of asking a student or academic to show their university or student card. Rather than being sent to a third-party student discount verification site or requesting documentation to prove student affiliation, students are asked to authenticate at their institution, using the familiar and well-established

eduGAIN identity and access management infrastructure. This quick, hassle-free process can be integrated seamlessly into workflows to reduce friction for the student and lessen the chances of cart abandonment. Critically this also means that customers' personal data is not being leveraged by third-party platforms, which helps to build

trust because it's a tangible proof point of putting the customer first. For those aligning themselves with everything that recommerce represents, being privacy-conscious is another aspect of social responsibility that has to be at the core of the offer and choosing InAcademia is part of 'walking the talk' on transparency.

Besides the speed and ease of claiming eligible discounts, InAcademia significantly enhances the overall student CX and supports brands' recommerce success by:

- Engaging the student community first-hand with targeted discounts.
- Fostering trust and loyalty among young, eco-conscious consumers.
- Driving the adoption of sustainable shopping habits within a key audience.

Creative ways to engage the student community

Straight-forward discounting has its place but community building initiatives that encourage buyers and sellers to interact with the brand can bring bigger, longer term returns.

Consider offering higher trade-in values for students, waiving or reducing shipping fees or discounted memberships and subscriptions. There are also lots of examples of companies providing store credit as an incentive for returning good-condition garments and/or rewards programs for ongoing participation. Collaborations with campuses to get on the radar of new intakes or running relevant campaigns during peak back-to-school weeks ensures a captive audience.

With tools to effortlessly set up, validate and deliver exclusive student offers brands can begin to think of more creative ways to reach students and realise their recommerce ambitions.



Out with the new, in with the old

Brands are approaching recommerce in different ways. As we tip towards mainstream adoption the emphasis is switching from market entry to being better and more efficient - starting by streamlining the CX and getting the basics right.

Focusing on Europe's student communities to seize the opportunities among this cost and eco-conscious group presents an exciting prospect for retailers that understand the need for transparency and commit to a customer-first approach.

The rise of digital platforms facilitating the buying and selling of used goods has not only made recommerce more accessible to a broader audience but it's also enabling non-traditional sectors to harness 'waste-to-wealth' success.

For example, the used mobile phone market is taking off in several countries. Back market is one such example and a frontrunner in finding ways to deliver a CX akin to traditional ecommerce in terms of search, customer service, warranties and returns. Also employing student verification technology, powered by InAcademia, to support a sleek and convenient sale for a prime target market.

Indeed, the environmental benefits of choosing a refurbished smartphone - over buying or leasing new - is not insignificant (50kg CO2e over two years and 20% less than a manufactured device). However, it's the cost savings that are the primary driver (67% cited affordability reasons). It's clear people - and in particular young people - are wising up to mass consumerism's impact on the planet and their personal financial positions.

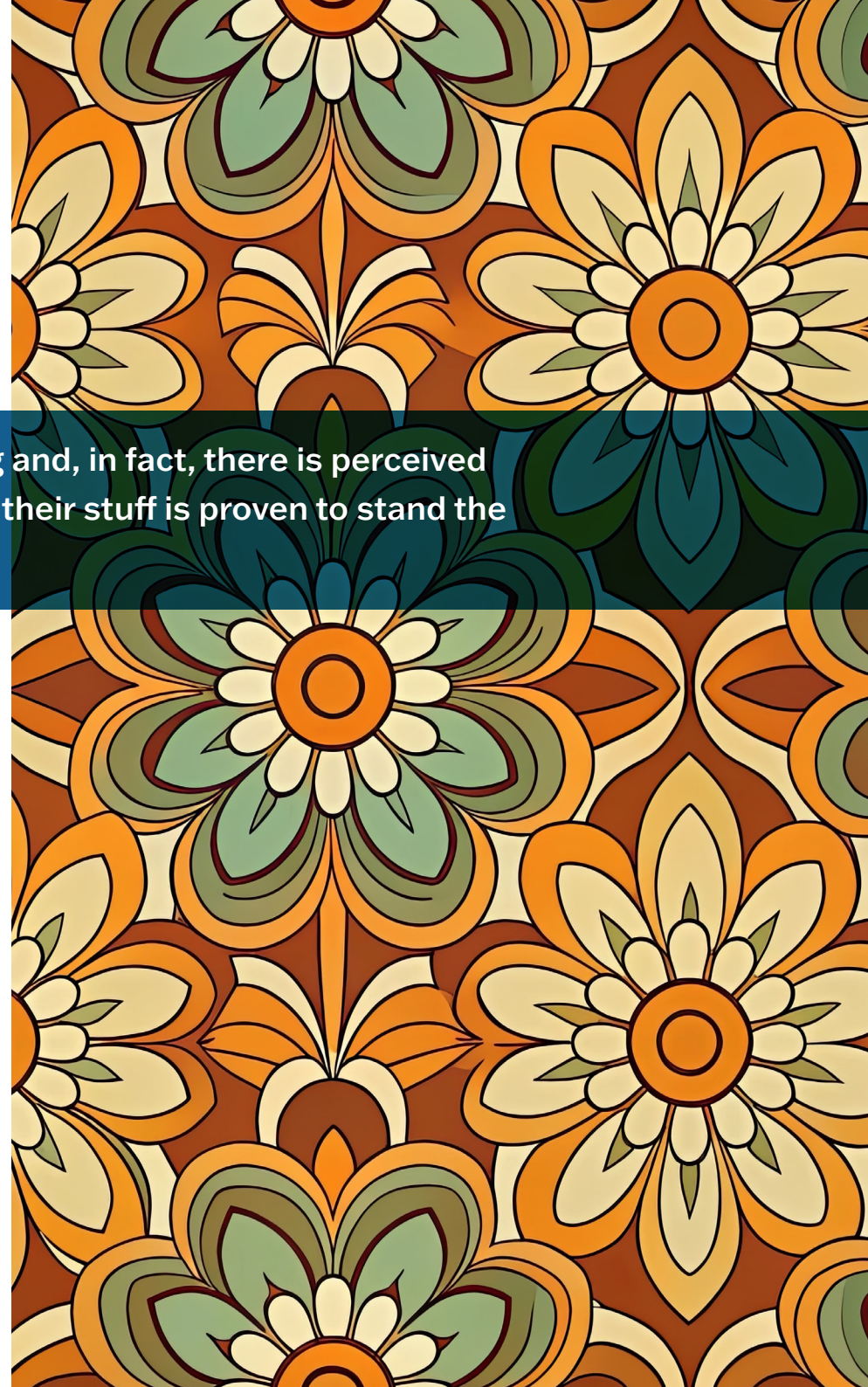
In March 2024, device refurbishment pioneer **Recommerce Group** partnered with Vodafone on research indicating that **52% of Europeans would buy a second-hand smartphone in the future.**

Appealing to Gen Z's and Gen Alpha's greener inclinations is all well and good as part of a wider sustainability story but brands should beware overegging this as a driver. Instead focusing on innovative recommerce strategies that help meet evolving consumer expectations and ensure trust isn't being eroded.

Any stigma surrounding the second-hand market is waning and, in fact, there is perceived status for brands operating in this space too. The fact that their stuff is proven to stand the test of time and retain value is a marketing lever.

Tools like InAcademia play a pivotal role in 2025's 'recommerce revolution' by first and foremost unlocking exclusive offers for the target demographic quickly, easily and safely. But also bridging the gap between sustainable and responsible online shopping and a more enjoyable CX akin to traditional ecommerce environments.

Taking a step back to consider seemingly mundane operational aspects can actually propel these platforms forward amid more intense competition. As brands continue to grapple with making recommerce profitable and scalable they need to deliver a preferable experience and - for students - that most critically means establishing trust and delivering a seamless exchange.



Five reasons to integrate InAcademia in 2025

1

Simplified access to discounts

Seamless Integration: Removes friction by automating the student verification process, making it quick and hassle-free for eligible users.

Enhanced Accessibility: By simplifying discount access, students are more likely to engage with recommerce platforms, driving both participation and loyalty.

2

Trust and transparency

Validation confidence: authoritative verification straight from institution - rather than relying on a third party - reassures both brands and students, ensuring only eligible users benefit from student discounts.

Student trust: Knowing that brands use a secure and reputable service like InAcademia builds trust in the shopping experience

3

Personalisation opportunities

Tailored campaigns: By identifying verified students, brands can offer targeted promotions, such as exclusive deals on sustainable goods or curated recommerce collections for student lifestyles (e.g., affordable tech or preloved dorm decor).

Community building: Verified students can be invited to participate in brand loyalty programs or sustainability initiatives, fostering a sense of inclusion.

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4

Improved conversion rates

Frictionless checkout: Simplifying the eligibility process reduces abandonment at checkout, especially for budget-conscious students.

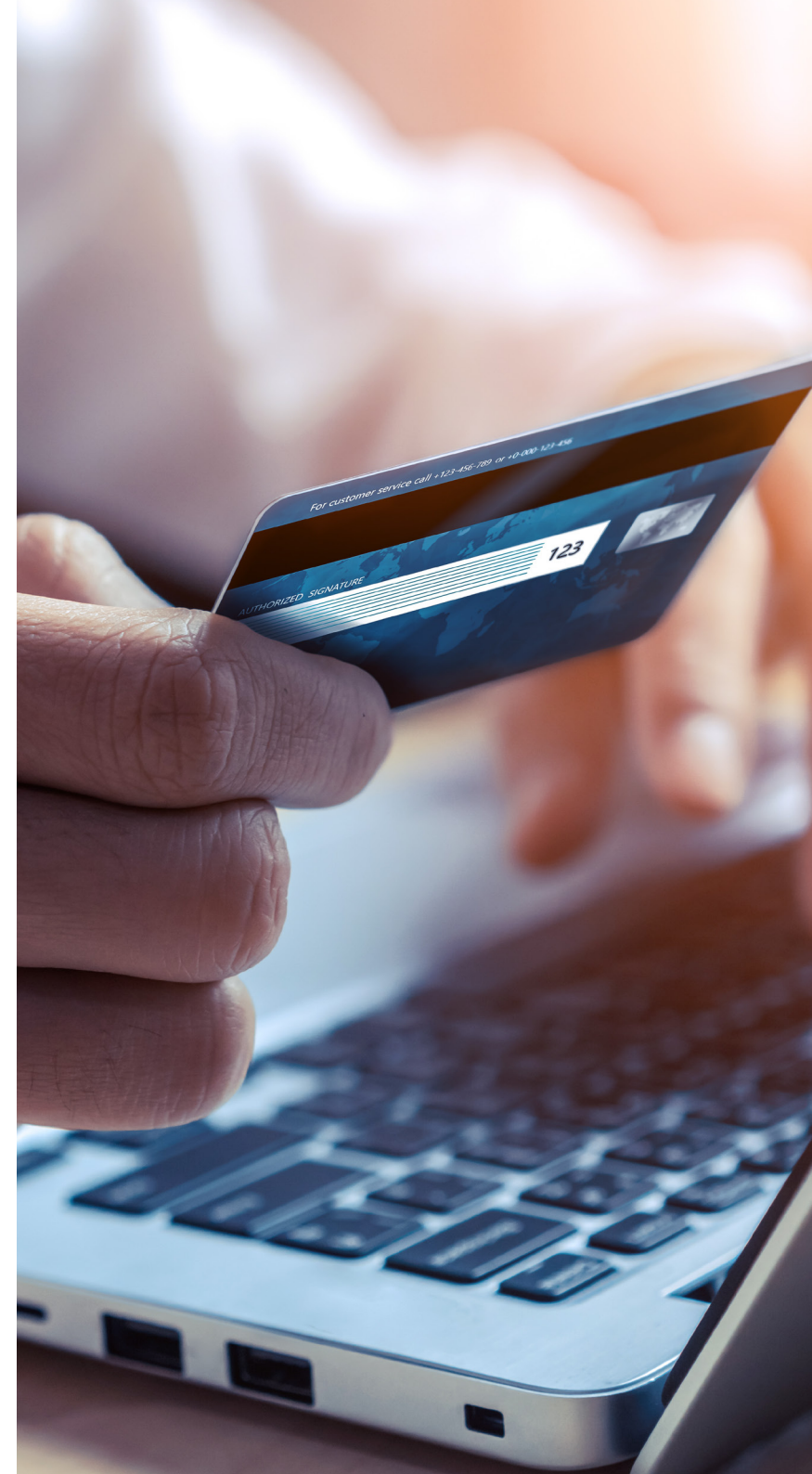
Higher engagement: A smooth discount application encourages repeat visits and purchases, particularly when recommerce aligns with student values like affordability and sustainability.

5

Competitive edge for brands

Attracting Gen Z consumers: Student-specific discounts validated by InAcademia make brands more appealing to this key demographic, driving market share in the competitive recommerce space.

Cross-sector appeal: Non-fashion recommerce brands (e.g., tech, homeware) can leverage the widget to attract students beyond the typical second-hand clothing market.





Get in touch today to team up with InAcademia and effortlessly deliver more transparent online student shopping experiences that meet this group's customer expectations on every level.



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