

Thrift Shopping and Sustainable Fashion: A Review of Emerging Trends in India

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Abstract

The fashion industry stands as a primary global economic pillar, yet its rapid expansion has been fueled by the 'fast fashion' model of mass production and consumption which has resulted in drastically reduced garment lifecycles and serious environmental degradation. As a critical intervention, thrift fashion has emerged as a viable pathway towards a circular and sustainable fashion economy. This research is aimed at examining the evolving growth trajectories of the Indian thrift market and analyzes its capacity to institutionalize sustainable consumption. Furthermore, by understanding future market trends, this study provides a strategic framework for policymakers and stakeholders to align the unique demographics of a digitised and not only fashion oriented but also environmentally-conscious India with the logistical and social benefits of thrifting.

Keywords: *Circular Fashion, Fashion consumption, Resale, Second-hand clothing, Sustainable Fashion, Thrift market*

Introduction

Fashion industry is one of the most renowned Industry in India which has huge share in GDP contribution. Not only in India but clothing industry of India has significant worldwide presence. Indian fashion market has seen a sharp increase and growth because of increase in affordability of consumers, digitalisation of economy and urban expansion. This development has influenced the market by making a shift towards fast fashion. Fast fashion refers to a prominent trend in the global clothing market characterized by the mass production of inexpensive apparel that mimics current high-fashion trends. Ironically, fast fashion has adverse environmental, social and ethical impact (Muralidharan, (2025)). It has been found that fashion industry one of the largest contributors in producing excessive textile waste, carbon emission, shortening of garment lifecycle and unsustainable consumption patterns. According to United Nation Environment Programme, 92 million tonnes of textile waste is produced globally, with only 8 percent of textiles fibres in 2023 made from recycled sources (Unsustainable fashion and textiles in focus for International Day of Zero Waste 2025, 2025). As the pressure was increasing to find out effective solution to solve this growing problem, promoting sustainable consumption practices was one of the effective solutions to solve this issue. The concern was increasing to find out the solution to this problem through promoting sustainable consumption practices and thrift shopping was one of the solutions which will help to reduce the environmental burden. Thrift shopping refers to the practice of purchasing second hand clothes or pre owned clothes instead of buying new ones and helps to promote sustainable consumption.

The trend of second-hand clothing was generally adopted by western countries and high-income countries. The novelty behind this research is that fast fashion and sustainability are two parallel lines and thrift shopping is the mid-way for Indian consumers. This research will help market to maintain balance between two different poles i.e. fast fashion and sustainable consumption. Digitally India is growing at a very fast pace so it will help policy makers, e-commerce platforms, startups and social media platforms to make a perfect blend of fast fashion and sustainability by adopting and promoting thrift shopping in Indian market.

The aim of this research is to examine current data, reports, and research of India's thrift shopping sector to understand the growth potential in Indian market and future predictions. The main aim of this research is to promote sustainable consumption practices by promoting adoption of thrift fashion. As a final point the paper will provide recommendations and suggestions will be provided to firms, policy makers and marketers on how market and consumer on the basis of findings that will help; the market and segment to flourish and grow.

Review of Literature

The rise of thrift shopping, or the consumption of second-hand clothing (SHC), has gained significant traction in India as an environmentally conscious response to the fast fashion industry (Muralidharan, (2025)). With advancements in technologies and Industrial revolution, there has been massive rise in production quantity which is always associated with some or the other form of pollution.⁵ It has been reported that 2% to 10% of environmental impact is associated with clothing and footwear after food and drink, transport and housing (S Tarai, 2020). The global market for resale and second-hand clothing (SHC) is a rapidly expanding, multi-billion-dollar sector that has emerged as a crucial component of the circular economy, driven largely by shifting consumer values and technological advancements (Evans, 2022). According to the ThredUp (2023) resale report, the second-hand fashion market has been growing significantly faster than the conventional retail apparel sector, propelled by consumer interest in affordability, sustainability, and digital accessibility. Scholars attribute this growth to the increasing normalisation of second-hand consumption, especially among younger generations, who perceive sustainable practices as identity statements and lifestyle choices (Hwang & Griffiths, 2017). Research also highlights the role of online platforms in facilitating large-scale adoption by reducing search costs, improving transparency, and offering curated second-hand fashion at scale (Turunen & Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2015). Life-cycle analyses further validate the sustainability potential of second-hand clothing. Klooster et al. (2024) show that reusing garments can reduce environmental impacts by 40–50% when replacing new purchases, with significant reductions in carbon emissions, water use, and energy demand. Similar work by EuRIC (2023) concludes that textile reuse generates up to 70 times lower environmental impact than producing new garments, reinforcing the role of reuse in environmental mitigation strategies. Although India has a long informal tradition of reused clothing—through donation networks, sibling hand-me-downs, and informal markets—the emergence of organised and digital thrift shopping is relatively recent. Market reports indicate that the Indian second-hand apparel market was valued at approximately USD 3 billion in 2023 and is projected to exceed USD 9 billion by 2032, driven largely by online resale stores and Instagram-based thrift pages (Credence Research, 2024). Research conducted among Delhi-NCR youth identifies fashion exploration, unique styles, and social-media influence as strong motivators, while hygiene concerns and stigma associated with “used clothing” still persist among some groups (Mehta, 2022).

As per the reports of WRI India (2021), second hand clothing is accepted and adopted by women and younger generation as they are more influenced towards environmental concerns. A significant barrier to purchasing second-hand clothing often involves deeply rooted psychological and social risks, particularly in specific cultural contexts like India. (Debnath, 2023)

The growing emphasis on sustainability has positioned thrift shopping as a critical component of responsible fashion consumption. Reuse complements sustainable fashion by reducing demand for virgin resources, lowering GHG emissions, and minimising textile waste (Klooster et al., 2024). Scholars argue that extending the life span of apparel is among the most effective strategies for reducing the overall environmental impact of clothing (Fletcher & Tham, 2019). Thrift shopping also disrupts the linear “take-make-dispose” model, aligning consumer behaviour with circular-economy frameworks (EMF, 2021).

Studies in India emphasise that sustainable consumption motivations are beginning to influence fashion choices, particularly among environmentally conscious youth (Sharma & Singhal, 2022). However, the degree to which thrift shopping actually replaces new purchases—thereby generating true environmental benefits—remains unclear in the Indian context. As Sandin and Peters (2018) note, the sustainability outcome of reuse depends on whether it substitutes rather than supplements new purchases, an area where empirical India-specific research is limited.

The expansion of online resale platforms and Instagram thrift stores has significantly contributed to the visibility and growth of thrift shopping in India. Mukherjee (2021) highlights that digital platforms provide curated selections, trust mechanisms, and aesthetic branding that make second-hand fashion appealing to younger consumers. Social media has also reframed thrift shopping as trendy, aspirational, and eco-conscious, reducing stigma and normalising reuse (Mehta, 2022). This digital mediation is critical because it transforms perceptions of second-hand clothing from necessity-based to lifestyle-oriented consumption.

While digital thrift markets have grown rapidly, academic research on their business models, sustainability impacts, and consumer trust-building strategies remains sparse in India. This presents opportunities for further scholarly investigation.

Perception regarding second hand clothing has been passed from generations. Older generation prefer buying second hand clothes more than younger generation. Beliefs, financial position and status are some of the social stigmas that influences the preference for second hand clothing. (Manocha & Dharwal, 2023)

Relevance of the study

In order to promote sustainable consumption practices, thrift shopping has appeared to be the best solution as apparel sector is contributing significantly towards increasing water and land pollution, carbon footprints and textile waste. Understanding the current and future scope of thrift or second-hand market in India, it will

help various segment how to shift consumption in apparel segment towards sustainability. Through this paper we will be able to find out how effectively we can promote reusing of clothes through thrift shopping and how we will be able to reduce the environmental impact of apparel industry through promoting thrift shopping as a solution. For authorities and marketers dealing with fashion, thrift stores pare down as the most feasible choice.

The study will help to find out the reasons for the rapid expansion and acceptance of thrift shopping by Indian consumers. By analysing current growth pattern of Thrift market in India and how consumers are responding towards growing thrift stores, this will help the firms to come up with new business models in fashion industry. This paper will help to discover the prospective growth of the thrift market sector in the future and how to encourage buyers to buy second hand clothing. By offering valuable insight on stimulating reducing, recycling and reusing and regulating the resale market and harmonising consumer behaviour with ethical environment practices will help industry participants in creating a new method to promote sustainable consumption practices. The possibilities for innovation, distribution system restructuring and emerging different models in the market will help in effective implementation of sustainability. In the end this study will provide valuable insights about how to convert fashion in a sustainable manner and inspire consumer to be more mindful of their environment.

Objectives

1. To examine current scenario and growth patterns of the thrift shopping segment in India.
2. To assess the role of thrift shopping in sustainable fashion consumption.
3. To anticipate potential trends and future advancement in the thrift shopping perspective in India.

Research Methodology

In this paper secondary research has been used through descriptive and exploratory research design to find out the rise of thrift market in India. For secondary research, data has been collected from sources such as journals, international reports, articles, market research database and data released by the government.

Through the paper the purpose is to find out the growth and trend in second hand clothing market, collecting data through primary research will not give exact results. This approach enables a comprehensive and integrated analysis of various perspectives—economic, social, and environmental—without the limitations of field surveys.

Data has been compiled and gathered through previous researches and publish reports by industries and government. The main purpose was to provide information about market trends, factors motivating consumers and influence of social media in promoting sustainable consumption practices. This paper will provide insights about research gaps existing in current literature and will provide information for future studies on sustainable consumption practices.

Findings

Objective	Insights
<p><i>Examine current scenario and growth patterns of the thrift shopping segment in India.</i></p>	<p>Social Media and Digital Resale platforms With the increase in digital platform users especially youth and expansion of digital resale platforms in last 5 years lead to increase in market of second-hand clothing (Basu, 2022). The increase in use of social media and online payment has promoted affordable clothing among consumers (Kumar & Murthy, 2021). The second-hand apparel market was having a value of USD 3 billion in 2023 and is estimated to grow to USD 9.1 billion by 2032 (IMARC Group, 2023). With the increase in usage of digital medias, the consumption patter of people has changed a lot and websites, Instagram and Facebook are becoming popular resale channels. (Sharma, 2023). In order to attract young consumers, social media plays a pivotal role. Digital media and platforms will help to promote thrift culture and will target lower income group people (Norum, 2017).</p> <p>Thrifting trends and Youth in India Traditionally India had second hand clothing market in the form of informal markets like flea bazaars and export surplus stores (Nair, 2019). A worldwide shift has been observed towards formal, well organised and quality-controlled thrift stores (Guiot & Roux, 2019). This will help in improving overall development of resale clothing sector. Young generation are considering thrift products as fashionable, unique and most importantly environmentally friendly (Hur, Lee, & Chung, 2021). This will help consumers to shift their perception towards second hand clothing. Once the perception of consumers toward thrift clothing is change then only second-hand market will be able to grow and flourish and younger generation especially Gen Z who are more trend and sustainability focused will help to bring the change in the market and consumer preferences. (McNeill & Venter, 2019).</p>
<p><i>Assess the role of thrift shopping in sustainable fashion consumption</i></p>	<p>Studies demonstrates that thrift shopping will help to reduce the textile waste as it will help to increase the life of the cloth (Joung, 2014). According to India Development Review, India produces approximately 7.8 million tons of textile waste annually and is one of the largest producers in the world. This increases the pressure to reuse clothes and reduce pressure on earth and promoting second hand clothing is one of the best substitutes as it will help in increasing the lifecycle of the clothes. Thrift shopping is based upon circular fashion where instead of discarding or dumping a product, more emphasis is given to recycle, reuse, repair or recirculate the garments. As per the studies carbon footprints of old clothes ids relatively very less as compared to new garment which in turn will help in reducing environmental pollution (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). When consumer starts using second hand clothing they will demand less of new good and thus will automatically reduce demand for new clothing which will lead to lesser use of resources which are required to produce new garments. Though thrift shopping will help in promoting sustainability but it has certain barriers which reduces its potential to promote sustainable consumption among consumers. Hygiene, Quality, social stigma, limited consumer awareness, lack of standardisation and quality control are some of the barriers which reduces the acceptance of thrift shopping among consumers. Therefore, addressing to these issues will help to promote and accept sustainable consumption in an effective way.</p>
<p><i>Anticipate potential trends and future advancement in the thrift shopping perspective in India.</i></p>	<p>India’s second-hand market has enormous opportunities to thrive and develop resale market. In order to regulate thrift market in India there is a need to develop quality check system and proper product grading system in order to sell only those second-hand clothes which are able to meet these regulations. This will help to protect the interest of the consumers Thrift market in India will be regulated further through standardised quality checks, authorised leadership and quality grading. Creating trust in the mind of the consumers by modelling the global. (Guiot & Roux, 2010). In order to enhance upcycling business in India, more emphasis should be given on garments repair and recycle, garment rental businesses. Also developing proper marketing and communication strategies will help to promote this sector in India (Debnath, 2023). Increased use of internet and digitalisation of lifestyle will help to bring acceptance and promotion and communication of thrift fashion in the market.</p>

Implications of the study

This research indicates that India has a promising future for thrift market. Policymakers should develop and implement policies, programs and incentives to help thrift apparel sector to grow in India. Incentives like reduction in taxes, rebates, subsidies, easy in starting up business and many more can be provided in to foster the growth of resale market. There is an opportunity for the retailers, marketers and e commerce startup firms to enter this segment as it is still unexplored and they will get the benefits of early mover advantage. They can amalgamate profit earning motive with sustainability. Through this they can also try changing the mindset of consumers and it will help in faster adoption of thrift fashion.

This paper will provide useful insights to thrift stores – online or offline or both, social media platforms and re-commerce startups. They will be able to comprehend the market’s potential for the growth and the tactics which can be used to encourage consumers to buy second hand clothes. The strategies should be focused upon educating consumers about the benefits of reusing and recycling second hand clothing and how this will help in promoting sustainability. Instead of just marketing focus should be on sustainable marketing. India’s second-hand clothing market will expand more quickly with the development of digital and technological facilities. The expansion online thrift stores will help the economy to shift towards technology enable sustainable fashion consumption.

As per the research findings young buyers are the foundation to the success of the thrift market and will play a major role in sustainable development. This will help in developing responsible behaviour of the consumers. Through promotion, communication and marketing awareness can be spread about the thrift segment and this will ultimately help in removing social stigmas about second hand clothing.

India's thrift market will contribute in lessening carbon foot prints of fashion industry, less textile waste and more environment conscientious consumer decision making. As India is heading towards achievement of sustainable development goals, one of the most intriguing opportunities to bring change in the future of India is through the thrift market.

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