

The socioeconomic causes and effects of the gentrified thrifting experience

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ABSTRACT

Thrifting is going shopping at a thrift store, garage sale, or flea market where one will find gently used items at discounted prices ("What Does It Mean To Go Thrifting?"). It is widely regarded as an environmentally sustainable way to buy clothing, as clothes in thrift stores are resale items. Historically stigmatized as being for the poor, thrifting has recently changed in meaning and became a gentrified consumer practice done by many affluent consumers. There are many causes to this shift in the thrifting consumer base and demand, and it poses as a problem for the future of thrifting. This study analyzes how recent economic recessions, younger consumer bases, climate change, upscale shopping, and social media have lured affluent customers to thrift. This has affected the low-income communities thrift stores were historically meant to serve, who need clothing at affordable prices for having a basic living standard and not a cute social media post. The overall thrifting experience, thrift stores, and the neighborhoods around thrift stores have all changed and became gentrified as fashion shifts to fit the demands of an affluent younger class. This study uncovers how the socioeconomic values of thrifting have changed, why they changed, and how it affects the social and economical fabric of thrift store shoppers.

INTRODUCTION

Kim Velsey once wrote of thrifting in the Observer Online as, "Frugality [in thrifting] no longer connotes paying \$10 for a winter coat, but finding a gently-used designer one for \$150" (Velsey). Simply, thrifting is going shopping at a thrift store, garage sale, or flea market where one will find gently used items at discounted prices ("What Does It Mean To Go Thrifting?"). Historically, thrift stores rose during the 19th century industrial revolution, as manufacturing and consumption became cheaper, creating highly populated urban centers that produced large amounts of waste in a limited space. Therefore, central waste management systems were implemented by governments to deal with increasingly consumerist lifestyles and to improve

sanitation and health. As waste disposal systems developed in the United States in the late 1800s, second-hand clothing stores and pawnshops began to appear in response to textile wastes. Despite hygiene concerns and racial stigmas which discouraged buying second-hand, these resale stores were well established by the 1920s and continued to grow with immigrant populations, whose main business involved peddling, after tailoring. This was in part thanks to the efforts of charity stores run by Christian organisations such as the Salvation Army, which helped further destigmatize the practice of buying second-hand. Since then, “thrift stores,” as they have come to be known, have had a stable role in American society (Poor?).

However, the stigma around thrifting and buying second-hand clothing was still present in the early 2000s within the United States. When children were surveyed for a 2008 study in the *Journal of Educational Studies*, 39 percent of the responses of why people were bullied related to not looking like everyone else, including wearing clothing that wasn't in fashion and wearing clothing that was old due to being bought second hand ("Thrifting Is Trendy, But It Hasn't Always Been"). Although, around the same time the survey was taken, experts started to see growth in the resale industry due in part to a change in attitudes towards buying used during the Great Recession that started in 2008. During this time period, many people were forced to adopt measures of frugality, which may have helped frame thrift shopping as sensible rather than desperate, lessening any stigma attached to it ("Thrifting: It's More Than Just Clothes - Planet Aid, Inc.").

Another trend among thrifting was that instead of being looked down upon, used-goods stores in particular were starting to get almost fetishized. Many connote this change with the release of American rapper Macklemore's 2012 song “Thrift Shop,” which romanticizes the act of wearing hand-me-downs and paying less money for alternative and hip looks. Recently, more and more upper-middle class and wealthy shoppers are turning to thrift shops in order to brag about the deals they got, or to vie for the moral superiority that comes with paying less for used instead of new clothes (Bither). In addition, consumers are more aware now than ever of the ethical and environmental impacts associated with their purchased goods and services. According to thredUP, 77 percent of millennials [people born from 1980-1994 ("Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, And Gen Z Explained")] prefer to buy from environmentally-conscious brands. Since eco-fashion is often out of millennial's budgets, the next best thing is to use those handy thrifting skills. Thrift shopping complements larger social trends, as well. For those who want to lead eco-friendly lifestyles, buying secondhand is the most straightforward means of applying the virtues of reuse and recycling to fashion ("Thrifting: It's More Than Just Clothes - Planet Aid, Inc.").

Although thrift stores have many benefits, as these websites claim, there seems to be a lack of online literature about the potential harms caused by thrift shopping. These blogs

encourage and elicit moral superiority through purchasing power without regarding the negative impact that thrifting has on the nearby communities. For example, Goodwill Industries and The Salvation Army both employ community members and help surrounding communities by using funds to support individuals and communities economically, allowing the two thrift chains to both employ and serve surrounding communities. However, their rise in popularity as well as the radical shift in their image has prompted them to cater to a more elite range of clients. In order to appeal to younger buyers, thrift stores around the country have started to upgrade their outposts into fancy boutique stores with high-end merchandise and more expensive brand clothing (Bither).

In a way, thrift stores are being gentrified, or being made more refined, polite, or respectable in order to cater to a wealthier consumer base. Gentrification involves the displacement of working class populations, a phenomena most obviously manifest in the transformation of residential landscapes. But this is also palpable in the changes visible on many shopping streets, with locally-oriented stores serving poorer populations and ethnic minorities being replaced by “hipster” stores such as these vintage and refined second-hand clothing stores (Hubbard). Unfortunately though, the gentrification of thrifting and its stores is starting to shed light on the socioeconomic issues surrounding thrifting. It is starting to show an issue of how second-hand shopping and being sustainable in fashion is a privilege for the affluent class given how it is getting harder for an average working class citizen to thrift. Considering thrift stores were historically meant to serve the less fortunate or working class, the gentrification of thrift stores and newer expensive pricing is also causing an economic burden on the intended customers for a typical thrift store. There is no denying that thrifting has recently acquired a refined reputation, becoming a gentrified practice and harming the socioeconomic fabric of thrift stores and the neighborhoods around them.

MANUSCRIPT BODY

The key methods stimulating the rise of thrifting amongst the younger generation is linked with the social idea that leading a sustainable lifestyle is a privilege. One can understand the privilege linked to thrifting by seeing how the affluent flaunt their thrifting purchases in social media. One example is looking at the social media platform, YouTube, where many people on YouTube are spending hours scouring thrift store racks for the best finds, touting the environmental benefits of shopping secondhand ("Is Thrifting Becoming A Form Of White Environmentalism?"). Sustainable life and style blogger Megan McSherry writes, “Don’t get me wrong — it’s exciting to see people having a larger conversation about the waste created by (and promoted by) the fashion industry. By now we’ve all heard that shopping secondhand extends clothes’ useful life, reduces textile waste, and is a simple, cost-effective way to shop more consciously and sustainably. But among the hordes of Adidas tees and Levi’s jeans being

emptied from thrift stores, I feel like there's something missing from the conversation. Is thrift shopping in the name of the environment becoming a form of white environmentalism?" ("Is Thrifting Becoming A Form Of White Environmentalism?").

"White environmentalism" is a form of environmentalism that has been attributed to a sign of privilege, and as McSherry explained, thrifting is becoming a form of that. White environmentalism does not recognize that populations of color and low-income populations are drastically more impacted by pollution and climate change is not really environmentalism at all. The goal of the environmental movement is about conserving and preserving the environment so that future generations are able to thrive, but focusing on activities that only benefit white and wealthy populations is not working toward a better future for everyone ("Is Thrifting Becoming A Form Of White Environmentalism?").

McSherry continues on the notion that thrifting is a privilege, writing, "I have a problem with people promoting thrifting in the name of the environment without recognizing that it's a much more complex issue. We need to recognize that whether one choose[s] to thrift to save money or to save the environment, it's a privilege to be able to *choose* to shop at a thrift store. We also need to recognize that thrift shopping isn't a be all and end all solution to climate change. Exploiting thrift stores [which are meant for low-income communities (who are disproportionately impacted by climate change and pollution)] in the name of the environment is missing the point of the environmental justice factor in the environmental movement" ("Is Thrifting Becoming A Form Of White Environmentalism?").

Moreover, social media is pushing influencers and other privileged people to thrift out of keeping up socially. For many, thrifting presents an opportunity for self-expression and keeping up with the latest fashion trends as purported by savvy Instagram influencers. Today's modern consumer can mix and match new fashion with high-end and second-hand to create their own individual style (Solanki and Anjee). It is especially incriminating knowing there are less fortunate people for whom it is necessary to buy from a historically stigmatized thrift store, while there are others exploiting a thrift store for social media.

Genevieve Finn of "Tough to Tame" writes, "That said, there still is something troubling about affluent young people fetishizing a low-income lifestyle for the sake of fashion. When we make trends out of styles we once mocked, does it do more harm than good for the people who originally utilized thrift shops out of need rather than for mere style?" ("Should We Be More Wary Of Our Thrifting Habits? — Tough To Tame").

Hence, the general thrift store is changing and becoming more gentrified due to the demand for modern thrifting experiences. Thrift-shop chains are now trying to capitalize on their shabby-chic reputation by embracing a more upscale look. They're investing in creating intimate, high-end shopping experiences where hand-picked merchandise lures younger shoppers who no

longer have time to weed through the bins (Velsey). Thrift chain Goodwill is a prime example of the recent gentrification, as the chain hopes to replicate that convenience for in-person shoppers by making the assortment at its 13 city locations more selective ("Boom Times Are Bad Times For Thrift Stores"). Another example is at select stores throughout the New York City (NYC), New York (NY) metropolitan region in the United States (US), where specially trained internal stylists and featured fashion influencers stock the shops with the season's most on-trend, cool and fashion-forward secondhand pieces. Stores that feature Curated Shops within classic Goodwill stores, including Downtown Brooklyn and Chelsea in NY, and Paramus, NJ, have seen an increase in foot traffic. The notion of social media driving the gentrifying thrifting experience is confirmed given the fact that these curated shoppers from the NYC metropolitan area proudly boast that they are "consciously clothed" and "aware of the wear," two curated taglines that are circulating on Instagram (Solanki and Anjee).

The influx of demand by more economically-advantaged people has resulted in many thrift stores raising their prices, exacerbating income inequality and effectively marginalizing the population that depend on thrifting clothing the most. To add to that, many thrift chain stores are upgrading to a more upscale look and selling expensive clothes in many neighborhoods. In the more expensive neighborhoods where Goodwill and the Salvation Army remain, they have moved toward higher-end "boutiques" in the Housing Works model, where the comparatively prosperous can be found hunting for designer cast-offs that easily exceed \$100 (Velsey).

Several discussion boards across the internet also share price increases in their local thrift stores and speculate the cause. In one instance, Reddit user u/Megan_nicole_93 found a pair of jeans at her local thrift store that were originally from Kohl's, with the tags still on, on clearance for \$12. Her local thrift store priced them at \$15. "What is this thrift store smoking?... At least scratch the clearance tag off!" she said in a Reddit post. Many believe the high volume of new "thrifiers" drives prices up in chain thrift stores such as Goodwill. In a 2010 donation valuation guide, Goodwill Industries estimated flat prices based on the item. But, in 2020, the valuation guide includes a range of prices. The difference in the two reveals that prices are increasingly focused on the maximum a customer would pay for a good, or how it's priced in retail or other resale markets ("The Thrift Economy"). It can be speculated that the "maximum a customer would pay for a good" may be based on the rise in demand driven by wealthier customers, and how much money these recent affluent customers are willing to spend for their thrifted goods.

Going back to the method about sustainable thrift shopping being a privilege, according to a 2010 Pennsylvania State University study by Spencer James, a researcher at Brigham Young University, lower-income families see secondhand shopping as a necessity, whereas higher-income shoppers view it as a commodity. "The upper class essentially sees it as a toy store. Something to find stuff that's fun, like a kind of playground," James said. "Yet we have a

lower class that sees that as one of the last few places where they can afford to buy the goods that they need to maintain their standard of living.” James and his colleagues conducted the study after a major employer in their county shut down, leaving many families in financial distress. The study measured families’ participation in thrift economies and found that both thrift stores and yard sales provided many of the necessities families needed to survive. Lower- and middle-income households typically participated in thrift economies at a higher rate than higher-income households. The results also noted that those in the lower-and middle-income brackets shopped for furniture and clothing while higher-income families typically bought antiques or trinkets. Though James conducted the study a decade ago, he feels the results have only become more relevant, especially as thrift stores become a more prominent shopping alternative. “This can have the deleterious effect of rising prices and thereby pricing the poor out of yet another place where they could potentially access the commodities that they need to maintain their standard of living,” James said ("The Thrift Economy"). Needless to say, thrift stores are becoming less affordable for the less fortunate and putting their socioeconomic standards of living at risk.

The opening of gentrified thrift stores and demand for new chic fashion also changes the demographics of the neighborhoods around them, creating gentrified neighborhoods. This can be seen in the US major city of Los Angeles (LA), California (CA), where neighborhoods are gentrifying due to the opening of gentrified thrift stores and other related amenities. The Silver Lake neighborhood in LA has seen the Goodwill on Hollywood Boulevard and Out of the Closet on Sunset Boulevard rival with chic new stores like Flounce Vintage. All over LA’s Eastside, which has seen several areas gentrify this century, vintage stores and specialty thrift stores have sprung up, with more than a half dozen in hip neighborhoods like Highland Park and Echo Park. The demographics of these gentrified neighborhoods such as Silver Lake have changed due to these newer fashion amenities ("Are Vintage Stores A Sign Of Gentrification?"). Younger hipsters have been linked to gentrification because they often move into urban enclaves from the outskirts of cities. Many enjoy the modern fashion amenities that cities offer, driving the demand for gentrified thrift stores and shopping experiences. Because they are young, hipsters aren’t usually rich but tend to be upwardly mobile, with jobs that place them on stronger financial footing than the longtime residents of gentrified areas, meaning they have more disposable income to use on existing thrift stores than the residents the thrift stores were meant to serve. These high-demand expensive thrift stores can be proven to change the urban demographic in neighborhoods as seen in the case of LA ("Are Vintage Stores A Sign Of Gentrification?").

CONCLUSION

It is evident and can be concluded that the gentrification of thrifting goes beyond the thrifting experience or the physical thrift store. It shows the changes in the socioeconomic fabrics present in who and where these thrift stores are meant to serve. The changes in the thrifting experience is evidence that consumers demand a higher-end thrifting experience as thrifting and sustainable shopping gets popular. Although thrifting is done for the right environmental cause, it is hard to deny that the popularity of thrifting amongst affluent people is harming the low-income residents for whom the thrift store was intended for. Many thrift in the name of environmental sustainability, but it is important to understand that one should become conscious about their impact on the environment, but also become conscious about whether their decisions are only helping certain populations, or are collectively serving the low-income people who are disproportionately impacted by climate change and pollution. When one decides to purchase a thrifted item, they should consider if it is truly necessary in their life, or if it is better if the item serves someone in need. This is even more important as thrifting gentrifies and becomes a more expensive practice, and it becomes harder for lower income individuals to thrift. The gentrified thrifting experience does bring harmful effects for the low-income communities who use the thrift store for their basic needs and livelihoods. It changes the demographics of the neighborhoods that once had general thrift stores and low income residents. Overall, thrifting is done with good intentions, however it is changing to become a gentrified and exploited practice, and affluent consumers of thrift stores should understand their privilege and be more considerate for those who truly need to purchase from a thrift store.

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