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Theorising intention to buy second-hand wedding dresses: a ZMET study

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the limited literature on second-hand purchasing in the bridalwear context by examining the emotionally charged, high-involvement nature of wedding dress shopping. Despite environmental benefits and lower costs, many brides remain hesitant to choose second-hand options. Using the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) with 18 UK brides, we identify how sustainability orientation, second-hand market knowledge, bridal identity, and shopping experience shape purchase intentions. While sustainability plays a role, the symbolic and emotional significance of the dress, alongside expectations around convenience, service, presentation, and sensory experience, emerge as central influences. Our findings highlight the importance of emotional and experiential alignment in sustainable consumption and suggest that second-hand bridalwear retailers should offer boutique-style experiences to meet expectations and enhance the appeal of second-hand options.

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ZMET; second-hand clothing; wedding dress; collaborative fashion consumption; sharing economy; bridal identity

Introduction

Weddings in Western culture are highly commoditised social events, filled with ritual and symbolism (Friese, 1997). Aspects of this appear in other cultures too, although we explore the cultural norms specifically of UK-based brides and the Western wedding traditions they engage with. Modern media has shaped many brides' desires for their wedding to be a perfect day where the bride and groom are like a princess and prince (Dobscha & Foxman, 1998). This romanticised and highly commercialised narrative blends tradition with modern trends that reflect not only the attitudes and beliefs of the bride and groom, but their reference groups too. While weddings remain a significant life event, evolving social trends and economic pressures are reshaping consumer behaviour in the bridalwear market. Wedding costs in the UK are continuing to rise, averaging £23,250 in recent years (Hitched, 2025), and marriage rates are continuing to decline, with approximately a quarter of a million marriages in 2022 (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2024) These trends are leading some couples to reconsider traditional, high-cost weddings.

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The UK bridalwear market is highly fragmented, with no dominant players. Instead, small businesses tend to focus on serving local communities through personalised services and boutique offerings (Mak, 2024). The average wedding dress in the UK costs £1,309 (Shephard, 2024) and as household disposable income has declined, many brides are experiencing financial pressure to consider more affordable options, such as high street collections (Mak, 2024). Moreover, sustainability is becoming a growing concern, with 68% of UK couples including at least one sustainable element in their wedding (WedPro, 2024). In response to these market forces, second-hand bridalwear offers a highly cost-effective solution that is both eco-friendly and accessible. These second-hand options also represent a high-involvement purchase decision, where brides must weigh their emotional and symbolic expectations against the desire for sustainability and affordability. However, despite these benefits, second-hand bridalwear remains a niche choice among brides, due in part to social stigma, symbolic expectations, and the emotional significance attached to the wedding dress.

Wedding dresses represent a high-context, high-involvement purchase decision. High-context purchases are shaped by deep cultural meanings, social expectations, and emotional symbolism; the value of the product goes far beyond its functional use (Friese, 1997). In this case, the wedding dress symbolises personal identity, family values, and societal ideals about romance, beauty, and tradition. High-involvement purchases, meanwhile, require substantial emotional and cognitive investment. They are typically expensive, one-time, or highly visible decisions that carry perceived social or psychological risk (Park & Chang, 2022). Wedding dresses fit this category precisely: they are bought with great care, carry significant emotional weight, and are central to how the bride is seen, both by herself and others, on a culturally important day. As such, they present a unique context for exploring sustainable consumption, particularly where ethical values may compete with symbolic expectations.

As anticipated, weddings, as high-visibility social events, provide an ideal platform for encouraging sustainable consumption. This occurs not only through the bride and groom's choice to purchase sustainable wedding products but also through the increased visibility of these practices to their guests. However, sustainable consumption practices vary widely in motives and determinants depending on nationality and context (Nguyen & Johnson, 2020). Despite growing interest in sustainable weddings and fashion, there remains a significant gap in literature regarding wedding-related sustainable consumption. While substantial research exists on sustainable consumer behaviour in fashion, the emotional and symbolic dimensions of high-involvement purchases like wedding dresses remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by exploring how brides navigate sustainability in such a personal, ritualistic purchase, highlighting the complexity of second-hand wedding dress consumption. Current sustainability research often focuses on fast fashion, overlooking the high-involvement nature and personal identity work in wedding dress decisions. As noted by Hassan et al. (2022), ethical decision-making in high-involvement purchases requires further exploration, particularly concerning sustainability. The UK offers a unique context for this study, given its active sustainability discussions and the prominence of its bridalwear market.

Sustainable dresses can be manufactured, but promoting second-hand dresses allows for an accessible, less expensive alternative for brides. It also extends the life of the fabric used for the gown, which significantly lessens environmental impacts

through ownership chaining and lowered primary production (Levänen et al., 2021). The environmental cost of a wedding dress is significant; manufacturing a wedding dress uses approximately 9000 litres of water (Stillwhite.com, 2021), produces 400 pounds of rubbish, and 63 tons of carbon dioxide (Harrison, 2008). The dress will be worn for around 12 hours as a single use item. Despite these significant concerns, the unsustainable nature of wedding dresses is generally overlooked by society (Kwon, 2017). Addressing these concerns by shifting towards second-hand dresses could provide both environmental and economic benefits, helping brides align their values with their purchases. Businesses can benefit both society and the environment by encouraging more sustainable wedding planning, widening access to second-hand wedding dresses, and helping to negate the perceived stigma of wearing a second-hand dress.

The issue is not only about increasing second-hand wedding dress consumption, but about understanding why these acquisition routes remain niche. Our aim is not only to encourage second-hand bridalwear adoption, but to understand why, despite sustainability becoming more important, these purchasing routes remain niche for many brides. Therefore, we aim to understand how brides approach their wedding dress search and what aspects are most important to them in their purchase experience. We address this gap by asking the research question: *What factors influence UK brides' intentions to purchase a second-hand wedding dress?*

Gaining insight into this high-involvement, emotionally significant decision, where sustainability is becoming increasingly salient, offers valuable knowledge for both scholars and practitioners. To investigate this, we adopt a grounded theory approach supported by the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), drawing on interviews with 18 UK brides. Analysing this data enables us to offer practical recommendations for making second-hand wedding dresses more appealing, contributing to efforts to reduce textile waste and promote sustainable consumption. In doing so, we also advance the literature on sustainable consumer behaviour by identifying the key factors shaping brides' intentions and decision-making processes. While sustainable fashion is a growing area of research, few studies have explored how sustainability motivations operate within emotionally charged, identity-defining purchases such as bridalwear. This study addresses that gap by examining how symbolic consumption, social ritual, and emotional resonance influence second-hand intentions in the bridal context.

Despite a growing body of research on CFC, second-hand bridalwear remains underexplored, particularly with regard to the emotional and high-involvement nature of wedding dress purchases (Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018; Henninger et al., 2020). Our study fills this gap by examining how sustainability, symbolic consumption, and bridal identity influence brides' decisions to purchase second-hand dresses. This builds upon existing literature in sustainable fashion and high-involvement consumer behaviour (Friese, 1997; Min et al., 2018), while responding to calls for more research on the cultural and psychographic factors that influence ethical decision-making (Hassan et al., 2022). By focusing specifically on second-hand bridalwear, our research also contributes to broader discussions on sustainable fashion consumption (Busalim et al., 2022) and the sharing economy (Rojanakit et al., 2022), offering new insights into a complex and underexamined market.

Literature review

Our literature search reveals limited academic work on second-hand wedding dress consumption. While only two papers directly address second-hand bridalwear, both in the context of the South Korean rental market (Kwon, 2017; Min & DeLong, 2015), we recognise that this topic can be situated within broader literatures on second-hand fashion, luxury resale, and sustainable consumption. We address this gap by reviewing the symbolic role of the wedding dress in constructing bridal identity, before situating second-hand wedding dresses within the wider spheres of sustainable fashion, collaborative consumption, and the sharing economy.

While purchase intentions have been widely examined in sustainable fashion, most studies focus on everyday clothing rather than high-involvement, symbolic purchases like wedding dresses. In the Gen Z context, Narayanan (2022) shows that corporate social responsibility perceptions can increase both PI and willingness to pay through brand equity effects. In the second-hand fashion space, Prisco et al. (2025) combine the Norm Activation Model with the Model of Goal-Directed Behaviour, finding that personal norms, desire, and anticipated emotions (but not perceived control) drive Gen Z's second-hand clothing purchase intentions, with price value also playing a role. Together, these studies highlight attitudinal, normative, and emotional drivers of purchase intentions, but leave unexplored how identity work, ritual, and the shopping experience might strengthen, or undermine, intentions in a bridalwear context.

Bridal identity and symbolic consumption

Consumers negotiate their identities through consumption (Banister & Hogg, 2004) and define themselves through their possessions (Latter et al., 2010). They negotiate personal and social identity through their clothing choices (Banister & Hogg, 2004), a need which is heightened for a wedding. Wedding dresses serve as key symbols of the wedding and act as the focal point of bridal identity (Min et al., 2018), meaning identity construction overlaps with symbolic consumption here.

During luxury purchase selection, consumers consider utility and price, and symbolic value (Sedikides & Hart, 2022). Consumers may need to choose between sustainability and other product attributes (Luchs & Kumar, 2017), including for wedding dresses. The importance of product attributes varies by consumer, and further, priorities can change during the decision-making process (Park & Chang, 2022). This suggests that for some, a second-hand dress will be a trade-off, and for others, an ideal purchase to fit their bridal identity.

Bridal identity is a temporary form of self-expression through which the bride communicates her tastes, aesthetics, and values (Boden, 2003; Min et al., 2018). The wedding dress extends the personal body into a social body (Parkins, 2021), becoming a visible symbol interpreted by others as part of the broader wedding narrative (Dobscha & Foxman, 1998). As such, bridal identity is not solely about the dress itself, but about negotiating the bride's individual consumer preferences alongside the collective norms and expectations of her social group, shaped by market forces and actors involved in the wedding ritual (Fagbola et al., 2023, p. 15). This symbolic weight contributes to the perception that second-hand dresses may not fully embody the idealised bridal image,

helping to explain why they remain a marginal choice despite their environmental and economic benefits.

Social role theory suggests that bridal identity comes with expectations and obligations which add pressure for the bride to plan a perfect wedding, and to wear a dream wedding dress (Min et al., 2018). These pressures happen at a time when the bride may be expected to take a significant interest in her importance, appearance, and special social status, but also to satisfy the expectations of others. Negotiation of expectations has been briefly documented in the literature, but never as a focus.

Typically, a wedding dress would be used to symbolise purity, but it also makes a statement around luxury and the desirability of the bride. However, in the same way consumers seek out typical luxury items to convey status and uniqueness (Latter et al., 2010), symbolic consumption can extend past luxury purchases to ethical purchasing decisions (Ekström & Salomonson, 2014). Second-hand wedding dresses allow brides to highlight uniqueness through creative choice counter-conformity, a socially acceptable means of expressing oneself while conforming to tradition (Latter et al., 2010). By choosing a second-hand dress, brides may be conveying values of sustainability, authenticity, or heritage if she wears a hand-me-down dress, which would add additional layers of symbolism. They may also simply be responding to time or financial constraints. This is contrasted by typical luxury clothing desires of wealth and the status bought by visibly associating with a brand (Latter et al., 2010).

Some luxury second-hand clothing is purchased for status seeking and social climbing (Kessous & Valette-Florence, 2019), which may extend to this context. A number of external forces, or gatekeepers, can also have varying effects on bridal identity, including family, media, religious institutions, and market actors (i.e. vendors) (Boden, 2003; Dobscha & Foxman, 1998), while as recently suggested by Fagbola et al. (2023), other less powerful audiences include peers and other reference groups.

Sustainable garments are more saleable when they appeal to a consumer's self-concept and boost their self-esteem (Henninger et al., 2020). Self-concept and self-esteem are important functions of a wedding dress in relation to building bridal identity, suggesting that brides won't develop, or sustain, purchase intentions for second-hand wedding dresses that do not satisfy their bridal identity. Beyond the dress itself, shopping experience is vital in constructing bridal identity (Friese, 1997); indeed, searching for a wedding dress can be considered a ritual which is only completed when the right dress is purchased (Sykes & Brace-Govan, 2015).

Sustainable wedding dresses

Originally, UK brides simply wore their best dress to their wedding, which aligns closely to the circular economy principles of reuse. However, it has been customary to buy a new wedding dress since Queen Victoria's wedding in 1840, the same wedding in which wearing a white dress became popularised (Chrisman-Campbell, 2020). Now, sharing economy practices are challenging the dominant 'take-make-use-dispose' model favoured by fashion at a time when sustainability is increasingly part of the public consciousness (Henninger et al., 2021). Although the fashion industry is a notable polluter, some manufacturers are taking steps to reduce harm (Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020). For wedding dresses, this means adopting more sustainable materials and increasing

transparency surrounding manufacturing practices (Lieber & Sergison, 2021), but sustainability extends into the usage and post-usage phases of clothing too (Iran & Schrader, 2017).

The availability of second-hand dresses is determined by brides choosing to donate or sell their used dress, and our study focuses on this cycle between the usage and post-usage phases. These behaviours are not well documented within extant literature. In the post-usage phase brides must choose what to do with their often soiled, now-worn dress. Alongside donating or selling their dress, they can also choose to save the dress as a future hand-me-down or alter the dress for re-use. Our own interviews with brides suggested that many were unsure what to do with it. In future research we aim to explore what happens to dresses after their use further, but it is not within the scope of this study.

Reusing a dress is often considered more sustainable than manufacturing a new one, even if made with eco-friendly materials (Kwon, 2017; Levänen et al., 2021). However, it is important to acknowledge that second-hand consumption also carries environmental impacts. Rather than presenting a perfect solution, second-hand dresses offer a way to reduce, rather than eliminate, the footprint of bridal fashion, warranting further investigation into the motivations and barriers affecting their uptake. In the Korean market around 75% of brides rent their dress, but unlike in the UK, they conceptualise dress rental as a cultural norm (Kwon, 2017) rather than a sustainability-related or budget-conscious choice.

The environmental impacts of the rental business model may not be insignificant (Levänen et al., 2021), and so we note six types of sustainable wedding dress excluding rental dresses: those made of eco-friendly materials, pre/post-consumer waste, less material/waste, convertible dresses, dresses altered for reuse, and previously worn dresses (i.e. second-hand) (Kwon, 2017). Our study focuses on commercial redistribution, to spotlight the role of business and marketing in facilitating redistribution of ownership. We exclude rental and hand-me-downs and focus on three commercial means of redistribution: online retail, boutiques with second-hand collections (i.e. curated boutiques), and charity shops.

Second-hand clothing

CFC provides a lens with which to examine the uptake of second-hand wedding dresses by considering second-hand clothing redistribution in a broader form. Consumers can own garments via gifting, swapping, or purchasing second-hand, and also access non-ownership via renting, sharing, lending, or leasing (Iran & Schrader, 2017). This can be done online or offline, but little literature has been produced about either (Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020).

Online, general marketplace apps like eBay, Vinted, Depop and Facebook Marketplace, or alternatively, specialised sites like Bridal Reloved (commercial) and Stillwhite (commercially-enabled peer-to-peer), offer the opportunity for brides to locate and purchase second-hand wedding dresses at reduced prices. Offline, charity shops and bridal boutiques stocking second-hand collections provide opportunities for purchase through formal redistribution hubs that obscure the identity of the previous owner. We know very little about the role of place in CFC, and less in relation to second-hand wedding dresses. Boutiques have been shown

to have an important role in the shopping experience, with work from the UK (Friese, 1997), Australia (Sykes & Brace-Govan, 2015) and America (Min et al., 2018) all emphasising this. However, such a small number of the UK's boutiques stock second-hand collections that shopping channels have increased in importance because redistribution of ownership will depend on the brides' ability to access the purchase.

Limited research suggests that beyond basic hygiene concerns which are commonly cited in CFC literature, consumers may prefer to acquire second-hand clothing through organisations instead of through peer-to-peer options, in part to remove the identity of the previous owner and also to lessen contamination fears (N. L. Kim et al., 2023). Alternatively, knowing the identity of the previous owner may help to facilitate purchase because through symbolic interaction items can be imbued with positive properties from desirable people (L. N. Kim & Jin, 2023).

Research on CFC highlights various motivations for purchase, particularly economic and sustainability-related reasons (Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020; Park & Joyner Armstrong, 2019). However, studies suggest that sustainability motivations may be less influential than identity-driven motivations, with personal expression playing a more significant role (Kessous & Valette-Florence, 2019; McNeill & Venter, 2019). Similarly, research shows that motivations for second-hand shopping often include a desire for uniqueness, nostalgia, frugality (Guiot & Roux, 2010), and fashionability (Ferraro et al., 2016). These motivations can be especially relevant in the bridalwear context, where the emotional significance of the purchase may outweigh purely ethical considerations. These motivations can differ across social classes: affluent consumers may enjoy treasure hunting for exclusive, hard-to-find items, while less affluent consumers tend to focus on economic benefits (Arrigo, 2021). Conversely, fear of judgement may prevent some from revealing they wear second-hand clothing (Rulikova, 2020). Given that wedding dresses are often high-involvement, one-time purchases, similar knowledge barriers that hinder sustainable fashion adoption may arise (Busalim et al., 2022). This could lead brides to rely on heuristics, such as associating price with quality or preferring new over second-hand to avoid judgement.

While Becker-Leifhold and Iran (2018) highlight sustainability as a key motivator in CFC, the intersection of these motivations with bridal identity in the context of wedding dress shopping has received little attention, a critical gap our study addresses. Furthermore, existing research has largely focused on everyday fashion, overlooking the emotionally significant and high-involvement nature of wedding dress purchases (Hassan et al., 2022), which is explored in this study.

Summary of the issue

There is limited literature on second-hand bridalwear, despite the growing interest in CFC as a means of promoting sustainability (Arrigo, 2021; Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020). While existing research highlights that second-hand clothing contributes to environmental sustainability during or after use (Iran & Schrader, 2017), the specific context of wedding dresses remains largely underexplored. In particular, there is scant understanding of how motivations for second-hand bridalwear differ from those for everyday fashion, especially given the high-involvement and emotionally charged nature of wedding dress purchases (Friese, 1997; Min et al., 2018).

The role of sustainability in fashion consumption has gained attention, yet there is limited research on how second-hand wedding dresses are perceived compared to sustainably manufactured new dresses. Our study positions second-hand wedding dresses as a relatively more environmentally friendly alternative, as they extend the life cycle of a garment and reduce the need for new production. However, as others have noted (Levänen et al., 2021), even more sustainable forms of consumption still have an environmental cost, reinforcing the need to explore not only environmental benefits but also consumer motivations. By understanding the motivations and barriers that affect brides' decisions to buy second-hand wedding dresses, this research fills a critical gap in sustainable fashion literature and addresses the broader issue of how to encourage pro-environmental behaviour in the bridal market (Henninger et al., 2021).

Bridal identity plays a significant but under examined role in the wedding dress shopping experience. Existing research on identity and consumption (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Latter et al., 2010) suggests that brides use wedding dresses as tools to express both personal and social identities. However, current literature has not fully developed the concept of bridal identity nor explored its impact on shopping behaviour in depth. Furthermore, the role of place, specifically, where brides shop for wedding dresses, has not been sufficiently addressed, with most studies focusing on traditional boutiques, leaving other acquisition channels underexplored.

This study contributes to both consumer behaviour and sustainable fashion literature by foregrounding the previously underexplored role of shopping experience in shaping brides' intentions to purchase second-hand wedding dresses. By addressing gaps related to bridal identity, second-hand market knowledge, and sustainability motivations in a high-involvement consumption context, our research offers valuable insights for retailers, marketers, and sustainability advocates. Whereas most existing research on sustainable fashion has focused on routine or everyday clothing choices, this study examines a high-stakes, emotionally significant purchase where sustainability competes with powerful symbolic, cultural, and affective expectations. In doing so, it expands the scope of sustainable consumer behaviour research by exploring how sustainability operates in contexts shaped by ritual, identity performance, and deep emotional investment.

Methodology

Our study used a grounded theory approach based on inductive analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2006). Given the nascent nature of the field and the lack of directly related literature, this was the most appropriate choice. We aimed to go beyond simply explaining what is happening during the purchasing experience and instead explain why the intention to buy is occurring (or not), in order to uncover the underlying drivers and barriers that shape decision-making in this high-involvement, emotionally charged context.

Research context

Choosing a wedding dress can be a complex and intimate process, so we conducted an ethically approved (by the lead author's university's Ethics Committee) data collection to provide rich, high-quality data. Having established that choosing a wedding dress is

sensitive and personal, we used a robust alternative research method to access deeper and sometimes repressed thoughts. The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) is a hybrid multi-disciplinary visual research method, and used for its ability to elicit participants' deeper, sometimes difficult to access, thoughts and feelings on sensitive topics (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

Sampling

Using snowball sampling, we recruited 18 UK-based engaged or married women who had considered purchasing a second-hand wedding dress at any point in their decision-making process. Three pilot interviews were conducted to confirm the suitability of the ZMET method, the questions used, the appropriateness of the sample, and to inform the sample size. As no changes were required, the pilot interviews were included in the final dataset. This sample size aligns with established guidance for ZMET studies, where saturation typically occurs between 12–20 participants (Zaltman, 1997) and exceeds the minimum threshold of 4–5. Saturation was confirmed during the final stages of data collection, when no new themes or insights emerged, indicating that key data points had been captured. Participants were recruited through referrals from initial contacts, with all participation being voluntary and unpaid. The sample also offered geographic diversity across the UK, although location did not emerge as a significant factor in the findings.

Data collection

Three pilot interviews were undertaken before the main interviews, with data analysed by the research team to encourage consistency in the interviewer approach and inter-coder reliability. The pilot confirmed the method was appropriate and that the right questions were being asked. Interviews lasted around 90 minutes and were conducted via Microsoft Teams, allowing participants to share images and engage in a comfortable, familiar environment. Interviews were automatically transcribed for efficiency and later manually checked for consistency. This is the first use of ZMET in this area of study and therefore our interviews help contribute to filling the identified qualitative gaps in the literature (Busalim et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2022; Rojanakit et al., 2022) and demonstrate how future studies could proceed.

There are four stages to the ZMET technique: pre-interview; interview; analysis, and construct-forming (Hancock & Foster, 2020). The pre-interview stage consists of 'priming' the participant with the ZMET question (Zaltman, 1997) and briefing the participant one week before the interview. Participants were asked to choose 6 images which represented their thoughts and feelings about second-hand wedding dresses purchase and experience. This would act as a foundation for the interview. The participants provided written consent (both informed consent and consent to publish) during the pre-interview stage and verbal consent at the beginning of the interview. Hancock & Foster (2020) fully explain the detailed process of conducting a ZMET interview, however we briefly outline the interview steps in the next section and further explain our decision to utilise ZMET.

ZMET

ZMET has been used both commercially by OlsonZaltman, a market research organisation with global reach, and academically (Zaltman, 2003). Using participant-provided images as a visual prompt, it uses a series of established research tools to uncover unconscious thoughts by probing participants. Using images enables a bridge of trust with the interviewer/interviewees (Hancock & Foster, 2020) and helps counter the depth deficit often associated with traditional research methods such as surveys and word-alone interviews (Mulvey et al., 2010). With ZMET, respondents are in control of the agenda, since the image becomes the centre of focus, thus helping reduce the potential pressures often associated with an interview situation (Harper, 2002). Using images benefits the interviewer by providing a more direct and fluid response from the participant, who feels more comfortable narrating their chosen image.

Photo and image elicitation has been used across various disciplines since the 1950s to great effect. Much of social communication is nonverbal, and we think and recall memory through images as opposed to words (Zaltman, 1996; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Collier (1957) concluded that more conversation is created because of using images when compared to a 'words-alone' interview, thus richer transcripts are produced as the brain is constantly being stimulated by the photograph, producing more emotional responses from latent memory. An image or picture becomes a surface 'metaphor' of an interviewee's subconscious perceptions enabling the picture to represent something else.

Metaphoric language is common in daily vocabulary and it represents our brain's way of accessing the subconscious thoughts. Thus, metaphors shape and add meaning to our environment. We live by them daily and express them through our language subconsciously. When people are often asked to share a metaphor as an example, it is very difficult to quickly provide one consciously (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). Using ZMET is an appropriate technique to explore such a personal topic as choosing a wedding dress and perhaps the even more sensitive nature of buying a second-hand one. In ZMET, deep metaphors are fundamental, often unconscious, and universal ways of understanding the world, distinct from surface metaphors, which are more context-specific. The technique is designed to reveal these deeper structures by moving beyond literal descriptions to uncover the symbolic patterns shaping participants' thoughts and decisions.

Table 1 highlights how we deployed the ZMET techniques. Each one has a unique purpose and is used in a reasonably structured way; a skilled interviewer can draw upon the various techniques as needs arise (Hancock & Foster, 2020). ZMET has commonly been adapted by academic users of the method, with some steps omitted to improve fluidity of the interview style with participants. We also adapted the ZMET process after the pilot study by omitting one step (the vignette or play), as participants found it unhelpful and difficult to create a play as they felt a little fatigued by this stage. These changes were made because of sufficient depth found during the pilot studies and through experience of previous research projects conducted using ZMET. These changes also created a much more fluid interview for the participant and interviewer, without the loss of rich data.

Table 1. The adapted seven steps of the ZMET interview.

Step	Description	Purpose
1. Storytelling	Participants can fully express why they chose the image, what it means to them, and how it relates to the second-hand wedding dress. Participants were asked '*Please tell me why you chose this image*'.	Allows participants a bridge to fully articulate what would normally be considered personal and private thoughts, providing rich narrative data.
2. Missed Images	Participants were asked *'If you couldn't find an image to represent a thought or feeling could you describe any missing images'.*	Missed images often close the gap for a thought that the participant wanted to share and can provide elusive missing detail.
3. Triad Test	Participants were asked '*Please compare this image with these two others. How do they differ, or how are they similar?' (Images are selected by the interviewer, during the process of the interview, from the set of images provided by the participant).*	Participants can critically compare images and explain why differences matter, generating further depth and providing rich data which may uncover something previous steps didn't.
4. Metaphor Probe	The process of laddering the questions to get further depth. Participants were asked '*Why do you think that? Why do you feel that?'*	Probing participants dig deeper and as a result latent, sometimes subconsciously censored thoughts were uncovered, offering valuable insights.
5. Expanding the Frame	Participants were asked *'Please imagine zooming out with a camera - what else may be present in the photograph and more importantly why do you think that is?'*	Allows participants to add further details, helping reveal elements which the previous steps may not have uncovered, increasing the depth to the interview.
6. Sensory Metaphor Probe	Participants were asked '*Please now immerse yourself in the image and then relay to me what the image may smell, taste, sound or feel like?*' They were then asked the same questions, in relation to a second-hand wedding dress.	Metaphors are prevalent here as participants tend to relate senses in terms of something else. Thus, the sensory probes reveal further insights which may have only been alluded to in other techniques.
7. Montage (Visual Summary)	This is where a montage is created with the participant. It collectively brings the images together. This is undertaken by the interviewer but directed by the participant. They decide where and how they want the image positioned and then pull each image into play. Finally, the participant gives the montage a title.	A key part of the interview process which creates a visual map of the snapshot of thoughts, providing a holistic perspective of the overall thoughts on the topic.

Data analysis

Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and personal identifiers were removed during transcription to anonymise the data prior to analysis. To ensure consistency and reliability in coding, we conducted three pilot interviews, and the team collaboratively analysed the data, helping to establish a consistent coding approach and ensuring shared understanding. Following the initial transcription and coding, the team engaged in iterative discussions to refine codes and reach consensus on overarching themes, allowing cross-validation of interpretations. Only constructs that were mentioned by more than a third of respondents were selected to be included (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995), and following this, data was reviewed jointly to gain consensus on inclusion. Visual data maps were developed from the transcripts, identifying metaphoric language and subsequent themes, which were then distilled into the deep metaphors presented in Table 2.

Data saturation was achieved after 18 interviews, with no new themes emerging during the final interviews. The consistent identification of key metaphors and constructs across participants confirmed that further data collection was unnecessary, and theoretical saturation had been reached. The quality of grounded theory

Table 2. Deep metaphors shaping second-hand wedding dress decision-making and their relationship to the themes.

Deep Metaphor	Related Themes	Example Quote	Connection to Findings
Control	Second-Hand Market Knowledge; Bridal Identity, Desired Experience, Expected Experience, Actual Experience	"I wanted my dress to be perfect, like it was made for me"	Shapes how brides assess autonomy and fit when evaluating second-hand options; reflects agency within desired and expected experience
Connected	Bridal Identity; Desired Experience, Actual Experience	"It just felt like someone else's dress, not mine"	Captures emotional ties and social rituals that enforce bridal identity; also includes emotional disconnection when the dress fails to align with imagined identity or meaning
Journey	Bridal Identity, Desired Experience, Expected Experience, Actual Experience	"I always imagined myself in one of those fancy bridal suites, like you see in the movies"	Structures how brides anticipate and narrate the bridal experience, particularly in shaping expected experience and identity
Balance	Sustainability Orientation, Bridal Identity, Actual Experience	"You feel like you have to please everyone, but it's still your day"	Illustrates internal negotiations between sustainability values and personal/social expectations, often mediates between competing priorities
Container	Bridal Identity, Actual Experience	"I wasn't sure if a second-hand dress could be tailored that way"	Represents how social judgements and perceptions influence actual experience and constrain identity expression
Transformation	Bridal Identity, Expected Experience, Actual Experience	"You're supposed to have that moment, like when you just know it's the one"	Reflects emotional and symbolic transformation expected through dress shopping; central to both expected and actual experience
Resource	Sustainability Orientation, Second-Hand Market Knowledge, Bridal Identity	"It's more affordable and better for the planet, but it still has to feel like me"	Supports sustainability motivations and practical concerns, but only resonates when aligned with bridal identity and self-image

can be assessed by its ability to meet the criteria of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). We have exceeded the necessary sample size for systematic comparison to allow for credibility, and the originality is supported by the study's novel focus on an under-researched, high-involvement consumption context. Resonance is supported by our use of ZMET to uncover a depth and breadth of conscious and subconscious thoughts on the topic, allowing the creation of rich concepts that are representative of the participants' experiences. Finally, usefulness is demonstrated in the ability of the research to uncover a previously undocumented area of bridal behaviour, opening up the area for future research.

Findings and discussion

Our analysis identifies a set of deep metaphors and associated themes (Table 2) that shape brides' intentions to purchase second-hand wedding dresses. These metaphors provide the conceptual grounding for the relationships discussed in this section, revealing the emotional and symbolic dimensions of decision-making, with experience emerging as the central influence. As deep metaphors operate largely at

an unconscious level, their full range may not be captured; however, the multi-stage, image-based ZMET process and participant reflection in this study revealed a rich, consistent set of deep metaphors relevant to second-hand bridalwear decision-making.

Experience, as a multi-sensory and emotionally charged phenomenon, shapes the bridal shopping journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and is conceptualised here through three interrelated constructs: desired, expected, and actual experience. Brides shop across three key redistribution channels – online, charity shops, and curated boutiques – and their experiences are shaped by three antecedents: sustainability orientation and second-hand market knowledge, which influence both bridal identity and expected experience; and bridal identity itself, which informs desired and expected experience. The following sections examine each construct in turn.

Sustainability orientation

Sustainability is frequently cited as a motivator in second-hand clothing consumption (Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020), and many brides in our study expressed concerns about the environmental impacts of manufacturing and textile waste. This section explores how sustainability orientation intersects with bridal identity and second-hand market knowledge, each of which is examined further in the sections that follow, and how it shapes decisions around second-hand dresses. Brides often acknowledged the wastefulness of new wedding dresses. For example:

> . . . in the industry, I bet there's quite a bit of wastage and things like that. So having second-hand wedding dresses would definitely lead to a lot less of that. (Erica)

Although sustainability emerged as a recurring theme, few brides selected images explicitly referencing it, such as recycling symbols, a seedling in soil, or textile waste, suggesting it was not a primary motivator for most. Many valued sustainability in principle, but it was frequently secondary to preserving a particular bridal dress shopping experience. Some framed second-hand dresses as budget-friendly and environmentally responsible, but only when this aligned with their sense of identity and values. For others, the idea of a second-hand dress provoked emotional resistance:

> I might feel a bit like I don't really want to try it on because it's not new . . . So, I don't think it would feel like mine. (Leanne)

This tension reflects the Balance metaphor, as brides weighed their sustainability values against the desire for a luxurious, emotionally resonant experience. Brides with stronger sustainability orientations often described second-hand dresses as practical and worthwhile, aligning with the Resource metaphor, where dresses were seen as budget-conscious and eco-friendly yet still meaningful when they felt personally appropriate.

Motivations for sustainable consumption vary by context (Nguyen & Johnson, 2020), and priorities can shift over time (Park & Chang, 2022). Even those who value sustainability may not prioritise it during emotionally charged events like weddings (Henninger et al., 2020). However, brides with greater second-hand market knowledge often felt more in control of their choices and better equipped to navigate trade-offs. These brides were not

only aware of second-hand options but also were more willing to incorporate sustainability into their bridal identity.

Second-hand market knowledge

Second-hand market knowledge refers to a bride's understanding of the availability and suitability of second-hand options. This includes awareness and accessibility, both of which influence how brides engage with sustainable fashion and make decisions. Access to and familiarity with second-hand markets significantly informs the redistribution channels brides consider viable. In other words, where brides choose to shop is shaped by what they know and how confident they feel navigating second-hand options. We explore how knowledge influences expectations and decision-making, and then consider how that knowledge affects the redistribution channels brides engage with.

Awareness and expectations

As demonstrated in the metaphor table, the balance between new versus used, cost versus sustainability, and the value of personalisation shapes expectations of the second-hand experience. Brides who anticipated a highly personalised service typically struggled to imagine finding it shopping second-hand, especially when their market knowledge was limited. Some participants had strong second-hand market knowledge but still ruled out second-hand options. More commonly, brides were open to the idea but lacked the knowledge or motivation to act, *'I never looked into it, didn't need to'* (Crystal). Others noted visibility as a barrier, suggesting boutiques *'need to make [themselves] easier to find'* (Georgia).

Limited market knowledge often led to uncertainty about what the shopping experience would involve. This reflects broader CFC research, where lack of knowledge reduces engagement with sustainable options (Busalim et al., 2022). In the context of weddings, the ritual of dress shopping is often central to a bride's identity (Sykes & Brace-Govan, 2015) and is typically associated with traditional boutiques. Without knowing how second-hand shopping compares, many brides were unsure whether it could meet their expectations. This links closely to the Control metaphor. Brides with greater knowledge felt more confident and autonomous in shaping their dress journey, while those with less knowledge described anxiety or hesitation: *'Do I go to the shops, try the dresses on, and then look online now I know what I want and what style suits my body?'* (Amelia). This uncertainty also connects to the Journey metaphor, as brides attempted to navigate unfamiliar terrain. Without guidance or examples, second-hand shopping often felt complicated and filled with potential missteps.

Redistribution channels

Each redistribution channel provides a different shopping experience shaped by price, trust, service, and emotion. Brides' choices reflected what they knew or believed about each one. Where they chose to shop was strongly informed by what they felt confident accessing.

Curated boutiques. Boutiques were most commonly associated with luxury, personal service, and family involvement. Many brides valued the shared nature of boutique shopping, for example, *'You want that special day where you go with your chief bridesmaid and your mum . . . you all have some champagne and, you know, it's just a nice event'* (Georgia). Another said, *'I really appreciate the value [of the boutique] and how enjoyable it was . . . You wouldn't do that at a charity shop'* (Alex).

Some boutiques are starting to offer second-hand collections, but these remain niche. Bridal Reloved is a notable example of a commercial boutique specialising in second-hand gowns, although few can replicate the full service of traditional shops. Still, their alignment with the bridal shopping ritual suggests potential. The CFC model highlights that consumer and industry acceptance are both essential to growing circular fashion markets (Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018).

Online platforms. Online platforms such as eBay, Facebook Marketplace, and Stillwhite were perceived as accessible and increasingly mainstream. Some participants cited social influence and media visibility as shaping their decisions: *'Love Island is now sponsored by eBay, and there's a lot of talk about pre-loved things . . . it was quite an obvious first go-to'* (Alex). Another said, *'The second-hand stuff is getting really popular now . . . and there is a huge movement towards buying a lot more second-hand stuff'* (Alisha). However, some brides were hesitant to buy a dress they could not try on. *'I wanted to try it before I bought it and you can't do that online'* (Chelsea). Despite these concerns, platforms such as Stillwhite have introduced features like ratings and buyer protection to reduce risk and build trust (Park & Joyner Armstrong, 2019).

Charity shops. Charity shops were mentioned less often and often divided opinion. For some, the environment did not match the formality of the occasion: *'That experience put me off . . . it did feel very cramped. I think at first I didn't like the smell of it because it did smell like a charity shop'* (Laura). Another noted, *'It was like charity shopping or bargain finding'* (Autumn), contrasting it with the boutique experience.

Other participants were more enthusiastic, particularly those motivated by sustainability or cost, for example saying, *'I'd be going around the charity shops and I would make it known if this dress came in, please let me know'* (Amelia). For some, charity shops offered an alternative that aligned with their values and goals (Richardson et al., 2022).

Understanding where brides choose to shop reveals how second-hand market knowledge influences both attitudes and actions. Those with greater awareness were more confident in exploring non-traditional options and more likely to consider second-hand purchases. These brides often saw dresses through the lens of the Resource metaphor, recognising them as valuable, sensible choices when aligned with personal meaning and fit. Others, even those with positive intentions, experienced uncertainty or hesitation. Ultimately, knowledge shaped not only behaviour but also the emotional tone of the wedding dress journey, reinforcing the link between Control, confidence, and access.

Bridal identity

Bridal identity was a strong recurring theme across our interviews. In this section, we focus on the psychological and cultural dimensions that shape bridal identity, the types of

dresses brides desire, and how these factors influence attitudes towards both new and second-hand options. Brides frequently submitted images of dresses being tailored to a body, reflecting their desire for personalisation. This customisation was especially important to many participants, who wanted the dress to reflect their individuality. For instance, Amelia explained: *'I wanted my dress to be perfect, like it was made for me. It had to fit exactly how I imagined, and I wasn't sure if a second-hand dress could be tailored that way'*. The need for personalisation reflects the Control metaphor, as brides sought to shape their experience and retain autonomy over how they looked and felt on the day. Here, *Control* encompasses not only the final look of the dress, but also the reassurance that every element has been actively chosen and adapted to fit the bride's vision.

Another common image showed rows of dresses on display, symbolising the overwhelming task of finding the 'perfect' one. Too much choice and information overload are known barriers to sustainable fashion adoption (Puspita & Chae, 2021), and our findings confirm that this extends to wedding dress shopping. Brides like Beth described the pressure of managing their own preferences while accommodating input from others: *'The whole process of finding the dress is so overwhelming because everyone has an opinion. You feel like you have to please everyone, but it's still your day, and the dress has to represent who you are'*. This demonstrates the Balance metaphor, where brides negotiate between personal desires and societal or familial expectations. In this context, *Balance* reflects the ongoing adjustment between individual taste and the perceived need to meet the expectations of significant others.

Participants also shared images of themselves revealing dresses to others in boutiques to gauge their reactions. This reflects the Connected metaphor, where emotional bonds and social rituals are central to the bridal shopping experience. Emotional disconnection is also captured here, as some brides described second-hand dresses as 'not mine', indicating a lack of symbolic resonance. These sub-themes support the notion of bridal identity as a performance of taste, aesthetic, and values (Boden, 2003; Min et al., 2018) and align with Fagbola et al. (2023) view that brides negotiate between internal preferences and collective expectations. For example, Sarah explained, *'I always imagined myself in one of those fancy bridal boutiques, you know, like you see in the movies. Going somewhere else just didn't fit with what I thought a bride should do'*. This highlights how the boutique experience is integral to bridal identity and illustrates the Journey metaphor. However, for some, second-hand dresses felt emotionally distant, reinforcing the disconnection brides experienced when options failed to align with their envisioned self. In this sense, *Journey* captures both the literal steps of visiting venues and trying on dresses, and the symbolic milestones that mark the transition towards marriage.

Brides also spoke about the broader forces that shape their bridal identity, including vendors and family. Tailoring services were described as ways to reinforce identity, while the presence of family during dress shopping was seen as essential. As Alex noted, *'I couldn't imagine not having my mum and sisters with me when I tried on dresses. It's such a big part of the experience, and it's not just about the dress, but about them being there to see me as a bride'*. This again reinforces the Connected metaphor and the importance of shared meaning-making in the dress selection process. Here, *Connected* also extends to the validation and emotional security brides derive from these shared moments.

While religious institutions are known to influence bridal identity in some contexts (Boden, 2003; Fagbola et al., 2023), this was not evident in our UK-based data. This

contrasts with the Nigerian setting described by Fagbola et al. (2023) and reflects broader cultural shifts in sustainable consumption determinants (Nguyen & Johnson, 2020). Similarly, cultural norms shaped expectations around dress rental. Very few participants considered renting a dress, and none had done so, compared to much higher acceptance in other markets such as South Korea, where rentals account for approximately 75% (Kwon, 2017).

Our data show that bridal identity strongly shapes the desired dress shopping experience. Brides form ideas of what is personally and socially acceptable and internalise these ideas into clear preferences for how and where to shop. This connection was particularly strong given the central importance many placed on the dress. As Chelsea reflected, *'. . . the dress that you wear on your wedding day is very significant. You'll remember it forever'*. This supports prior findings that the dress plays a dominant role in bridal identity formation (Friese, 1997; Min et al., 2018; Sykes & Brace-Govan, 2015), and that many brides feel pressure to find the 'right' one (Min et al., 2018). These concerns illustrate the Container metaphor, where brides fear judgement or disapproval, especially if they choose something unconventional like a second-hand dress.

Bridal identity also affects expected experience. Beyond simply desiring a dress, brides actively research and refine what kind of shopping experience they anticipate. This includes whether a second-hand dress will be acceptable and which retail formats feel legitimate. The Journey metaphor is again relevant here, as brides navigate uncertainty and expectations in an iterative process of discovery and decision-making. Jenna's account illustrates this: *'Everyone always talks about that moment when you put on the dress, and it just feels right. I didn't want to miss out on that, so I was scared to even consider a second-hand one'*. For Jenna, second-hand was incompatible with the bridal identity she had imagined.

While bridal identity is inherently complex, our analysis highlights sustainability orientation and second-hand market knowledge as commonly occurring and influential factors in shaping brides' decisions. These factors do not fully define bridal identity, but they offer insight into how it is expressed and negotiated in the context of second-hand dress shopping. This aligns with role theory, as the role of the bride is highly symbolic and prescriptive, encompassing expectations around aesthetics, behaviour, and emotional display. When second-hand options are perceived as incompatible with performing this role convincingly, they are often rejected, even by sustainability-minded consumers.

Together, these reflections demonstrate the strong presence of all seven deep metaphors in shaping bridal identity and attitudes towards second-hand options. Connected is evident in the emotional and social rituals of the dress journey, while Journey frames the narrative progression of becoming a bride. Control and Container appear in concerns about autonomy, fit, and social judgement. Balance underscores the tension between personal desire and external pressures. Transformation reflects the symbolic change many brides expect to experience, and Resource is present when second-hand options are viewed as practical, but only when they resonate with the bride's sense of self.

Experience

Much of the data corresponded to the theme of experience in the shopping journey. Experience is a 'multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive,

emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey' (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). We identified three interrelated themes aligned with different stages of shopping: desired experience, expected experience, and actual experience.

The experience brides desire shapes their expectations, which in turn inform whether they proceed to actual experience (that is, shopping for a second-hand dress). Addressing these as distinct but connected stages allows for clearer insights at each point, helping to identify gaps between intention and behaviour. Our data includes second-hand acquisitions through online platforms, charity shops, and boutiques. By unpacking desired, expected, and actual experiences, this section shows how experience connects bridal identity, market knowledge, and the final decision. Each stage plays a pivotal role in determining whether a bride continues down the path towards a sustainable option.

Desired experience

Desired experience refers to the bride's understanding of what she wants her wedding dress shopping experience to be like, including where she shops, who attends, and how she wants to feel. As discussed earlier, this is strongly influenced by bridal identity. Brides may form both conscious and subconscious desires over time, shaped by media, marketing, reference groups, and their knowledge of second-hand markets. The Journey metaphor is especially prominent here, as brides envision a narrative arc from the start of dress shopping to the moment they walk down the aisle. This journey is both practical and emotional, symbolising transformation into a bride.

Brides consistently emphasised that acquiring the dress was a central part of the wedding, echoing earlier research (Friese, 1997; Min et al., 2018). This suggests a strong link between desired experience, expected experience, and ultimately, intention to buy a second-hand dress. When there is a mismatch between a bride's desired experience and what she expects from second-hand shopping, she is unlikely to engage. However, alignment between the two increases the likelihood that she will consider second-hand options.

When brides felt their desires could not be fulfilled through second-hand channels, they often did not progress to considering the expected experience in detail, making the relationship between desired experience and intention to buy second-hand a negative one. This contrasts with Dobscha and Foxman's (1998) study on brides' bargain-hunting in chaotic outlet environments, where they accepted the dissonance between environment and emotion to secure a deal. In our data, that same willingness to compromise did not extend to second-hand dresses, suggesting second-hand was often viewed as incompatible with the symbolic expectations of the bridal experience.

The metaphor of Control is also significant. Brides wanted to feel in charge of the dress journey, which they saw as a core part of their transition to becoming a bride. As Daisy described, *'. . .part of the whole experience of being a bride-to-be for me was going to these fancy, glamorous bridal boutiques and trying on the different dresses'*. Control in this context includes not only decision-making autonomy but also the ability to curate an experience that feels personally meaningful and socially recognisable.

The Connected metaphor is also embedded throughout this stage. Brides frequently described wanting to share the shopping experience with close family and friends.

Georgia reflected, *'. . .you want that special day . . . where you go with your chief bridesmaid and your mum . . . and you try them on and you all have some champagne and, you know, it's just a nice event'*. Similarly, Erica said it was something she had *'always really looked forward to'*, while Leanne and Alisha mentioned *'choosing their wedding dress and having that experience with their family, their mum and mother-in-law'*. For Alisha, this was *'kind of like a pinnacle point in that experience that most people think about'*.

These accounts reflect how deeply rooted these rituals are in a bride's sense of self. The metaphor of Journey encapsulates this forward movement towards a transformative moment, while Control and Connected reinforce the emotional weight and social meaning embedded in the experience brides desire.

Expected experience

Expected experience refers to what brides anticipate when shopping for a second-hand wedding dress. Our data suggests that sustainability orientation, bridal identity, second-hand market knowledge, and desired experience all influence these expectations. Brides with a strong sustainability orientation may be more willing to adjust their expectations, accepting trade-offs in personalisation or convenience in favour of eco-consciousness. In turn, expected experience directly affects actual experience: brides anticipating a positive journey are more likely to shop second-hand.

The Control metaphor is particularly salient here. Brides with greater second-hand knowledge or stronger sustainability values felt more confident and in control of their choices. Those lacking this knowledge or motivation often felt uncertain, hesitant, or overwhelmed. This was especially evident in comparisons between new and second-hand shopping. New dresses were typically associated with holistic, enjoyable service, while second-hand options were viewed more as stand-alone products. This disconnect shows how expected experience can shape behaviour. If brides anticipate losing pleasure, guidance, or autonomy, they may disengage from second-hand options altogether.

Enjoyment and practicality were often weighed against each other, and where the hedonistic aspects of shopping were prioritised, brides hesitated to sacrifice them for sustainability (Luchs & Kumar, 2017). The bridal gown remains central to the wedding experience (Min et al., 2018), meaning that a strong sustainability orientation or substantial second-hand knowledge may be necessary to tip the balance. Our qualitative data does not allow us to quantify this relationship, but future research could explore it further. Cost was the most frequently mentioned trade-off influencing decision-making, as Erica explained: *' . . . if the second-hand dress was a lot cheaper then absolutely, it wouldn't bother me that it's second-hand. But if the second-hand dress was a lot more expensive, then you know, I would probably go for the new one'*.

The Journey metaphor was also embedded in brides' expectations around sourcing and buying dresses. Many expected to begin their search on online platforms such as eBay or Facebook Marketplace, believing they offered a wider selection than boutiques or charity shops. This echoes the importance of usability and discoverability identified in rental fashion literature (Park & Joyner Armstrong, 2019). Brides often turned to online platforms because they felt it was the most common and accessible path: *'eBay . . . was like the most obvious kind of second-hand online place to go. And I feel like they do everything . . . it's probably the first place that a lot of people would go to look'* (Alex).

However, many participants also voiced concerns about the limitations of second-hand sourcing. Some described feeling *'cold'* (Jade) about buying online, while others missed the *'valuable guidance'* offered by boutique staff (Alex). Brides feared that buying second-hand might feel stressful, particularly due to added steps like arranging fittings (Laura). Limited stock and sizing further exacerbated these concerns: *'At the end of the day, you're limited for choice in a sense that you can only buy what other people are selling. It's not like you can go on and pick a dress and then go and change the size or change the length. That's it'* (Chelsea). Max echoed this: *'[dresses are] just so . . . probably few and far in-between in a lot of different shops, but you'd have to go through so many shops to try and find the one that you like'*.

Charity shops were expected to fall far short of the desired bridal experience. Brides submitted images of dark, cluttered interiors and racks of miscellaneous items, reinforcing concerns that the experience would be underwhelming or uninspiring. Erica worried about *'unfashionable'* stock, and others described the environment as *'not very fun'* (Alex), *'less glamorous'* (Jenna), and lacking the *'fun experience of planning it with your friends and family'* (Alisha). While charity shops may serve practical or eco-conscious goals (Richardson et al., 2022), they rarely fulfilled the emotional or symbolic needs tied to bridal identity (Min et al., 2018).

Curated boutiques were viewed far more positively. Brides expected a *'nicer experience'* (Amy), with dresses displayed in a clean, curated environment that felt more in line with traditional bridal shopping. For some, this setting could still meet the need for *'that experience'* (Alex), while removing the stigma associated with second-hand.

Expected experience plays a vital role in shaping intentions. When brides anticipate an experience that aligns with their bridal identity, especially one that maintains control, emotional resonance, and symbolic transformation, they are far more likely to engage with second-hand options. This reflects the overlapping influence of the Control, Journey, and Transformation metaphors, each shaping how brides envision the path to becoming a bride through the dress they choose.

Actual experience

Actual experience is shaped by expected experience and refers to the bride's tangible encounter when shopping for a wedding dress, whether through online platforms, charity shops, or boutiques offering second-hand collections. The metaphor of Transformation plays a central role, as brides anticipate the shopping process to mirror their emotional shift into becoming a bride. When the experience supports this Transformation, intentions to purchase a second-hand dress increase. Conversely, when it falls short, intentions often decrease. While experiences varied across acquisition channels, value-seeking was a consistent theme, particularly within online shopping. Despite the convenience and familiarity of websites, many brides found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of choices. This reflects the metaphor of the Journey, where the bride must navigate a complex and often disorienting landscape to locate a dress that meets both emotional and practical expectations.

Chelsea explained this tension, *'I would have . . . maybe 10, 20 browsers of wedding dresses that look vastly different, have different price points, and think, you know, where do you go from here? Because I can't go and try each one on . . . How do I filter it out? Do I filter it down by just lowering my budget, you know doing it by price, or do I lower it down by*

proximity? . . . that's the main thing that put me off the whole second-hand shopping process . . . ' (Chelsea). Her sense of imbalance, between too many options and not enough guidance, ultimately led her to favour a boutique, where expectations and reality could align more effectively. The metaphor of Balance is key here. Brides must weigh up cost, convenience, emotional fulfilment, and aesthetics. When this balance tips too far towards practical concerns such as price or sustainability, without offering emotional satisfaction, the experience becomes dissatisfying. Brides often seek not only affordability but a moment that feels meaningful and symbolic.

Boutiques are often better equipped to deliver that balance. They support both emotional and tactile needs, helping the bride feel centred between practicality and fantasy. Boutiques also play a key role in the bridal Journey (Friese, 1997; Min et al., 2018), with some brides describing the experience as the *'most fun part of the process'* (Max). Within this space, the metaphor of Control becomes apparent. Brides feel empowered through structured service, personal attention, and curated selections. The boutique experience enhances not only physical interaction with the dress but also the social and symbolic dimensions of the event, reinforcing the metaphor of Connectedness. As Alex shared, *'I really appreciate the value [of the boutique] and how enjoyable it was and the fact my mum and my bridesmaid came, and her mum, and how excited they all were, which was so sweet and they even brought a bottle . . . You wouldn't do that at a charity shop, like that would be really weird. I will always remember that'*. (Alex). This illustrates how shared moments within boutique settings help construct an emotionally resonant bridal identity.

In contrast, charity shops were more likely to evoke discomfort. Contamination fears, long recognised as a barrier to second-hand clothing (Rulikova, 2020), surfaced frequently. While some concerns focused on stains, unpleasant smells were more widely reported. Smell is a powerful atmospheric and emotional cue, closely tied to the metaphor of Container, how a dress or space holds, reflects, and transmits meaning. Crystal described the stigma of *'rummaging in what some people would call "smelly shops"'*, while Jenna noted the *'charity shop smell – a bit old and musty . . . the smell that fabric gets when it's been sat for a while'* (Crystal; Jenna). As the dress symbolically extends the bridal identity to the body (Parkins, 2021), any sensory disruption, particularly smell, can compromise the bride's sense of Transformation. Unlike luxury fashion environments, where scent has minimal impact on consumer experience (Blazquez et al., 2019), the bridal context is uniquely sensitive to these cues.

The metaphor of Control resurfaced in brides' frustrations with second-hand boutiques. Many were disappointed by disorganised displays, lack of service, and uninspiring spaces. These factors prevented them from visualising themselves as brides or feeling in charge of their decisions. Laura captured this disappointment: *'It did feel very cramped. I think at first I didn't like the smell of it because it did smell like a charity shop . . . There were quite a lot of [dresses]. And I remember there was not much to maybe inspire you or get an idea of what you could look like in this. There was no personal service. It was not like sit and have a glass of champagne and let's see what you want. You just wander around it like you would do in a normal shop . . . I originally wanted to buy a second-hand one, but yeah, it didn't happen in the end'*. (Laura).

The metaphor of the Journey also appears in how brides navigate platforms like eBay and Facebook Marketplace. These environments require brides to reconcile their practical constraints, such as price and size, with the aspirational vision of wedding shopping.

Amelia described the allure and limitation of this experience: *'. . . there is a second-hand charity shop and upstairs is all bridal. They have stunning dresses, shoes, everything you would want . . . And funnily enough, when I went with my mum to get her a wedding outfit, there was this one all lace and plus-size dress that was on the rack and it had a tag that it was meant to be like £900 and they want just £200 for this gorgeous lace dress. So, I did look and I was like "Ohh OK", because I think as well it's more the experience like I see on Instagram. I wanna be sat there with my bridesmaids drinking champagne, trying on dresses'* (Amelia).

Again, sensory cues such as smell shaped her perception, but just as significantly, the lack of service and emotional ambiance undermined the Transformation she sought. When these environments failed to offer visual inspiration or meaningful interaction, brides struggled to maintain their emotional investment. The imbalance between affordability and aspiration left many disengaged. Ultimately, brides seek a shopping experience that supports not just their practical needs, but also their emotional transformation, social connection, and symbolic identity. When second-hand environments fail to uphold this complex Balance, the shopping experience loses meaning. The dress, in these cases, becomes just a garment, not a container of dreams, not a milestone in the journey, not a marker of transformation.

Intention to buy a second-hand dress

The data suggests that many brides have a low intention to purchase a second-hand wedding dress. By exploring the psychological, cultural, and experiential barriers involved, this section highlights how entrenched norms and expectations shape decision-making. Socio-cultural standards tied to the metaphor of Identity lead many brides to favour boutique shopping. As seen in Friese's (1997) and Min et al. (2018) findings, the shopping experience plays a vital role in shaping bridal identity and coping with the pressure of finding 'the one'.

Boutiques offering second-hand collections often present the most attractive compromise, combining a sense of occasion with the legitimacy of second-hand purchasing. Since the dress extends the bride's body into a public identity (Parkins, 2021), concerns around presentation, cleanliness, and quality are magnified. Here, the metaphor of Control becomes central, as brides seek to manage how they are perceived by others. Even where interest in second-hand options exists, it is often conditional. One bride described a willingness to search extensively but only if it fitted her timeline, highlighting the metaphor of Journey, where the process must still lead to the dream dress.

> My dream dress is still gonna win. I just won't buy it off the shelf, like brand new ridiculous price. I would be still looking for the dream dress I want, but I would be searching on second-hand Facebook groups. I'd be going around the charity shops and I would make it known if this dress came in, please let me know. (Amelia)

Another bride initially found her ideal dress second-hand but chose to buy it new after trying it on in-store. Her decision reflects the influence of Control, prioritising convenience, safety, and service.

> I wanted to try it before I bought it and you can't do that online. So, I decided to . . . try it on at the original shop. But then I just bought it from there rather than go back and buy it second-hand. For me it was just way more convenient. She just had it and I feel personally that I'm

> more safe going for that option. If I change my mind, there's like a return period in terms of the tailoring and getting the veil and all of that done, they sort it all out for you, you don't have to go and find a tailor and things like that. (Chelsea)

These examples illustrate that psychological and experiential barriers, such as perceived risk, effort, and social perception, often outweigh the practical or environmental benefits of second-hand shopping. Brides are not only evaluating functionality but assessing how the experience aligns with the broader narrative of their wedding. The metaphors of Control, Journey, and Identity help explain why these barriers persist: when second-hand shopping disrupts the emotional arc or fails to reinforce the bride's social image, it becomes a less viable option, regardless of affordability or sustainability.

Altogether, our findings reinforce that sustainable consumption is not solely driven by values or awareness, but also by emotional and symbolic alignment, especially in high-involvement contexts like bridalwear, where identity, ritual, and tradition are central. This study offers a more nuanced view of how sustainability is negotiated in emotionally and culturally significant consumption decisions.

Conclusion

This study explored the factors influencing UK brides' intentions to purchase second-hand wedding dresses, a context that brings together sustainability, identity, and symbolic consumption. Using the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, we identified four key influences: sustainability orientation, bridal identity, second-hand market knowledge, and shopping experience. While second-hand dresses are increasingly considered, they remain a niche choice due to persistent barriers including social stigma, emotional expectations, and mismatches between retail environments and consumer desires.

Our findings offer a new lens on sustainable consumer behaviour by focusing on the emotionally and symbolically charged context of bridalwear, an area that has received limited attention in the literature. Unlike everyday fashion purchases, wedding dresses are high-involvement, once-in-a-lifetime items entangled with identity performance, ritualised consumption, and cultural norms. This study highlights how sustainability motivations are often overridden by affective and symbolic expectations, revealing the limits of rational appeals in promoting sustainable consumption for emotionally significant goods.

By applying deep metaphors rooted in qualitative data to achieve our findings, we show that sustainable decision-making is shaped not only by knowledge and attitudes but by the emotional and narrative coherence of the shopping experience itself. These insights extend sustainable fashion research by illuminating the complex trade-offs consumers make when navigating sustainability within contexts of heightened social meaning. The findings have clear implications for both researchers and practitioners seeking to promote sustainable choices in categories where tradition, identity, and ritual carry considerable weight.

Managerial implications

Our findings show that emotional and symbolic factors, especially the metaphors of control and journey, shape not only where brides shop but how they engage

with second-hand options. Understanding their perceptions of different channels can help businesses tailor marketing, improve access, and address concerns around quality and stigma. Aligning second-hand shopping more closely with the emotional tone of traditional bridal boutiques may foster trust, increase engagement, and support sales.

While online platforms offer affordability and convenience, concerns about fit, condition, and a lack of personal connection limit their appeal (Richardson et al., 2022). Charity shops face similar challenges, often falling short of the emotional and sensory expectations tied to such a significant purchase. Poor displays, limited assistance, and uninviting environments further reduce their attractiveness (Canniford et al., 2018; Rulikova, 2020). To address these barriers, redistributors should create sensory-rich, emotionally engaging spaces that reflect the atmosphere of traditional bridal boutiques (Blazquez et al., 2019). These efforts are most effective when they also attend to deeper emotional needs. Brides with limited second-hand knowledge often reported discomfort linked to a lack of perceived control. Practical features such as fit guarantees, clear guidance, and personalisation tools can help restore agency and foster more meaningful engagement.

Boutiques offering curated second-hand bridal collections are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between sustainability and the traditional wedding dress experience. Personalised service, social interaction, and a luxurious setting can replicate the emotional and symbolic weight of buying new (Sykes & Brace-Govan, 2015). Our findings show that when these elements align with brides' expectations, they elevate second-hand options without sacrificing affordability or sustainability. This supports the idea of dress shopping as a journey; a transitional, narrative-rich experience. When second-hand shopping evokes ritual and story, brides are more likely to connect emotionally and view their choices as valid and fulfilling.

A key barrier is the lingering stigma around second-hand bridalwear. Some brides see used dresses as less desirable or 'special', shaped by concerns over hygiene, status, or social perception. This view is often reinforced by cultural norms framing weddings as occasions for new, luxurious, and highly personalised items. Businesses can challenge this by reframing second-hand gowns as unique, meaningful, and high-quality. Marketing that highlights the individuality and emotional history of pre-loved dresses, alongside aspirational imagery and testimonials, can help normalise them as desirable, not second-best. Framing these stories through metaphors of personal empowerment or destiny may further help reframe the choice as intentional and special, rather than second tier.

Online boutiques play a vital role in reshaping the second-hand bridalwear market. While they offer affordability and convenience, barriers like reduced emotional engagement and trust remain. To enhance accessibility and personalisation, retailers could provide virtual consultations, digital try-ons, detailed fit guides, and styling support. High-quality visuals, videos, and story-driven descriptions, such as the history of a pre-loved dress, can help restore the emotional resonance of in-person shopping. Customer reviews and peer testimonials further build trust and normalise second-hand bridalwear as a meaningful, credible choice. Embedding narrative and symbolic meaning into the digital experience through stories of past brides or metaphors of renewal and legacy can evoke the same emotional depth as physical spaces. Balancing sustainability with the emotional and symbolic aspects of bridal identity is key to making second-hand shopping a desirable mainstream option.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study has limitations related to both method and sample. The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) allowed us to explore deep emotional and symbolic dimensions of bridalwear consumption, but the method is time-intensive and suited to small, purposively selected samples. This limits the generalisability of findings beyond the participants studied (Zaltman, 1997). While we adhered to grounded theory criteria of credibility, resonance, and originality (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021), metaphor analysis is interpretive in nature and subject to researcher bias. Our sample was composed entirely of UK-based brides and reflects Western wedding traditions, which may differ significantly in other cultural contexts. The emotional and symbolic significance of wedding dresses, and the stigma surrounding second-hand options, may be experienced differently in other cultural, religious, or socioeconomic settings. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings, and future studies may wish to explore these dynamics more broadly.

Future research

Future research can build on this study by exploring each second-hand shopping channel – online platforms, charity shops, and curated boutiques – in more depth to better understand how retail environments influence sustainable bridalwear consumption. Further work could also examine how sustainability orientation explicitly shapes purchase decisions in high-involvement, emotionally charged contexts like weddings (Hassan et al., 2022). As sustainable consumption is highly context-dependent (Nguyen & Johnson, 2020), additional research into how sustainability values interact with bridal identity would help uncover deeper cultural and psychological drivers. Cross-cultural studies will be particularly important for extending generalisability and exploring how socio-cultural norms shape both sustainability perceptions and second-hand wedding dress consumption (Hassan et al., 2022). Future studies using qualitative or survey-based methods (Busalim et al., 2022; Rojanakit et al., 2022) could also build on these findings, enabling broader application across markets.

Research could also explore how identity transitions, such as becoming a bride, entering marriage, or navigating adulthood, influence the symbolic weight placed on wedding attire. Different forms of stigma, including concerns about hygiene, class perceptions, and emotional disconnect, may act as barriers and could be studied across demographic groups. Since weddings are highly visible, socially shared rituals, future work might also examine how social influence, peer judgement, or social media visibility shape second-hand bridalwear choices. Platform-specific research may further reveal how trust and engagement vary between peer-to-peer marketplaces and formal resale retailers. Together, these directions offer valuable opportunities to deepen understanding of how sustainability, identity, and social norms intersect in high-stakes, symbolic consumption.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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