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FASHIONING SUSTAINABILITY AT SCRIPPS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF SCRIPPS COLLEGE STUDENTS' CLOTHING ACQUISITION AND  
DISPOSAL HABITS IN THE ERA OF THE FREE CLOSET

by

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(SHE/HER)

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF ARTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

PROFESSOR KIMBERLY DRAKE

PROFESSOR MELINDA HERROLD-MENZIES

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## Abstract

The fast fashion industry presents an array of environmental and humanitarian concerns, and, while this is not the fault of individual consumers, collective action can help to mitigate the negative impacts of the industry. At Scripps College, the Scripps Free Closet seeks to aid in this action by accepting clothing donations from students and providing clothing to students free of charge. A survey among Scripps students sought to answer the question “Is the Scripps Free Closet an effective sustainability initiative on campus by a) decreasing the amount of clothing students buy and/or b) decreasing the amount of clothing students dispose of ‘irresponsibly?’” Over 100 responses were recorded, and results indicated that the Scripps Free Closet is an effective sustainability initiative by decreasing the amount of clothing students buy, and dispose of “irresponsibly.” As there has been limited scholarship on the effectiveness of community closets on college campuses as sustainability initiatives, this research adds to the scholarly discussion around community closets and sustainability.

## Acknowledgements

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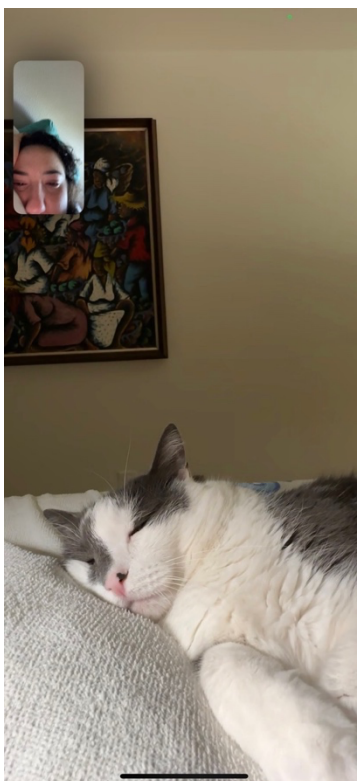
*Edwin and me at Pitzer*



*A Seal Court Turtle*



*Teresa and me at Disneyland*



*Captain Mookie and me on Facetime*



*Mr.FluffyPants*

## Introduction

It's no secret that I like to shop. When I was little, I remember going to the thrift store with my mom and filling our cart with clothes to try on; some of the clothes were placed in the cart with the intention of taking them home with us, but, the majority of the items in our cart I snagged off the racks with the intention of playing dress up with my mom in the Salvation Army fitting rooms. As I got older, these periodic trips to the thrift store with my mom turned into biweekly trips to the mall with my friends, and, by the time I began high school, Briarwood Mall in my hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan, served as my home-away-from-home, where my friends and I would search for the cheapest items at Forever 21 and Aeropostale that we could afford, gossip over a Wetzel Pretzel in the food court, and try on prom dresses in the spring to prepare ourselves for our own prom that was soon to come a few years later (ultimately, my senior prom was cancelled due to the pandemic, which really was a shame considering how much prom-dress-wearing experience I had acquired up to that point!).

There is one thing, however, that I like even more than shopping, and that's free stuff. One consequence of my being chronically online during the pandemic was my introduction to various Facebook groups that allow members of one's local community to give away and ask for items, all free of charge. Soon enough, I found myself as an active member of the Facebook group "Buy No Things Ann Arbor, MI," and when I arrived in Claremont for the first time as a freshman, I began utilizing the Facebook groups "Buy Nothing Claremont (South & East), CA", and "Claremont Gifting Neighbors" to furnish my new apartment.

Coincidentally, during my high school career and into the beginning of college, discussions around fast fashion and the negative environmental impacts of overconsumption began to arise in both social and traditional media, as well as within my own social circles. During this time, young people around me seemed to exchange their negative view of

secondhand clothes as dirty, unfashionable, and as sign of a lack of wealth, for positive views towards thrifting as a trend that allowed for young people to make the most out of their limited budgets, acquire unique clothing items and expand their personal style, and ease the shopping-related guilt that some felt since learning about the environmental impacts of fast fashion.

Throughout high school, my trips to the thrift shop increased in frequency compared to my trips to the mall, until I finally found myself choosing to visit the thrift store over the mall nearly every time I felt an urge to shop.

When college started back up in person at the beginning of my sophomore year, I was excited to visit the Pomona Free Room, and, for the first time, discover the magic that is a free community closet. As a lover of both shopping and free stuff, the Free Room was a perfect combination of the two, and it also allowed me to avoid contributing to the negative impacts associated with clothing consumption. As a Scripps student, however, I felt that the walk to Pomona from my dorm was longer than I would prefer, especially when trudging through campus with an armful of clothing. Additionally, I had difficulty knowing when the Free Room was open, as open hours seemed to be more widely advertised to Pomona students than students at the other Claremont Colleges. Even when I was aware of open hours and made the trek to Pomona, I always faced one final obstacle in actually entering Walker Hall, the residence hall in which the Free Room is housed. Swipe access is required to enter Walker, and only Pomona IDs work to unlock the door, meaning that every time I wanted to visit the Free Room, I would have to awkwardly peer in through the windows until a nice Pomona student let me in. All of these reasons compelled me to visit the Pomona Free Room far less often than I would have liked, and I found myself yearning for a similar resource at my home campus of Scripps College.



In March of 2023, that dream became a reality when a classmate and I first opened the Scripps Free Closet. We began accepting clothing donations from students and displaying these donations during weekly open hours, in which all members of the Claremont Colleges community are invited to shop for as many items as they'd like, free of charge. Now, one full year into this project, we host two-hour long open hours twice per week in the Scripps Student Union, located on the second floor of Malott Dining Commons, Scripps' dining hall. The location of the Free Closet is conducive for visits not only from Scrippsies, but from members of the Claremont Colleges community as a whole, since open hours are held during mealtimes in which many students from all 5Cs flock to Malott. We make sure to prop open the doors to the Student Union so anyone can enter regardless of swipe access. Plus, we advertise the Free Closet while we're open with eye-catching signs outside of Malott, by posting a story on our Free Closet Instagram, which is accessible to all users on Instagram, and via posters we've hung up around Scripps campus.

We started the Free closet with three main goals: to increase sustainability on campus; to mitigate financial- and transportation-related barriers students face in accessing clothing; and to provide a judgement-free space for students to explore new-to-them clothing, whether that be to accommodate sizing shifts or to aid in gender expression. While I wholeheartedly believe in and support the latter two goals of the Free Closet, as an environmental analysis major, the sustainability aspect of the Free Closet is what intrigues me the most. Now that we are one year into the Free Closet's existence, we host open hours twice per week that see consistently high attendance, we host one event per semester, and we receive upwards of thirty clothing donations each week. I would consider the Free Closet a successful initiative on campus. However, I began

to wonder if the Free Closet was really as successful as I thought, especially from a sustainability standpoint.

In this thesis, I will attempt to answer the question “Is the Scripps Free Closet an effective sustainability initiative on campus by a) decreasing the amount of clothing students buy and/or b) decreasing the amount of clothing students dispose of ‘irresponsibly?’” In order to answer this question, I conducted a survey among Scripps students that received over 100 responses, with the goal of gauging if, how, and why students utilize the Free Closet, and to research students’ clothing acquisition and disposal habits in comparison to their use of the Free Closet (or lack thereof).

Writing this thesis represents a sort of full-circle moment for me as I finish up my college career at Scripps. Over the past two years, I have put my literal blood, sweat, and tears into creating and maintaining this project, which is entirely volunteer run, and does not receive direct funding from the school. I hope that in conducting this research, the importance of the Free Closet to the Scripps’ community will be emphasized as not only a sustainability initiative, but also as a resource that helps students fulfill their basic needs, and as a third place (a place that is not the home or workplace) (Butler et al. 2016) for students to come together in community. I intend for this research to be sharable with members of the Scripps administration who may be able to support the longevity and ongoing success of the Free Closet.

## Background

To situate the Scripps Free Closet as a sustainability initiative on campus, we must first understand the environmental and humanitarian issues associated with the fashion industry, and how the recent growth of fast fashion is largely culpable for the proliferation of these issues.

### What is Fast Fashion?

Fast fashion is defined as “inexpensive clothing produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends” (Oxford English Dictionary 2024). The common rhetoric around fast fashion posits that it exists as a response to rapidly changing trends and a hunger for new styles at affordable prices. Additionally, the industry pushes that, now more than ever before, consumers crave “frequent novelty” that can easily be satiated by the ever-increasing pace at which brands pump out product after product. However, we must consider whose hunger for new styles the fast fashion industry responds to, and if consumers are really the true drivers of demand for these rapidly changing trends and the cheaply made products that come along (Niinimäki et al. 2020).

This begs the question: Where did fast fashion come from, and how come it differs so much from “traditional” fashion that dominated the market pre-1980’s? To answer this question, I will refer to the book *The Dirty Side of the Garment Industry: Fast Fashion and Its Negative Impact on Environment and Society*, written by political economist and Associate Professor in the department of Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, Nikolay Anguelov. Fast fashion brands will have you believe they exist in response to a consumer-driven demand for relevant clothing in response to the increasing rate at which trends cycle. While trends can explain part of the story, we must take a second look at whose demand these trends are responding to. Back in the day, before fast fashion existed, the fashion industry followed a calendar of eight distinct “seasons” that divide the year somewhat evenly. But now, at

least 24 “seasons” comprise the fashion calendar, including new categories like “back to school,” “prom,” and “wedding,” among many others (Anguelov 2015). Ultimately, with the advent of countless fast fashion brands constantly releasing new styles, such as Shein, who releases up to 10,000 new items on its website each day (Selyukh 2023), these seasons have blurred together to comprise the current state of the fashion industry.

While some consumers such as myself get overwhelmed by the volatility of fast fashion industry, clothing brands would argue that they are simply responding rapidly to increasingly changing consumer demands. Here’s the thing; the fashion industry is lying to us. The reason that there are upwards of 24 seasons in a year and that Shein drops thousands of new items daily is not in response to consumer demands, but rather that brands see exponentially higher profits from pumping out thousands of new styles at dirt-cheap prices than from the traditional industry model that dominated the mid 20th century. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw rapid globalization in the fashion industry in response to new communication and media technologies that allowed brands to cater to a global, and therefore much larger, audience (Anguelov 2015). Additionally, globalization and technological advances allowed producers to lower the high price tags associated with apparel throughout much of human history, since garments could now be made for cheaper than ever before (Schor 2013). With increased globalization came access to a wider array of consumers and an unprecedented desire for profits. To satiate the desire for such profits, insiders in the fashion industry began meeting biannually to determine the trends to design and sell for the next six months. It is these industry insiders, not consumers, who dictate the trends we all wear (Anguelov 2015). The fast fashion industry thus creates a false demand for ever-changing styles, instils in consumers an inflated sense of urgency around purchasing, and relies on recurring consumption and impulse buying to maintain its status as a dominating global

industry (Niinimäki et al. 2020). Contrary to what the industry will have you believe, fashion trends are not in fact a response to rapidly changing consumer demand, but rather a response to ever-growing industry demand for infinitely higher profits.

As the century turned and technology continued to improve, ecommerce prompted more change in the fashion industry. H&M began selling online in 1998 and was one of the first fashion brands to do so. As consumers began to shift from purchasing clothing in stores to online, the previous “on-sale” marketing model was decidedly not going to work with ecommerce. Instead of increasing sales by marking certain items on-sale, which allowed customers to see a tangible difference in the value of a product for its cost compared to other garments in the store, online clothing retailers such as H&M adopted a “no-sale” model, which exchanged the sale model with decreasing regular prices altogether. This model was adopted by other brands, and now serves as a dominant way for brands to make huge profits. Instead of enticing buyers by marking down prices of good quality items, brands could now entice buyers with lower prices up-front, which increased both profits and sales (Anguelov 2015). This model, in conjunction with a thriving mall culture that allowed young people to socialize while simultaneously spending their own money on garments they can afford, allowed for the birth and growth of fast fashion. The mid 2000s saw a major increase in the clothing industry, as “by the mid-2000s, Zara, H&M, and Gap had around 1000, 1400, and 3000 stores, respectively” (Anguelov 2015). Soon enough, countless fast fashion brands saturated the market, which all in all supplied the average consumer with an increased number of 68 garments per year in 2006, compared to just 34.7 garments in 1991 (Schor 2013). Subsequently, consumers were keeping their items for less time than before, with “perfectly wearable garments” being thrown out or given away long before their “useful or functional lives” were over (Schor 2013). By the end of

the 2000s, fast fashion brands saturated malls across the country, established themselves as a dominating presence online, and had millions of consumers in their back pocket. With this level of global dominance having been achieved, fast fashion had taken over not only global economic markets but was consuming the natural world as well.

## **Environmental and Social Impacts of the Clothing Industry**

With the increased prevalence of fast fashion has come unprecedented levels of environmental and social harm caused by the fashion industry. The low price tags associated with fast fashion are incredibly desirable to consumers, yet, the price that a consumer pays for a garment does not represent its actual cost. The actual, full cost of a garment, which consists of the material, labor, and environmental costs, is usually paid for by poor communities, oftentimes in the Global South, through the exploitation of their labor and degradation of their local ecosystems (Ramirez 2023). There are a variety of ways in which this industry creates negative impacts, including through the production, consumption, and disposal processes. In this section, I will review some of the ways the fashion industry inequitably pollutes the world's ecosystems and causes humanitarian issues.

### **Production – environmental pollution**

One of the biggest issues the fashion industry presents is the ecological degradation it inflicts on our planet. To understand this issue, I will refer to “The Environmental Price of Fast Fashion,” a literature review by scholars Niinimäki et al. Making textiles and then turning them into garments is an incredibly resource-heavy process and oftentimes requires the extraction of non-renewable resources. It is difficult to estimate the exact amount of pollution this industry produces since so much of textile and garment production takes place in countries with loose environmental regulations. However, it is estimated that the fashion industry contributes to

approximately 10% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, 20% of industrial water pollution, and 35% of oceanic microplastic pollution. Additionally, over 15,000 different chemicals are used during the garment production process. Annually, that's 4-5 billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted, 79 trillion liters of water polluted, and 190,000 tons of microplastics dropped into the ocean (Niinimäki, et al. 2020).

As discussed above, the fashion industry has seen unprecedented growth within the past 30 years due to globalization, technological advances, and profit-driven business models. With this growth in the industry has come greater environmental degradation, largely due to the sheer volume of textiles being produced. To put this into perspective, global per-capita textile production has increased from 5.9kg to 13kg annually from 1975-2018, and global consumption of apparel is now estimated at 62 million tons annually, with this number expected to hit 102 million tons by 2030 (Niinimäki, et al. 2020).

Consumption has followed this pattern of unfettered growth. From 1996-2012, Europe has seen a 40% increase in clothing purchases. Accordingly, the average garment lifespan – the average number of times a garment is worn before it ceases to be used – has dropped 36% since 2005, meaning that consumers are buying more, but getting less bang for their buck (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017).

As more garments are being produced, the negative environmental impacts of the fashion industry are being exacerbated. In order to grow the crops used to make textiles, such as cotton, chemicals are often used. But these chemicals have detrimental health and environmental effects. Considering that 6% of global pesticide production is applied to cotton crops, growing the materials used to make textiles can lead to poor health in the form of nausea, diarrhea, cancer, and respiratory diseases, as well as neurological problems, reproductive issues, and even death

(Niinimäki, et al. 2020). Pesticides also degrade the environment by prohibiting biodiverse ecosystems.

Chemicals aren't the only threat to global ecosystems brought on by the fashion industry; the overuse of water and pollution of the Earth's groundwater and waterways are also of great concern. On average, the ratio of water it takes to produce textiles is a whopping 200:1, meaning that it takes on average 200 tons of water to produce one ton of textiles. Additionally, 3% of global irrigation water use was applied to crops intended to make textiles, totaling 44 trillion liters of water per year. While it is easy to see these large numbers and render them unfathomable, we can visualize it by learning that 20% of water loss in the Aral Sea has been caused by the cotton industry in the European Union, and that, especially in arid regions and heavy manufacturing areas, such as China and India, 7% of the total depletion of local groundwater and drinking water is caused by the fashion industry. But water loss isn't the only area of concern – pollution of water is also important to consider. Of all the water pollution and chemical pollution in Cambodia, the fashion sector is responsible for 60% and 34%, respectively (Niinimäki, et al. 2020).

Among chemicals and water as areas of concern in the production process is the huge amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> the industry emits. Approximately 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions come from the textile industry (*UN Helps Fashion Industry Shift to Low Carbon*, 2018). The most CO<sub>2</sub> is emitted during initial fiber extraction, more so than during any other part of the garment's existence. Much of this CO<sub>2</sub> pollution comes from non-renewable energy use during the production process, especially in synthetic fibers such as acrylics and polyester, which originate from fossil fuel. Apart from textile production lies another source of greenhouse gasses – transportation. The transport of textiles and garments across the globe emits huge amounts of



CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere, especially because the norm of long supply chains in the fashion industry means that the same materials can be shipped back and forth between countries and continents during the production of a single garment, well before it even hits the shelves and becomes available for sale. Among the various ways garments are transported, including cargo ships and trucks, air cargo is by far the largest emitter of greenhouse gasses. It is estimated that if just 1% of the materials transported by cargo ship were transported by air cargo instead, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions would increase by 35% (“2018 Environmental Impact of the Global Apparel and Footwear Industries Study” 2018).

### Disposal – exporting clothing waste to the Global South

While clothing production poses a great threat to the worlds’ ecosystems, clothing waste is of equal concern. Every year, Americans and Europeans buy 36 billion units of clothing, and 85% of them get discarded (Orner 2024). According to the EPA, 17 million tons of textile waste was generated in the United States in 2018, not including textiles that were reused. This makes up approximately 5.8% of all municipal solid waste (MSW) generated in 2018. Also in 2018, 11.3 million tons of textiles were landfilled (7.7% of all MSW landfilled that year), and 3.2 million tons of textiles were combusted (9.3% of all MSW combusted) (“Textiles: Material-Specific Data | US EPA” 2023). These numbers are astronomically high, but we must consider the fact that these figures apply only to textiles that were disposed of in the United States, and stayed in the country through their ultimate demise. A common practice in America is to export our clothing waste to countries in the Global South, overwhelmingly to Latin American and African countries. This practice is even more cruel than how we experience waste in the U.S., since other countries are bearing the environmental burden of the West’s overconsumption of clothing, and the U.S. is unwilling to pay for it.

At the center of this issue lie national thrift chains, such as Goodwill. According to journalist for The Washington Post Allyson Chiu, in 2021, Goodwill received over 107 million donations of used items, totaling more than 5.7 billion pounds. However, only about half of all clothing donations Goodwill receives are of high enough quality and in good enough condition to be “suitable for retail.” Due to the sheer volume of clothing Goodwill receives, much of it being low-quality fast fashion, many items remain unsold. Goodwill claims that a “minimum” of 30% of the total weight of donations received are sold, either in stores, online, or at Goodwill outlet stores, which sell the rejects from traditional Goodwill retail stores priced by the pound (Chiu 2023).

What happens, then, to the other 70%? Items that don’t sell at Goodwill are sold “in bulk as salvage” to buyers local to each Goodwill store. Since each Goodwill store processes their excess donations individually, tracking the exact amount of excess donations and their final destinations is difficult. This process is similar at other national thrift chains who receive a surplus of clothing donations, as well as in the case of many disaster relief organizations, as many of these non-profits, while well intentioned, do not have the capacity to process bulk clothing donations that are not specific to what they may be looking for, such as winter coats, or to clean and repair damaged items (Chiu 2023). It is estimated that less than 1% of clothing is recycled into new garments (NBCLX 2020).

The United States has deals with numerous countries in Africa that involve exporting our clothing waste. One used clothing market in Accra, Ghana, Kantamanto Market, is the “largest secondhand economy in the world,” and receives 15 million units of secondhand clothing each week (Orner 2024). Ghana has a population of just over 32 million people, which means that every person in Ghana would need to acquire two new garments from Kantamanto market every

week to justify this volume of clothing. However, we know this is not the case, as 40% of the garments that are imported into Kantamanto Market goes into the waste stream. This clothing waste is then incinerated or ends up in the gutter system, ultimately washing out to sea and onto their beaches. In Ghana, this secondhand clothing is referred to as “Obruni Wawu,” which means “dead white man’s clothes” (Orner 2024). Ghana, along with other African countries, have tried to sever its deals with The United States, but the U.S. has threatened punishments such as tariffs, removal of duty-free statuses, and revocation of grants (Orner 2024).

The environmental deterioration in Africa brought on by the secondhand clothing industry brings into view an important question: can Americans’ clothing waste that we donate with the intention of helping others truly be considered a charitable donation when these donations are drowning countries in the Global South? Since this is not the central topic of my research, I shall not dive too far into this question, but it does provide important context on why I favor sharing secondhand clothing over thrift shopping. Karen Tranberg Hansen claims in her book *Salaula*, which centers around clothing exports from the U.S. to Zambia, that this question of a “charitable guise” has been under researched, as Western culture has always considered clothing waste a necessary evil in a growing fast fashion industry (Hansen 2000). But our perception of donating clothing must shift when we learn not only how much of our donated clothing ends up polluting countries in the Global South, but also that the American government threatens to deprive these countries of economic freedom if they stop accepting our clothing waste (Orner 2024).

### Production – labor exploitation

Finally, I cannot move on from this topic without discussing the issue of labor exploitation in the fashion industry. It can be easy for American consumers to ignore the journey

textiles take before they become a garment and end up in the consumer's hands, but let's take a minute to think about the "made in \_\_\_" tags stitched into every garment. This may seem obvious, but even I find myself forgetting that every single clothing item that exists was made by a human, sitting at a sewing machine, painstakingly feeding endless rolls of fabric into said sewing machine with great care. There is no such thing as a machine that can make clothing on its own; it is not possible to toss some fabric into a machine and wait for the "magic" to happen of creating a garment from scratch (Vox 2024). The only "magic" in the fashion production industry is the way the lives of the workers who create every single clothing item by hand magically disappear in the minds of the average American consumer.

It is no secret that the fashion industry is carried on the backs of the women, mostly women of color, that make our clothes (Orner 2024). And, while clothing production for fast fashion companies is usually outsourced to countries in the Global South, sweatshops and labor exploitation can exist anywhere, including in the United States and Europe. In fact, according to a 2022 study by U.S. Department of Labor, 80% of Southern California garment-sewing contractors and manufacturers surveyed committed wage violations towards their employees (Wage and Hour Division 2023). The fashion industry has "always robbed workers of their wages and always had unsafe conditions," and many have pointed out that if a garment is priced "too good to be true," then somebody is most likely being exploited for their labor at some point in the supply chain (Orner 2024).

Of the three main segments of the fashion chain – textile production, garment production, and retail sales – garment production has the highest prominence of labor exploitation. This is because the garment production process is the least technologically sophisticated and requires relatively low-skilled labor. (If you ask me, sewing and garment making is *very* difficult, and I

think it should be considered an art form rather than a low-skilled, low-paying job. But, alas, I am not the one who makes these decisions.) Clothing manufacturers tend to outsource garment production to countries with lax labor laws in an effort to curtail labor costs and thus production costs (Figueroa 1996). China, the European Union, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Turkey, India, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and Indonesia were the top ten exporters of clothing in 2020 (d'Andrea and Bhatia 2021). Oftentimes, garments are made in sweatshops, which are defined as factories or workshops where manual workers are employed at low wages for long hours and under poor conditions (Oxford English Dictionary 2023). And as the sweatshop industry relies on underpaying its workers, it is incredibly profitable, with the global sweatshop industry being worth an estimated \$1.5 trillion annually. These sweatshops do employ child, undocumented, and even slave immigrant labor (Figueroa 1996), with 85% of sweatshop workers being women and girls between ages 15-25, which situates the exploitation of garment workers as an important humanitarian issue (Lindner 2023).

The West's current level of clothing consumption cannot be sustained on the backs of the exploited women and children who make our clothes and the communities in countries such as Ghana and Zambia that are forced to watch as multinational corporations work in conjunction with American imperialism to convert their land into a dumping ground for our clothing waste. For that matter, the world as a whole cannot sustain the West's current level of clothing consumption, for the environmental impacts of producing and disposing of clothing in the Western hemisphere are felt worldwide and are experienced disproportionately by communities who are not responsible for this harm (UNICEF 2022). While the fast fashion industry and multinational corporations are at fault for this harm, I still wonder if I as a consumer can avoid contributing to this issue, which segues us into discussion about the Scripps Free Closet.

## **The Scripps Free Closet**

As a Scripps student, an environmental analysis major, and a life-long shopping enjoyer, I felt that something should be done on campus to provide students with a way to explore their style without supporting the fashion industry and the environmental and humanitarian atrocities that come with it. I joined the Scripps Student Sustainability Committee (which has since been renamed to the Scripps Sustainability Team) in the fall semester of 2022, with the hopes of eventually opening a free community closet at Scripps, similar to the Pomona Free Room, which is a free community thrift store at fellow Claremont College, Pomona College, that provides students with not only clothing but other household items as well. In the fall of 2023, I began collaborating with fellow Scripps student and Committee member Cecelia Blum to make this idea a reality. Cecelia and I developed a business proposal that outlined the goals and planned operations of this project, which we eventually titled the Scripps Free Closet, or, simply, the Free Closet. We shared this proposal with various people and groups on campus, including the Dean of Students and Scripps Associated Students (SAS). After lots of reworking of the proposal, we were eventually granted approval to utilize one of the small study rooms in the Scripps Student Union as a storage space for the Free Closet (see fig. 2), and to begin operations.

Over the past year, Cecelia and I have refined the operations of the Free Closet to best fit the needs of Scripps Students as we interpret them. Currently, the Free Closet hosts open hours twice a week – on Tuesdays from 5:30-7:30 p.m. and on Saturdays from 11 a.m. -1 p.m. – in the Scripps Student Union. Since the Student Union is located on the second floor of Malott Dining Commons, Scripps' dining hall, open hours were chosen to coincide with mealtimes so students could easily visit the Closet before or after eating at Malott. The reason the Free Closet hosts designated open hours instead of it being open for students to browse at any time is threefold: space limitations, organization, and to replicate the feeling of shopping in a store. The first two

reasons are relatively straight forward; the storage room in which the Free Closet materials are held is far too small for anybody to browse comfortably, let alone for anyone to take one step into the room without removing all the racks first (see fig. 2). Additionally, we work hard to maintain the cleanliness and organization of the storage room, and I fear that if students were allowed unsupervised access to the room at all times, it would become far too messy for anyone to find what they're looking for. The last reason is a bit more nuanced. The Free Closet serves as both a community space for students to socialize with one another, as well as a resource that fulfills the basic clothing needs of students on campus. For these reasons, we feel that it is important to replicate the feeling of shopping in a store as much as possible. I believe that allowing easy access for students to browse with their peers before or after a meal fosters a greater sense of community than if students were encouraged to instead browse the Closet on their own time. Additionally, as one of the main goals of the Free Closet is to increase equitable access to clothing among all students (as will be discussed in the following paragraphs), it is important to create a space that feels organized, well curated, and familiar to what students may be used to when shopping at a regular store. Shopping can be a very vulnerable experience, and I feel that it would be a disservice to the Scripps Community to distinguish the Free Closet as a resource where students can meet their basic needs, and provide anything other than a comfortable, familiar-feeling shopping experience for those students who utilize the Closet out of necessity.

During open hours, 2-3 Free Closet team members roll out the clothing racks, on which clothing is organized by category, from the storage room into the main living room of the Student Union, and arrange shoes and accessories on nearby tables (see fig. 1). During open hours, all 5C community members are invited to take a look around and acquire as many items as

they would like free of charge. Open hours are advertised on the Instagram page @scrippsfreecloset and via posters around Scripps campus. Additionally, one event is hosted on Bowling Green Lawn (located outside of Malott Dining Commons) per semester, in order to raise awareness of the Free Closet among students, as well as to liquidate excess inventory. This past year, the Free Closet hosted an opening event in the fall and Pants-a-palooza in the spring, which served to liquidate the Closet's surplus of pants (see fig. 3). More Free Closet team members have been brought on since last year, with our team now consisting of eight part-time volunteers, in addition to Cecelia and me, who assist in running open hours and collecting donations.

The Free Closet sources all of its inventory from student donations. There are two on-campus donation locations – one in the Student Union, where open hours are held, and one in Tiernan Field House, which is Scripps' gym, pool, and wellness center – each containing one donation box where students are welcome to drop donations 24/7 (see fig. 4). The Free Closet accepts donations of clothes, shoes, and accessories that are clean and in good condition. Any donations of damaged items get put in the discard box – in the past, damaged clothing has been recycled at Suay Sew Shop located in Pasadena, CA (“SUAY IT FORWARD”, n.d.), damaged sneakers have been recycled at the Nike Store in East LA (“Recycle + Donate Your Athletic Gear”, n.d.), and socks have been recycled through a mail-in Terracycle program (“GOLDTOE® Socks Free Recycling Program · TerraCycle”, n.d.).





*Figure 1. The Scripps Free Closet during open hours*





*Figure 2. The Free Closet storage room*



Figure 3. *Pants-A-Palooza* event hosted by the Free Closet

# Donation Locations

**#1 - Student Union**



**#2 - Tiernan Field House**





Figure 4. An Instagram post featuring the Free Closet donation locations. Originally posted on April 3, 2023.

Cecelia and I have identified three main issues the Free Closet seeks to mitigate on campus: environmental sustainability; financial- and transportation- related barriers to accessing clothing; and barriers to accessing clothing based on personal changes related to being a young adult at college, such as sizing fluctuation and gender and style exploration. After identifying these issues, we authored an official mission of the Free Closet:

The Scripps Free Closet is an entirely student-led resource that aims to increase sustainability and equity at Scripps College. By redistributing used clothes among the Scripps community free of charge, we keep textile waste from landfills, reduce the need for students to buy new clothes, and mitigate financial- and transportation-related barriers that students face in finding clothing. Furthermore, by allowing students to easily access clothing in a variety of sizes, we hope to reduce experiences of body dysmorphia and subsequent eating disorders that can be exacerbated by ill-fitting clothing.

I want to make one thing very clear: I do not see individual consumers, including Scripps students, as being responsible for the environmental and humanitarian effects brought on by the fashion industry, and the Free Closet does not exist to shame students for buying clothing. Rather, I blame the fashion industry as a whole, late-stage American capitalism that rewards corporations for committing environmental and humanitarian exploitation with tremendous profits, and the multinational corporations that directly exploit laborers and degrade the environment, for the atrocities brought on by the industry. I also recognize that, in the grand scheme of things, the shopping decisions made by the Scripps student body represent a teeny-tiny drop in the bucket of decisions made by consumers as a whole that may, all together, be able

to make a shift in the negative impacts of the fashion industry. In opening the Free Closet, I did not expect to change the world, but I rather tried to begin making a campus-level change that may contribute to the national trend of community closets on college campuses (see Literature Review for more information) and to alleviate some of the aforementioned issues revolving around clothing acquisition and disposal on campus. For lack of a better term, I will be referring to disposal of clothing through donations to national thrift chains and by throwing them in the trash as “irresponsible clothing disposal.” However, I do not believe that it is the responsibility of consumers to remedy the bad habits of the fashion industry, and I do not believe that consumers are “irresponsible” for disposing of their clothing through these channels, but rather doing what they can to make a change given how society views clothing donations as charity (which could be an entire thesis on its own! For the sake of time, I will not be going down that rabbit-hole, but I encourage you, reader, to consider why used clothing, often of cheap quality or in bad condition, is so widely regarded as something to be graciously donated to those in need, instead of burden, which a surplus of subpar clothing can be to charities and countries that import our clothing waste alike.)

Scripps is a private (read expensive) college – full tuition including room and board is listed as \$87,742 for the 2024-2025 school year (“Tuition and Fees”, n.d.). However, approximately 56% of Scripps students receive grant or scholarship financial aid (“Financial Aid”, n.d.), meaning that students represent a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. As such, I personally know multiple students who have expressed experiencing clothing insecurity, but, when attending a private college where students experience a wide range of financial situations, having conversations around financial barriers to access clothing can be tricky. The Free Closet aims to provide all students with access to good quality clothing for free, with no questions asked

about how much students take or why they chose to do so. This helps to mitigate inequitable access to clothing among Scripps students in addition to fostering a judgment-free environment for students who may be facing clothing insecurity.

Along with financial barriers to accessing new clothing, many students face transportation-related barriers to both acquiring and disposing of clothing. At Scripps, first years are not permitted to have cars on campus (“Parents & Supporters Information”, n.d.), and only a handful of students bring cars to campus after their first year. Concurrently, there are limited resources on campus at the Claremont Colleges for students to acquire and dispose of clothing, none of them being housed at Scripps, and there are limited second-hand clothing stores within walking distance. There are four secondhand clothing stores in the Claremont Village, which is approximately one mile away from Scripps, and three of them are consignment stores, meaning that they price their items higher than a traditional thrift store. There are no other thrift stores in Claremont, with the nearest being located in the neighboring cities of Upland and Pomona. Due to this distance, many students have trouble finding time and transportation to visit these resources, signaling a gap in the market when it comes to Scripps students’ ability to acquire and dispose of clothing. The Scripps Free Closet fills this gap in that it provides students with two on-campus locations to dispose of their unwanted clothing, and an on-campus space for students to shop for new clothing.

Another matter the Free Closet addresses on campus is barriers to accessing clothing based on personal changes related to being a young adult at college, such as sizing fluctuation and gender and style exploration. Based on personal experience and conversations I’ve had with my peers at Scripps, body and sizing fluctuation, oftentimes colloquially known as the “Freshman 15,” is a real thing that students experience on campus not only during their first year,

but throughout college as a whole. As a result of sizing fluctuation, many students seek to acquire clothing that fits their new sizing, but this process can oftentimes be stressful, prompt body insecurity, and even exacerbate eating disorders. The Free Closet aims to provide a stress-free environment for students to try out clothing of different sizes for free. Since we encourage students to try on clothing in their dorms and re-donate the items that do not work for them, students are able to try on clothing in the comfort of their own room, without feeling judged by their peers. Additionally, I would consider Scripps an overwhelmingly accepting college when it comes to gender expression and trans-ness, and thus students at Scripps and the surrounding Claremont Colleges are able to try out clothing of different styles and gender expressions for free through the Free Closet. The Free Closet aims to provide a stress- and judgment- free zone for all students to try out clothing of new styles, sizing, etc.

An interesting facet of the Free Closet is that Scripps is a historically women's college that accepts students of all gender identities, excluding cisgender men. While I would love to delve into the implications of having a community resource to share clothing – which represents a market that is disproportionately catered to women and a production industry that disproportionately employs and exploits female workers – at an institution in which all students either currently identify as or have formerly identified as or been perceived by others as female, I fear that an adequate discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this project. However, I wonder if the Free Closet would be as important of a resource on campus if housed at a coed institution. I also wonder if the Scripps community being tighter knit in the sense of trust and vulnerability than other coed colleges might impact the judgement-free sense of community fostered at the Free Closet. Perhaps a future Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies major at Scripps could one day respond to my queries.

## Literature Review

There is limited scholarship on the sharing economy of clothing or clothing sharing initiatives on college campuses similar to the Scripps Free Closet. However, in this literature review, I will highlight some comparable programs at other colleges.

### **The Sharing Economy of Clothing on College Campuses**

The sharing economy is defined as a peer-to-peer economic model that facilitates acquiring, providing, or sharing access to goods and services, either for free or for a fee (The Investopedia Team 2024). Recently, this term has been used to describe online platforms that facilitate the sharing of goods directly between consumers, such as Ebay, but this term can also be used to describe college campus community closets that provide students with access to clothing free of charge, such as The Scripps Free Closet. A handful of studies have been published that discuss community closets on college campuses, including both established community closets and proposals for beginning community closets. However, there is a lack of scholarship that explores community closets on college campuses through the lens of sustainability – rather, much of this scholarship regards clothing insecurity and meeting students’ basic needs. Additionally, much of the scholarship around community closets on college campuses only discusses community closets that specialize in professional clothing, which differs from the clothing the Scripps Free Closet provides.

At California State University (CSU) Stanislaus, graduate student Jesus Preciado recently conducted an assessment of the student need for a campus clothing closet and created a detailed program proposal for implementing a closet through the Basic Needs Program on campus. There had been concerns about meeting students’ basic needs at CSU Stanislaus, which prompted the completion of this project. The study found that the CSU system does not adequately address clothing insecurity on their campuses, and does not consider access to clothing a basic need in

the same way they regard food and housing, in contrast to how the CSU system considers *professional* clothing a basic need. The author claims that accessible and free access to casual clothing on campus will improve the lives of students as they will be able to focus on their studies and lives without the worry of accessing clothing, either due to financial reasons, or reasons having to do with gender expression. There is not only a need for a campus closet, but also a dearth of research and awareness on the topic. The study also claims that student input is essential in implementing a campus closet. As students will be the ones utilizing the campus closet, their needs must be taken into consideration to effectively implement this initiative. Student mobilization also plays an important role in the implementation and longevity of a campus closet (Preciado 2023).

At West Los Angeles College (WLAC), meeting students' basic needs is a relevant concern as it is at CSU Stanislaus. WLAC students have access to a professional community closet called West Wardrobe. At this community college, students needing professional attire for an internship, interview, or new job can shop for free on campus. West Wardrobe sources its inventory from donations from the community, originally consisting mostly of donated clothing from faculty, and now expanding to receiving donations from local community groups, churches, and retired people. Founded by Trish Limbaugh (who is married to the president of WLAC), West Wardrobe exists as a response to financial insecurity on campus, which often limits students from acquiring the clothing they need to dress for success. The only caveat is that there is a limit to the number of clothing items students are permitted to take every six months: four shirts or sweaters, four pairs of pants or skirts, one coat, one suit, and four pairs of shoes. However, "Limbaugh waives those rules if a student shows real need" (Gordon 2019). Similar "career closets" have sprung up at other schools in California, including at community colleges



such as Crafton Hills College and Santa Monica College, and at multiple University of California campuses, including UC Riverside and UC Merced. Additionally, 12 of the 23 CSU campuses are home to “giveaway stores” (Gordon 2019).

Scholars at college campuses across the country have been exploring the possibility of opening professional community closets, including at St. Catherine University in Minnesota. A student, Pa Kou Yang, conducted a study to assess the feasibility of and student opinions around implementing a professional community closet, titled Katie’s Closet, on campus. The study concluded that students face financial barriers to acquiring professional attire, and students indicated that they would utilize a professional community closet if there was one on campus. Yang also cited that gaining access to professional clothing through a local non-profit, Dress for Success, was overly difficult, requiring a referral in order to complete a complicated application process, thus reinforcing the need for an accessible professional closet on campus. Environmental sustainability was briefly referenced in this article as a goal of Katie’s Closet. A 75 minute pop-up shop event took place in November of 2019 to test out the project, and the project was deemed a success, indicating feasibility of Katie’s Closet being open long term. They received over 300 clothing donations prior to the event, and redistributed 75 items to students, with almost every student who attended the event acquiring at least one clothing item (Nelsen, et al. 2021).

Another professional community closet is housed at COPE (College of Professional Education) at Texas Woman's University. Aimée Myers shared her experience of opening and maintaining a free professional community closet on her campus, highlighting the success of the program in a short period of time. This article discussed the community closet with the goal of meeting students’ basic needs, many of whom struggle with financial insecurity (Myers 2022).

I was able to find one source that discussed a clothing swap at a college campus through a sustainability lens. Zola Zermeño authored a thesis in which she chronicled the experience of hosting a clothing swap event at the University of Arizona in 2016. The one-time event, which she titled UA Wear and Share, occurred during a four-hour period in which students were encouraged to bring clothing to donate to the event, and take clothing that others had donated. Students were required to bring donations to acquire clothing from the event. Additionally, posters were placed around the event that contained educational information about the negative effects of the fashion industry, and students were asked to complete a survey before and after their visit to the event. Zermeño considered the event a success, having “donated” 166 items to students and 99 items to the Salvation Army (as discussed in the Background section, I would not consider a clothing donation to a national thrift chain such as the Salvation Army “responsible.” However, discussion of the ethics national thrift chains seemed to me beyond the scope of Zermeño’s project). Additionally, survey responses indicated that the majority of students could see themselves changing their purchasing habits and/or sharing more with their peers after attending the event. However, she stated that, while the event was successful in redistributing clothing among students, it was unsuccessful in educating students about the negative environmental impacts of the fashion industry (Zermeño 2016).

## Methods

To answer the research question, “Is the Scripps Free Closet an effective sustainability initiative on campus by a) decreasing the amount of clothing students buy and/or b) decreasing the amount of clothing students dispose of ‘irresponsibly?’”, I conducted a survey of current Scripps students to gauge if and how they use the Free Closet in relation to their general clothing acquisition and disposal habits. I used Qualtrics to conduct my survey, and used this service to anonymize responses, including not collecting IP addresses from participants. The survey was advertised via posters in the Scripps Residence Halls and by word of mouth. The survey first asked students to read a consent clause and provide consent to taking the survey, as well as verify that they are 18 years of age or older and a current Scripps student in the class of 2024, 2025, 2026, or 2027.

The sets of questions were outlined as follows: general buying habits, Free Closet use for clothing acquisition, general clothing disposal habits, and Free Closet use for clothing disposal. Within the general buying habits section, participants were prompted to answer multiple choice questions such as “Approximately how many times have you shopped and/or browsed for clothing, new or second-hand, in-person or online, within the past school year?”, “What was the purpose of your shopping and/or browsing at a clothing store, new or second-hand, online or in-person, within the past school year?”, “Please select the approximate number of new, unworn clothing items you have bought from in-person or online retailers within the past school year.”, “Please select the approximate number of second-hand clothing items you have bought from in-person shops or online resellers (i.e. Goodwill, a local thrift store, Ebay, Depop) within the past school year.”, and “What was the reason(s) you decided to buy this/these new or second-hand item(s)?”

Section 2 first asked participants if they had ever visited the Scripps Free Closet before, and then asked specific questions based on their answer. If the participant answered “no”, they were prompted to provide a reason or reasons why they hadn’t visited. If the participant answered “yes” when asked if they had visited the Free Closet before, they were then prompted to answer some specific questions about their visit to the Free Closet, such as “Approximately how many times have you visited the Scripps Free Closet”, “What was the purpose of your visit(s) to the Free Closet?”, “Please select the approximate amount of items you have ever acquired from the Free Closet”, “What was the reason(s) you decided to take home this/these item(s) from the Free Closet?”, and “Suppose you had not found that/those item(s) at the Free Closet. Do you believe you would have purchased a comparable item to fulfill its same purpose?” Those who had visited the Free Closet were then asked if they ever feel an urge to shop for clothing, and if visiting the Free Closet lessened those urges.

In section 3, participants were asked about their clothing disposal habits, such as if they had ever donated clothing to Free Closet, and, if so, how many items. Participants were also asked about how many items they had discarded in other ways while on campus, and what method(s) of disposal they used. Finally, participants were asked “Suppose the Scripps Free Closet didn’t exist. How would you discard your unwanted clothing while on campus? Consider your access to reliable transportation, the time it takes to travel to a donation center or sell clothing, the rush to move out during finals week, and other relevant factors.” All questions relating to number of visits and number of clothing obtained and discarded included a specification to only consider activities within the past school year.

All of these questions work together to form a collective image of how Scripps students usually obtain clothing, how they usually discard their unwanted clothing, and what role the

Scripps Free Closet plays in these processes. Responses were displayed graphically and analyzed collectively for trends.

I recognize that, as a co-founder of the Scripps Free Closet, I am biased. I can't deny that I want the results of this survey to demonstrate that the Free Closet is an effective sustainability initiative on campus, and that I have feared that the results will show the opposite. However, I have taken care in approaching this research from as unbiased as a place as I could. I carefully worded survey questions to ensure that they were not leading, and I assessed my results while considering multiple perspectives. That being said, this thesis has been written by an environmental analysis major who has a personal stake in this project, so I recommend considering these factors when taking in the following information.

## Results

The survey was open for twelve days and received 103 valid responses from Scripps students in that time period. As a reminder, the survey sought to answer the thesis question: “Is the Scripps Free Closet an effective sustainability initiative on campus by a) decreasing the amount of clothing students buy and/or b) decreasing the amount of clothing students dispose of ‘irresponsibly?’” I am measuring the effectiveness of the Free Closet as a sustainability initiative on campus by assessing if students buy less and dispose of less clothing irresponsibly because, as discussed in the Background section, making new purchases from clothing companies or secondhand purchases from national thrift chains contributes to the environmental and humanitarian harm brought on by both the fashion production and fashion disposal industries.

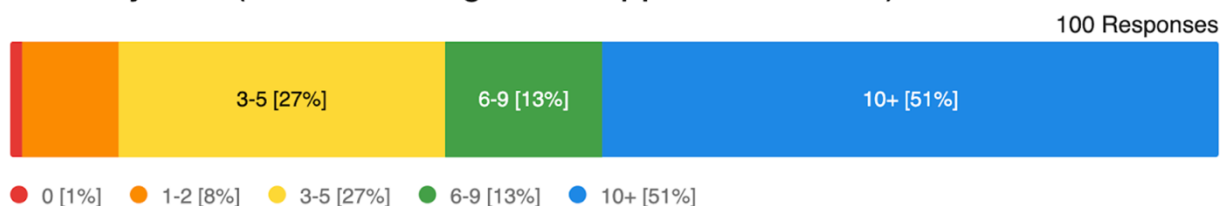
This is certainly a nuanced issue – purchasing new clothing is not always bad, especially if bought from a local or sustainable business, and there are a variety of ways to dispose of clothing that could be considered beneficial to society, other than participating in the sharing economy of clothing on a local scale. Arguments can even be made in support of donating clothing to national thrift chains. However, due to the factors discussed in the Background section, and for simplicity’s sake, I am considering all purchases of clothing, and disposal of clothing via donations to national thrift chains and tossing in the trash as less sustainable than acquiring clothing from the Free Closet or disposing of clothing through the Free Closet. All questions related to *frequency* specified that participants should consider the frequency of a certain action they have taken *within the past school year*.

### **Clothing Acquisition**

Clothing acquisition – general

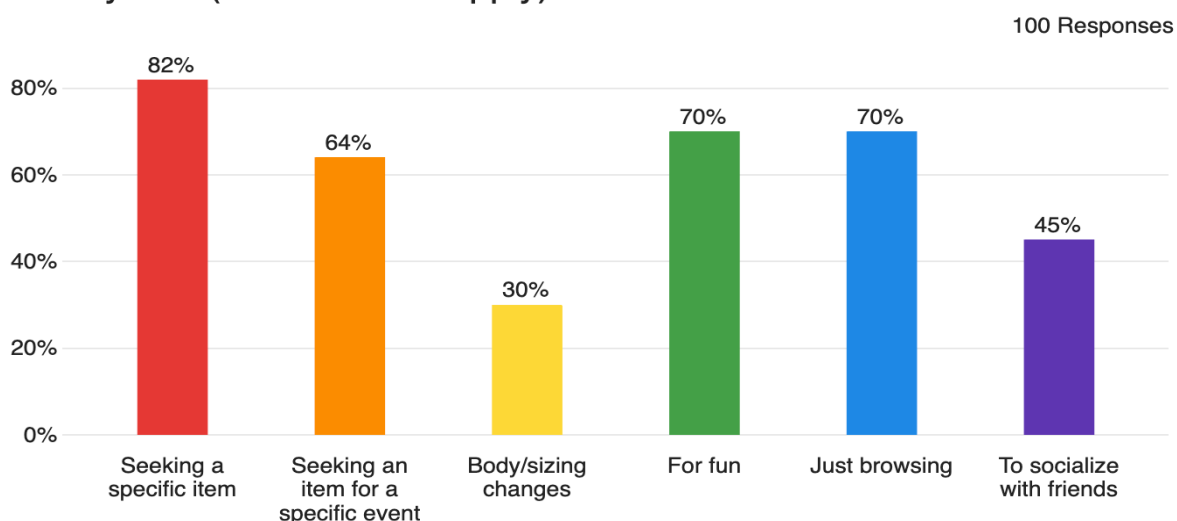
The first section of the survey posed questions about respondents' general clothing acquisition. Overwhelmingly, students have shopped or browsed for clothing, either new or secondhand, with 99% of participants responding this way. 51% of students have shopped or browsed for clothing ten or more times, and 27% of students have shopped or browsed three to five times, which represent the most common answers to this question (see fig. 5). Students cited a variety of reasons for shopping and browsing for clothing, with the most common answers being that they were seeking a specific item, such as a pair of jeans or a basic white shirt, going for fun or simply to browse, and that they were seeking an item for a specific event, such as for a themed party or a job interview (see fig. 6).

**Q1 - Approximately how many times have you shopped and/or browsed for clothing, new or second-hand, in-person or online, within the past school year? (NOT including the Scripps Free Closet)**



*Figure 5*

Q2 - What was the purpose of your shopping and/or browsing at a clothing store, new or second-hand, online or in-person, within the past school year? (select all that apply)



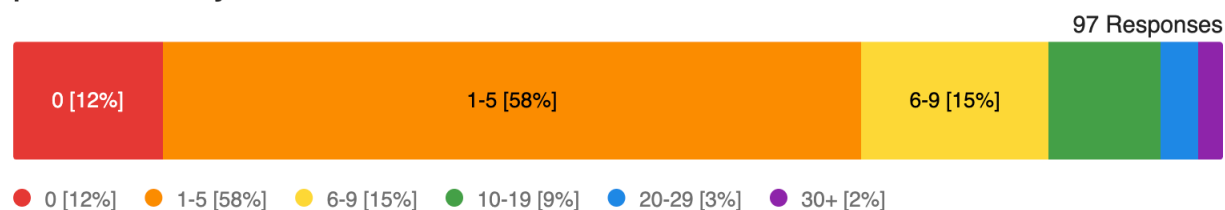
*Figure 6*

When comparing students' purchases of new, unused items with their purchases of secondhand items, the same number of respondents (88%) indicated having purchased at least one item that was new as those who responded having bought at least one secondhand item (see fig. 7 and 8). However, responses indicated that students are buying more items secondhand than new, with 30% of respondents having bought at least six new items (see fig. 7), and 48% of respondents having bought at least six secondhand items (see fig. 8). When asked about why they made these purchases, a majority of respondents indicated that they had found a specific item they were looking for, such as a pair of jeans or a basic white shirt, or that they had spontaneously found an item they were not specifically looking for. Many respondents also



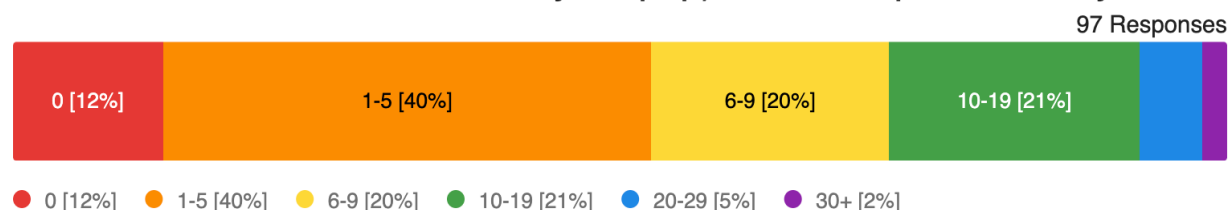
indicated that they were seeking an item for a specific event, and found an item that met that criteria (see fig. 9)

**Q3 - Please select the approximate number of new, unworn clothing items you have purchased from in-person or online retailers within the past school year.**



*Figure 7*

**Q4 - Please select the approximate number of second-hand clothing items you have purchased from in-person shops or online resellers (i.e. Goodwill, a local thrift store, Ebay, Depop) within the past school year.**



*Figure 8*

Q5 - What was the reason(s) you decided to buy this/these new or second-hand item(s)? (select all that apply)

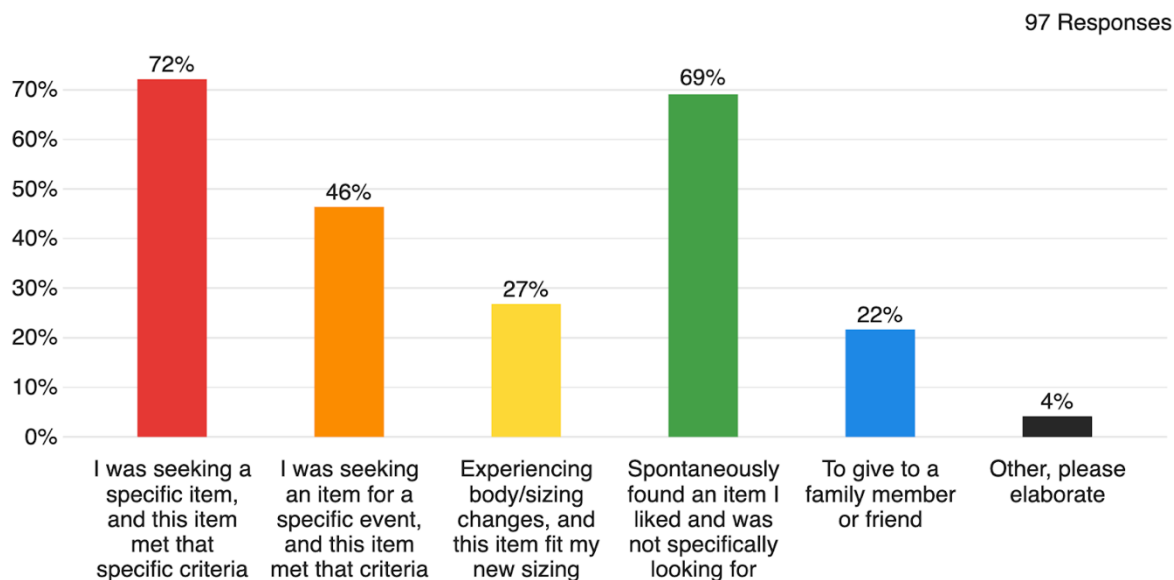


Figure 9

Responses indicate that most students (74%) have acquired clothing for free, including from friends or family, another on-campus resource, such as the Queer Resource Center or Pomona Free Room, and/or from other sources (see fig. 10).

Q6 - Have you acquired any clothing, new or second-hand, for free within the past school year that was not from the Scripps Free Closet? If so, from where/who? (select all that apply)

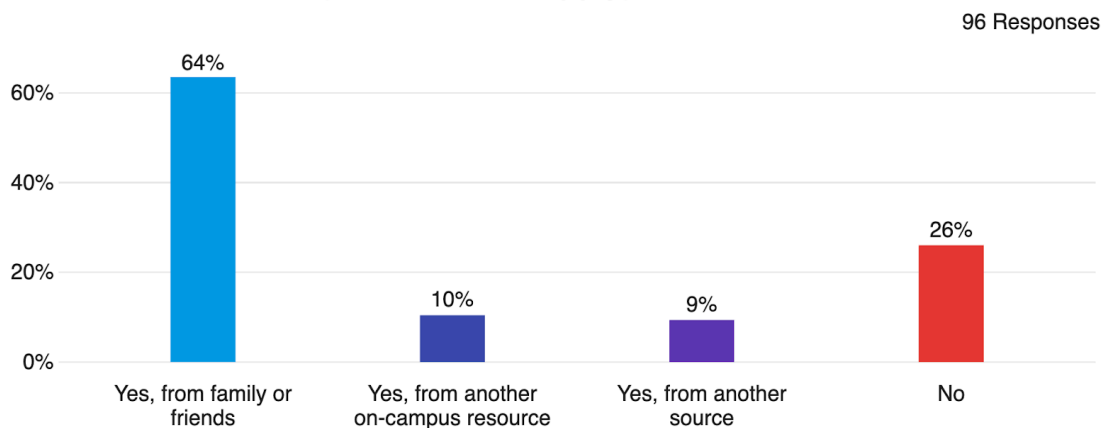


Figure 10

## Clothing acquisition – Free Closet

68% of respondents have visited the Scripps Free Closet at least once in the past (see fig. 11). A large majority of respondents who have visited the Free Closet at least once reported visiting five times or less, with 27% of respondents having visited just once, 24% having visited twice, and 41% of respondents having visited between three and five times (see fig. 12).

**Q7 - Have you ever visited the Scripps Free Closet, either during regular open hours or during a special event on Bowling Green (i.e. fall opening, Pants-a-palooza)?**

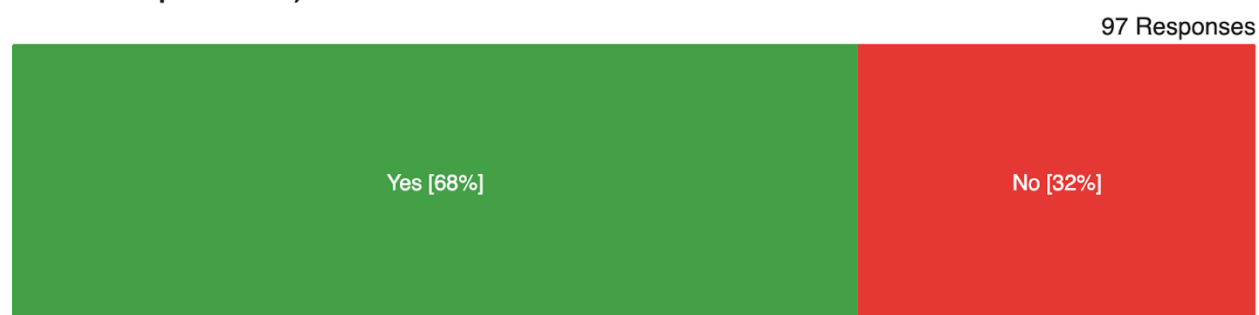


Figure 11

**Q8 - Approximately how many times have you visited the Free Closet, either during regular open hours or during a special event on Bowling Green (i.e. fall opening, Pants-a-palooza)?**

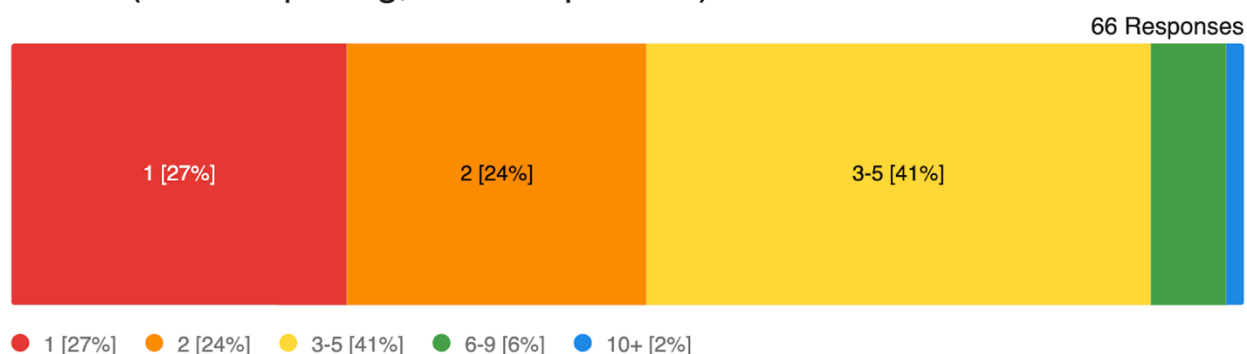


Figure 12

Most respondents answered that they visited the Free Closet for fun or simply to browse, and a much smaller percentage of respondents indicated visiting the Free Closet for other reasons

(see fig. 13), compared to a higher percentage of respondents who indicated that they shopped/browsed for new or secondhand clothing for reasons other than browsing or fun (see fig. 6). I take this to indicate that students have less confidence that they will be able to find specific items they are looking for at the Free Closet than if they were to shop for that item instead.

### Q9 - What was the purpose of your visit(s) to the Free Closet? (select all that apply)

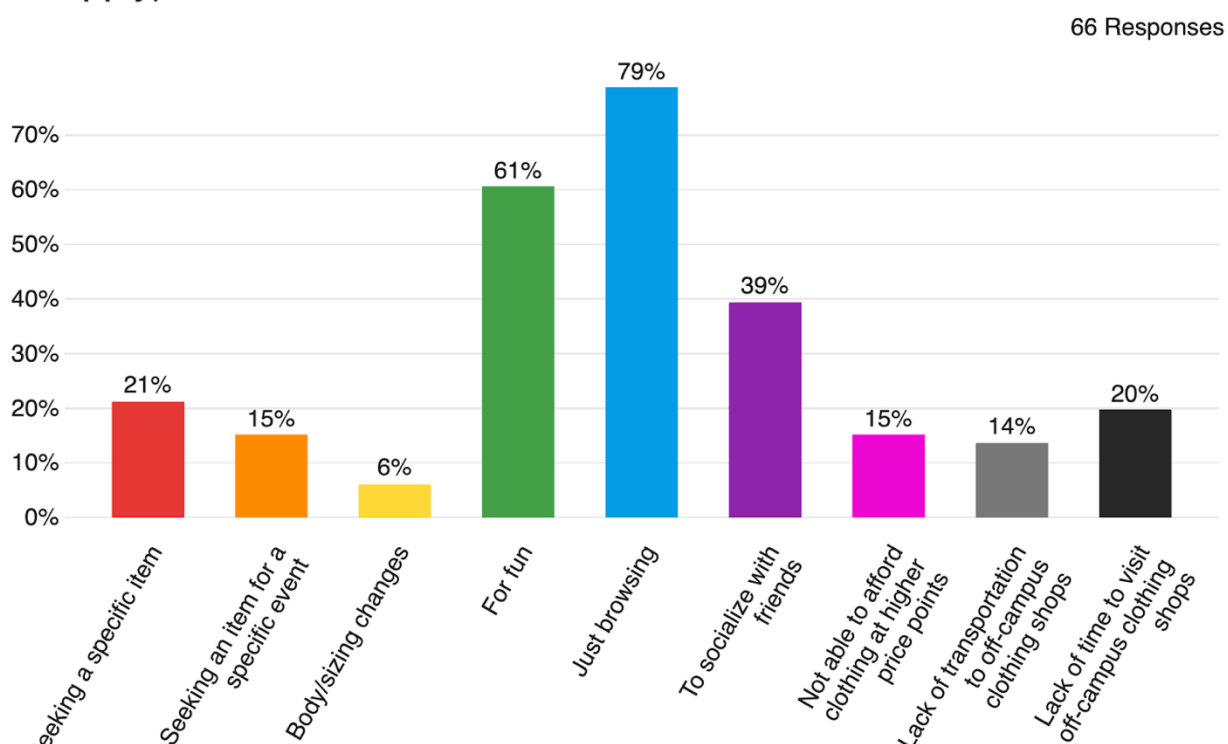


Figure 13

For respondents who have not visited the Free Closet, when asked why they have not visited before, 48% reported not visiting for any particular reason, 31% reported that open hours conflict with their schedule, and 28% responded that they have not needed any new clothing (see fig. 14). As more time passes since the Free Closet first opened, members are being added to the team, in hopes of hosting additional open hours, so that 31% who have scheduling conflicts can hopefully visit the Free Closet in the future.

Q15 - Why have you not visited the Scripps Free Closet before? (select all that apply)

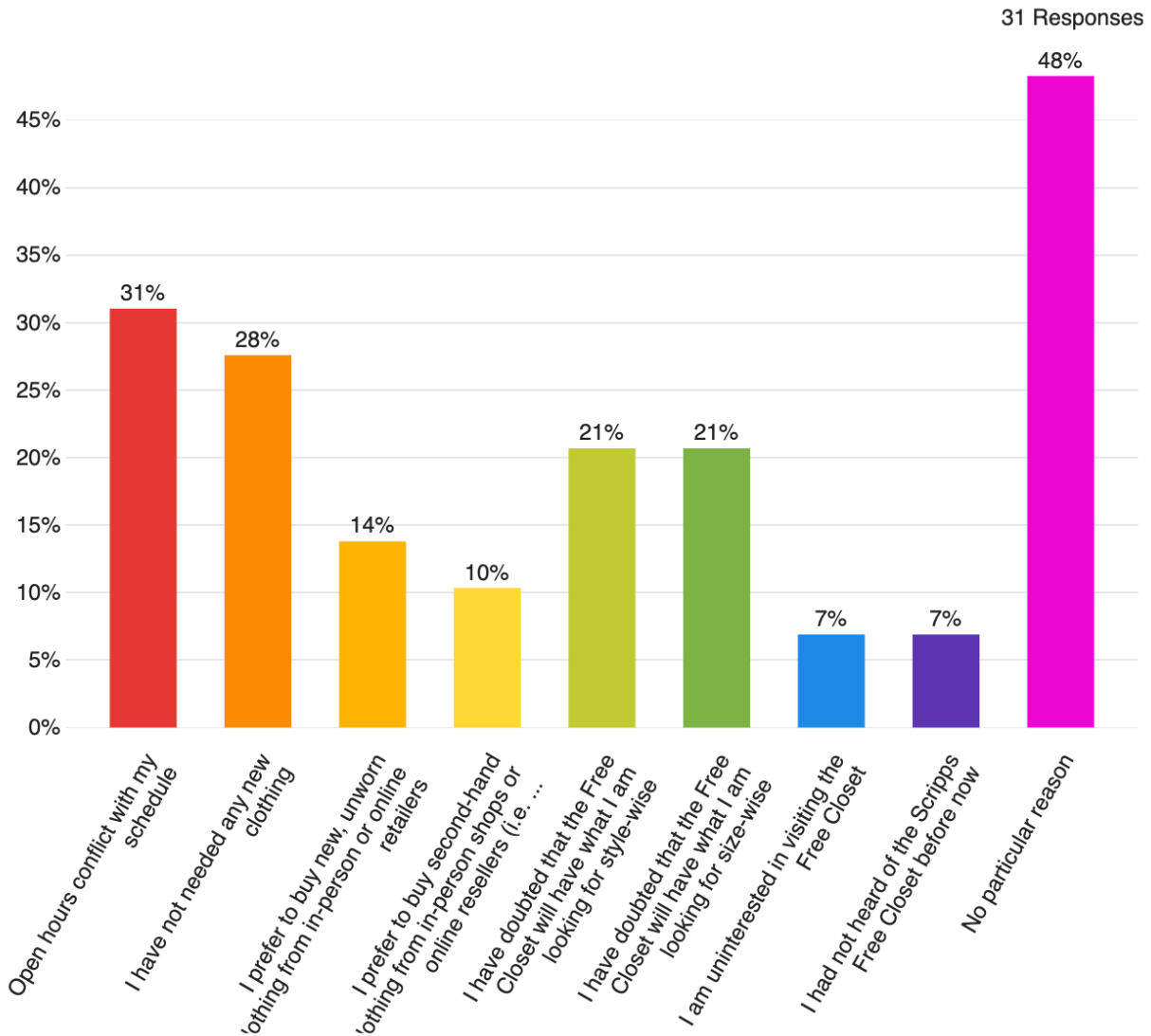


Figure 14

74% of respondents who have visited the Free Closet reported having acquired at least one item, and the majority of respondents (61%) have acquired between 1-5 items from the Closet (see fig. 15).

Q10 - Please select the approximate amount of items you have ever acquired from the Free Closet.

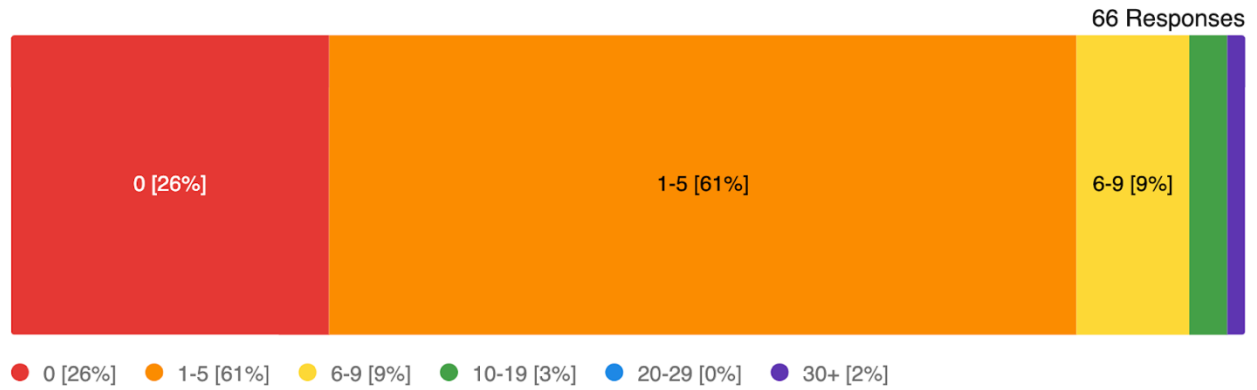


Figure 15

Spontaneity seems to be the most common reason respondents who took home an item from the Free Closet decided to do so, with 89% of respondents identifying spontaneity as a reason. The second most common answer, at 40%, was unwillingness to purchase a comparable item at a higher price point due to the respondent's perception of its value (see fig. 16).

### Q11 - What was the reason(s) you decided to take home that/those item(s) from the Free Closet? (select all that apply)

48 Responses

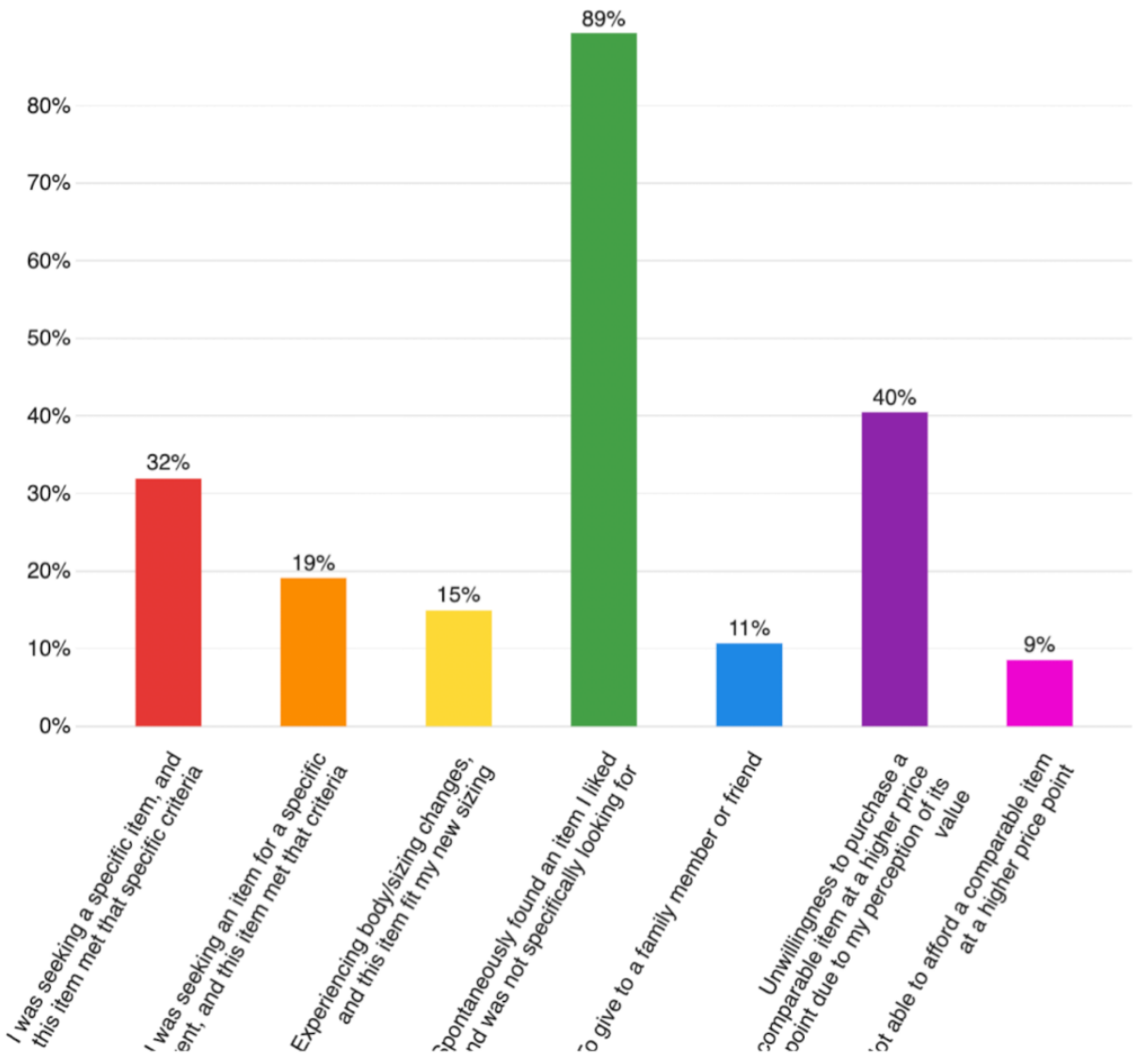
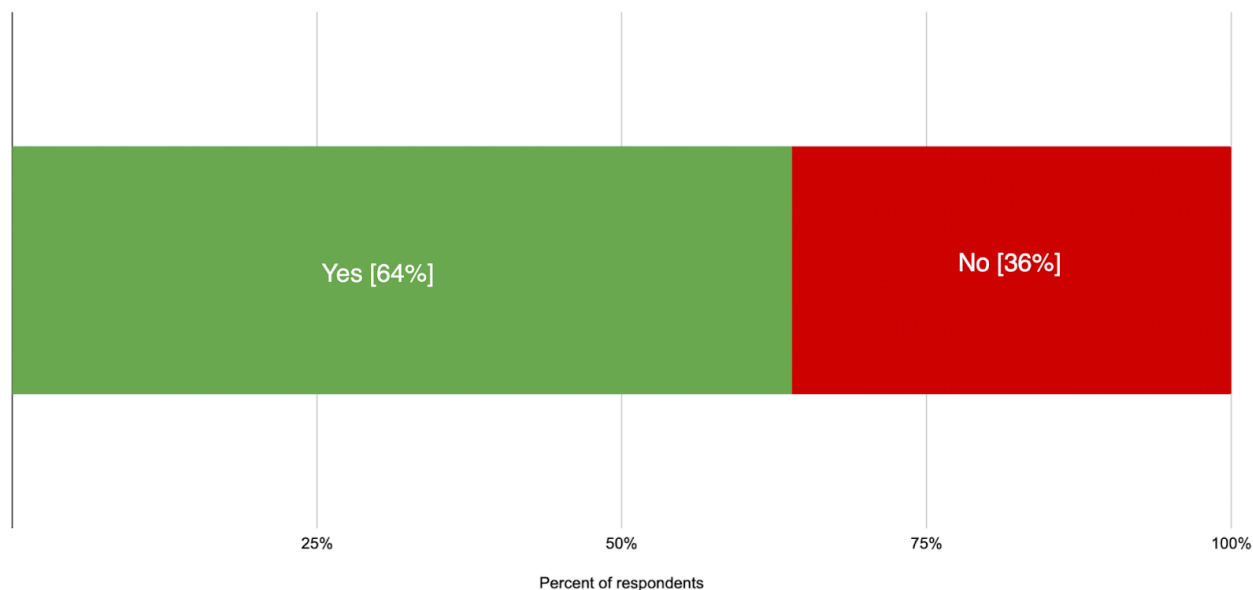


Figure 16

For the majority of students who have acquired an item from the Free Closet, that acquisition replaced a potential purchase. When asked to imagine a hypothetical situation in which they had not found the item they had taken home, 64% of respondents who have acquired clothing from the Closet indicated that they would have bought a comparable item (see fig. 17).

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Q12 - Suppose you had not found that/those item(s) from the Free Closet. Do you believe you would have purchased a comparable item to fulfill its same purpose?



*Figure 17*

Additionally, respondents who have visited the Free Closet at least once were asked if they ever felt an urge to shop, with 74% of respondents answering “yes” (see fig. 18). Of that 74% of respondents who have visited the Free Closet and felt an urge to shop for clothing in the past, 59% reported feeling a lessened urge to shop after visiting the Free Closet (see fig. 19). This indicates to me that, for most students, visiting the Free Closet brings about pleasurable feelings similar to the feelings students experience when browsing for clothing from a store. This, in turn, suggests that, in general, students could be browsing for clothing in stores less often after they visit the Free Closet to fulfill these urges, which can also be described by the fun-related reasoning given for shopping/browsing by 70% of respondents, displayed in figure 6.



### Q13 - Do you ever feel an urge to shop for clothing?

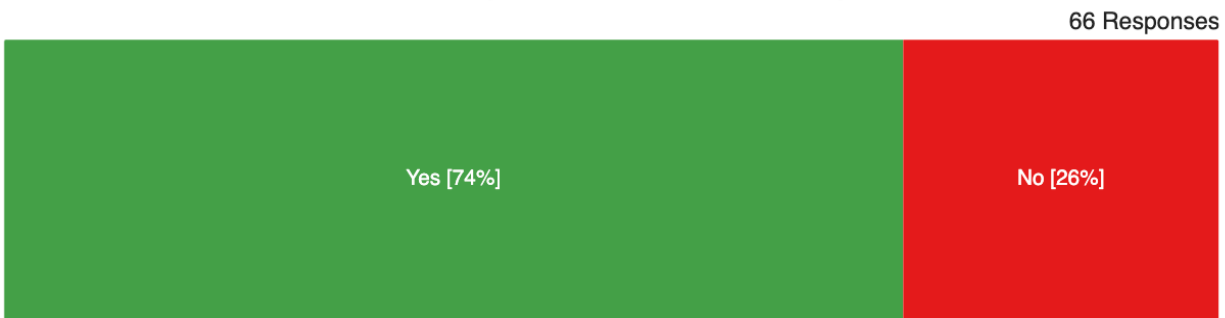


Figure 18

### Q14 - If you had an urge to shop before visiting the Free Closet, do you recall feeling a lessened urge to shop after your visit?

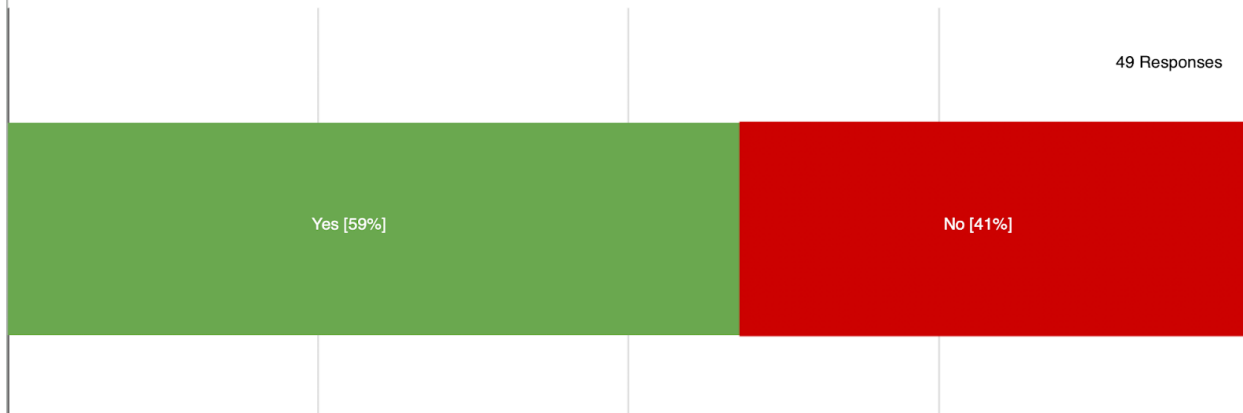


Figure 19

## Clothing Disposal

Let us transition from clothing acquisition to clothing disposal. 42% of all respondents reported having donated clothing to the Free Closet in the past (see fig. 20), compared to 66% of respondents reporting discarding clothing in another way while on campus (see fig. 21).

Q16 - Have you ever donated clothing to the Free Closet?

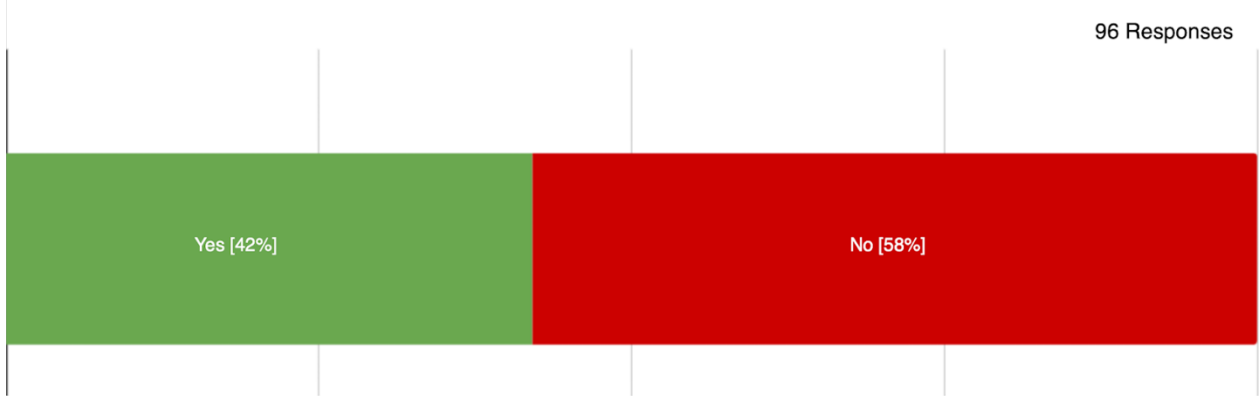


Figure 20

Q18 - Within the past school year, have you discarded clothing in other ways while on campus?



Figure 21

The most common way respondents chose to dispose of clothing, if not through the Free Closet, is by giving items away to family or friends. Two methods are tied for the second most common method of disposal, with donating to a national thrift chain and throwing in the trash each having been selected by 16% of respondents (see fig. 22).

Q19 - What method(s) of disposal did you use to discard that/those item(s)? (select all that apply)

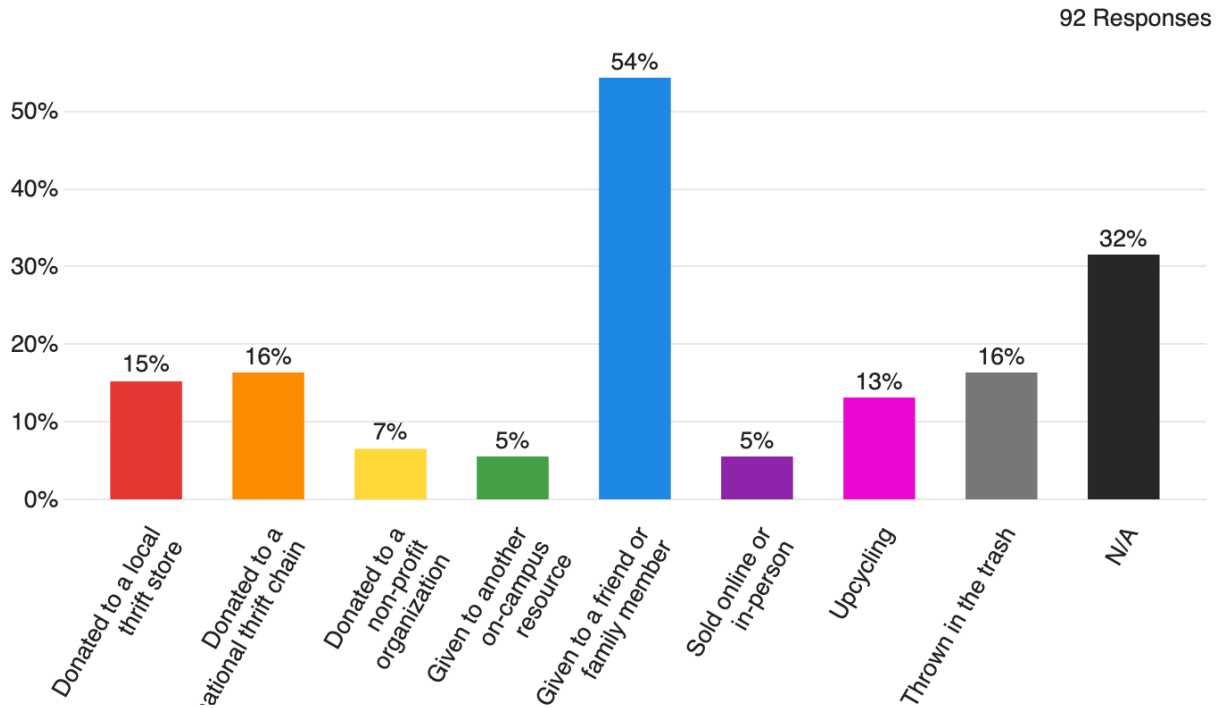


Figure 22

Finally, respondents were asked to consider a scenario in which the Scripps Free Closet did not exist, and select how they would dispose of clothing on campus if this were the case. Most respondents (66%) indicated that they would give clothing to a family member or a friend, 49% answered that they would donate to a local thrift store, 41% answered that they would donate to a national thrift chain, and 41% answered that they would give their clothing to another on-campus resource (see fig. 23).

**Q20 - Suppose the Scripps Free Closet didn't exist. How would you discard your unwanted clothing while on campus? Consider your access to reliable transportation, the time it takes to travel to a donation center or sell clothing, the rush to move out during finals week, and other relevant factors. (select all that apply)**

95 Responses

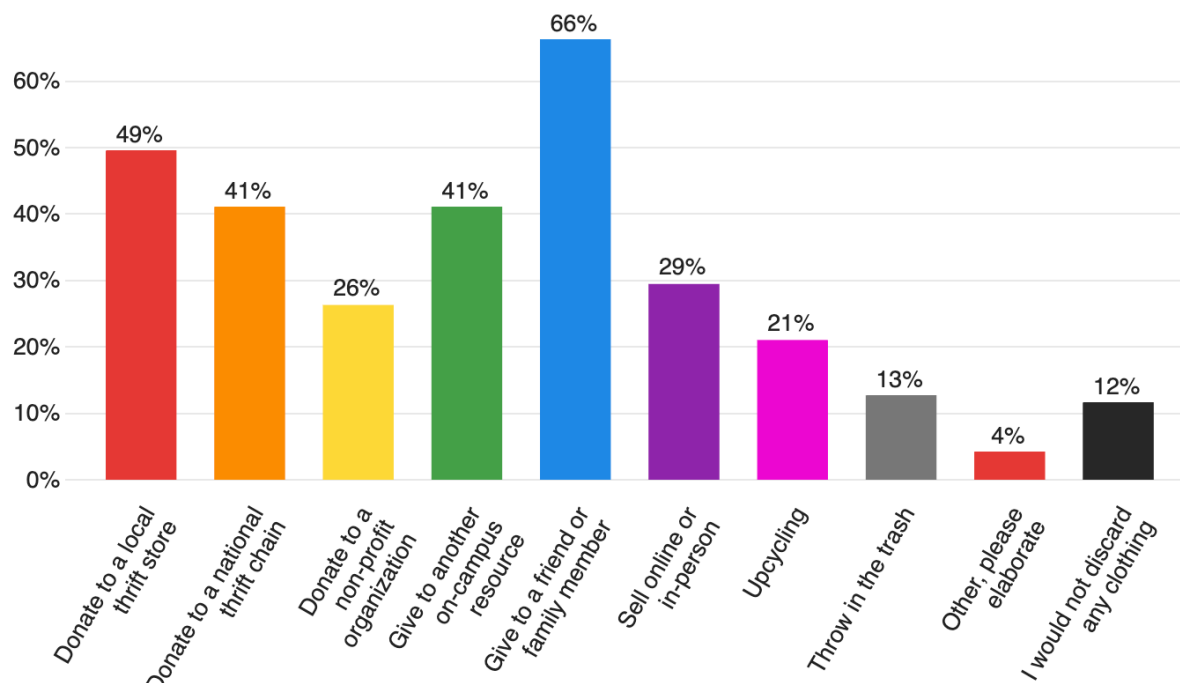


Figure 23

## Discussion of results

There are many implications that can be drawn from the above results, and here I will be focusing on those that aid in answering the thesis question: “Is the Scripps Free Closet an effective sustainability initiative on campus by a) decreasing the amount of clothing students buy and/or b) decreasing the amount of clothing students dispose of ‘irresponsibly?’”

Firstly, responses indicate that, independent of the Scripps Free Closet, students are already participating in the free sharing economy of clothing in their personal communities. 74% of respondents indicated that they have received clothing for free within the past school year, with 64% answering that they received free clothing from family or friends, and 10% answering

that they received clothing for free from another on campus resource (see fig. 10). Additionally, 54% of respondents indicated that they have given away clothing to family or friends within the past school year, and 5% indicated that they have given away clothing to another on campus resource (see fig. 22). Not only that, but in the hypothetical absence of the Free Closet, 66% of respondents indicated that they would give away clothing to family or friends, and 41% indicated that they would give away clothing to another on campus resource (see fig. 23). These statistics indicate to me that students participate in the free sharing economy of clothing in their normal lives. This suggests to me that there is potential for student use of an on-campus free sharing economy of clothing, such as the Scripps Free Closet.

A majority of respondents (68%) have visited the Free Closet (see fig. 11) and a majority of respondents who have visited the Free Closet (74%) have acquired at least one item (see fig. 12). 79%, 61%, and 39% of respondents answered that they visited the Free Closet just to browse, for fun, and to socialize with friends, respectively (see fig. 13). Additionally, 59% of respondents who have visited the Free Closet and indicated that they do sometimes feel an urge to shop answered that their urge to shop was lessened by their visit (see fig. 19). Therefore, I would posit that Scripps students are utilizing the Free Closet not only to acquire clothing, but to fulfill an urge to shop, either by browsing through clothing, by having a good time alone or with friends, or both.

Responses indicate that most acquisitions from the Free Closet replace a potential purchase, but, students do not appear to have confidence in being able to find specific items from the Free Closet. 64% of respondents who have acquired clothing from the Free Closet answered that, had they not found that item from the Free Closet, they would have bought a comparable item (see fig. 17). This signals to me that many students are acquiring items from the Free Closet

that they would have bought had the Free Closet not provided it to them. Yet, only 21% of respondents who have visited the Closet reported doing so because they were seeking a specific item, and only 15% visited because they were seeking an item for a specific event, while 79% of respondents reported visiting just to browse (see fig. 13). I take this to mean that, while students are having success finding clothing that they want or need at the Free Closet, which is signaled by the 64% of respondents who would have bought a comparable item had they not found the item they took home, students do not necessarily expect to find success at the Free Closet, which is signaled by the low percentage of respondents who visited the Free Closet in hopes of finding something specific. Therefore, I would posit that the Free Closet is reducing the amount of clothing items students are buying, but this may only be the case when students visit the Free Closet prior to browsing for items to buy. Based off this, I hypothesize that the experience of visiting the Free Closet and acquiring an item that they may have bought instead might compel students to visit the Free Closet in the future when looking for something specific before visiting a store. To accomplish this, I believe that measures should be taken to increase attendance at the Free Closet so more students can experience replacing a potential purchase with an item from the Free Closet. I hypothesize that this can be achieved either by expanding open hours in hopes of alleviating scheduling conflicts for some students (31% of respondents who have not visited the Free Closet cited scheduling conflicts as reasoning), or by advertising open hours more widely to actively encourage more students to visit, as 48% of respondents who have not visited the Closet reported not doing so for no particular reason (see fig. 14), and I hypothesize that more advertisement may remind students about the Closet and prompt them to visit.

Students are not only utilizing the Free Closet to acquire clothing, but they are also utilizing it to dispose of clothing. While less than half (42%) of respondents have ever donated to

the Free Closet (see fig. 20), this percentage represents a substantial number of students who do utilize the Free Closet to dispose of their clothing. Independent of the Free Closet, most students appear to be disposing of their clothing “responsibly,” with 54% of total respondents having given clothing to a friend or family member, only 16% having donated clothing to a national thrift chain, and only 16% having thrown clothing in the trash (see fig. 22). This is especially telling when compared to how respondents would dispose of clothing if the Free Closet did not exist; 41% of respondents said they would donate clothing to a national thrift chain, which represents many clothing items that would have either created profits for a polluting and exploitative fashion disposal industry or would have become pollution itself. While only 13% said they would throw clothing in the trash, that still represents numerous clothing items that are saved from landfill due to the presence of the Free Closet. Further research could investigate why students choose to discard of their clothing in other ways, including in “irresponsible” ways, and what can be done to increase the rate at which students donate to the Free Closet compared to the rate at which they dispose of clothing “irresponsibly.” I hypothesize that more widespread education about the negative impacts of the clothing disposal industry could encourage students to swap their “irresponsible” disposal methods for donating to the Free Closet.

To answer the thesis question “Is the Scripps Free Closet an effective sustainability initiative on campus by a) decreasing the amount of clothing students buy and/or b) decreasing the amount of clothing students dispose of ‘irresponsibly?’”, I would say “yes.” As discussed above, students are replacing potential purchases with acquisitions from the Free Closet, and, therefore, the Free Closet reduces the amount of clothing students buy. Additionally, students are utilizing the Free Closet to dispose of their clothing, and responses indicate that the ability to

donate to the Free Closet reduces the amount of clothing students would dispose of “irresponsibly.”



## Conclusion

The fashion industry poses great threats to the world's ecosystems and exploits human labor for profits, and, while it is easy to feel guilty for one's own contributions to this issue, it is important to remember that individual consumers are not at fault for the atrocities committed by the fashion industry. Still, small, collective steps can lead to widespread change, and I hope that the Scripps Free Closet can be a long-standing part of this effort. After conducting a survey among Scripps students, I found that the Scripps Free Closet is an effective sustainability initiative on campus, not only by decreasing the amount of clothing that students buy, but also by decreasing the amount of clothing students dispose of "irresponsibly."

Responses indicated that, independent of the Free Closet, students are already participating in the sharing economy of clothing within their own communities, and this suggests potential for ongoing student utilization of a campus community closet at Scripps. Most respondents indicated that they have visited the Free Closet before, and most respondents who have visited the Closet at least once indicated that they have acquired at least one item. While responses indicated that the presence of the Free Closet diminishes the amount of clothing students buy, with the majority of Free Closet acquisitions replacing a potential purchase, students do not appear to have confidence that they will find what they are looking for at the Free Closet. I suggest that hosting more open hours each week and advertising these open hours more widely should increase the number of students that visit the Free Closet, which should, in turn, mean that more students will find success in acquiring one or more items from the Free Closet. As more students experience finding success at the Free Closet, I hypothesize that students will gain greater confidence in their ability to find specific items at the Closet.

The Free Closet also seems successful at diminishing the number of items students dispose of "irresponsibly." Responses indicated that the ability to donate clothing to the Free

Closet curbs students from disposing of their clothing in “irresponsible” ways, such as donating to a national thrift chain. While only 42% of respondents indicated they have donated to the Free Closet before, this represents a substantial number of students who utilize the Closet to dispose of their clothing.

The Scripps Free Closet is a not-for-profit project that is run entirely by student volunteers, yet, I feel that the project should continue to grow in future years. The Scripps Free Closet is utilized by many students on campus for a variety of reasons, in addition to sustainability. Thus, I feel that it is important to make this resource even more accessible to students from all 5Cs including Scripps. This can be done through expanding open hours, advertising open hours more widely, and increasing the capacity of inventory the Free Closet can store and display at once. As displayed in Figure 2, the current storage room that the Free Closet utilizes cannot accommodate any more clothing than we are already receiving on a regular basis, so, in order to expand operations and accept more donations from the Claremont Colleges community, the physical storage space of the Closet must expand as well.

Additionally, the Free Closet team has grown fivefold, as we started off with Cecelia and me as the only volunteers; we now have grown to a total of ten team members, including us. This extra help has already allowed us to expand from holding open hours only once per week last year, to now holding open hours twice per week. With even more team members, open hours could be held more often than twice per week, and we would also have the capacity to manage more donations. However, I feel that the workload associated with being a Free Closet team member is enough that team members should be paid for their labor, whether that be with an hourly wage or a semesterly stipend. Concurrently, I feel that consistent institutional funding should be allotted to the Free Closet to help cover operating expenses. Currently, the Free Closet

funds operating expenses through grants that we apply for each semester, including through the Scripps Student Investment Fund and through grants from The Motley Coffeehouse, Scripps' student-run coffeeshop. Guaranteed institutional funding would be beneficial to the Free Closet to maintain and expand the project, and could be used towards buying sturdier clothing racks, storage totes to replace the many cardboard boxes we currently use, additional storage space to accommodate the large amounts of donations that students drop off during move-out in the spring, and pants hangers that, no matter how many times we replenish them, always end up disappearing after some time. Consistent institutional funding could be accomplished by establishing the Free Closet as an official organization (also known as a CLORG on campus).

However future leaders of the Free Closet decide to maintain, and possibly expand, the project, I feel that it is imperative that the Free Closet lives on well after Cecelia and I graduate this year, and that Scripps has a responsibility as a historically women's residential liberal arts college to create an inclusive and sustainable campus. Part of providing an inclusive campus means ensuring students' basic needs are met, including the need for clothing, as well as providing ample third places for students to build community outside of their academic responsibilities. Additionally, my perception of Scripps after having attended the college for the past four years is that the administration loves to tout the campus as sustainable, but often relies on their students to lead sustainability initiatives, which is challenging considering that the administration is infamous among students as being exceedingly difficult to work with. I feel that if Scripps wants to step up its sustainability initiatives, it is necessary that the administration supports students' efforts to make change, including showing stronger support for the Free Closet.

I am honored to have had the opportunity to merge two of favorite things – shopping and free stuff – to make my dream of having a community closet at Scripps a reality. I am also ecstatic (and dare I say relieved) to learn that the Free Closet is utilized and valued by so students, and that the effectiveness of the project as a sustainability initiative holds up after research. The current proliferation of the fast fashion industry will always concern me, but it is important to note that small actions can lead to collective change. I am proud of the Scripps community for coming together to mitigate the negative impacts of the fashion industry through their use of the Free Closet, whether students are visiting out of a concern for sustainability, to meet their basic needs, or to simply have a good time. May the Scripps Free Closet live on and continue to provide for students for years to come!

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