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Style is an art form

The Role of Instagram Affordances in Promoting Sustainable Fashion as a Service

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Article – Theme section

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The role of Instagram affordances in promoting sustainable fashion as a service

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Abstract

This study investigates new and alternative communication models of sustainable fashion within Instagram thrift stores in India using digital affordances of social media platforms. Drawing from interdisciplinary areas of fashion, media, and sustainability, we explore how social media platforms, such as Instagram, enable sustainable fashion systems of creation and consumption in distinct socio-ecological contexts. Addressing the current gap in the study of environmental communication and consumer behaviour, the study explores how Instagram affordances facilitate the promotion of fashion as an experience service through affective communication. Based on qualitative interviews with eight Instagram thrift store owners in India, our analysis reveals how these small businesses leverage Instagram to engage, interact, and foster a community with their customers to drive sustainable fashion consumption, contributing to the broader social and ecological well-being.

Keywords

Sustainable Fashion, Instagram, Social Media Affordances, Thrifting, India, Experience Service

Introduction

The United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (2024) estimates the global fashion industry to be valued at USD 2.4 trillion, yet amounts to 10% of global emissions and 87% of total fibre inputs that end up as waste (World Bank, 2019). Current research on fashion sustainability focuses overwhelmingly on production and consumption patterns, while communication mechanisms driving consumer behaviour remain understudied (Fletcher, 2010; Niinimäki, 2010). Media forms, traditional and digital, have been used to inform the public about environmental challenges since the 1980s and are intrinsic in shaping public opinions and awareness (Kaul, 2017; Grønning et al., 2024). Nevertheless, it is the communication strategies used within media portrayals of sustainable fashion that reinforce or challenge hegemonic consumer behaviour (Grønning et al., 2024).

Despite research on environmental communication, much of it is biased toward the Global North and methodologically limited (Agin & Karlsson, 2021). As social media platforms like Instagram become the key spaces for sustainable discourses (Grønning et al., 2024), there remains a gap in formulating environmental communication strategies to drive sustainable fashion consumption. Today, developing countries in the Global South are home to the world's largest apparel-producing industries, due to outsourcing cheaper labour and resource availability (Russell, 2020). Much of the produced apparel is sold cheaply in the West, while suppliers often discard defective pieces. These rejects are sold back to countries like India, with much of it ending up in landfills. Yet, according to an OEC World Report (2022), India is the second-highest importer of used clothing, valued at USD 797 million, serving as a crucial economic system for the poorer classes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the slowing down of the fashion economy reinforced the need for policies to address sustainability at an environmental, economic, and social level (Pelikánová et al., 2021). The Clothing Manufacturers Association of India (CMAI) reported an 84% year-on-year decrease in sales in May 2020 (Tandon, 2020). The shutdown of physical stores and the ban on sites like SHEIN by the Government of India (Sengupta, 2020) urged Indian youth to search for affordable alternatives. An increased awareness of fashion's socio-ecological impacts and the economic downturn during the pandemic highlighted a surge in sales of secondhand and rejected clothing (Prasad, 2021), giving rise to newer models of promotion and communication of sustainable fashion through Instagram thrift stores. Despite the underlying stigma, a search result of #thriftindia on Instagram showed over 845K posts in 2024, revealing a growing interest in sustainable fashion consumption.

Indian Instagram thrift stores are small-sized online businesses that cater to varied consumer segments and clothing styles (Chaithra et al., 2022). The owners follow a routine sourcing of garments, curating pictures, sharing prices and size details, posting them on their Instagram feed, answering queries through Direct Messaging (DMs), and completing transactions through digital payment platforms (Chaithra et al., 2022). These thrift stores establish their storefronts and operations through an integrated system with social

media platforms like Instagram. India's unique socio-ecological context has allowed these thrift stores to economise on 'fashion wastes' and communicate affective values within them using Instagram affordances.

Our study aims to explore the role of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, to address the aforementioned academic gaps by exploring *affective* communication strategies and values to promote sustainable fashion. We argue that fashion is a system with intermingling aspects of self, society, and the environment, and thus must be communicated as an *experience* to promote broader social and ecological well-being. Furthermore, today's digital media platforms are key to establishing and influencing consumer behaviour driven by community and emotions. Drawing on the case of Instagram thrift stores in the unique socio-ecological and digital context of India, our study provides alternate models of sustainable fashion communication that promote affectiveness, distinct from the frameworks of thrifting in the Global North. Our research is driven by the following questions:

1. How do thrift store owners in India promote fashion as a sustainable service through Instagram?
2. How do Instagram affordances act as tools to promote alternate methods of sustainable communication of fashion?

Below is a review of existing literature that explores fashion as a social tool, consumption norms, and contextualisation of thrifting in India's social, ecological, and digital context. We then explore the role of social media, particularly Instagram, and its affordances in the promotion of sustainable fashion. Drawing from the empirical data brought forth by qualitative interviews with eight Indian Instagram thrift store owners, we illustrate communication and representation of sustainable fashion as a *service*, and the role of Instagram affordances in its value creation.

Conceptual framework

The understanding of sustainable fashion is broad and subject to many definitions. There is an inherent tension between fashion and sustainability, with fashion by nature signifying constant change and thriving on consumerism, whereas sustainability advocates for longevity, resource conservation, and minimal waste (Henninger et al., 2016; Clark, 2008). With our current understanding, sustainable fashion is often viewed as an *oxymoron* (Clark, 2008), especially with the fast-fashion system that thrives on the economic value of fashion and continuous consumption, making sustainability rather difficult to achieve. To truly bring out sustainable approaches, fashion itself must be redefined (Clark, 2008).

A "working definition" proposed by Mukhendi et al. (2020, p. 2877) reiterates that sustainable fashion is more than behaviour or garment but includes "environmental, social,

reuse, recycling, cruelty-free, and anti-consumption and production practices". By lacking direct objectives, this definition helps provide a direction to a subjective understanding of what makes fashion sustainable and creates business models for profit generation with the least possible environmental damage. Woodside and Fine (2019) present sustainable fashion as an environmentally and socially responsible system. While the current fashion systems are understood as capitalistic tools for production and consumption, their environmental effects have been a topic of debate. Even with multiple businesses adding their bit to making fashion more environment-friendly, the larger debate about its sustainability remains the underlying question. For that, we must better understand what *socially responsible fashion* is and how it can be developed by businesses in today's world of deep mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Fashion – a social consumption

Fashion, we argue, is a system of perpetual change. It is the formation of individual and collective identities that are inherently attached to social relations and the social world (Feinberg, et al., 1992). But, it is also situated within the natural world, which allows its production, as material, resource usage, and waste in landfills. Today's fashion focuses on fast fashion, "low-cost fashion textile commodities frequently updated in large retail chains" (Entwistle, 2015, p. 26). This growing industry is entrenched with well-documented environmental challenges such as resource depletion, waste generation, and pollution. This nature of fashion forces us to question whether it can be truly made sustainable. This understanding stems from the economic value of garments that manifests into fashion, but it is not the meaning of fashion itself, while clothes are mere material manifestations.

Fashion is a dynamic system that encompasses identities and expression, social orders, consumption, trade, and a range of environmental consequences (Palm & Cornell, 2020). Gupta et al. (2019) suggest viewing sustainable fashion through *style orientation* rather than *fashion orientation*, arguing the difference between clothing, style, and fashion even though they have often been used interchangeably. *Style* represents long-term identities and expressions of the wearer, resonating with personal values, meanings, attitudes, and lifestyle (Gupta et al., 2019). It is an expression of fashion and art of clothing, but not *fashion* itself, which is a broader system of society, politics, culture, and environment. The need to conform to fashion ideals stems from the intrinsic striving to climb higher in the social hierarchy and simultaneously achieve an ideal self (McNeil & Venter, 2019). Fashion theorist Simmel (1957) distinguishes between fashion and clothing, describing *fashion* as a representation of social equalisation and differentiation of one class from another. However, the hunger for short-lived fulfilment through material capital shadows our understanding of well-being (Bauman, 2007). It institutionalises socio-economic hierarchy as the norm and harms a healthy ecology through overproduction, overconsumption, and environmental degradation to maintain that norm.

As socio-ecological meanings are produced, reproduced, interpreted, and circulated within society, fashion becomes a fluid process, with social interaction and identity formation within shifting cultural and ecological contexts (McCracken, 1986). Fashion is also understood as "a system of dress", where there are possibilities of socio-ecological mobilities associated with its production, consumption, and distribution (Entwistle, 2000, p. 11). This is highlighted through the interaction of the fashion system with the biophysical world and the society.

Thrifting

To develop a truly sustainable fashion business, it is necessary to view alternate systems and the role of stakeholders, including suppliers, small-scale owners, distributors, and consumers. The current economy works around the system of supply and demand; there is no denying that consumers are essential stakeholders within the sustainable fashion system. The existing literature on *social sustainability* within fashion has predominantly centred around the role of suppliers (Huq et al., 2013), including the ethical treatment of workers and labour rights within the apparel industry (Balsiger, 2014), with insufficient attention given to the role of stakeholders such as distributors, consumers, and other value creators.

Clark's (2008) framework of slow fashion focuses on quality instead of quantity, promotes less frequent purchases and trends, and brands that highlight transparency and ethical aspects of sustainability. Slow fashion approaches include but are not limited to custom-made clothing, ethically produced clothes, organic clothing, rental or swapping, and thrifting (Fletcher, 2010). While thrifting is positioned under the umbrella of sustainable fashion, it is important to conceptually differentiate it from slow fashion. Fletcher (2010) argues that slow fashion involves a systemic critique of fashion industry's reliance on economic growth and underlying values and worldviews of fashion, enabling a fundamental transformation of norms surrounding fashion production and consumption. Thrifting primarily focuses on the reuse of clothes, garment longevity, waste management, and essentially, circularity. But in doing so, it can still operate within the trend-driven, high turnover logic of fast fashion, essentially driving overconsumption (Eetti, 2024).

Nevertheless, online thrift stores can perform some characteristics of slow fashion within their thrifting practices, building a system of fashion out of a socio-ecological need. They do so by sourcing waste clothing, factory rejects, and surplus that would otherwise end up in the Indian landfills. Thrifting, in this context, must not be equated only with secondhand fashion but viewed as a circular practice functioning within its socio-ecological realities. We frame thrifting as a related but distinct form of sustainable fashion that can highlight slow fashion ideologies in practice, if not conceptually. But, a systemic change to fashion cannot be done without exploring the inherent socio-economic and socio-cultural norms that hinder it.

Thrift stores are resource-efficient and waste-reducing systems, and as with any business model, they must find ways to generate customer value through marketing (Grundtman, 2017). Thus, thrifting is also a form of consumption where economic transactions take place through consumers. In contrast to the traditional fashion model of make-use-dispose, it offers a circular approach in a slow fashion system, highlighting a closed loop cycle of revival of clothes, reuse and recycling, managing waste reduction, and resource efficiency (Nautiyal & Goel, 2021). We do not determine thrifting as a definitive answer to sustainable fashion, but as a practice to drive an alternative to the current form of fashion distribution and consumption. Its potential is conditional and dependent on its regulation, communication, and alignment with broader socio-ecological goals. While generating economic value remains central to thrift stores (Grundtman, 2017), the concept of social morals, environmental concerns, and good service can drive their customers.

But existing research on secondhand clothing mostly focuses on developed economies and/or physical thrift stores (Poldner et al., 2022; Pal, 2015), leaving online stores, especially in the Global South, as *terra incognita*.

Thrift stores in India

The fashion system, as discussed, is heavily affected by the socio-cultural and socio-ecological norms around it. To formulate sustainable paradigms around fashion, it is necessary to study newer communication models to suit distinct and varied geographical and cultural contexts.

India is home to some of the world's largest apparel-producing industries and, thus, is also a space for discarded "defective and rejected" pieces that end up in its landfills. Yet, it is also the world's second-highest importer of used clothing (OEC World, 2022), which functions as an important economic source for the country's poorer classes. Generations of Indians have been introduced to thrifting through family hand-me-downs and street markets (Chaithra et al., 2022). However, the formal selling of secondhand or *waste* clothing is stigmatised due to hygiene concerns (Parker & Webera, 2013), its association with lower classes (Kapoor & Khare, 2019), and/or spiritual beliefs. Despite controversies, Instagram thrift stores in India continue to thrive, especially among a younger market segment.

Away from a normative understanding, these Instagram thrift stores sell curated pieces of garments that are limited in quantity, from secondhand to factory rejects and surplus. By doing so, they encompass a broader system of sustainable fashion. Their distinct socio-ecological context shapes the practices and operations of thrift stores, emphasizing the need for more localised models of sustainable fashion communication. We approach this case study on Instagram thrift stores in India through a bottom-up lens to explore business communication practices, keeping in mind the growth of the local community, society, and ecology (Harding, 2008).

Value creation of service

While economic values are intrinsic to businesses, for sustainable fashion systems, values must be understood and shaped while keeping their broader social and ecological impact in mind. The lack of research on online thrift stores opens doors to understand the intersection of the social, ecological, and digital worlds, prompting formulation and standardisation of new and sustainable models of fashion.

Poldner et al. (2022) assess the key strategies that form the foundation of the functioning of thrift stores: "fashion as a service", "place value proposition", and "community as a co-creator". These strategies are essential in communicating the *consumer value* within their services that promote sustainable fashion.

We argue that Indian thrift stores render fashion as a service in the form of style consumption, its aesthetic representations, and community belonging. In his book, Florida (2002) determines the rise of the creative class and experiences service as part of the broader *creative economy*. *Experience services* are business values and practices that focus on providing consumers with memorable and engaging interactions through creative communication (Florida, 2002). *Services,* here, refer to the holistic experience of fashion provided by the thrift stores, encompassing not only tangible products but intangible benefits such as exclusivity, personalisation, environmental consciousness, and community well-being.

The art of dressing is an expression of self-identity, but moreover, a reflection of sociocultural norms and beliefs. Poldner et al.'s (2022) study found that offering styling types, modelling with outfits, and community engagement drove the business to profit. They underpin the aesthetic values within fashion apparel that can generate consumer value, prompting the *consumption of styles* rather than the clothes themselves. After all, the aesthetics of fashion exemplify social relations with the taste of the times and are representative of the most personal and intimate aesthetic choices (Kang, 2018). Yet, it illustrates subjective ideas within the objective reality of what we wear and the styles we like. An experience within a thrift store is synonymous with that of a "treasure hunt" of unique garments and styles (Poldner et al., 2022) that motivates its customers to express their self-identity. The consumption of secondhand clothing is largely motivated by consumers' environmental consciousness but also by the desire to gain social and cultural capital (Han & Sweet, 2020). Thus, it can also inculcate a sustainable consumer identity.

Florida (2002) further conceives the idea of *community as a co-creator* within his study of the creative class and lists the importance of accessible and inclusive communities within businesses where innovation can thrive. The experiential aspect of a thrift store includes the space within which it functions and the community it serves. Moreover, choosing a space that is clear, attractive, and welcoming is essential to add customer value to a brand (Poldner et al., 2022). For Instagram thrift stores, Instagram serves as a face as well as a place for their brand. However, to understand the interaction between thrift

stores and their customers, it is necessary to lay down the role of consumption and its *mediatisation* in fostering sustainable fashion systems.

Community, consumption, and media

The discussions around conscious consumption remain central to sustainable fashion. Nevertheless, the trend in consumption is not just an economic transaction but is driven by the formation of identity and communities. Thompson (1995) notes that consumers are engaged in a continuous process of constructing an *ideal self* through symbolic meanings within material manifestations. The perceived symbolism of fashion consumption is associated with reaching aesthetic ideals, seeking novelty, or fitting into/disrupting social and cultural norms (Niinimäki et al., 2010). In doing so, consumers associate themselves with certain social groups or communities, especially those that align closely with their personal beliefs and values. However, the meanings associated with objects are short-lived, socially constructed, and shared among individuals. With changing identity, the self-identity associated with material items and their social world is also in flux (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Hall, 1996). Consumers are thus part of imagined communities through shared meanings, narratives, and imagined connections that are merging aspects of consumer identities (Anderson, 2016).

Media and communication technologies play a crucial role in allowing free flow of knowledge and interaction, aiding faster formation of new identities. We argue that consumption patterns are dictated and mediated by new markets with changes in new communication technologies. Technology acts as the medium through which mediators of the fashion marketplace access their audience and influence values within market commodities. Overconsumption remains a critical issue within the current fashion system wherein frequent purchases are made through changing and short-lived trends and symbolic meanings associated with material goods as perpetuated by media. Consumer Culture theory understands *consumption* as a social arrangement through which meaningful ways of life are shaped through dependency on material goods mediated through markets (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Changes within new media technologies can generate opportunities for marketers to ideate and innovate alternate ways of communicating with their audiences. With the symbolic representations and encoded meanings of life, they can communicate social and individual circumstances, their self-identity, and lifestyle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). While today's market is hegemonically driven by their goals to generate profit, new media technologies can provide opportunities for market actors to drive socially and ecologically friendly ideologies, creating alternate and sustainable fashion systems.

Social media affordances

Today, many of our ideas and ideologies are virtually expressed and propagated through media technologies. From our knowledge about the environment to our interactions with

new fashion trends, media forms are essential in propagating ideologies within. Much of our social world today is deeply mediatised, overlapping different sectors of our lives: public and private, private and political, online and offline, and social and digital (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Thus, the modern consumer navigates an increasingly fluid and interconnected media landscape where distinctions between real and virtual have faded.

Media has been intrinsic in perpetuating need-based consumption as the norm and has allowed the flow of idealistic goals within fashion systems. Yet, it has also furthered ideas of inequalities, power relations, and ethics through sustainable consumption. With social media platforms like Instagram, media technologies provide space for communications and discussions for environmental awareness. Thus, media portrayals of sustainable fashion are crucial to shaping policy, politics, attitudes, behaviours, and intentions of imagined consumer communities (Kaul, 2017).

These imagined communities grow closer as social media allows the convergence of digital and social spaces. With the advent of social media, information and communication have become more accessible, with direct interactions with information, social norms, and broader ideologies. We argue that social media, with its affordances, is a sociocultural space that can connect broader social and ecological ideologies in sustainable fashion consumption. With widespread interconnectivity and the ability to shape public opinions, it allows the formation of communities that can directly formulate discourses on society and the environment (Kaul, 2017). Thus, social media can function as a *public sphere* and an organised tool to inform and drive groups towards social and environmental causes. This is elaborated through affordances of social media platforms such as Instagram, which allows its users to be producers of narratives. The accessibility and connectivity provided by Instagram allows its users to pen opinions, discuss issues, upload media, and disseminate information on fashion, sustainability, and consumption, allowing the formation of innovative models of promoting sustainable fashion (Tierney, 2013).

Papacharissi (2014) understands the shared sentiments, connections, and discourses of imagined communities on social media as *affective publics*. She explores the affordances of Instagram as *possibilities for action* that the platform provides through its design and user engagement (Papacharissi, 2014). These affordances ensure the ability to create, edit, share, connect, and interact, enabling *affective* spaces not just for content generation but for active discussions and contributions to socio-ecological issues. Papacharissi (2014) argues that emotions are crucial in shaping public opinions and social outcomes, especially in the digital age. Users, such as thrift store owners, utilise Instagram affordances to affectively communicate and amplify their environmental cause, influence consumer behaviour, and mobilise collective actions towards sustainable fashion consumption.

Methodology

This study applies a case-based qualitative research design to get an in-depth understanding of Indian thrift stores and their use of Instagram as a tool to promote sustainable fashion (Bryman, 2012). Here, we contextualise the case study to explore the dynamic nature of social and ecological values and norms to tackle sustainability issues within fashion (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Instagram thrift stores in India present a distinct case away from the traditional, Western meaning of thrift stores as physical stores that provide used garments. The socio-ecological dynamics within the used-clothing industry and the prevalence of surplus garments in India provide a fertile ground for Instagram thrift stores to create alternate fashion systems. The digital norms of Instagram further emerge as a potent medium through which these enterprises craft socio-ecological paradigms surrounding sustainable fashion.

Sampling and recruitment

The participants, self-identifying as *thrift store owners* in India on Instagram, were selected via purposive sampling to ensure they provide relevant insight to the study (Bryne, 2012). They were considered expert informants who could relay the comprehensive functioning of their thrift stores, from the production to the consumption of the value generated through Instagram. We reached out to these owners via their store handles on Instagram, maintaining their anonymity as well as understanding the stores as reflections of their owners' motivations.

A total of eight thrift stores were identified for the study, four of which were recruited upon sending personalised messages over Instagram, while the others were identified through snowball sampling. Thrift stores chosen had to meet the pre-requisite criteria of having over 5,000 followers, ensuring a substantial engagement with customers to maintain the study's credibility. The study chose stores that had "preloved" or "thrift" highlighted in their profile bios, eliminating those that provided new or handmade products and focussing only on those providing a circular mode of fashion. All identified stores had their business fronts only on Instagram, delivered across India, and sold products across fashion categories such as clothing, shoes, and accessories.

Data collection and analysis

For this study, we opted for one-on-one, open-ended, semi-structured interviews to delve into the participants' thoughts and opinions (Byrne, 2012). Qualitative interviewing allowed us to concentrate on the hidden meanings behind the discourses created by the interviewees and allowed them to go in-depth on the subject and express their thoughts (Byrne, 2012).

Store Name	Owner	Year of Establishment	Follower Count	Products	Sourcing Area
Dodo Finds	Jennie	2020	13.5K	Secondhand Clothes, Bags &Shoes	Delhi (North India), North-East India
Gon Vintage	Irene	2020	6.3K	Vintage & Secondhand Clothes, Shoes	Around the World, Gujarat (West India)
Luu Liu	Leah	2020	56.4K	Vintage & Secondhand Clothes, Lingerie	Delhi (North India), North-East India
Bangalore Thrifts	Karina	2021	19K	Secondhand Clothes & Factory Surplus	Bangalore (South India), Delhi (North India)
Old love Studios	Lisa	2021	9.2K	Vintage, Secondhand & Factory Surplus Clothes	Around the world, Mumbai (West India)
The Fine Finds	Hyuna	2019	13.8K	Secondhand Clothes & Accessories	Bangalore (South India)
Revival of Thrifts	Iris	2021	32.4K	Factory Reject Clothes	Gujarat (West India)
The Junk Store	Suzy	2020	11K	Secondhand Clothes & Factory Surplus	Mumbai (West India), North-East India

Table 1 – List of Interviewees

As is the norm of production interviews, the participants were irreplaceable in the study of media production with distinct expertise on promoting sustainable fashion over Instagram (Bruun, 2016). We conducted eight interviews over Zoom and recorded them using Zoom's built-in recording feature. With an inability to access the owners physi-

cally, an online platform like Zoom helped bridge the gap and provided a space that was comfortable for the interviewees, a metaphorical representation of an online store. All the interviews were conducted in English, with an average length of 60 minutes. With their pre-requisite and informed consent, the interviews were recorded and then manually transcribed by the first author (Byrne, 2012). For the integrity of the study, all participants are anonymised; hence, all the names appearing in the analysis are pseudonyms. However, to ensure transparency, the store names have been kept. The interview guide further covered the topics of environmental awareness, Instagram usage, store aesthetics, and community engagement.

We used thematic coding to analyse the data. Seale (2012) notes that codes or themes become easier to understand along with their descriptions in the transcripts, illustrating the quality of data and the reliability of the findings. Descriptive coding was used to perceive larger ideas arising from the interviewees' reflections; these complex phenomena were combined within the analytical codes and finally assembled into thematic codes to determine broader meanings and discourses (Bazeley, 2013).

Analysis and findings

The analysis is structured according to three major steps in an Instagram thrift business in India: sourcing, curation, and distribution. The aspect of distribution is further explored through the services they provide through styling, inclusivity, and a thrift community, and the inherent role of Instagram affordances in facilitating them.

To study Instagram thrift stores in India, we explore them within the context of the social, ecological, and digital norms they shape and are shaped by. Presently, need-based fashion consumption is an institutionalised economic norm mediated by the existing digital norms within marketing. Yet, consumption is itself crucial to a sustainable business to sell its products. As Lisa (Owner, OldLoveStudios) states, "If I am selling something, it should be sellable". While thrift store owners are eco-conscious in their motivations, their businesses are driven by the ecological norms of the Indian market that make used clothing and factory rejects or surplus available. The value creation within thrift stores is not only a reflection of their socio-ecological context but also becomes a basis for the norms they are hoping to change. As these Instagram thrift stores foster digital communities with shared values, aesthetics, and interaction, value creation becomes more than just a tool of economic transaction but a means to cultivate sustainable identities. Business values are promoted within the sourcing, curation, and distribution of their experiential services.

Sourcing

Sourcing clothes from reliable vendors is the first step of the thrift business; these sourcing practices are rooted in the fashion-waste cycle that rescues garments from landfills, extending their life. Vendors in India are wholesale dealers who deal with the selling, recycling, and import of rejected, surplus, or used clothing before they end up in landfills. Jennie (Owner, TheDodoFinds) suggests, "Most of the clothes that come are defective and somewhat not sellable". These clothes undergo rounds of selection, maintaining a deliberate strategy of waste management and circularity within local socio-ecological contexts. Iris (RevivalOfThrifts) suggests that a day of sourcing goes by "scanning hundreds of clothing" for visible defects and fixable damages according to their personal aesthetics. This manual method of sorting and mending allows thrift stores to be resource-efficient.

Adhering to the principles of slow fashion, thrift store owners ensure limited, unique, and high-quality pieces (Jung & Jin, 2016). The social norms of trend consumption are central to thrift stores. However, thrift owners work their way around trends to promote limited consumption that keeps the ecological values of the business intact. These values contribute to sustainability through intentional selection of clothes based on classic trends, durability, and resisting overconsumption through a limited inventory. Lisa reasons, "If you have limited pieces, you'll have a limited approach to buying clothes". At BangaloreThrifts, Karina collects classic pieces or garments like *jorts* (baggy shorts made out of denim) that can be in trend for a longer period, stating, "I don't like micro trends".

High-quality and exclusive pieces are crucial to thrift store owners. By having such items, they add ecological values to their service that are superior to fast fashion. Sourcing quality fashion pieces that are *durable* is key to these Instagram thrift stores. Lisa (Owner, OldLoveStores) notes, "Material is the most important, and the feel on skin […] especially durable materials like polyester don't degrade for years". None of the interviewees shied away from the likes of non-organic fabric like polyester while sourcing. Despite much controversy around the unsustainability of polyester, thrift store owners unanimously agree that polyester must be reused and remain a part of the fashion cycle. As Jennie recounts, "70% of the clothes that come are made up of polyester", pointing to its non-biodegradability that makes it a durable, affordable, and recyclable option. The novelty of this finding does not lie in the sustainability of the clothes themselves but in the process, presenting an interesting channel to explore tensions between trend consumption and ecological sustainability.

Curation

> "Instagram is the first representation […] point of entry for anybody who is coming to shop".
> – Irene (Owner, GonVintage)

Instagram thrift stores ride on their *exclusivity* to curate value in their products and experiences. Thus, picking up the right pieces is crucial to making their service sellable. Curation is the second step of their operations; the chosen aesthetics and their presentation on Instagram deliver a difference in their product to customers who perceive their identities through exclusive items (Jung & Jin, 2016). The first phase of curation begins with sourcing, keeping in mind their aesthetics, relevance, and durability forming the core of their business.

Curation is done with both social and ecological aesthetics in mind to provide a sustainable experience and service. These aesthetics, while subject to human perception, can be shaped to bring out ideas of environmental sustainability and affect human emotions (Hemmati, 2016). For instance, Jennie curates clothes that are breezy and comfortable, symbolising being free and one with nature. Using natural decor, earthy tones as backgrounds (Lisa), and natural lighting (Iris) in the curation of their Instagram feed adds a symbolic connection with the environment and "present[s] clothes in their natural state" (Iris). The thrift store owners are motivated by their eco-consciousness and eco-literacy, curating eco-friendly business values. This awareness is reinforced and communicated through their aesthetic choices. However, the owners' emotional connection with fashion is key in identifying the choice of aesthetic chosen by each store: "My store is really an extension of me" (Hyuna, TheFineFinds). Thus, they use aesthetics to influence others' ideas of beauty, changing our relationship with the object of that beauty (Hemmati, 2016). As exemplified, Hyuna's love for collecting unique garments allows her to curate a variety of clothing, from crochet tops to gloves and ties; thus, bringing in new aesthetics helps keep her store fresh and adds a customer recall value.

As discussed later, Instagram acts as the key tool for personalising the service aesthetics for their customers, that are relatable and relevant. It mediates the curation of social and ecological aesthetics to present a sustainable experience of fashion. However, these aesthetics are more than just symbolism of sustainability. Sustainability is promoted through curation of timeless styles, supporting clothing longevity, and encouraging a holistic relationship with one's wardrobe. Keeping ecological intent at the core of the business, thrift stores align aesthetic practices to resist the traditional fashion cycle of "make-use-dispose".

Style service

The exclusivity within thrift stores is performed by the interaction and engagement of customers with thrift stores. Thrift stores do not present fashion as just transactional but as an *experiential service* that betters our quality of life and well-being (Florida, 2002). With an understanding of society as an exchange of services (Delaunay & Gadrey, 1992), thrift store owners curate their clothes and Instagram feeds with community care at heart.

Fashion is a concept in flux (McCracken, 1986), making it a dynamic system of stories, narration, emotions, history, aesthetics, and values. Thrift stores become creative playgrounds for owners to weave new ideas and values of styles and trends. Like Irene suggests, "The true unique factor for each store or each curator is just the personal style". With curation of outfits, styling tips, and trend forecasting, thrift store owners promote fashion through *style consumption* rather than apparel consumption. Lisa curates vintage pieces such as embroidery and animal prints, perceiving the pieces to be "classic and timeless, they will be in trend in some way or other". *Style consumption* forms a unique mode of shared experiences, with their meanings rooted in a given time and involvement in that time, making it capable of being timeless (Hasanpahic, 2016). Through styling, thrift stores present ideologies of rethinking one's relationship with fashion, as a means of self-expression and of versatile identities and wardrobe. Styling the same trousers in different ways or identifying newer colour combinations is Irene's way of adding an emotional attachment to clothes and transforming fashion from single-use purchases to versatile wardrobe staples. As claimed by Suzy (Owner, TheJunkStore), "Style is a form of art".

The uniqueness of each thrift store is determined by the personal style and representation of its curator. Owners like Leah (Owner, LuLiu) curate their collections with pop culture references, such as *Barbenheimer* (a social media term that combines the opposing aesthetics of 2023 movies, Barbie and Oppenheimer) outfits or Vivienne Westwood–inspired gothic collections. The recollection of style as a form of art is derived from the ability of clothing and outfits to convey moods and emotions. The emotional appeal of styling provides a gateway for celebrating sustainable behaviour of rewear, limited consumption, and resisting societal conformity through self-expression. Thus, forecasting upcoming street styles or increasing engagement of their store through pop-culture references allows them to be relevant and engage with their customers while maintaining the uniqueness of their stores. Unlike the conventional understanding of thrifting as just secondhand retail, Instagram thrift stores in India function as curators of style, offering services that promote value-based over product-based consumption, through personalisation, longevity, and creativity in fashion.

Belonging

Styles and trends allow thrift owners to explore options that can change standards within fashion to promote a sense of belonging. Hyuna recollects, "I shifted into trying to be a place where you could get whatever you want. I want people to think that if I want to buy it, I can just thrift it". Each aspect of the experience service provided by thrift stores is established through building a community with their customers, beyond the relationship of buyers and sellers (Florida, 2002). Iris notes, "it is a personal connection" with their customers that pushes them to share titbits about their life, while Lisa reasons their interaction "as a means to get to know them, to know what they are buying and why they

look to buy them". Thrift stores thus create a space where consumers can feel heard and validated, furthering the concept of inclusivity through accessibility.

While social class and hierarchy form the backbone of modern society, services that traverse these lines are crucial for socially sustainable values. Thrift stores create community values by providing access to their capital through inclusivity, affordability, and access to the used goods market. The interviewees unanimously agreed that keeping a decent price range was crucial to their functioning. Keeping low prices for premium brand rejects was a good deal for Iris to attract buyers with. Hyuna makes us understand this by terming it as their "approachability", which makes owners empathetic to their customers and encourages them to listen to their problems. Community care, by listening to their customers and directly acknowledging their problems, allows them to personalise their service of fashion. They provide their customers an opportunity to experiment with their self-identities without the need to conform to an *ideal*.

Thrift stores enact their *inclusivity* by providing *accessibility*, making them interdependent concepts. We perceive accessibility with a focus on economic and material capital, where inclusivity underlies the beauty standards or gendered views of clothes. As slow fashion businesses, thrift stores communicate and persuade customers that they are their ideal selves, promoting a validated sense of well-being. Owners like Iris ensure that they have a range of sizes available, including strapless clothes for plus-sized people, with the thought that someone might want to experiment irrespective of their cultural context. Karina emphasizes, "fashion has no gender" with her unisex collections. Fostering this experience service of validation, trust, care, and overall well-being allows the formation of a community where customers feel seen, heard, and motivated to thrift again. Beyond mere transactions, these thrift stores become emotional spaces of self-expression, personalisation, and affordable luxury, redefining traditional business–consumer relationships within fashion.

Thrift community

> "To me, it is about building a community of people that appreciate vintage clothing and see its luminance".
> – Irene

Community is central to the functioning of any creative business, wherein the relationship between customers and owners is a symbiotic one. Both business owners and customers work as creators and receivers of values, fostering what Florida (2002) understands as holistic community values of co-creation. Leah and Jennie often emphasised their satisfaction in garnering a loyal customer base and helping those customers to attract more to their environmental cause. They promote consumer participation through impression management, thrift usage, and participation (Schau et al., 2009). Thrift owners also

indulge in helping customers sell their preowned clothes, establishing ecological values within fashion formed out of community care and dependency.

The intended creation of value within thrift stores happens through trust and transparency within the community, as Iris notes, "We are very transparent". Whether it is about the details of the defects or discussing customers' experiences through DMs, thrift stores become a space for owners and customers to share their love for fashion and, in turn, the environment. Iris also reflects, "There is enough space for all of us to thrive together," noting the friendliness and courtship shared with other thrift store owners. Jennie acknowledges that shopping escapades with other owners allowed a variety of aesthetics to thrive and created a holistic space for learning and growth. The relationship between thrift owners, their customers, and each other ties them together as part of an imagined thrift community (Anderson, 2016). They share collective meanings and understandings of sustainable fashion within its social and ecological values. Instagram is critical in fostering this sense of community by remodelling thrifting into a shared experience through interactive elements like tagged posts, customer reviews, and Q&A sessions. This collective engagement validates individual choices and urges consumers to be part of a larger values-driven movement in fashion.

From sourcing to distribution of clothes, the experience service is curated with community and ecological well-being in mind. Whether it is sourcing secondhand and rejected goods by saving them from landfills, or curating limited and rare finds, thrift stores build spaces of patience, trust, and care towards the environment and the community. Thus, they promote sustainable fashion as a service that can benefit society and its biophysical world, the environment. While thrift stores promote the ideas of social and ecological well-being to be mutually inclusive, the digital norms of Instagram and its affordances pave the way for these processes to occur within it.

Instagram affordances

> "If you are posting a product that is attractive with relevant hashtags and concise captions, Instagram can drive the exact audience you want".
> – Lisa

Digital technologies and affordances of social media form the core of the distribution of products and services within thrift stores. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, hold their audience close, allowing communication and engagement through shared knowledge (Tierney, 2013). As Jennie remembers, their eco-literacy, too, was motivated via Instagram content on sustainable fashion, reflecting on the mediatisation of the environment that is intrinsic to social media platforms. As the interviewees unanimously agreed, Instagram offered them access to their desired audience and visual tools to communicate with their customer community. Affordances are loosely understood as perceived potentialities of any technology that allow its users to connect (Papacharissi, 2014). We analyse

the functionality of Instagram by using Papacharissi's (2014) derivation of Instagram affordances based on four factors – visibility, persistence, editability, and association – that drive the formation of identity, community, and business values of thrift stores in India.

Visibility

As narrated by Irene earlier, Instagram is their store's first representation. Their Instagram feed is the sole form of visual communication of their store, unlike a physical store that adds a place value to its business. Visibility on Instagram allows thrift stores to design the face of their store based on how they would like to be perceived. Multi-modal affordances such as images, stories, reels, and captions can help communicate meanings that reflect the store's personality and style (Hurley, 2019). Suzy approaches her communication by posting "BTS [behind the scenes] on reels to let customers know the importance of every step" of her business, from sourcing to selling. The strategic use of Instagram helps thrift stores form a virtual bank of their clothes to give a personalised charm to their store.

Furthermore, social interaction is key to visibility on Instagram and is fuelled by the presence of "like, comment, and share" features (Papacharissi, 2014). For instance, Leah's customers often interact with her new collections through reels commenting their excitement and eagerness for new drops, or tagging their friends who would appreciate them. Iris loves resharing customer reviews that tag their store on their Instagram stories. *Giveaways* are yet another means through which thrift stores engage with their customers, driving engagement through sharing on stories, tagging potential customers, and supportive comments. By providing "a clear way of communication" (Lisa), the social semiotics of Instagram allow it to become a medium that shapes and reshapes communications between thrift stores and customers, helping form a community (Hurley, 2019). With relevant hashtags like #thriftindia, #vintagefashionindia, #thriftfinds, and more, thrift stores strategise and reach out to customers interested in sustainable fashion.

Persistence

The affordances of Instagram allow thrift store owners to break space-time barriers and showcase their digital content for a longer period. It allows them to carefully curate their feed with colours, images, and stories, helping build a consistent narrative and long-term brand value (Papacharissi, 2014). Thrift store owners amplify and establish their eco-friendliness in multiple and distinct ways. For instance, Hyuna's posts on sustainable fashion practices, such as thrifting, eco-tags, and fair trading, help her educate and engage her customers while building a narrative of eco-consciousness around her store.

Consumer interaction with thrift owners on Instagram through comments and DMs allows thrift owners and their customers to build a parasocial relationship of friendship and intimacy. The instant connectivity offered by Instagram allows thrift stores to act as community spaces and create social values where people can feel they *belong*, thus interacting with community activities and eventually supporting their environmental cause

(Poldner et al., 2022). Persistence plays a crucial role in attracting new customers by allowing them to interact with posts on Instagram after they are initially published, extending conversations and social relations.

Editability

Editability is the ability to craft, revise, and modify content before making it public, which allows brands to control their self-representation. Papacharissi (2014) suggests that editability provides the ability to manage impressions and engagement by editing content before distribution. This affordance is crucial in spaces like Instagram thrift stores that work closely with the desires of their customers, where they can modify their narratives according to the newer requirements.

For instance, to manage their waste, Hyuna and Leah often host clearance sales on their Instagram stories that allow them to resell their remaining stock by simply editing the captions to make them look exciting. It further allows Karina to experiment with music and fast motion visuals to derive a holistic sensory experience for the customer to associate emotions with outfits. Thus, *editability* as an affordance provides control over how thrift stores want to be perceived by continuously changing their digital representation as per their self and social identity, making them flexible towards the needs of the community. As Hurley (2019) states, the social semiotic resources of Instagram allow it to be a medium that can shape and reshape communications of the thrift owners with their customers. Thus, these tools are central to the business communication of the stores around which they can strategise.

Association

Association as an affordance is essential in driving community engagement and interaction on Instagram. It promotes identity formation by allowing consumers to actively participate in thrift culture, through live sessions, store prompts, comments, broadcast channels, tagged posts, and shared stories. Thus, it allows customers to reinforce their role as co-creators within a community that values sustainability and self-expression.

Multi-modal tools such as hashtags (#thriftindia, #thrifting, #rarefindsindia), tagging (their customers, especially influencers), and mentions help thrift store owners share their interests with the likes of the imagined thrift communities. Customers' engagement through the sharing of their outfits and mentions of the thrift store in their stories drives a *feedback loop* between the seller and the consumer. Karina recalled that in their initial days, their customers became the biggest word-of-mouth marketers for their store through sharing and tagging. Association fosters tools for connectivity that let thrift stores connect with influencers, driving strong voices towards their cause, thus elevating their market presence and establishing them as platforms of economic transactions by reaching a larger and more meaningful audience. Thrift owners promote consumer participation in co-creating values, such as through construction of Instagram, thrift usage,

impression management, and participation (Schau et al., 2009); this is mediated and communicated through *association*, an intrinsic affordance of Instagram.

Thrift stores foster well-being through trust, care, and transparency, communicating social and ecological values in each step of their experience service business. Instagram affordances become essential for enabling digital communities and sustainable fashion systems that contribute to a healthy society and environment. By analysing Instagram thrift stores in India, this study has expanded on the sustainable fashion discourse in understanding the role of new communication technologies in mediating socio-ecological values and forming digital communities. This further enhances the understanding of sustainable fashion businesses beyond Western contexts and the evolution of sustainable fashion in the Global South, keeping unique geographical and cultural contexts in mind.

Conclusion

> "My store is just me, personified".
> – Suzy

Our study embarked on a journey to investigate how Instagram thrift stores in India utilise digital media platforms to shape sustainable fashion through community-driven, affective communication strategies. Our analysis illustrated how these enterprises leverage and mediate their ideologies through Instagram affordances to cultivate values of community and well-being and, in turn, promote sustainable fashion as an experience service. Social media platforms provide tools to shape and reshape consumption norms that can be experience-driven rather than product-driven.

So, how do thrift store owners in India promote fashion as a sustainable service? Our analysis offered a simple answer to the question – through well-being. By inculcating values of care, trust, and transparency, thrift store owners understand the importance of stakeholders, like customers, as inherent to their business as well as environmental causes. Florida's (2002) concept of experience service, central to our analysis, offers an exploration into how emerging businesses can provide memorable experiences with fashion, integrating social and ecological values into their offerings. Thrift stores in India emphasise *affordability* and *accessibility* of their services, where consumers can feel a sense of belonging. *Inclusivity* is key to Florida's (2002) experience service, where value is created through shared meanings, cultural engagement, and interactive consumption. Here, Instagram becomes both a tool for communication and a space for aesthetic and emotional engagement, where the values of social and ecological well-being are encoded and shared, creating a sustainable fashion system.

Platform affordances of Instagram provide digital norms within which thrift stores can function as online spaces, playing a critical role in the establishment of communities. As aesthetic representations are curated around socio-ecological well-being, Instagram acts as a medium wherein encoded meanings within these are communicated socially

(Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Instagram affordances – visibility, persistence, and association (Papacharissi, 2014) – become key to their functioning, where their use dictates the value they shape. Thus, Instagram becomes a virtual space of socio-cultural exchanges and the formation of imaginary communities, mediating accessibility of thrifted clothes across a wider audience, inclusive of their socio-cultural and socio-ecological contexts. Thrift stores connect, engage, and foster meaningful relationships with their customers, ultimately driving the ethos of social and ecological well-being in fashion consumption. While much of existing study on environmental communication has focused on the Global North (Agin & Karlsson, 2021), our study underscores the necessity of understanding how digital communication practices function in diverse socio-ecological contexts, like India, and how they offer alternate models of sustainable fashion rooted in local digital norms.

However, our study recognises the inherently unsustainable nature of thrifting that can mimic the nature of fast fashion, such as the inherent risks of unregulated growth of thrift stores or constant turnover through trends. Without regulatory frameworks and policies, the unprecedented growth of thrift stores and the competition to strive for the top potentially highlights the blind spots of sustainability within this thrift system. The role of Instagram as a mediating space for sustainable fashion consumption calls for further investigation into the creation of localised practices and consumption norms of fashion sustainability in the Global South. Our research has focussed on the producers of business values within sustainable fashion; its inherent limitations serve as an avenue for further research in understanding the consumer perceptions of Instagram thrift stores in India and examining online interaction with offline behaviours. This broader study would provide a more transformative and holistic view of a sustainable fashion system.

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