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A Behavioural Economics Perspective on Second-Hand Clothing Consumption with Special Reference to Ernakulam District, Kerala

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Abstract

This study analyses the behavioural shift from fast fashion to Second-Hand Clothing (SHC) markets. It examines demographic characteristics, shopping habits, economic decision-making patterns, and consumer perceptions toward thrift retailing in the Ernakulam district. The study is grounded in behavioural economic perspectives and sustainable consumption frameworks. The research employs correlation analysis to explore associations between selected demographic and behavioural variables. To assess sustainability orientation, a Sustainable Consumption Score (SCS) is constructed by integrating environmental, economic, social, and behavioural dimensions. It aims to throw light on the multidimensional factors shaping the growing acceptance of thrift shopping as an alternative to fast fashion.

Major Findings: The study reveals that sustainability and cost-effectiveness are the main drivers of thrift shopping. Social stigma and inconvenience remain key barriers, with age influencing environmental concern.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Fast Fashion, Second-Hand Clothing (SHC), Sustainable Consumption, Thrift Retailing

1. Introduction

Thrift fashion has emerged as a significant response to the growing environmental concerns associated with fast fashion. The increased interest in sustainable consumption practices has contributed to the rapid expansion of thrift retailing. Thrift stores have grown significantly in both number and sales. But scholarly attention to thrift retail as a distinct sector remains limited (Park *et al.*, 2020).

Informal street shopping and second-hand exchanges have long existed in India. In recent years, greater exposure to Western culture and expanding educational awareness have enhanced the social acceptance of organised thrift retailing (Panda, 2022). Despite persistent consumer skepticism toward SHC, thrift fashion has emerged as one of the fastest-growing trends among young consumers.

The transition from fast fashion to thrift fashion can be theoretically understood through the lenses of altruism and behavioural motivations. Altruistic motivations are reflected in other motives such as environmental responsibility, ethical consumerism, and support for social causes through recycling and donations (Park *et al.*, 2020). These align with the normative goal frame, which emphasises moral obligation and environmental concern. However, empirical evidence suggests that altruism alone does not sufficiently explain purchase intention in thrift markets. Instead, behavioural motivations such as economic value (gain goal frame), hedonic enjoyment, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) play a more significant role in influencing

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consumers' decisions (Yadav & Sijoria, 2024). Studies also identify distinct consumer segments, including bargain seekers, ethically motivated shoppers, and hybrid consumers driven by both enjoyment and moral considerations (Park *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the growing popularity of thrift fashion reflects the interplay of moral values, economic incentives, and behavioural factors.

In this backdrop, this paper examines the behavioural economics principles influencing consumers' participation in thrift markets. It integrates economic motivation, altruism (Herjanto *et al*., 2023), social influences (Vicamara *et al.*, 2023), and psychological factors (Koay *et al.*, 2022) within the analytical framework. The framing effect also plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perception as sellers strategically employ terms such as "upcycled" and "sustainable" instead of "used clothing," thereby reducing social stigma (Toebast-Wensink *et al*., 2025). Consumers are also driven by perceived price advantages and value for money (Halicki *et al*., 2024), which explains the success of thrift markets. Altruistic motivations further reinforce purchase decisions by allowing consumers to justify thrift consumption on sustainability grounds (Styvén & Mariani, 2020). The study thus seeks to explain how thrift consumption is behaviourally constructed within emerging retail contexts.

2. Literature Review

Recent studies have increasingly examined thrift consumption through behavioural and sustainability perspectives. For instance, Preece and Schultz (2025) demonstrate that the adoption of SHC is shaped not merely by environmental concern. It is also a combination of psychographic drivers, including sustainability beliefs, perceived value, and social influence. Their findings indicate that sustainable fashion participation reflects behavioural heterogeneity. They show that targeted interventions are more effective than generic sustainability appeals in promoting second-hand consumption. Building on such insights, this review synthesises existing research on thrift markets and sustainable fashion. The section is organised into four parts: economic behaviour influencing consumption decisions, sustainability as a key driver in fashion, participation patterns in the global SHC market, and the challenges faced by retailers amid the expansion of thrift markets.

Studies indicate that economic considerations significantly shape SHC consumption. Herjanto *et al.* (2023) find that Gen Z consumers' purchase intentions are strongly influenced by financial pressure, peer influence, and the desire to keep up with fashion trends. For them, affordability is also a central driver. Similarly, Amaral *et al.* (2022) report that the need for uniqueness and social prestige positively influence SHC purchases. Post-pandemic increases in socio-environmental awareness and reduced brand attachment further contribute to thrift market growth. Price sensitivity, frugality, and perceived exclusivity consistently emerge as strong behavioural determinants, often outweighing purely environmental motivations (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2023; Truong, 2022).

Beyond economic incentives, social and psychological factors also influence consumption decisions. Social support, emotional, informational, and instrumental dimensions significantly affect purchase behaviour (Vicamara *et al.*, 2023; Bazi *et al.*, 2022). Impulsive tendencies and hedonic motivations, particularly among materialistic individuals, further encourage thrift purchases. Environmental awareness contributes to attitude shifting away from fast fashion. Studies show that affordability, personal style, and perceived value remain the dominant motivations for engaging in second-hand consumption.

The fashion industry generates significant environmental externalities, including resource depletion, waste accumulation, and carbon emissions (Niinimäki *et al*., 2020). Thrift consumption offers a corrective pathway by extending product lifecycles and reducing dependence on new production. This incorporates circular economy principles within consumer behaviour (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020). At the institutional level, initiatives such as the Geneva Environment Network (2024) reinforce the transition toward low-carbon and responsible fashion systems. Heightened awareness of

fast fashion's socio-ecological costs has accelerated the shift toward sustainable alternatives, particularly second-hand clothing.

Digitalisation has accelerated the transition to thrift shopping. The growth of the internet has shifted many young consumers from traditional retail to online shopping due to convenience and cost advantages. Calica (2022) highlights that thrifting has gained popularity among younger generations for its affordability, sustainability, and unique offerings, posing challenges to conventional retailers. Similarly, Uthumalebbe (2022) notes that online platforms attract consumers through lower prices, wider choices, and easier return procedures compared to physical stores.

Despite its sustainability promise, there are certain contradictions. Increased demand has sometimes led to overconsumption and rising prices of SHC (Wang, 2022). This price escalation may reduce accessibility for low-income groups, raising concerns about the equity dimension of sustainable fashion.

Income remains a key determinant of thrift participation. Higher income levels are generally associated with lower engagement in thrift economies. Middle- and lower-income groups show greater participation, particularly during economic downturns (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Social class and peer influence also shape buying behaviour, especially among college students navigating financial constraints (Parker, 2021).

In the backdrop of the review of literature, the following research questions emerge. What economic factors influence consumers' decisions to shop at thrift stores? How does socioeconomic background affect thrift shopping behaviour? Is there a relationship between income level and participation in thrift markets? To answer these questions, the following objectives are set.

3. Objectives

- To analyse the determinants of consumers' shift from fast fashion to SHC markets.
- To analyse the impact of consumer motivations on thrift shopping behaviour using a Sustainable Consumption Score (SCS).

4. Scope of the Study

Historically, thrift markets were largely associated with low-income groups. Higher-income segments set mainstream fashion trends. Although class divisions persist, thrift shopping has gained broader acceptance across different income groups. The present generation demonstrates greater social and environmental consciousness. They recognise the adverse impacts of fast fashion. While fast fashion continues to dominate the market, thrift shopping has emerged in recent years as a viable alternative for fashion-conscious consumers in India. The growing popularity of thrift markets reflects changing consumption norms, increasing financial awareness, and the gradual breakdown of social stigma traditionally attached to SHC.

While neo-classical economic theory assumes that individuals are perfectly rational decision-makers, behavioural economics recognises that real-world decisions are shaped by cognitive limitations and imperfect information. Consumers make choices within the constraints of bounded rationality. The present study aims to analyse the buying behaviour of thrift consumers. It examines the economic and social factors influencing their decisions, their socioeconomic background, and the implications of this shift for traditional retailers. This study explores the behavioural shift underlying the increased participation in thrift markets. Particular emphasis is made on behavioural economic principles such as moral licensing, altruism, subjective norms, and bounded rationality as proposed by Herbert Simon. In the context of rising textile waste and environmental degradation, thrift consumption represents a sustainable alternative aligned. Given the limited empirical studies in the Indian context, the study is relevant for understanding changing consumer preferences in an evolving fashion economy.

5. Research Methodology

Primary data were collected from active participants in the thrift market belonging to different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. A structured questionnaire was used for this purpose. It was supplemented by informal interviews to gather detailed information regarding attitudes, motivations, shopping

patterns, and sustainability orientation. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. This method was adopted because thrift shoppers represent a specific and relatively niche consumer segment. No comprehensive sampling frame exists from which respondents could be randomly selected. Other sampling techniques were not feasible due to the absence of an identifiable population list of thrift consumers. Therefore, a deliberate selection of respondents who had prior and active engagement in thrift shopping was made. It ensured relevance, depth, and alignment with the objectives of the study.

Respondents were identified through a monthly pop-up thrift initiative in Ernakulam known as Kaimattom, functioning under the collective "Mattam," which promotes reuse and eco-conscious consumption. This unit was selected because it represents an organised offline thrift model in a context where such stores are limited.

The questionnaire was structured into sections capturing socioeconomic characteristics, behavioural determinants, and sustainability orientation. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and graphical representations, along with econometric tools. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to examine relationships between variables such as age and gender, age and environmental concern, and age and Sustainable Consumption Score. A Sustainable Consumption Score (SCS) was constructed to measure the extent to which thrift shopping behaviour aligns with environmental, economic, behavioural, and social sustainability dimensions. The score was developed with reference to the Sustainable Consumption Behaviour (SCB) scale proposed by Quoquab and Mohammad (2017), ensuring theoretical grounding. Reliability and internal consistency of scale items were assessed prior to final analysis.

Although the methodology ensures contextual relevance, the non-random sampling approach and geographic concentration limit the generalisability of findings. The results, therefore provide focused insights into thrift consumption behaviour within the selected setting. This study builds upon data generated as part of an academic research. The present analysis expands its scope by incorporating additional variables and more rigorous statistical techniques.

6. Findings and Analysis

To analyse the factors driving the behavioural shift from fast fashion to SHC markets, the study is structured around key dimensions. They are a demographic profile of respondents, their shopping habits, economic behaviour influencing decision-making and their perceptions and attitudes towards the SHC market.

The demographic analysis provides insight into the socio-economic background of thrift shoppers. The majority of respondents belong to the 25-34 (40%) and 35-44 (33.3%) age groups. This signifies stronger participation among millennials and middle-aged consumers rather than younger cohorts. With regard to employment status, 73.3 per cent of participants are employed, followed by unemployed individuals (13.3%), students (5%), and retired persons (8.3%). Educated and financially independent individuals form the core segment of thrift shoppers. This signifies that respondents have greater awareness of consumption patterns and environmental implications.

In terms of area of residence, 67 per cent of respondents are from urban areas and 28 per cent from suburban regions, with limited rural participation. This pattern indicates that thrift participation in Ernakulam district is influenced more by awareness, accessibility, and exposure than by income constraints alone. The limited rural representation may be attributed to the lack of availability of offline thrift outlets.

6.1 Shopping Habits

The frequency with which consumers visit thrift stores and the motivations encouraging repeated visits provide an idea about the growing acceptance of thrift shopping in the locality. The sources through which individuals receive information about thrift stores reflect the diffusion of the concept within the community.

The data show that 45.03 per cent of respondents shop rarely, while 43.3 per cent shop occasionally (1-3 times a month). The predominance of rare and occasional visits suggests a conscious effort to avoid excessive consumption, consistent with mindful buying behaviour. Nearly 12 per cent of respondents visit thrift stores primarily to sell or donate used clothes rather than to purchase.

Many stores operate a credit-point system. This allows individuals who contribute reusable garments to earn points that can be redeemed for purchases. This circular exchange mechanism encourages waste reduction and gradually fosters participation in thrift consumption.

Various factors motivate consumers to choose thrift stores, including affordability, access to unique items, environmental concerns, charitable intentions, and alternatives to fast fashion. Social media plays a dominant role in spreading awareness, with 73 per cent of respondents learning about thrift stores through online platforms. Word of mouth through friends and family accounts for 15 per cent of awareness. This implies the importance of social media in expanding the reach and acceptance of thrift culture within urban settings.

6.2 Economic Behaviour

To understand the economic behaviour underlying thrift shopping decisions, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which their financial situation influences their purchasing choices. Questions relating to whether they would buy from thrift stores if prices were higher than retail outlets, and whether they compare prices before making a purchase, were asked. The responses reveal a mixed pattern. It's understood that while income considerations are important for many consumers, they are also guided more by ethical and moral motivations than by financial constraints alone.

The findings suggest that income does not exert a uniform influence on all respondents. For some, financial situation moderately shapes their decision-making process. For others, their participation in thrift shopping is not strongly tied to income levels. Many consumers view thrift shopping as a means to limit unnecessary expenditure and avoid bulk buying. At the same time, a section of respondents indicated that their engagement with thrift markets stems from moral responsibility and sustainability concerns rather than economic necessity. This demonstrates that thrift participation is not solely income-driven but also value-oriented.

Price comparison behaviour further highlights the rational decision-making process of consumers. About 63 per cent of respondents compare prices between retail and thrift markets before purchasing. But 14 per cent do not engage in comparison, assuming thrift stores to be more affordable. When asked about purchasing behaviour in the event of higher thrift prices, 90 per cent stated they would be very unlikely to buy from thrift shops if items were more expensive than retail alternatives. This confirms that affordability remains a critical determinant of thrift consumption. Although ethical considerations encourage participation, price advantage continues to be central to sustaining consumer engagement in the thrift market.

6.3 Perceptions and Attitudes

To examine public attitudes toward thrift shops, respondents were asked questions regarding their perception of thrift stores, their motivations for purchasing from SHC, and their overall shopping experience. The findings are summarised in Table 1.

The perception of comparable quality may stem from asymmetric information, as consumers often lack complete knowledge about product history and durability. Those who trust thrift shops tend to perceive the products as good value for money. They believe that these items satisfactorily meet their consumption needs in a budget-friendly manner.

Table 1. Perception of quality of items in thrift shops compared to retail shops

Perception of Quality	Percentage
Better quality	40
Comparable quality	50
Worse quality	7
Not sure	3

Source: primary survey

Table 2 indicates that sustainability (60%) is the most prominent advantage of thrift shopping, followed by lower cost (48.3%). Rising environmental awareness significantly shapes consumer preferences toward thrift shopping. Ecological consciousness and moral licensing encourage individuals to adopt more responsible consumption patterns. Hence, they choose sustainable fashion alternatives.

To understand the key determinants behind thrift shopping behaviour, respondents were asked to identify the main factors influencing their purchase decisions. The results are presented in Table 3.

The decision to shop from a thrift store is influenced by the discount percentages offered by the sellers, lesser price as compared to retail shops and the condition of the item. Unlike the West, people do not go to thrift stores in search of brands.

To identify the barriers associated with thrift shopping, respondents were asked to indicate the factors that discourage them from purchasing second-hand items. The results are presented in Table 4.

Although issues like perceived poor quality (6%) and negative past experiences (3%) are reported by a smaller proportion, apprehensions regarding quality and hygiene persist. Many respondents expressed the need for more physical stores, as in-person verification of product quality increases their confidence. The absence of a return policy, especially in online purchases, further intensifies the fear of receiving inferior products.

Table 2. Advantages of thrift shopping

Advantages	Percentage
Lower cost	48.3
Sustainability	60
Unique finds	5
Quality	8.3
Other	0

Source: primary survey

Table 3. Factors influencing purchasing decisions

Factors Influencing Purchase	Percentage
Discount percentage	46.6
Original price comparison	16.5
Brand reputation	0
Condition of the item	36.9
Other	0

Source: primary survey

6.4 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between selected demographic variables and thrift shopping behaviour.

To examine whether gender influences the number of times individuals shop in thrift markets, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted (Table 5). The results ($r = 0.108$) show a very weak positive association between gender and shopping frequency. However, the relationship is statistically not significant ($p > 0.001$). It remains insignificant even at the 0.005 level in a one-tailed test.

The low correlation coefficient indicates only a negligible linear association between the two variables. Since the result lacks statistical significance, the observed pattern may be attributed to random variation rather than a meaningful relationship.

Even if descriptive trends suggest relatively higher female participation in thrift shopping, the inferential analysis confirms that gender does not significantly

Table 4. Factors discouraging buying behaviour

Factors Discouraging Purchase	Percentage
Perceived poor quality	6
Lack of return policy	18
Inconvenience of shopping	22
Negative experience	3
Social stigma	36
Difficulty in finding items	15

Source: primary survey

Table 5. Correlation matrix of gender and frequency

	Gender	Frequency of shopping
Gender	1	0.108
Frequency of shopping	0.108	1

Source: primary survey

determine how often individuals shop. Hence, the study regarding the relationship between gender and shopping frequency is not supported by statistical evidence.

It's also necessary to examine whether age has any association with environmental concern among respondents. To assess this, a point-biserial correlation (computed using Pearson's correlation coefficient) was employed. Environmental concern was treated as a binary variable, while age group was measured on a continuous scale.

The results presented in Table 6 indicate a moderate positive correlation between age group and environmental concern (r = 0.365). The relationship is statistically significant (p = 0.004) which implies that the association is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Table 6. Correlation matrix of age and environmental concerns

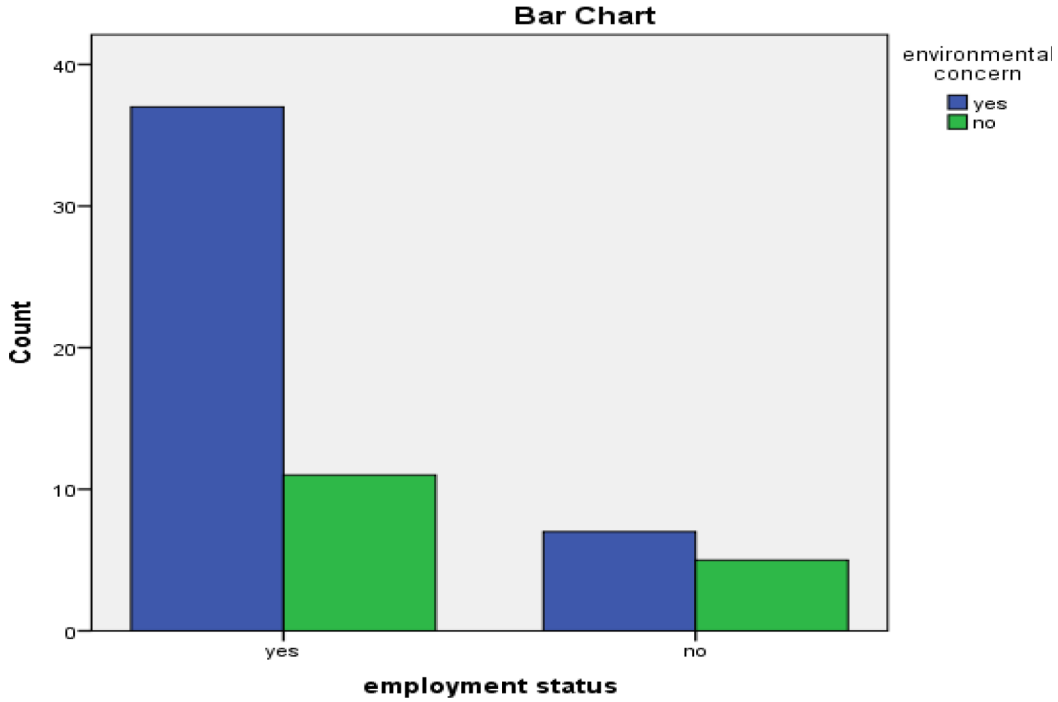
	Environmental concern	Age group
Environmental concern	1	0.365
Age group	0.365	1

Source: primary survey

The positive coefficient implies that as age increases, the likelihood of expressing environmental concern also rises. Older respondents demonstrate relatively higher levels of awareness and inclination toward sustainable practices compared to younger respondents. This finding establishes a meaningful relationship between age and environmental considerations within the sampled population.

To find out whether altruistic values influence consumption behaviour, the study examined the relationship between employment status and environmental concern in the context of thrift shopping. The analysis (Figure 1) reveals that 38 per cent of employed respondents participate in the thrift market primarily for environmental conservation compared to only 8 per cent of unemployed respondents. The remaining respondents reported price advantage as their main motivation.

Individuals who are employed are relatively more inclined to associate their consumption decisions with environmental responsibility. Employment status often reflects higher economic stability and possibly greater



Source: primary survey

Figure 1. Employment level and environmental concerns.

Table 7. SCS Score

	Environmental factors	Economic motivation	Social factors	Behavioural intentions	SCS
Mean	4.164	4.257	3.912	4.647	4.245
Median	4.300	4.300	3.950	5.00	4.300
Mode	4.60	4.60	3.00	5.00	4.300

Source: primary survey

Table 8. Correlation between Age and SCS

	Age group	SCS
Age group	1	0.236
SCS	0.236	1

Source: primary survey

exposure to awareness and education. It encourages value-driven participation in the SHC market. Thus, employment plays a role in strengthening environmentally conscious consumption practices.

6.5 Sustainable Consumption Score (SCS) Analysis

Drawing on the sustainable consumption behaviour framework developed by Quoquab *et al.* (2019), the present study constructed a Sustainable Consumption Score (SCS). This is to assess whether thrift shopping decisions are driven by sustainability-oriented motivations. The original scale emphasised dimensions such as quality of life, environmental care, and concern for future generations. This study operationalised sustainability through four components: environmental factors, economic motivation, social factors, and behavioural intentions. The SCS represents the composite average of these four dimensions. It is calculated individually for each respondent and then aggregated to obtain an overall mean score. A higher score reflects a stronger sustainability orientation in consumption decisions.

As shown in Table 7, the overall mean SCS is 4.245 out of 5. This shows a high level of sustainability-driven engagement among respondents. Among the four dimensions, behavioural intentions recorded the highest mean (4.647) and a median of 5.00. This implies a strong internal commitment toward responsible consumption practices. Economic motivation (mean = 4.257) and environmental factors (mean = 4.164) also show substantial influence. It indicates that both cost considerations and ecological awareness significantly shape participation in thrift markets. In contrast, social factors registered a comparatively lower mean score (3.912) and a mode of 3.00. This indicates more varied opinions regarding the social dimension of sustainable consumption.

Thus, thrift shopping is primarily influenced by intentional behavioural shifts supported by economic rationality and environmental consciousness, rather than by social pressures or norms. Sustainability, therefore, appears to be embedded more in personal values and practical considerations than in social signalling.

The study also examined the relationship between age and SCS (Table 8). The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.236$) indicates a weak positive association between age group and sustainable consumption score. However, the relationship is statistically not significant ($p > 0.001$), even at the 0.005 level in a one-tailed test. Although older respondents display a slight tendency toward higher sustainability scores, the absence of statistical significance suggests that age cannot be considered a reliable predictor of sustainable consumption behaviour within the sampled population.

7. Conclusion

The expansion of second-hand shopping reflects a significant shift in consumer behaviour shaped by behavioural economic principles and rising environmental consciousness. The study contributes theoretically by linking demographic factors with sustainable purchasing decisions. It enriches the literature on behavioural economics and sustainable fashion in an emerging market context. The findings demonstrate that consumers increasingly combine economic prudence with social responsibility. They characterise thrift shopping as both a cost-effective and environmentally conscious alternative to fast fashion.

From a policy and practical perspective, the results highlight the need for stronger institutional support and improved market structures to promote sustainable consumption. Policymakers can integrate thrift retailing into the circular economy. Initiatives like awareness campaigns and improved access to organised resale platforms can be undertaken. Sustainable fashion businesses, in turn, should address barriers such as stigma, inconvenience, *etc*. It should emphasise quality and transparency to build consumer trust. Future research in this area can expand the scope by undertaking comparative studies across regions or socio-economic groups. This will help to generate broader and more generalisable insights into sustainable fashion consumption.

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