

THRIFTING AS A SUSTAINABLE FORM OF FASHION CONSUMPTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The fashion industry has been criticised for being a source of environmental degradation and poor labour practices. Alternatively, sustainable fashion provides fashion consumers with a method of sourcing clothing in a conscious manner. Such alternatives include thrifting second-hand clothing, clothing swapping, and renting to prevent clothing in a wearable condition from being disposed. Thrifting as a form of sustainable fashion has developed both globally and in South Africa with motivations centred around environmental and financial benefits and a concern for labour practices by fast fashion brands. Despite these developments, studies on thrifting in South Africa have been limited. This paper aimed to address this paucity by investigating thrifting practices as sustainable fashion consumption. The findings revealed varied ethical motivations behind respondents' thrifting activities, the frequency at which respondent's thrift, and the challenges they experienced. This paper contributes to the current understanding of thrifting practices in South Africa and proposes recommendations for future research.

KEYWORDS

thrifting, sustainable fashion, second-hand clothing, fast fashion, consumption

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INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is considered an affordable and accessible way to follow fashion trends but is the source of many ethical and environmental concerns (Joy *et al.* 2012:273). Indeed, fast fashion relies on the production of clothing with low-cost labour and low production costs while maximising profit. This type of fashion also provides clothing products that respond to the latest fashion trends but have a short life span (Niinimäki 2020:189). Due to the impacts associated with fast fashion, a transformation in the form of slow fashion has been initiated by consumers and conscious clothing brands. Legere and Kang (2020:1)

define 'slow fashion' as an approach to fashion in which the quality of clothes, its production, and social empowerment are prioritised. Slow fashion includes the thrifting of second-hand clothing, renting, and sharing of clothing items (Bläse *et al.* 2023:639). In addition, upcycled fashion (a form of thrifting) is a growing trend where clothing items that would otherwise be discarded, are redesigned and combined with new materials and resold (Marques *et al.* 2019:1063).

Given these contrasts between slow and fast fashion, the aim of this paper is to understand the motivations and practices surrounding thrifting by addressing the paucity of investigating thrifting practices as sustainable fashion consumption in South Africa. While the objective of this study is to understand the benefits of slow fashion by providing a deeper understanding of alternatives that address environmental concerns such as the overconsumption of clothing. The rationale for the study is to address Moodly, Christie and Strydom's (2023) call to better understand sustainable fashion consumption in emerging markets like South Africa.

The paper will unfold as follow: firstly, a literature review is supplied that considers the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion and the alternatives to fast fashion. Secondly, the method of the study is supplied, and the results of the study. Lastly, a discussion and conclusion are provided with several recommendations for future research opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental and social impacts of fast fashion

With current clothing production and consumption at record high, some fashion brands have claimed to have adopted sustainable manufacturing processes

(Kaivonen, Mesiranta & Nävänen, 2024:86). Despite these marginal gains, many fast fashion brands continue to produce clothing rapidly that maximises profit at the expense of the environment (Hirschgänger, Canning & Ritch 2023:84). Fashion processes that include 'just-in-time' production and the rapid production replicates higher fashion trends and promotes overconsumption of clothing. Just-in-time production leads to less wears per item and a 'throw-away culture where clothing becomes single-use (Peters, Li & Lenzen 2021:2). For example, the average North American uses 37 kilograms of textile a year, followed by 27 kilograms in Australia, and 22 kilograms in Western Europe (Shirvanimoghaddam *et al.* 2020).

Due to this mass consumption, the fashion industry has been criticised for having a disastrous impact on the environment as clothing materials and processes contribute to pollution, chemical wastes, and other ecological concerns such as increased volumes of non-biodegradable clothing waste (Niinimäki *et al.* 2020:190; Todeschini *et al.* 2017:760). Legere and Kang (2020:1) add that 75% of clothing ends up in landfills long before it is no longer wearable. Whereas Soyer and Dittrich (2021:3) claim that an average clothing item is worn seven or eight times before it is disposed, with only 15% being recycled. At the current rate of production, textiles in fashion lead to the emission of 1.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide annually while consuming large amounts of resources (Sanders & Mawson 2019:24). It is estimated that this industry emits 2-8% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, produces 20% of wastewater, and is the source of 9% of annual microplastics found in the ocean (Adamkiewicz *et al.* 2022:1).

Alongside energy and food, clothing is one of humanity's primary needs and is a 2.4 trillion-dollar industry that provides employment for 300 million workers globally (Adamkiewicz *et al.* 2022:1). The fast fashion industry has often

been criticised for resorting to poor labour practices such as low-wages and poor workers' rights to maximise profit margins and often make use of forced, non-voluntary and child labour (Papasolomou, Melanthiou & Tsamouridis 2023:191-193). In addition, labour in this industry has been accused of supporting feminised and racialised low-wage labour in low-income countries (Monahan 2017:191-192).

Sustainable fashion and thrifting practices

Heinze (2020:1555) states that sustainable fashion is clothing production that aims to protect workers, provides fair compensation, and reduces the negative impact of consumption. There are numerous methods of engaging with sustainable fashion including upcycling, repurposing, thrifting, and new clothing items that are produced to be sustainable (Orminski, Tandoc & Detenber 2021:123).

While some consumers have become more conscious of their actions and their contribution towards sustainability, trend-driven clothing influences individuals to participate in the consumption of fast fashion (Bläse *et al.* 2023:639). Individuals who prioritise environmental practices tend to respond positively to the ecological integrity of products they purchase (Granskog *et al.* 2020:2). Thus, there is a conflict between individuals purchasing clothing that aligns with their ethics or purchasing clothing that assimilates them into current trends.

According to Yangzom (2021:269), thrifting has made clothing accessible for those who were unemployed, experiencing poverty, or on a budget. Harbin (2023:128) adds that consumers practice thrifting as it allows them to find their desired fashion at a lower cost while being conscious of the impact of their consumer choices. Another reason for thrifting clothing is it allows individuals to locate

designs and garments that satisfy their aesthetic needs (Lang & Armstrong 2018:39). McNeill and Venter (2019) add that respondents in their study stated that finding an exclusive clothing item motivates their thrifting practices, which assist consumers to enhance their personal identities. It is worth noting that thrifting niche items can be more expensive than shopping for new clothing so affordability is not always a motive to thrift (Han & Sweet, 2021:171). Furthermore, thrifters make use of different methods of thrifting, from shopping second-hand clothing at consignment stores, retail thrift stores, curated thrift markets, and online stores (Evans, Grimmer & Grimmer 2022).

Sustainable fashion and thrifting practices in South Africa

Moodly, Christie & Strydom (2023) rightfully points out that there are limited studies on sustainable fashion practices in emerging economies, not least thrifting practices. Indeed, the second-hand clothing industry in South Africa benefits those who sell clothing items, in addition to offering clothing access to individuals who would otherwise find it unaffordable (Nimo 2022:18190). The practice of sharing clothing has taken place informally. However, the formal sharing economy of clothing is growing locally, allowing for this practice to become economically viable (Brand *et al.* 2023:284). This growth can be witnessed by the growing presence of online Instagram second-hand clothing stores and formalised online thrifting spaces such as *Yaga*. The growth of Web 2.0 technology have allowed more consumers to participate in collaborative clothing consumption. Examples include purchasing second-hand niche items and renting wedding attire.

There are several South African slow fashion brands such as SELFI, Anmari Honiball and Fuata Moyo that produce small batches of clothing, use natural fibres, upcycle textiles,

minimises waste, use biodegradable packaging and support local clothing artisans (Hertantyo n.d.). In an emerging economy, online spaces for the selling and buying of second-hand clothing assist in the creation of employment. While online thrift stores offer economic opportunity to sellers, there are risks involved for buyers such as low product quality, service delivery, parcel delivery experiences, and online fraud which acts as a challenge for online thrift stores to develop (Arrigo 2021:5; Makhitha & Ngobeni 2021:2).

The current study aims to address some of the gaps present in the field of thrifting. This includes identifying the preferred methods of thrifting, determining the motivations for adopting thrifting practices, engaging the frequency of thrifting, and identifying the percentage of thrifted clothing in their wardrobes along with the challenges experienced. There is limited research into the social and environmental responsibility of thrifters to engage whether they are concerned by such factors which this study aims to explore. The addition of these original components in this study contributes to the current body of knowledge on fashion consumer studies.

METHODS

The data from this study was collected using the online survey software 'Surveyplanet' from 5 April 2024 until 14 April 2024. A purposive sampling method was utilised by distributing the survey to personal connections known to participate in thrifting and numerous social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram. One of the authors is an Instagram micro-influencer with 3700 followers and posted the survey link on both "stories" and "feed" posts on Instagram. The survey link was also shared on Facebook with different thrifting communities in South Africa and in WhatsApp groups where members participated in different types of pro-

environmental practices. Page administrators could choose to share the survey link. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained before the study began. Respondents were advised that participation was voluntary and anonymous and that they had to be over the age of 18 and South African resident at the time of data collection and respondents could self-identify their gender. Raw data was collected and stored in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) of the Republic of South Africa. Data was analysed through basic descriptive statistics given the relatively low level of response. During this period, 123 usable responses were obtained before saturation was reached. There is a level of bias present in the study because of the nature of purposive sampling techniques that targets specific individuals who may be relatively knowledgeable about the topic at hand. Whereas a broader non-purposive sampling technique may have produced results that differ from the results found in this study.

The following sections will address the aim of this study by scrutinising the motivations and practices of thrifting among the respondents, as well as achieving the objective of the study by understanding the benefits of slow fashion.

RESULTS

Biographical details

Of the 123 respondents, 86% are female, 6% are male, 6% are gender non-binary, and 2% selected 'other'. Regarding age, 2% (n=122) were born between 1950-1959, 10% between 1960-1969, 16% between 1970-1979, 21% between 1980-1989, 29% between 1990-1999, and 20% between 2000-2006. In terms of respondents' permanent place of residence (n=108), the majority are from the Gauteng province (Johannesburg, 49%, Pretoria, 13%, 1% from Vanderbijlpark), 14% are from Cape

Town, 7% from Durban. Three per cent are from East London and 2% from Bloemfontein/Mangaung. A combined total of 11% of the respondents are from Stellenbosch and a variety of smaller urban centres.

Preferred thrifting methods

Regarding respondents' primary method of thrifting (n=123), most (67%) use physical thrift stores and charity shops for most purchases and trade-ins/donations of clothing items. Of these respondents (n=83), 46 noted the importance of the 'tangible' shopping experiences of fitting clothes and browsing with limited pressure from other shoppers and store clerks to find what they seek. Fifteen respondents noted that it is more affordable to shop for thrift clothing than to buy new clothing. Eleven stated the accessibility of thrift stores in proximity to where they stay and the ability to go on schedules that suit them, which was a major drawcard for visiting thrift stores. Six respondents noted the social experience of going to thrift stores with friends as an important part of 'thrifting'. Five respondents stated the importance of the environmentally friendly aspect of thrifting and the charities they can support simultaneously.

Eleven per cent of respondents (n=123) use 'Instagram Thrift Stores'. The primary reason respondents use Instagram Thrift Stores is the convenience of taking part in shopping while making use of their phones. For example, respondents stated:

"It seems a lot more user-friendly than other platforms that I've used. Online thrifting/shopping is also the way to go nowadays, I believe."

"Convenient to thrift from home"

Eight per cent of the respondents visit physical Thrift Markets in their respective cities and towns. Those who use Thrift

Markets particularly enjoy the tangible experience of shopping. For example, respondents noted:

"I've always loved doing "shopping" in my mother's closet from when she was younger. Now I can find more similar items while thrifting."

Another respondent said:

"I mainly really enjoy seeing the clothes I'm choosing physically. I am only recently buying off YAGA. And have found it convenient!"

Lastly, 13% of the respondents use YAGA or thrifting mobile applications to buy and sell clothes. For these respondents, the ease and convenience of YAGA or other thrifting applications are the main reasons behind using it. It especially benefits respondents who live in areas with few thrift stores near their permanent residence. One respondent stated:

"Easy and I can browse a number of items and search for specific pieces of clothing. There is also a wide variety of pieces available."

Another respondent said:

"Where I am located, we have no thrift shops, therefore online thrifting is better."

The key point in this regard is that the tangibility of physical thrift stores remains popular, and the convenience of using social media platforms helps respondents take part in thrifting activities.

Thrifting habits

Respondents were asked why they preferred thrifting over conventional shopping (n=123);

18% noted that thrifting allows them to find their style of clothing or aesthetic easily. Thirty-three per cent consider thrifting more environmentally friendly than shopping for new clothes. Furthermore, 34% pointed to the affordability of thrifting. Lastly, 15% of the respondents mention that it combines various factors such as affordability, environmental friendliness, style, and aesthetics.

Out of 117 respondents, the amount of clothing in their wardrobes made up of thrifting clothing varies significantly, as is shown in Table 1.

In terms of the frequency of thrifting, 13% (n=123) thrift once a year, 38% every two to six months, 31% thrift once a month, where 9% thrift on a bi-weekly basis, and 7% weekly. It is important to note that most respondents

still buy new clothes. Thirty-three per cent (n=123) buy new clothes once a year, 54% every two to six months, 11% monthly, and 2% do not buy new clothes at all.

Social and environmental responsibility of thrifters

Respondents (n=123) were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree to several statements (Table 2).

In general, respondents show high levels of social and environmental responsibility. For example, respondents are concerned about the treatment of labourers in the fast-fashion industry. They are also concerned about the sustainability of the clothing industry and the fashion industry. Environmental and social

TABLE 1: PER CENTAGE OF WARDROBE MADE UP OF 'THRIFTED' CLOTHING

Per centage of Wardrobe Thrifted	Per centage of respondents (n=117)
Less than 10%	13%
11-29%	11%
30-39%	17%
40-59%	21%
60-79%	16%
More than 80%	21%

TABLE 2: RESPONSES TO STATEMENTS ON CLOTHING CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOUR

Responses to various statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
"I am concerned by the treatment of workers by fast fashion clothing companies."	2%	0%	11%	32%	54%
"I am concerned by the environmental impact of clothing."	1%	1%	8%	28%	62%
"The mainstream fashion industry is environmentally sustainable."	51%	37%	9%	2%	2%
"I care about thrifting clothing where I can extend its life and appreciate the resources that went into making it."	1%	0%	7%	43%	49%
"When I thrift, I do it with sustainability in mind."	0%	3%	21%	45%	31%
"Thrifting is just a trend."	41%	34%	18%	6%	1%
"When I purchase new clothing, I seek environmentally-conscious brands."	11%	32%	42%	15%	0%
"I am motivated to thrift clothing by YouTubers, TikTokers and other social media influencers who share thrifting hauls and other content."	30%	29%	21%	17%	2%
"I consider the number of wears I can get out of clothing before I purchase it."	0%	15%	21%	34%	29%

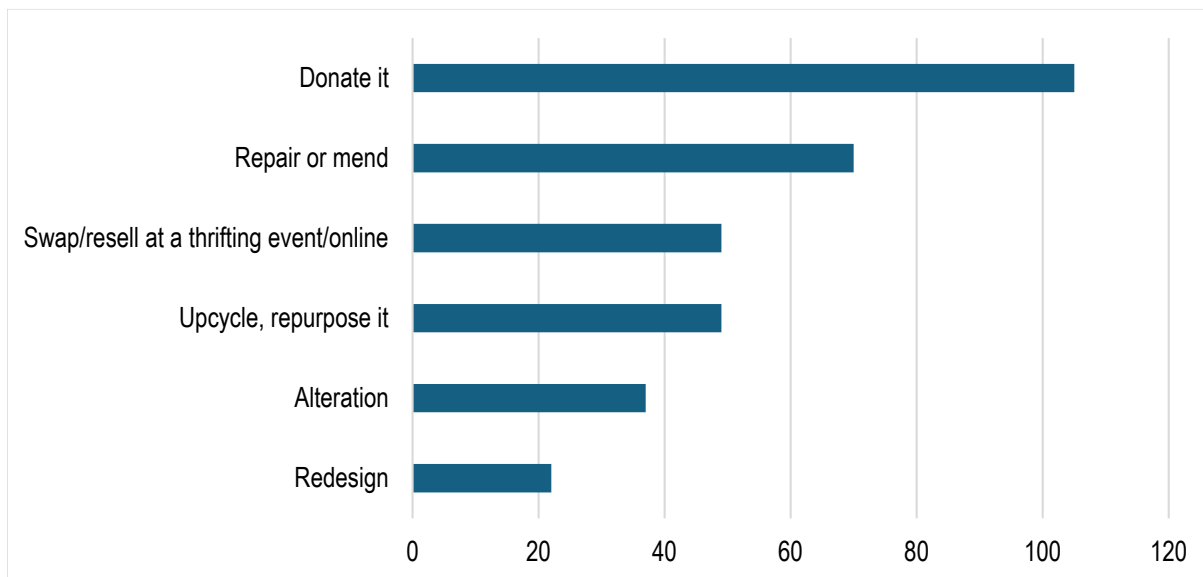


FIGURE 1: RESPONDENTS CLOTHING REPURPOSING BEHAVIOUR

sustainability is the primary reason why respondents are generally interested in thrifting. Indeed, respondents generally view thrifting not as a trend but as a long-term behaviour change, although they are influenced by trends like social media influencers.

In Figure 1, respondents report their sustainable fashion disposal practices. In this regard, respondents could choose more than one option. As a result, a high number of respondents (n=110) donate their clothes to charity stores when they feel their clothing does not appeal to them anymore, does not fit, or has torn. Seventy responses indicate that respondents repair or mend their clothing, 49 swap/resell their clothing at an event or online, and 49 respondents upcycle or repurpose their clothing. Thirty-seven respondents alter their clothing, and some redesign their clothes (22).

To further query respondents' views on social and environmental responsibility, they were asked if they avoid certain fast fashion stores (n=115). Nineteen per cent do not avoid fast fashion stores. In contrast, 81% mentioned a variety of stores, with specific mentions of

Shein, Temu, Cotton-on, Mr Price, and Cape Union Mart. The main reasons that emerged for avoiding certain fast fashion stores were the questionable labour practices and concerns about 'slave-like' conditions for labourers and potential child labour practices. The poor quality of garments produced by fast fashion stores and the consequences of negatively affecting the environment were some of the other reasons cited. Several respondents mentioned their partaking in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) lobby against the State of Israel, where they avoid stores that are on the list of stores boycotted by BDS. The following quote exemplifies this decision-making:

"Oh yeah, all the worst ones environmentally, like Shein, Temu, and Amazon, etc. Plus, stores like Cape Union Mart, etc. who, funnel their profits into the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) and continue the war against Palestine. I also try avoid the biggest companies who try to do everything, like Pick 'n Pay or Woolworths, etc because I don't want them to become a monopoly."

Conversely, respondents (N=110) were asked whether they avoided certain clothing brands while thrifting. Seventy-seven per cent do not, and of the 33% that do, the brand Shein comes up most frequently for similar reasons. Arguably, thrifters are very selective in their selection of brands when they buy new clothing, but it is of less concern when thrifting. In addition, respondents were asked when they buy new clothing, what characteristics a piece of clothing should satisfy (n=112). The vast majority, 76%, noted that it did have to satisfy them in a certain way. The number one reason was quality, with 51 responses, and the importance of South African-made products, with 19 responses. Four respondents mentioned it had to be 'vegan' friendly; for example, no products such as leather or fur, or made from animal leather. For the remaining 11, there were various reasons such as broader themes of ethics, environmental friendliness, and affordability, among others.

Challenges experienced while thrifting

Respondents were asked whether they had experienced any challenges (n=123) during thrifting. Many respondents experienced no challenges (33%). In general, of the thrifters that did experience minor issues, some were false advertising of products (3%) and issues around delivery (3%). Some issues were being scammed (2%) while thrifting, such as never receiving paid goods. The 'other' option was also selected, adding up to 9%. Some of the more significant issues included respondents not finding clothes that were the right size (24%) or that did not fit (27%). Valuable quotes came from this section, such as:

"All of it has to do with the gentrification of thrift- limited clothing sizes because resellers tend to buy up clothes quickly and then additionally, they tend to sell them for almost quadruple the price they got them for."

"Finding the correct sizes has been a major block in my thrifting activities, being transgender and still transitioning, it's extremely difficult to find stores with the clothing pieces that I like, that actually fit my current body proportions."

"Not enough thrift shops in South Africa (not like in Australia, for example, where there are thrift store chains and thrift stores are everywhere)."

The next section of this paper will consider the findings of this study against the literature on the topic.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to understand motivation and practices of South African thrifters, while the objective was to gain a perspective on the benefits of slow fashion in terms of environmental and social concerns of the fast fashion industry. The findings of this study reveal that the respondents have various motivations for their thrifting practices and are consciousness of their clothing consumption habits. While different methods are used for thrifting by the respondents, the most preferred method for purchasing second-hand clothing is physical thrift stores and secondly, from online thrift stores (Evans, Grimmer & Grimmer 2022). While the convenience of shopping online is beneficial, thrifting in person at stores allow for a tangible experience where one can ensure the clothes match their style and size (Milanesi, Biraghi & Gambetti, 2023). Brand *et al.* (2023:277) highlighted challenges of distrust, hygiene, and sizing. The respondents from this study shared that clothing sizing and thrifting opportunities were the primary challenges experienced during thrifting revealing that thrifting businesses need to have inclusive sizing and more thrifting stores are required to make it accessible in South Africa.

It is important to note that respondents still purchase new clothing where they think consciously about the brands they support. The respondents usually look at whether the new clothing is affordable, environmentally conscious, and reflects specific social values that guide their consumption (Hochtritt 2019:303). Thus, respondent's closets appear to be mixed between thrifted and new clothing which reflects sustainable fashion consumption without having to commit only to second-hand clothing.

Overall, the respondents purchase clothing that aligns strongly social and environmental responsibilities whereby they are concerned about worker treatment, environmental impacts of clothing, the wearability of clothing, and appreciate the resources that go into clothing which is a sentiment in line with existing studies (Orminski, Tandoc & Detenber 2021:123). Respondents also revealed clear avoidance of brands associated with fast fashion, monopolizing brands, and brands supportive of the Israeli Defence Force highlighting the concept of thrifting as social action (Hochtritt 2019:303). It is valuable to note that while past studies (Harbin 2023; Kaivonen *et al.* 2024:86) suggest that social media plays a role in persuading consumers to thrift, only some of the respondents agreed to have been motivated by this, suggesting that it is not a significant motivation in the South African context. Williams (2016:217) adds that awareness and education are vital for consumers to develop conscious intention that aligns with the sustainable consumption and disposal of clothing. The implications of this study's findings provide an understanding of thrifting practices, methods, and challenges which may be used to support awareness programmes and emerging fashion brands and thrifting businesses. While this study adds more knowledge to the field of sustainable fashion consumption, further investigation into

the relationship between such fashion consumption and environmental ethics should be conducted.

CONCLUSION

For the respondents of this study, the act of thrifting is a means to be sustainable and minimise consumerist behaviour, while for others, thrifting is a form of consumerist behaviour. The level of environmental sustainability amongst thrifters varies significantly. While slow fashion practices such as collaborative clothing consumption in the form of thrifting is growing locally and globally, there are challenges to such practices including concerns around thrift store availability, clothing sizing, and scams. Ultimately, consumer practices around fashion need to be investigated and understood to address the environmental and social impacts associated with the growth of fast fashion brands.

Further exploration of thrifting practices, particularly in the South African context, is required which should take into consideration the informal practices of thrifting. Future studies could also highlight the different values and requirements consumers look for in the brands and clothing they purchase. Lastly, investigations that include communication with stakeholders in slow fashion such as slow fashion brands owners and thrift store owners and managers, could add to the understanding of this topic.

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