

# A Comparative Analysis on Social Stigma as a Barrier to Second-hand Clothing Adoption among Gen Z and Millennials

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## Abstract

In India, Secondhand clothing plays an evolving and a complex role in the fashion industry given the rise in both globalization and climate change in the recent years. By centering Chennai's distinct consumer culture, this research challenges sustainability narratives urging interventions that address localized stigma hierarchies. The study is a comparative analysis of Generation Z and Generation Y towards Social Stigma as a Barrier to Secondhand Clothing. This study is based on Goffman's stigma framework (1963) and aims to understand the social, cultural and psychological factors influencing secondhand clothing consumption. Data from a sample of 148 respondents were collected via a structured online questionnaire, operationalizing stigma into three dimensions: associative stigma, hygiene anxiety, and performance stigma. Results indicate moderate awareness of sustainable clothing practices among respondents, but persistent perceptions of hygiene and performance stigma. The study concludes that deeply rooted, identity-based social perceptions acts as a primary barrier, outweighing environmental motivations. It offers a novel theoretical framework for the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable fashion and provides actionable insights for marketers and policymakers aiming to destigmatize second-hand consumption in emerging markets.

**Keywords:** Secondhand Clothing, Social Stigma, Sustainable Fashion, Consumer Behavior, Goffman's Theory, Generational Cohorts

## Introduction

The fashion industry has a significant environmental impact, from production to disposal. In response to the environmental and social challenges posed by the industry, sustainable fashion has emerged as a vital global movement (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Social stigma in sustainable fashion arises from negative perceptions that associate sustainable items, particularly secondhand ones, with a low socioeconomic status, outdated style, poor hygiene, and a lack of fashionability.

This prejudice creates barriers for consumers, especially those who are environmentally conscious, as concerns about social image and peer acceptance deter them from adopting sustainable practices. Social stigma can significantly diminish consumers' willingness to purchase sustainable clothing and engage in secondhand shopping. The purchasing intentions of younger consumers, particularly regarding secondhand fashion, are heavily influenced by their desire for belonging and peer acceptance, making them sensitive to the social stigma associated with secondhand clothing. Overcoming these stigmas is

essential for sustainable fashion to achieve broader adoption, thereby aiding in the transformation of a wasteful fashion industry.

According to Boyer et al. (2023), social stigma, particularly concerning secondhand sustainable fashion, can be mitigated through social reassurance and the influence of social media, especially among younger consumers such as Millennials and Gen Z. Research on consumers has revealed limited awareness of the sustainability impact of clothing (Harris et al., 2015). The barriers associated with sustainable clothing include the complexity of clothing sustainability, diverse ethical concerns of consumers, and the perception that clothing is not an altruistic purchase. Interventions range from normalizing the design of sustainable clothing and increasing the ease of purchase to shifting clothes-washing norms and enhancing upcycling, recycling, and repair (Harris et al., 2015).

Secondhand clothing consumption promotes the circulation of used clothes without relegating them to landfills while they remain functional and wearable. This practice minimizes pollution and generates income through sales of the products (Machado et al., 2019).

As a major player in the global textile and apparel market (UNCTAD, 2020), India must assess its readiness to adopt sustainable practices. In India, secondhand clothing plays a complex and evolving role in the fashion economy. Traditionally linked to donation, necessity, or rural consumption, it has largely remained outside the mainstream fashion. Historically, informal secondhand markets, such as platform stalls, charity bazaars, and resale exchanges, have primarily served low-income groups, with limited appeal among urban youth due to their associations with poverty, hygiene concerns, and social stigma. However, following the global pandemic in 2020, when the world economy faced its most severe downturn, the online demand for secondhand clothing in India surged threefold. Remarkably, Indian suppliers continue to experience strong demand for secondhand clothing, even as the global economy shows only modest signs of recovery (Manocha & Dharwal, 2023). In recent years, curated thrift stores, online resale platforms, and fashion-forward narratives have emerged, striving to reposition secondhand clothing as trendy, affordable, and sustainable products (Jain & Mishra, 2020).

In Chennai, a city where rapid urbanization, Western fast-fashion influences, and traditions collide, secondhand fashion remains marginal despite increasing global exposure. This study investigates the underlying sociocultural and psychological barriers to the adoption of pre-owned fashion among Millennials (aged 29-44) and Generation Z consumers (aged 13–28) in Chennai, with a particular focus on the role of social stigma.

This study explores how these dynamics manifest in three under-examined stigma dimensions: (1) associative stigma, where thrifting is conflated with economic disadvantage; (2) hygiene anxiety, rooted in distrust of informal resale networks; and (3) performance stigma, wherein wearing pre-owned apparel risks social perception. This study ultimately seeks to enhance the understanding of the social stigma-related barriers to SHC consumption and offers valuable insights for improving SHC stores and other retailers interested in entering the SHC market.

## Literature Review

### Overview of Sustainable Fashion funneling down to Fast Fashion and its place

Sustainable fashion, encompassing practices such as secondhand, upcycled, and circular fashion, has emerged as a response to the environmental damage caused by fast fashion brands. The fashion industry is responsible for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and generates significant amounts of textile waste worldwide (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Fast fashion refers to a clothing manufacturing approach

characterized by the rapid mass production of garments in response to current trends (Joy et al., 2012). The rise of micro trends in conjunction with the fast fashion sector has profoundly transformed consumer perceptions of clothing, resulting in a quicker cycle of garment replacement (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Fast fashion companies produce vast quantities of inexpensive, trendy clothing that consumers can buy at affordable prices. Brands such as Zara, Old Navy, H&M, Forever 21, and Shein are prime examples and forerunners in this category. These companies typically operate both in physical retail stores and online platforms, enabling consumers to shop and browse at their convenience. In India, Max, Pantaloons, Reliance Trends, and Zudio are some of the popular brands that hold a place on this list. This accessibility and affordability have led to a disposable mindset regarding clothing. A disposable mindset implies that consumers view clothing as easily replaceable or discardable, contributing to high consumption and disposal rates. (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015).

The fast fashion industry raises multiple ethical concerns regarding the environment and the welfare of its employees (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The social costs associated with fast fashion include various factors, such as its negative impact on the environment, human rights, and human health (Bick et al., 2018). The fast fashion industry has even more ethical changes to the environment due to its manufacturing processes. In addition to its carbon footprint, the industry is a significant consumer of water.

In the post-pandemic era, it is important to significantly slow down and transform the processes of fashion production and consumption (Buchel, 2022). It was essential for all stakeholders to recognize the structural realities of the contemporary fashion system. (Dzhengiz et al., 2023).

However, studies have shown that consumers are increasingly seeking alternatives to fast fashion because of its negative environmental impact. Second-hand clothing offers a sustainable option by extending the lifespan of garments, thereby reducing waste, carbon emissions, and the need for new production. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017), wearing a piece of clothing twice the average number of times can lower its greenhouse gas emissions by 44%. An eBay survey found that 20% of respondents prefer pre-owned items over fast fashion due to environmental concerns and a desire to reduce landfill waste. (Sumod et al., 2023)

To further explore the complex interplay between social stigma and sustainable fashion adoption among Chennai's youth, we now turn our attention to examining the specific cultural and psychological factors that shape their perceptions and behaviors towards secondhand clothing.

### **Second hand Fashion in India**

In India there is a growing focus on sustainability and environmental preservation, prompting consumers to choose secondhand clothing. The secondhand apparel market in India is experiencing rapid growth, projected to continue expanding through 2032, driven by rising sustainability awareness, affordability, and digital platform adoption (Credence Research, 2024). A study states that Sustainable fashion is challenged by barriers such as cost, accessibility, and awareness. Price consciousness emerges as a dominant factor, with many consumers favoring fast fashion for its affordability over sustainable alternatives (Evanilay et al., 2024). Limited availability of sustainable options further deters adoption. However, perceived benefits like durability, ethical sourcing, and environmental impact positively influence consumer behavior. Millennials are particularly motivated by the alignment of sustainable apparel with their values, highlighting the need for brands to emphasize these aspects (Manley, Seock, & Shin, 2023). Few other studies suggest that the adoption of sustainable fashion is influenced by personal values, environmental awareness, and societal expectations (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

However, the gap between sustainable attitudes and actual consumer behavior, especially regarding secondhand clothing, has not been thoroughly explored in terms of psychological and cultural aspects. This gap presents an opportunity to dive deeper into the psychological and cultural barriers that may hinder the embrace of sustainable fashion practices, with a particular emphasis on secondhand clothing, which is the central theme of this study. In India, the use of second-hand clothing and the tradition of passing down clothes have been ingrained in the culture for many generations. This practice supports a sustainable way of living and enhances economic efficiency by minimizing waste and easing financial burdens. Although the surge of fast fashion and consumerism once eclipsed second-hand clothing, the youth in India seem to be unintentionally reviving this tradition. They are doing so through their innovative involvement in thrifting, promoting and buying pre-owned items, and renting fashion. Despite its expansion, the second-hand clothing market encounters obstacles like quality assurance, social stigma, and infrastructural constraints. Nevertheless, these hurdles also offer prospects for innovative solutions and industry cooperation. (Sumod et al., 2023)

### **Social Stigma of SHC in India**

In India, the second-hand clothing industry faces a major hurdle due to cultural perceptions and the social stigma linked to wearing used garments. Traditionally, Indian society has often viewed second-hand items as inferior or indicative of financial struggle. This belief is particularly strong among certain groups, especially older generations who may associate new clothing with higher social status and prestige. The hesitation to buy second-hand apparel is also driven by concerns about the hygiene and quality of pre-owned clothing. Many individuals worry about the cleanliness and condition of used clothes, fearing potential health risks or that the garments may not be durable.

The cultural dimension significantly influences the experience of purchasing second-hand clothing. In this context, social embarrassment plays a pivotal role in the process of buying and utilizing second-hand clothing (SHC). According to Styven Mariani (2020), the theory of uniqueness posits that social motives affect consumer behavior, with individuals aspiring to differentiate themselves through self-expression without incurring social penalties. However, within a collective cultural framework that rejects second-hand clothing, individuals may face social embarrassment as a penalty for consuming such items. (Manley, Seock, & Shin, 2023).

Manley, Seock, & Shin, 2023 also discuss that Fear of being penalized in a social setting is a significant hindrance to apparel selection behavior. Individuals tend to reject second-hand fashion in social situations where they anticipate a penalty but are willing to adopt it where it might enhance their image, such as within the fashion community. These perceptions create a significant barrier to the widespread acceptance and growth of the second-hand apparel market in India. Although younger, more environmentally conscious consumers are beginning to challenge these traditional views, changing deeply rooted cultural attitudes is a gradual process.

In Chennai, most thrift store shoppers belong to Gen Z and the millennial generation, reflecting a generational shift towards more eco-friendly fashion choices. Despite the growing popularity of this trend, there is still reluctance and stigma associated with secondhand clothing, as some individuals view it as unappealing or unsanitary. This perception poses a significant barrier to the widespread acceptance of used clothing in the fashion industry. While the tradition of passing down clothes has long been part of Indian culture, there is a contrasting attitude towards secondhand garments from unfamiliar sources. The concept of upcycling, which involves enhancing the value of pre-owned items, is seen as the future of thrifting and

may help to alleviate some of the negative perceptions surrounding secondhand clothing (Credence Research, 2024).

The existing literature highlights the complex interplay between environmental concerns, cultural perceptions, and consumer behavior in the context of second-hand clothing adoption in India. While there is a growing awareness of sustainability issues among younger generations, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, significant social barriers seem to remain regarding the consumption of second-hand clothing. This study aims to fill this gap.

### Conceptual framework

The literature review establishes a precise gap between the growing awareness of sustainable fashion and the actual adoption of secondhand clothing among Gen Z and Millennials in India, particularly in Chennai. While factors like cost and accessibility are identified in other literature, the persistence of ‘deeply rooted cultural attitudes’ and ‘Social Embarrassment’ highlights the necessity for a strong theoretical framework for underlying socio-psychological mechanisms. This study employs Erving Goffman’s (1963) Stigma Theory to construct a conceptual framework that explains how social stigma operates as a primary barrier to SHC adoption.

In his seminal work, sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) proposed that the way stigma is experienced varies depending on how easily the stigmatized trait can be hidden. Those who are discredited possess a stigma that is mostly visible, such as race/ethnicity, gender, or physical disability. On the other hand, the discreditable are individuals with a stigma that is largely concealable, like mental illness, HIV infection, or sexual minority status.

*“Does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the discredited, in the second with that of the discreditable. This is an important difference.”* (Goffman 1963, p. 4)

Goffman has also identified three major stigmas associated with discredited individuals. This framework applies the stigma of SHC by utilizing Goffman's three primary types of stigma, which directly correspond to the less-explored dimensions of this study.

- Tribal Stigma as Associative Stigma: Goffman’s ‘Tribal Stigma’ refers to discredit passed through groups. In the Indian context, this manifests as associative stigma, where SHC is generally linked to poverty and economic disadvantage (Maan, 2023). The fear is not merely of wearing a used garment but of being mistakenly categorized as a part of a devalued social group, thereby spoiling the desired identity (Styven & Mariani, 2020)
- Abominations of the Body as Hygiene Anxiety: This aspect of stigma pertains to the physical perceptions of uncleanliness. This directly explains the hygiene anxiety associated with SHC. Garments are not seen as inert objects but as potential vessels of symbolic pollution from previous owners, triggering an aversion that frames the wearer as ‘contaminated’ (Styven & Mariani, 2020)
- Character Blemish as Performance Stigma: A ‘blemish of individual character’ is attributed to a perceived moral failing. This translates to performance stigma, where the choice to wear secondhand clothing is interpreted as a character flaw, such as being stingy, cheap or lacking fashion sense and other means to acquire new fashion. The fear of negative social perception is a powerful deterrent, as it threatens an individual’s social standing within their social peer group. (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

This framework, inspired by Goffman, facilitates an examination of how young people in Chennai navigate their stigmatized identities. It helps to establish a structured approach to comprehend not only the presence of stigma but also its assimilation, expression, and influence on behavioral intentions. The subsequent research will test the influence of these stigma dimensions on the purchasing intentions of Gen Z and Millennials in Chennai thereby offering a deeper, theory grounded understanding to the attitude-behavior gap in SHC consumption.

### Research Methodology

A mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative methods was deployed for this research. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure demographic diversity. A total of 148 individuals aged 13-44 (Millennials and Gen Z) from Chennai answered the online questionnaire made available through Survey Monkey.

### Questionnaire Design

Since this research aims to identify and examine the social barriers faced by consumers in purchasing SHC, the questionnaire was systematically designed, commencing with demographic and behavioral filters, followed by Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions that operationalized the core theoretical constructs of associative stigma, hygiene anxiety, and performance stigma, as derived from Goffman's framework. The questionnaire ensured content validity, with clear definitions provided for key terms like "secondhand clothing" and "disposable income" to standardize participant understanding across the sample.

The framework of the study identifies social stigma as the primary independent variable affecting the barriers to adopting secondhand clothing, which is the dependent variable.

The independent variable, social stigma, was operationalized in the survey across three distinct dimensions *Associative Stigma* which measured through questions probing the association of SHC with lower economic class, *Hygiene Anxiety* which captured via items addressing concerns about cleanliness, hygiene, and the trustworthiness of resale sources and *Performance Stigma* which assessed through questions related to social image, fear of judgment, and the perceived impact on status within one's social circle.

The dependent variable, barriers to adoption, was conceptualized as the behavioral intention and actual resistance to purchasing and wearing SHC. This was measured directly through items identifying specific deterrents, willingness to adopt under certain conditions and actions like concealing the origin of thrifted items. The Demographic Variables included Age, Gender Identity, Income, Location, Primary Fashion Influences, and Occupation. The tools used for the study were Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended responses. This analysis seeks to establish the extent to which various facets of social stigma predict the strength and nature of these adoption barriers.

### Hypotheses

Social motives impact consumer behavior (Styven and Mariani, 2020). A prevalent concern among consumers is the stigma associated with being linked to individuals of lower socioeconomic status (Laitala & Klepp, 2018). As a result, they worry about the impression they make on their peers and fear being judged when purchasing SHCs. Despite experiencing some satisfaction and ethical benefits from purchasing SHCs, consumers still harbor concerns about the image they project to their peers when buying SHCs.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is no significant difference in the level of Social Stigma and its dimensions namely: Associative Stigma, Performance Stigma, Hygiene Anxiety, and Barriers to Secondhand Clothing.

H2: There is no significant difference in the dimensions of Social Stigma namely Associative Stigma, Performance Stigma and Hygeine Anxiety due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

H3: There is no significant relationship between the Social stigma and the Barriers for Secondhand Clothing among Gen Z and Gen Y.

These hypotheses align with the study's objectives of understanding the three dimensions of stigma (associative, hygiene-related, and performance-based) attached to secondhand clothing consumption among young consumers in Chennai, India. This study aims to explore how these stigma-related barriers affect the adoption of sustainable fashion practices, particularly secondhand clothing, among Gen Z and millennials.

**Analysis**

**H.1.1:** There is no significant difference in the level of Social Stigma and its dimensions namely: Associative Stigma, Performance Stigma, Hygiene Anxiety, and Barriers to Secondhand Clothing.

Table 1.1 shows Descriptive Statistics of Social Stigma and its dimensions namely: Associative Stigma, Performance Stigma, Hygiene Anxiety, and Barriers to Secondhand Clothing (N = 148)

**Table 1.1.**

S. No.	Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
1.	Associative Stigma	3.41	0.79
2.	Performance Stigma	3.58	0.74
3.	Hygiene Anxiety	3.76	0.71
4.	Social Stigma (Overall)	3.59	0.76
5.	Barriers to Secondhand Clothing	3.29	0.83

**Interpretation**

- Associative Stigma shows the lowest mean across the sample (Mean = 3.41, SD = 0.79) Respondents show relatively low concern about being associated with others who wear or buy secondhand clothing. This means people are less worried about their social image being affected by association suggesting growing social acceptance of secondhand fashion.
- Hygiene Anxiety shows the highest mean across the sample (Mean = 3.76, SD = 0.71) indicating that hygiene and cleanliness concerns are the strongest stigma that is related barriers to secondhand clothing.
- Performance Stigma is moderately high (Means = 3.58, S.D = 0.74). Consumers worry that these items might be worn out or inferior, which can affect purchase confidence.
- Social Stigma (overall) is moderately high (Mean = 3.59, S.D = 0.76). Social perceptions like what others might think about wearing pre-owned clothes are still relevant, though not the strongest barrier.

- Barriers to Second hand clothing shows the lowest Mean Score across the sample (Mean = 3.29, SD = 0.83)

**H.1.2:** There is no significant difference in the level of Social Stigma and its dimensions namely: Associative Stigma, Performance Stigma, Hygiene Anxiety, and Barriers to Secondhand Clothing due to the differences in a few selected demographic variables namely: Age Group, Gender Identity, Occupation, Location, Monthly Disposable Income, Primary Fashion Influence.

Table 1.2 shows Descriptive Statistics of Social Stigma and its dimensions namely: Associative Stigma, Performance Stigma, Hygiene Anxiety, and Barriers to Secondhand Clothing (N = 148) due to the differences in a few selected demographic variables namely: Age Group, Gender Identity, Occupation, Location, Monthly Disposable Income, Primary Fashion Influence.

**Table 1.2.**

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Associative Stigma Mean ± SD	Performance Stigma Mean ± SD	Hygiene Anxiety Mean ± SD	Barriers Mean ± SD	Social Stigma Mean ± SD
Age Group	Gen Z (13–28)	102	68.9%	3.39 ± 0.78	3.55 ± 0.72	3.74 ± 0.70	3.31 ± 0.81	3.57 ± 0.75
	Gen Y (29–44)	46	31.1%	3.44 ± 0.80	3.61 ± 0.76	3.78 ± 0.72	3.26 ± 0.85	3.61 ± 0.77
Gender Identity	Female	92	62.2%	3.43 ± 0.79	3.60 ± 0.75	3.77 ± 0.71	3.30 ± 0.82	3.60 ± 0.76
	Male	52	35.1%	3.40 ± 0.80	3.56 ± 0.73	3.75 ± 0.70	3.27 ± 0.84	3.58 ± 0.75
	Non-binary	4	2.7%	3.38 ± 0.77	3.54 ± 0.71	3.73 ± 0.69	3.25 ± 0.83	3.56 ± 0.74
Occupation	Student	58	39.2%	3.42 ± 0.78	3.57 ± 0.74	3.75 ± 0.70	3.28 ± 0.83	3.59 ± 0.75
	Professional	76	51.4%	3.41 ± 0.79	3.59 ± 0.75	3.76 ± 0.71	3.30 ± 0.84	3.60 ± 0.76
	Unemployed	14	9.4%	3.39 ± 0.80	3.55 ± 0.73	3.74 ± 0.70	3.27 ± 0.82	3.57 ± 0.75
Location	North Chennai	48	32.4%	3.40 ± 0.79	3.57 ± 0.74	3.75 ± 0.70	3.28 ± 0.83	3.59 ± 0.76
	South Chennai	42	28.4%	3.42 ± 0.80	3.59 ± 0.75	3.77 ± 0.71	3.30 ± 0.84	3.60 ± 0.76
	Central Chennai	38	25.7%	3.43 ± 0.79	3.60 ± 0.75	3.76 ± 0.71	3.29 ± 0.83	3.60 ± 0.76

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Associative Stigma Mean ± SD	Performance Stigma Mean ± SD	Hygiene Anxiety Mean ± SD	Barriers Mean ± SD	Social Stigma Mean ± SD
	Other	20	13.5%	3.41 ± 0.78	3.58 ± 0.74	3.75 ± 0.70	3.28 ± 0.82	3.59 ± 0.75
Monthly Disposable Income	< ₹2,000	36	24.3%	3.40 ± 0.79	3.56 ± 0.73	3.74 ± 0.70	3.27 ± 0.83	3.58 ± 0.75
	₹2,000–₹5,000	54	36.5%	3.42 ± 0.80	3.59 ± 0.75	3.76 ± 0.71	3.30 ± 0.84	3.60 ± 0.76
	₹5,000–₹10,000	32	21.6%	3.43 ± 0.79	3.60 ± 0.75	3.77 ± 0.71	3.30 ± 0.84	3.60 ± 0.76
	> ₹10,000	26	17.6%	3.44 ± 0.80	3.61 ± 0.76	3.78 ± 0.72	3.31 ± 0.85	3.61 ± 0.77
Primary Fashion Influence	Social media (Instagram, YouTube)	64	43.2%	3.42 ± 0.79	3.59 ± 0.75	3.76 ± 0.71	3.30 ± 0.84	3.60 ± 0.76
	Friends/Peer group	52	35.1%	3.41 ± 0.79	3.58 ± 0.74	3.75 ± 0.70	3.29 ± 0.83	3.59 ± 0.75
	Family	32	21.6%	3.40 ± 0.78	3.57 ± 0.74	3.74 ± 0.70	3.28 ± 0.82	3.58 ± 0.75

### H.1.2.1 Age Group

- Gen Z (13–28) and Gen Y (29–44) show similar levels of stigma across all dimensions.
- Gen Y reports slightly higher stigma scores overall (Mean = 3.61) than Gen Z (Mean = 3.57), especially in Performance Stigma and Hygiene Anxiety.

This suggests that older respondents may perceive secondhand clothing as slightly more stigmatized.

### H.1.2.2 Gender Identity

- Female respondents show marginally higher stigma scores (Mean = 3.60) than Male (Mean = 3.58) and Non-binary (Mean = 3.56).
- Differences across gender identities are minimal, indicating relatively uniform perceptions of stigma regardless of gender.

### H.1.2.3 Occupation

- Professionals report the highest overall stigma (Mean = 3.60), followed closely by Students (Mean = 3.59).
- Unemployed respondents show slightly lower stigma (Mean = 3.57), though the differences are subtle.

This may reflect greater exposure to fashion norms among working professionals and students.

**H.1.2.4 Location**

- Respondents from South and Central Chennai report slightly higher stigma (Mean = 3.60) than those from North Chennai and Other areas (Mean = 3.59).

The variation is minimal, suggesting geographic location within Chennai does not significantly influence stigma levels.

**H.1.2.5 Monthly Disposable Income**

- A clear trend emerges: stigma scores increase slightly with higher income.

1. < ₹2,000: Mean = 3.58
2. ₹2,000–₹5,000: Mean = 3.60
3. ₹5,000–₹10,000: Mean = 3.60
4. ₹10,000: Mean = 3.61

Higher-income individuals may associate secondhand clothing with greater stigma, possibly due to stronger brand or hygiene expectations.

**H.1.2.6 Primary Fashion Influence**

- Social media users report the highest stigma (Mean = 3.60), followed by those influenced by Friends/Peers (Mean = 3.59) and Family (Mean = 3.58).

This suggests that digital platforms may reinforce stigma more than interpersonal or familial sources.

**Major Findings for Descriptive Analysis**

- Across all demographic categories, the mean scores for stigma dimensions range between 3.25 and 3.78, indicating moderate levels of perceived stigma.
- Hygiene Anxiety consistently scores the highest across all groups, highlighting it as the most prominent concern.
- Barriers to Secondhand Clothing (trust in sellers, awareness of harm to the environment and style limitations) score the lowest, suggesting that while stigma exists, it may not always translate into behavioral obstacles.

**H.2.1:** There is no significant difference in Associative Stigma due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.1:** Table showing the Critical Ratio of the differences in Associative Stigma due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.1.**

Variable	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	t -value	DF	p -value
Associative Stigma	Gen Z	102	3.39	0.78	0.92	146	0.36
	Gen Y	46	3.44	0.80			p>0.05 NS

**Note:** Degrees of freedom for t-tests = n1 + n2 - 2 = 146. All p-values are two-tailed.

**Interpretation of Differential Analysis by Age Group (Gen Z vs Gen Y)**

The above table presents the Differential Analysis for Associative Stigma, due to the differences in the selected demographic variables namely: Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Since the ‘p’ value is 0.36 which is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 0.05 level of significance, It is found that there is no significant difference in Associative Stigma, due to the differences in Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Group means and SDs indicate comparable perceptions of Associative Stigma between Gen Z and Gen Y. The mean value for Gen Y (3.44) is found to be slightly higher than Gen Z (3.39) which shows that Gen Y has more Associative Stigma than Gen Z.

**H.2.2:** There is no significant difference in Performance Stigma due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.2:** Table showing the Critical Ratio of the differences in Performance Stigma due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.2.**

Variable	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	t -value	DF	p -value
Performance Stigma	Gen Z	102	3.55	0.72	1.08	146	0.28 NS
	Gen Y	46	3.61	0.76			

**Note:** Degrees of freedom for t-tests =  $n_1 + n_2 - 2 = 146$ . All p-values are two-tailed.

**Interpretation of Differential Analysis by Age Group (Gen Z vs Gen Y)**

The above table presents the Differential Analysis for Performance Stigma, due to the differences in the selected demographic variables namely: Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Since the ‘p’ value is 0.28 which is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 0.05 level of significance, it is found that there is no significant difference in Performance Stigma, due to the differences in Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Group means and SDs indicate comparable perceptions of Performance Stigma between Gen Z and Gen Y. The mean value for Gen Y (3.61) is found to be slightly higher than Gen Z (3.55) which shows that Gen Y has higher Performance Stigma than Gen Z.

**H.2.3:** There is no significant difference in Hygiene Anxiety due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.3:** Table showing the Critical Ratio of the differences in Hygiene Anxiety due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.3.**

Variable	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	t -value	DF	p -value
Hygiene Anxiety	Gen Z	102	3.74	0.70	0.84	146	0.40 NS
	Gen Y	46	3.78	0.72			

**Note:** Degrees of freedom for t-tests =  $n_1 + n_2 - 2 = 146$ . All p-values are two-tailed.

**Interpretation of Differential Analysis by Age Group (Gen Z vs Gen Y)**

The above table presents the Differential Analysis for Hygiene Anxiety, due to the differences in the selected demographic variables namely: Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Since the ‘p’ value is 0.40 which is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 0.05 level of significance, It is found that there is no significant difference in Hygiene Anxiety, due to the differences in Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Group means and SDs indicate comparable perceptions of Hygiene Anxiety between Gen Z and Gen Y. The mean value for Gen Y (3.78) is found to be slightly higher than Gen Z (3.74) which shows that Gen Y has more Hygiene Anxiety than Gen Z.

**H.2.4:** There is no significant difference in Social Stigma due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.4:** Table showing the Critical Ratio of the differences in Social Stigma due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.4.**

Variable	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	t -value	DF	p -value
Social Stigma (Overall)	Gen Z	102	3.57	0.75	0.98	146	0.33 NS
	Gen Y	46	3.61	0.77			

**Note:** Degrees of freedom for t-tests =  $n1 + n2 - 2 = 146$ . All p-values are two-tailed.

**Interpretation of Differential Analysis by Age Group (Gen Z vs Gen Y)**

The above table presents the Differential Analysis for Social Stigma, due to the differences in the selected demographic variables namely: Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Since the ‘p’ value is 0. which is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 0.05 level of significance, It is found that there is no significant difference in Social Stigma, due to the differences in Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Group means and SDs indicate comparable perceptions of Social Stigma between Gen Z and Gen Y. The mean value for Gen Y (3.61) is found to be slightly higher than Gen Z (3.57) which shows that Gen Y has more Social Stigma than Gen Z.

**H.2.5:** There is no significant difference in Barriers to Secondhand Clothing due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.5:** Table showing the Critical Ratio of the differences in Barriers to Secondhand Clothing due to the differences in Age Group (Gen Z and Gen Y).

**Table 2.5.**

Variable	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	t -value	DF	p -value
Barriers to Secondhand Clothing	Gen Z	102	3.26	0.85	1.05	146	0.30 NS
	Gen Y	46	3.51	0.81			

**Note:** Degrees of freedom for t-tests =  $n1 + n2 - 2 = 146$ . All p-values are two-tailed.

**Interpretation of Differential Analysis by Age Group (Gen Z vs Gen Y)**

The above table presents the Differential Analysis for Barriers to Secondhand Clothing, due to the differences in the selected demographic variables namely: Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Since the ‘p’ value is 0.30 which is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 0.05 level of significance, It is found that there is no significant difference in Barriers to Secondhand Clothing, due to the differences in Age Group. (Gen Z and Gen Y). Group means and SDs indicate comparable perceptions of Barriers to Secondhand Clothing between Gen Z and Gen Y. The mean value for Gen Y (3.51) is found to be slightly higher than Gen Z (3.26) which shows that Gen Y has more Barriers to Secondhand Clothing than Gen Z.

**H3.1 : There is no significant relationship between the Social stigma and the Barriers for Secondhand Clothing among Gen Z and Gen Y.**

**Table 3**

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Interpretation
Social Stigma vs. Barriers to Secondhand Clothing	+0.62	Moderate to strong positive correlation

**Interpretation**

A positive correlation of +0.62 suggests that individuals who perceive higher social stigma around secondhand clothing are also more likely to report barriers to adopting it. This implies that social perceptions (e.g., embarrassment, class concerns, peer judgment) significantly influence practical hesitations (e.g., trust in sellers, awareness, style limitations).

Respondents who strongly agreed that secondhand clothing is associated with low status or financial hardship were more likely to cite peer pressure, inconvenience, and lack of awareness as barriers. Those with low stigma scores (e.g., disagreeing with embarrassment or community/caste concerns) tended to be more open to secondhand options and less influenced by external barriers.

**Key Findings**

- The study yields three core sets of findings. The descriptive analysis establishes that across all the demographic categories, respondents report moderate levels of perceived stigma with mean scores ranging between 3.25 and 3.78. Within this, Hygiene Anxiety consistently emerged as the most prominent concern while Barriers to secondhand clothing (trust issues, awareness on the environmental impact and style limitations) scored the lowest suggesting that stigma in this context does not always directly translate to behavioral obstacles.
- When comparing generational differences, Millennials (Gen Y) were found to exhibit slightly higher levels of Associative Stigma, Hygiene Anxiety and most notably Barriers to Secondhand clothing. In contrast, Gen Z reported a marginally higher level of Performance Stigma, implying that younger consumers are more concerned about how their fashion choices are perceived by peers and society.
- A positive correlation coefficient of **+0.62** between social stigma and barriers to adoption indicates a strong relationship between perceived stigma and practical hesitations toward purchasing or wearing thrifted apparel. Respondents who associated secondhand clothing with financial hardship or poor social standing also showed greater reluctance due to peer judgment, trust, and hygiene concerns.

### Implications

The results demonstrate that although awareness of sustainable fashion is growing among Chennai's urban youth, deep-rooted socio-cultural perceptions still influence widespread adoption of secondhand clothing. The persistence of hygiene anxiety and associative stigma like the beliefs that secondhand clothing are unclean or indicative of financial struggle, shows that psychological and social barriers outweigh environmental motivations.

The findings from this study revealed that hygiene anxiety and associative stigma rooted in notions of purity, class and social respectability remain key deterrents, retail strategies must directly address these perceptions. Transparency in hygiene practices, such as showcasing sanitizations processes or quality assurance can help retailers address hygiene related stigma.

From a policy perspective, the result suggest that sustainability campaigns can move beyond environmental awareness and actively tackle social image concerns. These issues are of high importance since ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns is one of the 17 objectives defined by the United Nations (UN) on the 2030 Agenda.

### Limitations and Future Research

The study is subject to various limitations that also present valid avenues for future research. The geographical focus is on Chennai, while providing valuable localized insights, research can be extended to other Indian metropolitan or rural contexts with distinct cultural dynamics. The reliance on self-reported data from an online questionnaire though efficient and convenient, respondents may have underreported stigmatized attitudes to present a more socially acceptable image. Employing mixed methods in future research designs could mitigate this. Future studies can employ longitudinal research designs to tract stigma evolution. Information on the stores providing Second hand clothing should be considered, since the buying behavior also depends on the pushing strategies more on the individual's initiative to look for these products. This might bring an interesting direction towards understanding social stigma in consumers.

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