

# **Thrift Economy: Why Gen Z Prefers Second hand Over Fast Fashion**

**Dr. M. Sumathy<sup>1</sup> and P. K. Kesawaraj<sup>2</sup>**

D.Litt., Professor and Head, Department of Commerce, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore<sup>1</sup>

Ph.D., Research Scholar Department of Commerce, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *The thrift economy has gained significant momentum in recent years, with Generation Z at the forefront of this shift toward second hand shopping. Rejecting the fast fashion industry's environmental and ethical drawbacks, Gen Z is embracing thrifting as a sustainable, affordable, and stylish alternative. This trend is driven by growing awareness of fashion's ecological impact, economic constraints, and a desire for unique self-expression. Online resale platforms like Depop and ThredUp have further accelerated this movement, making pre-owned clothing more accessible. Additionally, thrifting aligns with Gen Z's values of ethical consumption, as it reduces textile waste and minimizes support for exploitative labor practices. While challenges such as rising thrift store prices and corporate greenwashing persist, the secondhand market continues to expand, reshaping the future of fashion. This paper explores the key factors behind Gen Z's preference for thrifting and its implications for the broader retail industry.*

**Keywords:** Thrift economy, Gen Z, secondhand fashion, sustainable consumption, fast fashion, ethical shopping, circular economy

## **I. THE RISE OF THE THRIFT ECONOMY**

The secondhand market has exploded in popularity, with projections estimating it will double in size by 2027, reaching \$350 billion globally (ThredUp, 2023). Platforms like Depop, Poshmark, ThredUp, and Vinted have made buying and selling pre-owned clothing easier than ever. Even major retailers like H&M and Zara have introduced resale programs to keep up with the trend.

For Gen Z, thrifting is no longer just a budget-friendly alternative—it's a lifestyle choice that aligns with their values.

## **II. WHY GEN Z CHOOSES SECONDHAND OVER FAST FASHION**

### **A. Sustainability & Environmental Concerns**

Fast fashion is one of the **largest polluters in the world**, contributing to **10% of global carbon emissions** (UNEP, 2021). Gen Z, known for its eco-conscious mindset, sees thrifting as a way to reduce waste and lower their carbon footprint.

**Reduces textile waste** – Over **92 million tons** of clothing end up in landfills yearly (Ellen MacArthur Foundation).

**Lowers demand for new production** – Secondhand shopping decreases the need for water-intensive, chemically processed new garments.

### **B. Affordability in an Inflationary Economy**

With rising inflation and student debt, Gen Z is financially cautious. Fast fashion may seem cheap, but thrifting offers **higher-quality items at lower prices**.

**Vintage and luxury finds** – Many thrift stores carry unique, durable pieces that outlast fast fashion's poor-quality items.

**Reselling as a side hustle** – Platforms like Depop allow Gen Z to monetize their closets, creating a circular economy.



### **C. Rejecting Exploitative Labor Practices**

Fast fashion relies on **low-wage labor in developing countries**, often under unsafe conditions. Gen Z, highly aware of social justice issues, prefers thrifting as an ethical alternative.

**Supports fair labor indirectly** – Buying secondhand reduces demand for new sweatshop-produced clothing.

**Encourages conscious consumption** – Thrifting promotes buying less but choosing better-quality items.

### **D. Unique Style & Self-Expression**

Gen Z values individuality, and thrifting allows them to **curate a distinct wardrobe** without conforming to mass-produced trends.

**Vintage and retro fashion** – Thrift stores offer one-of-a-kind pieces from past decades.

**DIY and upcycling culture** – Many customize thrifted clothes to create personalized styles.

## **III. THE FUTURE OF THRIFTING**

As sustainability becomes a priority, the thrift economy is expected to grow further. Innovations like **AI-powered resale apps** and **rental fashion services** are making secondhand shopping even more accessible.

Challenges Ahead:

**Over-commercialization** – Some worry thrifting's popularity may drive up prices, making it less accessible to low-income shoppers.

**Greenwashing** – Fast fashion brands may exploit the trend without making real sustainability efforts.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

Gen Z's preference for secondhand fashion reflects a broader cultural shift toward **sustainability, affordability, and ethical consumption**. By choosing thrifting over fast fashion, they are reshaping the industry and proving that style doesn't have to come at the planet's expense. As the thrift economy expands, it offers a hopeful vision for a more sustainable and equitable fashion future.

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