

The Ethics of Thrifting

by [Lea Filidore](#)

I was seventeen the first time the concept of thrifting for pleasure entered my mind. It was spring during a global pandemic, and life was particularly drab; *TikTok* and whipped iced coffee seemed to be my only sources of comfort. When videos of thrift hauls and secondhand clothing flips began to grace my social media, I thought, ‘Why not?’ When I told my mom about my plans, though, she laughed. She’d grown up in a low-income household where thrifting had been a necessity, a mark of desperation. But for me, a teen girl influenced by social media and pandemic boredom, it was a casual pastime.

The secondhand clothing trade has been around a long time, and its social meanings have fluctuated. According to Dennita Sewell, professor at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, “The popularity of thrifting has come and gone throughout the years Sometimes it represented something greater than itself, other times it represented staying in the past” (Sewell qtd. in Cote 8). These days, in a world consumed by fast fashion – affordable knockoff garments with an air of disposability, sewn largely in sweatshops, thrifting appears to encourage sustainability while respecting affordability. But as the Internet and social media increasingly influence consumers, particularly younger generations, thrifting has also become a trend – a popular fashion activity in its own right that presents itself as a sustainable alternative to fast fashion.

As journalist and researcher Jillian Cote frames it, “With fast fashion exploiting human rights and the environment for a lower price point, fashion consumption feels like a double-edged sword, sacrificing morals or money.” Thrifting thus can appear to be a solution to this problem. According to data collected in 2020 by *thredUP*, an online consignment and thrifting app, “77 percent of millennials prefer to buy from environmentally-conscious brands” (Ronobir et al. 49). Likewise, Sara Kiley Watson, Assistant Editor for sustainability coverage at *Popular Science*, writes that “In 2019, around 40 percent of Gen Z-ers were buying second hand” (2). Following this spike in thrifting, arguments against affluent thrift shoppers began to surface on social media. While thrifting as a fashion choice among the affluent may promote sustainability and environmental well-being, it might also further marginalize low-income secondhand shoppers. This danger has led some to argue that trend-driven thrifting constitutes “thrift store gentrification” (Byus). Is the contemporary iteration of the thrifting trend

more dubious than it is beneficial? Is it worth championing as an ethical way to participate in fashion?

The problem of sustainability is serious and pressing, and consumers are increasingly aware of the environmental impact of their purchases. According to estimates from the Environmental Protection Agency presented by Allison Hirschlag in *Scientific American*, Americans in 2015 added more than 21 billion pounds of clothing and other textiles to landfills (1). Such a quantity of textile waste is incredibly harmful to the environment, equaling the amount of CO₂ expelled by around 42,000 cars in a one-year span, or the annual water usage of about 174,000 American households (5). For those who seek eco-friendly lifestyles, thrifting is a feel-good way to apply the logic of recycling to fashion. By giving clothing a second life, buying secondhand reuses textiles and avoids water and fertilizer use, greenhouse gas emissions, and other harmful environmental impacts that would result from producing a new garment (5).

Thrift shopping also lets consumers keep up with trends without contributing to the epidemic of fast fashion. Sustainability analysts Marcus Ruggiero, Alyssa Schamber, and Olivia Schroeder define fast fashion as “a highly profitable business supplemented by replicating catwalk trends while also mass-producing clothing [which] is then sold at a fraction of the cost of the high-designer items” (Ruggiero et al. 4). The fast fashion industry provides consumers with cheap, on-trend clothing. But these clothes come at an environmental cost. The fast fashion industry is infamous for producing low-quality garments with limited lifespans and high disposal rates, leading to increased textile consumption and production. “The average consumer throws away 70 pounds of garments per year,” reports Ruggiero. “With new fashion trends emerging almost every month, more than 100 billion items of clothing are produced each year with no sustainable method of disposal” (7-8). Thrift shopping can be as affordable as fast fashion brands, without the harmful environmental impacts associated with overproduction.

While the environmental benefits of sustainable fashion may seem undeniable, thrifting is not without ethical concerns. ‘Trendy’ sustainable practices like thrifting can be particularly harmful to marginalized and low-income people, as the increase in secondhand shopping by economically advantaged people results in “many thrift stores raising their prices, [which] exacerbat[es] income inequality, and effectively marginaliz[es] the population that depends on thrifting clothing the most” (Watson 3, 4). As a result of their increased popularity, thrifting locations like Goodwill and the Salvation Army are attracting higher-end consumers by “upgrading to a more upscale look and selling expensive clothes in many neighborhoods” (Ronobir 50). This movement toward a more affluent customer profile cuts off an important resource for low-income people for whom secondhand shopping is not a trend. Through the

gentrification of thrift shopping, vintage clothing and secondhand items often take on an air of luxury, both for those who can afford them and for those who can't.

As the trend of 'ethical' shopping develops, entrepreneurial thrifters have begun to move from browsing Goodwill for quality items, to buying and reselling vintage on popular apps like *Depop* and *thredUP*. As researcher and journalist Briana Byus writes, "A primary concern is that people who can afford to shop at other places will buy out the best items at thrift stores and then turn around and resell their thrifted items at an elevated price to make a profit" (3). In the buying and reselling process, these entrepreneurial thrifters raise prices on vintage and rare items, turning secondhand shopping into a luxury buying experience and further isolating those who shop secondhand out of necessity. According to Marie-Cécile Cervellon, professor at the International University of Monaco, "[v]intage connoisseurship and consumption entails a snob appeal which simultaneously attracts and excludes those who do not have the knowledge or the spending power" (961). Due to the required investment of money and time – a source of currency in its own right – vintage trade requires a certain level of cultural and economic capital. To understand what goods constitute valuable vintage items, to understand their value, and to be willing to expend the necessary amounts to collect and own them is an investment in and of itself. But why are so many people willing to spend this much time, attention, and money on the consumption of vintage goods? It all ties back to the social and psychological appeal of fashion.

In "The Psychology of Luxury Consumption," David Dubois et al. claim that "Consumers' enduring desire for luxury largely derives from the need for status" (82). Within the larger category of luxury, vintage items confer their own kind of status, namely the image of individuality. As Malia Simon writes in her article "Buying Into the Neoliberal Trap: Vintage Nostalgia and the Shopper's Dilemma," "Vintage and boutique-like style has made its way into the current American imagination by means of nostalgia for a sense of individuality The single-copy flannels and the faded or strangely cut jeans offer a sense of personalized choice and uniqueness that can appeal to anyone living in today's market" (22). Simon illuminates an ideology common to vintage consumption and secondhand shopping: the value of appearing unique. The *Journal of Consumer Research* agrees that consumers "[pursue] differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's social and self-image" (Tian et al. qtd. in Cervellon 960). By buying vintage, a shopper aims to express her singular personality.

For young people, much of this perceived uniqueness is displayed on social media. Social media both romanticizes and threatens individuality as millions of users compare themselves to others. Research conducted by the faculty of Psychology and Cognitive Science at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poland shows that "people tend to satisfy their need to be unique by being active on social media, whether by viewing

other users' profiles or by publishing their [own] content" (Drażkowski et al. 33). As young people turn to social media to satiate a desire for individuality, social media responds by intensifying the need for uniqueness through social comparisons. A particularly notable way that young users have come to subvert the feeling of conformity associated with social media is through "self-presentation of one's own consumer choices," such as buying and posting about one's "distinctive and unconventional clothes" (33). The problem of uniqueness on social media might influence consumer choices far more than the problems of sustainability or equity do.

Most people who thrift do so for a variety of reasons, not all of them ethically sound. Professor Peter Kalina suggests that many young social media users support trends that seem ethical, and object to others that don't, as a form of performative activism, more than truly caring about a cause. Kalina contends that what these social media users want is "a virtual pat on the back for being a 'good person' or for being 'on the right side' of a cause, or 'on the right side of history'" (478). Though many thrifters could conceivably afford to buy new, sustainably made clothes – and presumably to keep these purchases to themselves – thrifting and then posting about their purchases online allows these consumers to demonstrate both their ethical values and their personal uniqueness, all at a low price point. The thrifting trend, while conceptualized and marketed with eco-friendly intent, has thus turned into a lazy attempt by many socially conscious young adults to feel good about themselves. 'I thrifted this' is thus both a brag and a virtue-signal.

Many generations have turned to Goodwills and Salvation Armies for unique vintage pieces to define their own styles and identities. Contemporary thrifting may have adopted the additional ideology of sustainability, but there are still "gaps in the research that must be filled" to accurately gauge the environmental differences made by thrifting (Hirschlag). For instance, it's likely that if consumers are motivated by price, they will thrift selectively and turn to fast fashion companies when thrifts fail. And today's thrift shoppers are not curtailing their consumption: "Buying second hand clothes is still *buying more clothes*" (Cills). Thrifting, then, is likely more of an eco-ethical trap than an important part of a genuine movement toward a more environmentally-sustainable and equitable consumer culture. While the latest thrifting trend has spread in response to increased consumer awareness about the problems of fast fashion, it won't end fast fashion or shut down many sweatshops: in fact, thrift shopping itself "feeds off the instability and unsustainability of the fast-fashion industry," whose trend-chasing ensures constant turnover in a "massive second-hand market" (Fitzpatrick qtd. in Watson). Between unconsidered virtue-signaling and inconsistent consumer practices, it is clear that the latest iteration of thrifting is little more than an old pastime placed in an updated, more self-righteous frame.

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