

# Sustainable Fashion Practices Among Generation Z: The Role of Thrifting and Upcycling in Reshaping Consumer Culture

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**Aim** The research aims to investigate the impact of thrifting and upcycling practices among Indian Generation Z in advancing sustainable fashion and transforming consumer culture.

## Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the concept and importance of sustainable fashion in the contemporary fashion industry.
2. Analyze thrifting as a sustainable consumption practice among Generation Z.
3. Explore upcycling as a creative and environmentally responsible design strategy.
4. Understand the influence of social media and digital activism on sustainable fashion adoption.
5. Assess the role of Generation Z in promoting circular fashion and reshaping consumer culture.

**Abstract**—The fashion industry has increasingly drawn global attention due to its high environmental impact, intensive resource consumption, and persistent ethical concerns linked to fast fashion practices. As a response to these challenges, sustainable fashion has emerged as an alternative approach that prioritizes environmental stewardship, ethical production processes, and responsible consumption. This study examines the role of Generation Z in advancing sustainable fashion through practices such as thrifting and upcycling. Adopting a qualitative, literature-based research approach, the paper explores how Gen Z's environmental awareness, digital engagement, and value-oriented consumption patterns are influencing contemporary fashion culture. The findings suggest that thrifting and upcycling play a significant role in reducing textile waste, conserving resources, and supporting circular fashion models. The study concludes that Generation Z is instrumental in redefining fashion consumption by integrating sustainability, creativity, and social responsibility into everyday clothing practices.

**Index Terms**—Sustainable Fashion, Generation Z, Thrifting, Upcycling, Circular Economy, Ethical Consumption, Fast Fashion

## I. INTRODUCTION

Fashion has historically functioned as a powerful means of cultural expression, identity construction, and social interaction. In recent years, however, the industry has undergone a major transformation with the expansion of fast fashion, characterized by accelerated production cycles, low-cost apparel, and rapidly changing trends. Although this model has made fashion more accessible to a wider population, it has simultaneously intensified environmental and social challenges. High levels of water consumption, chemical pollution from textile dyeing processes, greenhouse gas emissions, and the increasing accumulation of textile waste have contributed to the fashion sector's role as a major source of environmental degradation driven by resource-intensive production systems.

Sustainable fashion has emerged as a necessary response to these challenges, advocating for environmentally conscious design, ethical labor practices, and long-term product use. Central to this shift is Generation Z, a cohort known for its heightened social awareness, digital fluency, and preference for value-based consumption. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers actively question brand ethics, environmental impact, and transparency.

This paper investigates how thrifting and upcycling two prominent sustainable fashion practices are adopted and promoted by Generation Z as alternatives to fast fashion norms. It further examines how digital

platforms and social media amplify these practices, contributing to a broader transformation of consumer culture.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Environmental Impact of the Fashion Industry:** - Extensive academic research has documented the significant environmental consequences associated with the fashion industry's production and consumption practices. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, the fashion sector accounts for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and consumes vast quantities of freshwater. Synthetic fibers such as polyester contribute to microplastic pollution, while textile waste continues to overwhelm landfills globally.

**Sustainable Fashion and Ethical Consumption:** - Sustainable fashion literature emphasizes a shift from linear production models to circular systems that prioritize reuse, repair, and recycling. Scholars argue that ethical consumption is increasingly understood as a conscious purchasing behaviour in which consumers consider the environmental and social implications of their fashion choices. Quality, durability, and emotional attachment to garments are increasingly valued over quantity and trend-based consumption.

**Generation Z as Conscious Consumers:** - Recent studies indicate that Generation Z demonstrates a higher level of environmental awareness and sustainability-oriented attitudes compared to previous consumer generations. Their purchasing behaviour is influenced by sustainability narratives, brand transparency, and peer influence through social media. Gen Z's preference for secondhand clothing, DIY customization, and ethical brands reflects a broader cultural shift toward mindful consumption.

**Thrifting and Upcycling in Academic Discourse:** - Thrifting is recognized as a sustainable practice that extends the lifecycle of garments and reduces textile waste. Upcycling, on the other hand, is discussed as a creative design intervention that transforms discarded materials into higher-value products. While both practices are praised for their environmental benefits, researchers caution that without mindful consumption, resale markets may risk reproducing overconsumption patterns.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology to explore sustainable fashion practices among Generation Z, with particular emphasis on thrifting and upcycling. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate as the research aims to understand perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural patterns rather than measure numerical relationships. The study is based entirely on secondary data sources, ensuring a comprehensive examination of existing knowledge in the field of sustainable fashion and consumer culture.

Secondary data were collected from a wide range of credible sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, government and industry reports, sustainability-focused publications, and relevant digital media content. These sources were selected to capture diverse perspectives on sustainable fashion, ethical consumption, circular economy principles, and Generation Z consumer behaviour at both global and Indian levels. Reviewing multiple data sources enabled a holistic understanding of emerging trends and contextual factors influencing sustainable fashion adoption.

A thematic analysis method was employed to systematically analyze the collected data. This involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring themes related to ethical consumption, circular fashion, digital activism, environmental awareness, and sustainable lifestyle practices. The thematic approach enabled the researcher to synthesize insights across multiple studies and data sources, facilitating a deeper understanding of cultural and behavioural shifts in contemporary fashion consumption.

The use of thematic analysis also ensured flexibility in examining complex social phenomena, making it particularly suitable for exploratory research in fashion and design studies. By focusing on qualitative insights rather than quantitative measurement, the methodology supports an in-depth exploration of how sustainability values are constructed, communicated, and practiced among Generation Z. This approach strengthens the study's analytical depth and provides a strong foundation for discussing the implications of sustainable fashion practices for the fashion industry and design education.

#### IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that thrifting and upcycling have gained widespread acceptance among Generation Z as viable alternatives to fast fashion. Thrifting offers environmental benefits by reducing textile waste and minimizing the demand for new garment production. It also appeals to Gen Z's desire for affordability, uniqueness, and self-expression.

Upcycling further strengthens sustainable fashion by encouraging creativity, craftsmanship, and emotional attachment to clothing. Through redesigning and customization, garments gain extended lifespans and added value. Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest play a crucial role in popularizing these practices through tutorials, challenges, and visual storytelling.

However, the study also identifies challenges, including unregulated secondhand clothing imports, limited access to thrift markets in certain regions, and the risk of sustainability becoming a performative trend. Despite these limitations, increased awareness and education have the potential to convert performative actions into genuine, long-term sustainable practices.

#### V. SUSTAINABLE FASHION PRACTICES AMONG INDIAN GENERATION Z

India occupies a unique position in the global fashion ecosystem, being both one of the largest producers and consumers of textiles and apparel. While the country has a long tradition of sustainable practices such as reuse, repair, and hand-me-down clothing, rapid urbanization and the influence of fast fashion have intensified issues related to textile waste and unsustainable consumption. In recent years, Indian Generation Z has emerged as a critical force in reviving sustainable fashion practices by blending traditional values with contemporary digital culture.

Indian Gen Z consumers demonstrate growing awareness of environmental issues, ethical labor practices, and the impact of fast fashion on local artisans and ecosystems. Urban youth, particularly in metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad, are increasingly engaging in thrifting, clothing swaps, and upcycling as alternatives to mass-produced fashion. This shift reflects both environmental concern and economic practicality,

making sustainability culturally resonant and accessible.

Unlike Western contexts where thrifting has long been normalized, India's secondhand culture is evolving rapidly through digital platforms and community-driven initiatives. Social media has played a pivotal role in redefining secondhand clothing from a symbol of necessity to one of individuality, creativity, and conscious living.

#### VI. THRIFTING CULTURE AND ONLINE RESALE PLATFORMS IN INDIA

The emergence of online resale and thrift platforms has significantly contributed to the growth of sustainable fashion in India. Platforms such as Instagram-based thrift stores, curated resale pages, and peer-to-peer marketplaces have enabled Indian Gen Z consumers to buy and sell pre-owned clothing conveniently. These platforms operate on principles of affordability, accessibility, and style diversity. Unlike traditional thrift stores, digital thrift pages allow users to curate collections, share styling ideas, and build communities around sustainable fashion. The popularity of hashtags such as *#IndianThriftStore*, *#ThriftIndia*, and *#SustainableIndianFashion* reflects increasing engagement with secondhand clothing.

This digital thrifting culture supports circular fashion by extending garment life cycles and reducing textile waste. Additionally, it fosters entrepreneurial opportunities for young individuals, particularly women, who manage thrift pages as small sustainable businesses. However, challenges such as lack of standard pricing, quality assurance, and regulatory frameworks remain areas for improvement.

#### VII. UPCYCLING PRACTICES AND INDIAN DESIGN INNOVATION

Upcycling aligns naturally with India's long-standing culture of reuse and repair. Traditional practices such as repurposing sarees into home furnishings, quilts made from textile scraps, and patchwork crafts exemplify sustainable design long before it became a global discourse. Indian Gen Z designers and consumers are now reinterpreting these traditions through contemporary fashion aesthetics.

Young designers and fashion students are increasingly incorporating upcycling into design projects,

transforming discarded garments into jackets, dresses, accessories, and bags. Denim patchwork, saree-to-dress transformations, and textile waste accessories have become popular forms of creative expression. These practices not only reduce waste but also add cultural and emotional value to garments.

Several Indian sustainable fashion brands and independent designers are building their identity around upcycled collections, emphasizing craftsmanship, storytelling, and limited production. This approach challenges the fast fashion model by prioritizing uniqueness, durability, and ethical production.

#### VIII. SOCIAL MEDIA, DIGITAL ACTIVISM, AND SUSTAINABLE FASHION IN INDIA

Social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping sustainable fashion narratives among Indian Gen Z. Platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok (through reposted or alternative formats) function as spaces for awareness-building, education, and inspiration. Indian influencers and sustainability advocates regularly share content related to thrift hauls, upcycling tutorials, capsule wardrobes, and ethical brand reviews.

Digital campaigns and challenges such as *#SustainableFashionIndia* and *#UpcycleYourWardrobe* encourage collective participation and normalize sustainable choices. These platforms also enable critical discussions around greenwashing, labor exploitation, and overconsumption, empowering consumers to make informed decisions.

While some sustainability content may initially appear performative, it often acts as an entry point for deeper engagement. Over time, repeated exposure to sustainability discourse fosters long-term behavioural change and reinforces conscious consumption patterns.

#### IX. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN FASHION INDUSTRY AND DESIGN EDUCATION

The growing adoption of thrifting and upcycling among Indian Gen Z has significant implications for the fashion industry and design education. For the industry, it signals a shift toward circular business

models, resale integration, and transparent supply chains. Brands are increasingly required to align with sustainability values to remain relevant to younger consumers.

From an educational perspective, incorporating sustainable fashion, upcycling, and circular design principles into fashion and design curricula is essential. Design institutions can play a vital role by encouraging experimental learning, craft integration, and sustainability-led innovation. This approach prepares future designers to address environmental challenges while maintaining cultural relevance and creative integrity.

#### X. CONCLUSION

The growing adoption of thrifting and upcycling reflects a significant shift in fashion consumption patterns, led predominantly by Generation Z. By extending garment lifecycles and encouraging creative reuse, these practices address key environmental issues associated with fast fashion, including waste generation and resource depletion. More importantly, they represent a broader cultural movement that prioritizes ethics, individuality, and conscious decision-making.

While sustainable fashion continues to face challenges such as scalability, regulation, and consumer awareness, the active participation of Gen Z offers a promising pathway toward long-term change. Their engagement through digital platforms, resale markets, and creative practices demonstrates that sustainability and style are not mutually exclusive. As thrifting and upcycling gain mainstream acceptance, they hold the potential to redefine fashion as a system rooted in responsibility, creativity, and environmental stewardship.

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