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Conversatia News

The Gentrification of Thrift Stores

There is a distinct smell upon entering any thrift store. Whether it may be your local GoodWill, Cross Roads, or 2nd Street chain, the familiar moth ball, Grandma's couch, and a tinge of dry rot scent will remain. These details are some of the key aspects of thrift stores, along with their notorious lower prices and contributions towards sustainable retail. Thrift stores have helped a plethora of lower income communities, especially in the late 1900s and early 2000s, and even now with its recent resurgence in media popularity. Yet, there has been consistent patterns of gentrification in thrifting, especially due to their second-hand branding that entices audiences who have a 'vintage' style. Although old-fashioned cheetah prints and y2k designs are historically fashionable, the larger lens of micro trends with swift climaxes and notable growing demand for second-hand clothing has made its impact on lower income communities. Many thrift stores today face a common issue, their signature lower retail costs are rising with consumer demands, making the once accessible and affordable resource for those in need less so, and *more so* tailored for wealthier buyers who want to follow trends.



Photo Cred: *Why We Should Move Towards Mindful Thrifting*, The Peak



Social Impacts

For apps and stores such as ThredUp or The RealReal, second-hand clothing has been increasingly accessible to purchase and adaptable to pop culture fashion trends. Ideally, the recent resurgence and popularity of thrifting originated from calls of actions to sustainability, a form of boycotting towards fast fashion brands in order to prevent waste, in addition to affordable options that are financially sustainable. However, the actual effects of thrift stores have been counter-intuitive. It is estimated that “by 2027, the U.S. secondhand apparel market is projected to be worth \$70 billion”, states Forbes article, “Are ThredUp, The RealReal and Depop Gentrifying The Thrift Store?”. Meaning, this increase in worth will manifest an increase in prices of clothing and as society progresses towards this estimate, the gradual rise of prices are starting to be more noticeable and less attainable.

Much of this stems from hyper-consumerism that pushes trends to frequently change online along with more environmentally conscious youth. Thrift stores are easy solutions to both discussions, but this drives demand and prices for many, ultimately making one of the only options of affordable clothing for lower income communities unavailable. It can even be ironic to some, as thrifting concerned the stigma that used clothing was considered ‘dirty’, which in association with lower income meant these statements actually referred to the communities themselves as dirty or ‘diseased’ (Fox 2023). Thus, the recent media coverage of thrifting as ‘trendy’ or ‘sustainable’ has been jarring to many, as the past of xenophobia and classism stereotypes continue to sting despite a contrast in public opinions. Further, the most obvious impact is original thrifting customers, who relied on affordable retail, having to adapt to price markups. Most popular in the U.S., Buffalo Exchange is a second-hand retail franchise, but consists of costly pieces, even suggesting in one article, “The True Cost of Fashion”, that if one buys an, “\$80 pair of jeans, but [one] wears them every other day for six months, that’s less than a \$1 per wear” (Pruitt 2022). Although this statement stands true, it is the matter of fact that one pair of jeans would be marked up to \$80 in the first place, an already unaffordable luxury that many are unable to afford especially coming into stores that market themselves for thrifting, a notorious category in fashion for its reasonable prices. Buffalo Exchange is one amongst hundreds of other thrift stores that advertise second hand clothing but evidently sell them for much higher prices than some can pay.

This gentrification of thrifting, a once cost effective way of shopping that benefitted lower income individuals, has displaced these customers with others who are more able to maintain the increasing prices and are influenced by social media and ‘sustainability’.

Environmental Impact

Besides the social implications of thrift stores being gentrified, social media has enticed younger audiences, who are particularly more environmentally conscious, that thrifting is a great method for sustainability. Initially, this was true. Fast fashion brands such as H&M, Zara, Shein, etc, are infamously known for worker exploitation and clothing waste, estimating that the average American, “generates 82 pounds of textile waste every single year” (Astoul 2024). The rat race for these brands to meet the demands of changing trends drives this sizable force to produce millions of clothing pieces each day, consequently overworking workers in less developed nations and contributing to waste as older, outdated trends are thrown out. Therefore, thrifting has served as a gateway to alleviating these harmful causes, but as it has grown in popularity, the recent effects of thrifting have shown to be counter-intuitive. Just as fast fashion brands frequently waste clothing each day, thrift stores have followed upon the surge of said clothing being donated in surplus or with consumers who donate and trash clothing they previously thrifted or purchased. It is reported by the EPA that 10 million tons (10 million, 2,000 pounds) of clothing are sent to landfills, making up 62.5% of all textile waste (Porter 2022). As pieces end up in landfills, the contribution to greenhouse gas emissions grows from incinerating it all while holding another consequence of costs going towards disposal. This in turn points out an irony of thrifting, as many begin to do so in order to prevent textile waste, yet eventually end up donating or wasting thrifted clothing due to its brief trending and contributing to textile waste anyway.





Photo Cred: *Thrifting Through Ages*, The State Press

Resolution

The common denominator across both issues seem to be the inconsistency of social media trends that influence, especially younger audiences, to thrift for sustainability or for an impermanent style. However, it is nearly impossible to track the roots of these issues, and trends will persist in the media with both its negatives and positives. The resolution towards contributing less to textile waste and hyperconsumerism that drives once affordable prices up is to simply abide by the three R's: reduce, reuse, and recycle. By reducing one's consumption of retail, it marks the first step towards purchasing items that might only be temporary and be later trashed. Additionally, reducing consumption adds one less consumer, reducing the demand for thrift stores to maintain whilst assisting communities that genuinely rely on thrift stores to afford clothing. Moreover, reusing pertains to preventing single-wear pieces, which applies to both fast fashion trends and thrift store finds. It can also be applicable to reusing materials of an item to create something else. Finally, recycling is most crucial, as it addresses the concern that clothing, even when donated to be recycled, ends up in a landfill. Thus, it is crucial to follow what recycling actually means when it comes to thrifting, which can be trading clothes, donating to



shelters, or simply upcycling the contents of a piece for other creations. Much like any consequence of social media, it is difficult to control, but with an increased effort to support sustainability in the environment and keeping thrift stores affordable, one can do so by being conscious of purchases and following trends online. Gentrification of thrifting is a real, and unfortunate, thing that is only yet to worsen over time if actual action and awareness is not being taken.

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