# Thrift Culture and Sustainable Fashion: Awareness, Perceptions and Behaviour Among Young Women in Pune

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***Abstract*— Thrift culture, the buying and selling of second-hand clothing, is growing among young consumers as worries about the environmental cost of fast fashion increase. This paper looks at how young women aged 15 to 24 in Pune, India, understand and engage with thrift shopping, and reads those findings against the wider literature on sustainable fashion. The study uses a mixed-method design: a structured survey of 53 respondents in April 2025, semi-structured interviews, and a review of academic and industry sources. Awareness of thrifting was high (87%), and most respondents agreed it supports sustainability (68%). Even so, affordability (53%) rather than sustainability (7%) was their main reason for thrifting, and Instagram thrift stores (34%) were the most common place to buy. The result is a clear attitude–behaviour gap, where positive views about sustainable fashion do not turn into sustainability-driven choices. The paper argues that affordability and social media, more than environmental concern, currently drive youth thrift behaviour in urban India, and that focused education and circular-economy efforts are needed to turn awareness into action. By putting a number on this gap in a young, urban Indian sample, the study adds primary evidence to a literature still dominated by Western and largely theoretical work.**

***Index Terms*— Affordability, circular economy, second-hand clothing, sustainable fashion, thrift culture, youth consumer behaviour.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is one of the largest sources of environmental pollution, and fast fashion is a big part of why. Fast fashion means producing cheap clothing quickly and in huge volumes, which pushes people to buy more and throw away more. The result is heavy textile waste, high water use, and large carbon emissions, all of which drain natural resources and damage the environment. Sustainable fashion has grown partly in response to this, with the aim of cutting the industry's footprint, and thrifting is one of the practices that has become popular under that umbrella. Thrifting means buying second-hand or pre-owned clothing and accessories, which keeps garments in use for longer. It has become a global habit, with thrift stores common in the United States and Europe and increasingly visible in India. Online platforms have made it easier still, helping resale and circular fashion reach a much wider audience.

The benefits are clear. Thrifting cuts garment waste, lowers demand for new production, and encourages reuse, while giving shoppers a cheaper option that puts sustainable fashion within reach. It is not without problems: quality can be inconsistent, sizes are limited, and some people worry about hygiene. Even so, it still matters for sustainability: it saves resources, cuts waste, and pushes people toward more thoughtful buying.

Objective. This research looks at how thrift culture supports sustainable fashion, focusing on its influence among young women. It weighs the benefits and challenges of thrifting and asks how far it can go in reducing the fashion industry's environmental footprint.

Significance of the Study. Studying how young consumers engage with thrifting shows how second-hand fashion might shift behaviour over time and feed into a more sustainable system in an Indian city. The study is also one of the few to put a number on the awareness–action gap in second-hand fashion among

young Indian women, an area the existing, largely Western literature has mostly left untouched.

Limitations. The study draws on a snowball sample of 53 young women from one city, Pune, surveyed at a single point in April 2025. The findings are exploratory rather than statistically representative of all Indian youth. Because the design is single-gender, single-city, and cross-sectional, it cannot capture differences across regions, genders, or time, and self-reported answers carry some risk of recall and social-desirability bias, especially on questions about sustainability. Section VII returns to these points.

A. Research Questions

This study sets out to answer four questions:

- What is the level of awareness and understanding of thrift culture among young women aged 15–24 in Pune?
- What factors influence their decision to engage in thrift shopping (e.g., affordability, sustainability, social media)?
- How do their perceptions and experiences reflect broader attitudes toward sustainable fashion?
- What are the key barriers or hesitations they face when considering second-hand clothing?

B. Research Gap

Sustainable fashion and thrift culture have had plenty of attention lately, but most of it sits in Western contexts. Research on the Indian market is thinner, and much of what exists is either theoretical or does not capture what young urban consumers actually do. There is little data on how young women in cities like Pune see and use second-hand clothing. Gen Z is often described as environmentally aware, yet few studies look hard at the distance between that awareness and real fashion choices. The pull of social media, and Instagram thrift stores in particular, is also under-studied in Indian research, as are cultural factors like hesitation, stigma, and hygiene worries.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Fast Fashion and the Environmental Imperative for Thrift

The environmental case for thrift starts with the cost of fast fashion. Niinimäki, Peters, Dahlbo, Perry, Rissanen, and Gwilt [1] put numbers on the problem, estimating that the fashion industry produces over 92 million tonnes of waste and uses roughly 79 trillion litres of water a year. Bick, Halsey, and Ekenga [2] frame these impacts as a global environmental injustice, since the burdens of textile production and disposal fall hardest on low-income communities. Siegle [3] criticises the throwaway logic of fast fashion and points to second-hand consumption as a practical remedy. By keeping existing garments in use, thrift speaks directly to the waste and resource use these authors describe.

B. Thrift, the Circular Economy, and Sustainable Fashion Systems

Thrift belongs to a wider shift toward sustainable and circular fashion. Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates [4] argue that sustainable fashion is not one attribute but a mix of environmental, ethical, and consumer-behaviour dimensions, all of which second-hand consumption touches. Vehmas, Raudaskoski, Heikkilä, Harlin, and Mensonen [5] place reuse and resale inside circular-economy models that keep materials in use longer. Gonzales [6] studies thrift stores specifically as an environmental solution, looking at what motivates buyers and donors, while Sadiq and Rehman [7] present second-hand clothing as a workable path to sustainability in everyday choices.

C. Consumer Motivations and Perceptions of Second-hand Clothing

Why people buy second-hand is central to the study of thrift. Guiot and Roux [8] build a widely used motivation scale that separates economic motives, such as price and bargain-hunting, from hedonic and ethical ones like nostalgia, uniqueness, and environmental concern. Jones [9] connects these motives to marketing, showing how sustainable-fashion messaging shapes what consumers do. Closer to this study, Sharma and Goel [10] find that perceptions of second-hand clothing in the Delhi NCR region are mixed, with affordability competing against worries about hygiene and status.

D. Youth Engagement and the Post-pandemic Surge

Young consumers sit at the centre of thrift's recent growth. Explorer Research [11] describes how Gen Z is reshaping fashion consumption around resale and conscious buying. Yulianti and Masyhuri [12] report similar millennial thrift behaviour in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where affordability and self-expression are

the main drivers. Aggarwal and Goel [13] trace thrift's path before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which sped up interest in affordable, conscious consumption.

E. Historical and Global Perspectives on Thrift

Seen historically and globally, second-hand exchange is neither new nor marginal. Minter [14] maps the global second-hand market and shows how reused goods move across countries and support a large informal economy. Thanhauser [15] traces the long history of clothing and its value, making the case for more mindful consumption. Cline [16] turns these ideas into practical advice, arguing for a "conscious closet" built through deliberate second-hand and sustainable choices.

F. Thrift in the Indian Context and Remaining Barriers

In India, thrift is becoming more visible but still meets resistance. FLAME University [17] calls thrifting a sustainable-fashion idea whose time has come, and Fibre2Fashion [18] treats it as a gateway to sustainable fashion for new buyers. Rathod [19] studies thrift culture and second-hand fashion among Indian youth as a step toward sustainability. Even so, hygiene concerns, social stigma, and the idea that second-hand means low status, all echoed in Sharma and Goel's [10] findings, keep it from going fully mainstream.

G. Conceptual Framework: From Attitudes to Action

To make sense of these patterns, the study uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the related value–action gap. Ajzen [20] argues that behaviour follows from intention, which is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Kollmuss and Agyeman [21] apply this to environmental behaviour, describing the value–action gap, where pro-environmental attitudes often fail to become action because of economic, social, and practical barriers. Applied to thrift, the framework predicts that good attitudes toward sustainability will not by themselves produce sustainable behaviour when economic motives (affordability), social norms (peer and social-media influence), and perceived barriers (hygiene, stigma) take over. This lens guides how the findings are read below.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a mixed-method approach, drawing on both primary and secondary research. The primary data came from a structured questionnaire of 16 items covering demographics, awareness, buying behaviour, motivations, and attitudes, circulated among young women aged 15 to 24 in Pune during April 2025. The same questions framed the semi-structured interviews that followed. Respondents were reached through snowball sampling, where existing participants referred others. About 118 people were approached and 53 completed the survey, a completion rate of roughly 45%. Interview participants (n = 19) were drawn from this same group, chosen to cover the full age range, and were spoken to by phone or in person.

The secondary research covered 4 books, 10 research papers, 3 academic articles, and 1 industry report, which gave historical, global, and conceptual background for making sense of the primary data.

Statistical analysis. Survey responses were coded and analysed descriptively in Microsoft Excel. For each categorical item, frequencies and percentages were worked out to summarise awareness, behaviour, motivations, and attitudes. Key variables were then cross-tabulated to see how they related: awareness against whether someone had actually bought, for instance, and sustainability belief against regular thrifting. Because the sample is small and non-probability based (N = 53), these patterns were read descriptively rather than through inferential significance tests. The 19 semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically: transcripts were coded for recurring themes, and quotations that captured those themes were pulled out.

Ethical considerations. Taking part was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifying details were collected. Everyone gave informed consent before the survey, and for anyone under 18 this came with parental or guardian consent. Participants knew what the study was for and could stop at any time.

## IV. RESULTS

A. Descriptive Findings

The first part of the survey recorded who the respondents were, summarised in Table I. The largest age group was 18–20 (34%), followed by 21–22 (30%), 23–24 (21%), and 15–17 (15%); almost two-

thirds were undergraduate students (64%). Monthly clothing spends sat mostly in the ₹500 to ₹1000 range (38%), with another 28% spending under ₹500.

Table I Demographic and Spending Profile of Respondents (N = 53)

| Characteristic | % |
|---|---|
| Age (years) | |
| 15–17 | 15 |
| 18–20 | 34 |
| 21–22 | 30 |
| 23–24 | 21 |
| Educational status | |
| School (up to 12th) | 11 |
| Undergraduate student | 64 |
| Postgraduate student | 19 |
| Other | 6 |
| Monthly spend on clothing | |
| Less than ₹500 | 28 |
| ₹500 – ₹1000 | 38 |
| ₹1000 – ₹2000 | 21 |
| More than ₹2000 | 13 |

Awareness was high. 87% had heard of thrifting and only 13% had not. Asked what "second-hand clothes" brought to mind first, most thought of affordability (45%), then donated clothes (23%), old or worn-out garments (19%), and a smaller group who were not sure (13%).

On behaviour, approximately two-thirds (66%) of respondents had purchased second-hand clothing at least once, while 34% reported never purchasing second-hand clothing. Instagram thrift stores were the most common source (34%), ahead of local thrift markets (26%), online platforms (17%), and friends or family (9%); 13% did not buy second-hand at all (Fig. 1). For frequency, 34% bought occasionally, 21% rarely, and 11% often, while 34% never did.

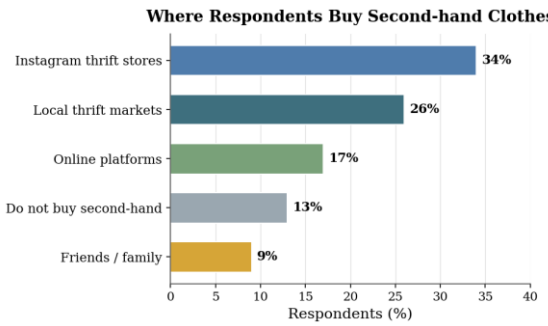


Fig. 1. Where respondents buy second-hand clothes.

Motivation is where the central tension showed up. Affordability was the top reason for buying second-hand, picked by more than half (53%), while sustainability came last (7%). Unique style (21%) and the pull of trends or social media (13%) sat in between, while the remaining 6% were not interested (Fig. 2). First reactions to wearing second-hand clothes were mostly positive (38%) or neutral (30%), with fewer negative (19%) or unsure (13%).

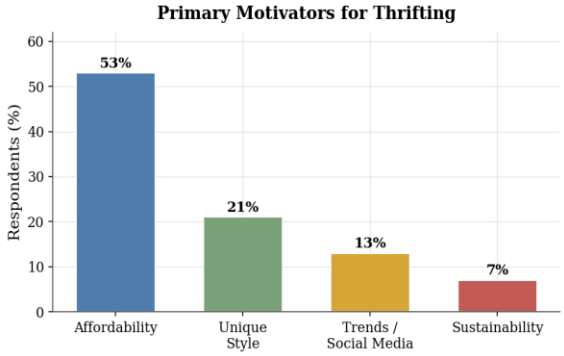


Fig. 2. Primary motivators for thrifting among respondents.

Attitudes ran ahead of behaviour. While 68% agreed that wearing second-hand clothes supports sustainable fashion, only a small share named sustainability as their main reason for thrifting. Hesitation was still common: 36% hesitated "sometimes," 32% said "yes," and 32% felt none. Spending on second-hand clothing stayed low, with 43% spending under ₹500 and 28% not buying it at all.

Despite this, respondents were open to thrift culture. Interest in learning more was high (81%), 53% would think about buying second-hand in future (another 30% said "maybe"), and 60% would recommend it to others (Fig. 3).

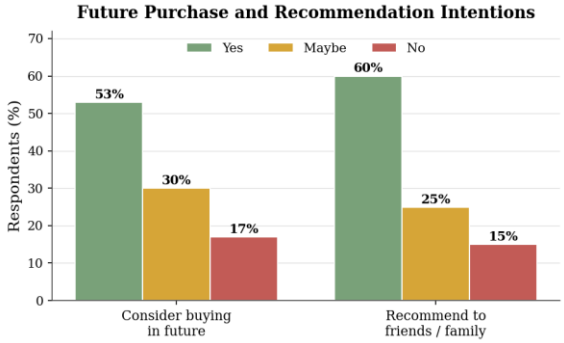


Fig. 3. Future purchase and recommendation intentions.

B. Relationships Among Key Variables

To look more closely at how these variables relate, the responses were cross-tabulated across three pairings (Table II). Because this is a small, non-probability sample (N = 53), the comparisons are read descriptively rather than as formal significance tests.

Table II Cross-tabulated Relationships Among Key Survey Variables (N = 53)

| Variables compared | Observed pattern in this sample |
|---|---|
| Awareness × ever purchased | Buying confined to those aware of thrifting |
| Age group × ever purchased | No clear difference between younger and older buyers |
| Sustainability belief × regular thrifting | No more common among believers than among doubters |

Note. Patterns are descriptive only; this non-probability sample (N = 53) was not designed or powered for inferential testing. Regular thrifting = occasional or frequent buyers; age groups 15–20 vs 21–24.

Two patterns stand out. First, purchasing was concentrated almost entirely among respondents who were aware of thrifting: those who had never heard of it had not bought any, so awareness looks like a precondition for even trying it. The more telling pattern is the second. Believing that second-hand clothing supports sustainability did not translate into thrifting more regularly; regular buyers were about as common among those who doubted thrift's green credentials as among those who endorsed them. Age likewise showed little relationship to whether someone had bought second-hand. Taken together, these patterns give the attitude–behaviour gap a concrete shape: holding sustainable beliefs does not, on its own, produce more sustainable behaviour, while awareness and affordability, rather than environmental conviction, are what appear to move people to act.

The same gap shows up in the headline numbers. Belief that second-hand clothing supports sustainability (68%) runs 61 percentage points ahead of sustainability-driven motivation (7%), even though most respondents know about thrifting (87%) and many have tried it (66%) (Fig. 4).

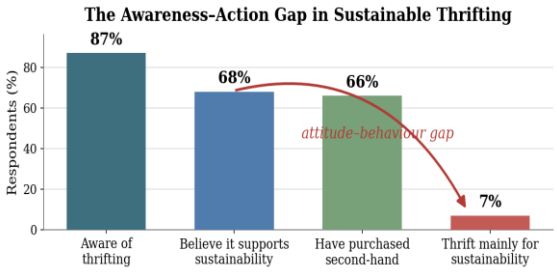


Fig. 4. The awareness–action gap: awareness of, and belief in, thrifting's sustainability benefits far exceed sustainability-driven behaviour.

## V. DISCUSSION

This section reads the findings through the conceptual framework and against earlier research. Table III sets out how the results answer each research question.

Table III Summary of Findings by Research Question

| Research question | Key finding |
|---|---|
| RQ1: Awareness | 87% aware of thrifting; 68% regard it as supporting sustainability |
| RQ2: Drivers of thrifting | Affordability (53%) and Instagram (34%) lead; sustainability marginal (7%) |
| RQ3: Perceptions vs. sustainable fashion | Positive attitudes, but a weak attitude–behaviour link |
| RQ4: Barriers and hesitation | Hygiene, stigma, unfamiliarity; 68% hesitate at least sometimes |

The interviews filled in the survey numbers. Most interviewees tied thrifting to affordability, which matches the headline survey result (53%). They tended to describe it as a cheaper alternative to fast fashion that let them shop without feeling guilty about money. One participant put it simply: "As a student, it's hard to buy expensive stuff all the time. Thrifting helps me look good without spending a lot." (Participant P__, age 19) That economic framing lines up with the price-driven motives in Guiot and Roux's [8] motivation scale.

Social media, and Instagram in particular, came through strongly in both the survey and the interviews. With 34% naming Instagram thrift stores as their main source, interviewees talked about the curated look and easy access of these pages. As one participant said, "Instagram thrift stores have become my go-to.

They're accessible, and I love the way they curate unique styles." (Participant P__, age 20) Several first came across thrifting through haul videos and sustainable-fashion influencers, a sign of how much digital trends are shaping the habit.

Awareness of sustainability was high (68% saw second-hand clothing as supporting sustainable fashion), but only 7% made it their main reason for thrifting. That gap, visible in Fig. 4, fits the perception barriers Sharma and Goel [10] describe in India. In the interviews, sustainability was something people appreciated but treated as a bonus rather than a reason to buy. A few were starting to think differently; one participant admitted, "I wasn't into it before, but after watching some reels and reading about fashion waste, I really want to try it more consciously." (Participant P__, age 22)

Hesitation still shaped what people did. The survey showed 36% hesitated "sometimes" and 32% "yes," and interviewees pointed to hygiene, stigma, or simply not being used to it. One participant said, "I used to think it was gross, but now I feel it's misunderstood." (Participant P__, age 18) Helpfully, several said their views changed after one good experience, which suggests that trying it once can take the edge off the hesitation.

Read through the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the value–action gap [20], [21], the pattern makes sense. People hold favourable attitudes toward sustainable fashion, but their intentions and actions are pulled harder by money (affordability), by what their peers and social feeds do (subjective norms), and by practical hurdles like hygiene and stigma (perceived control). Sustainability sits in the background as a value rather than acting as a driver, which is exactly the value–action gap Kollmuss and Agyeman [21] describe.

These results sit comfortably alongside earlier work, and push it a little further. The weight given to affordability echoes the economic motives in Guiot and Roux's [8] scale and the price-led behaviour Yulianti and Masyhuri [12] found among millennials in Yogyakarta, while the mixed perceptions and lingering stigma match Sharma and Goel's [10] Delhi NCR results. What this study adds is a number for the gap, 61 percentage points between believing thrift is sustainable and acting on it, in a young, urban Indian female sample that earlier work rarely looks at on its own.

For most respondents thrifting was an occasional thing rather than a habit, with only 11% buying often, and spending stayed low. That places it as an add-on to their wardrobes rather than the centre of them. At the same time, the appetite to do more was real: 81% wanted to learn more and 60% would recommend it. As one participant summed up, "I think once people get past the idea of it being used, they'll actually start enjoying the uniqueness and affordability it offers." (Participant P__, age 21) Together, the findings answer the research questions, showing strong awareness, behaviour led by affordability and social media, and a stubborn gap between sustainable attitudes and sustainable action.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand what young women aged 15 to 24 in Pune know about thrift culture, how they see it, and how they behave. Bringing the survey and interviews together, it found that while respondents liked second-hand fashion for being cheap and distinctive, and largely accepted it was good for the environment, sustainability was rarely what actually drove their choices. Price, style, and how others might see them mattered more. That is the sustainability paradox in action: good attitudes that do not reliably become conscious behaviour (cf. Henninger et al. [4]). Thrift culture is slowly winning acceptance among urban youth, but the move toward genuinely sustainable behaviour is still patchy.

What this study adds is primary evidence from an Indian urban setting, plus an actual number for the awareness–action gap in thrift buying among young women. Put simply, affordability and the pull of social media shape what they do far more than worries about sustainability do.

The findings point to a few practical, targeted moves. Since Instagram thrift stores are already the main channel (34%), awareness campaigns will probably land better through reels and influencers than through abstract messaging. Since affordability (53%) far outweighs sustainability (7%) as a motive, sustainability works best pitched as a bonus that comes with affordable, individual style, not as the headline. Since hygiene and stigma still hold people back, cleaner presentation and visible quality checks can ease hesitation, and the 81% who want to learn more are a ready audience for campus and community

education. Brands can back this up with circular options such as resale, rental, and take-back schemes, along with more transparency.

Colleges and universities can shape these habits early by working sustainability into fashion, business, and social-science courses and by running thrift events on campus. Government has a part too, supporting circular-economy ventures through grants and incentives and tightening rules on fast-fashion waste. The study adds to the wider conversation about the sustainability paradox in fashion and makes the case that real change needs brands, consumers, educators, and policymakers moving together. With education, awareness, and that kind of support, thrift culture could grow from a niche trend into something that genuinely reshapes how, and why, people dress.

## VII. SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDY

Different age groups and genders. This study focused on young women. Including boys, older shoppers, and people from other backgrounds would show how views on thrifting differ.

Changes over time. A longer-term study could check whether people shop more sustainably after learning about fashion waste or following eco-friendly trends.

Other cities. Looking at youth in Delhi, Mumbai, or Bangalore would reveal how thrift habits shift from place to place.

Larger, representative samples. The relationships reported here are exploratory and descriptive; a bigger probability sample would support firmer inferential testing, including regression models that weigh several predictors of thrifting at once.

Social media's role. Given how prominent Instagram was here, more work could dig into how pages, reels, and videos shape interest in thrift fashion.

Advanced modelling. A larger, probability-based sample would also open the door to structural equation modelling (SEM), which could map how sustainability attitudes, social influence, and the intention to buy thrifted clothes actually connect.

## DECLARATION ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI tools were used only to assist with language editing and formatting of the manuscript into the journal template. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the work of the authors, who take full responsibility for the content.

## APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

1 Age 15–17 / 18–20 / 21–22 / 23–24
2 Educational status School (up to 12th) / Undergraduate student / Postgraduate student / Working professional / Other
3 How much do you spend on clothing in a month (approx.)? Less than ₹500 / ₹500–₹1000 / ₹1000–₹2000 / More than ₹2000
4 Have you heard of the term 'thrifting'? Yes / No
5 When you hear "second-hand clothes," what comes to mind first? Old and worn-out clothes / Affordable clothing / Clothes donated by others / Not sure
6 Have you ever purchased second-hand clothes? Yes / No
7 Where do you usually buy second-hand clothes from? Instagram thrift stores / Local thrift markets / Online platforms / Friends and family / I don't buy second-hand clothes
8 How often do you buy second-hand clothes? Rarely / Occasionally / Frequently / Never
9 What is the main reason for buying (or considering) second-hand clothes? Affordability / Sustainability / Unique style / Influenced by trends or social media / Not interested
10 What is your initial reaction to the idea of wearing second-hand clothes? Positive / Neutral / Negative / Unsure
11 Do you feel any hesitation wearing second-hand clothes? Yes / No / Sometimes
12 Do you think second-hand clothes support sustainable fashion? Yes / No / Not sure
13 How much do you usually spend on second-hand clothes per month (if applicable)? Less than ₹500 / ₹500–₹1000 / ₹1000–₹2000 / More than ₹2000 / I don't buy thrifted clothes
14 Would you be open to learning more about thrifting (second-hand clothes)? Yes / No / Maybe
15 Would you consider buying second-hand clothes in the future? Yes / No / Maybe
16 Would you recommend second-hand clothing to your friends or family? Yes / No / Maybe

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