From Secondhand to Vintage: The Presentation and Valuation of Used Clothing

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Abstract

This thesis explores how used clothing becomes “vintage” through its interpreted value as authentic. Through an analysis of three popular used clothing markets: Etsy, flea markets, and thrift stores, I explain the ways in which three dimensions contribute to the ways in secondhand clothing is perceived as genuine both in terms of its source as well as style: the personalization of used clothing, their presentation and curation by the seller, and the experience of the shopper. I additionally explore the world of vintage as a reaction to fast fashion and to the mass-production of clothing through its ability to portray itself as individual and personalized. Ultimately authenticity is revealed to be authenticities as it becomes difficult to distinguish between the world of fast fashion and that of used clothing, or seemingly reinterpreted fashion. It is through this analysis as well as the three dimensions that the created value of vintage clothing can be understood as separate from the value of fast fashion.
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Introduction

Popular music bands, just like clothing, rise and fall in popularity. However during their height in popularity many of these groups have devout followers. These fans follow the band in the news, listen to their albums, and attend their concerts. They might buy a band t-shirt at a concert for $10-$25, proudly wearing it from time to time, reaffirming their love of this pop group and their music preferences. However like many trends, many of these fans might lose interest in the band or move on to other styles, shoving the shirt to the back of their closet and ultimately getting rid of it, to be replaced with that of a more current band perhaps. Though they might never think of it again, this shirt is far from gone. It will probably sit for a while in thrift stores, passed over for more stylish and on trend t-shirts. Yet eventually it will be picked up by a thrift store peruser who shells out a couple of bucks for this now dated item. The shirt’s new owner now proudly wears it, reaffirming their style preferences to the world. However this is not the same shirt it originally was. It has lost its original color and fabric quality, and the screen print of the lead singer has now faded. Furthermore, it was not bought at a concert, and the owner never went to one. If this new owner is actually a true fan why don’t they buy a new shirt? If they are not a fan, why even wear it? This shirt is appealing because of two major reasons. First, its obvious age guarantees its authenticity as an “original” band t-shirt. Second, it came from a thrift store and is not a “novelty tee” that can be picked up at many popular stores. These two points are suggestive of a complex valuation system surrounding used clothing. The band t-shirt is not necessarily special in and of itself, but rather is demonstrative of an interpreted sense of authenticity created by the reinterpretation of clothing in their second life.
The popularity of vintage appears to derive in majority from its on average low prices, its one-of-a-kind attributes, and oftentimes its quirky style. The sale of used clothing is broader than it might first appear, ranging from thrift stores to flea markets, to various online markets, garage sales, and estate sales. All of these forms of sale offer different modes of presentation, clothing, and prices and is dependent on location and as well as timing. With all of these different attributes at play, the question then becomes when does used clothing become vintage? There is no objective qualifier to determine what is and is not vintage. Is it purely age? Does brand matter? Condition? It’s origin? How does the subjective valuation of the buyer come into play?

In order to understand the vintage clothing market it is important to first acknowledge the popular clothing market, also known as fast fashion. Over the past three decades the decreasing costs of clothing manufacturing has led to the sale of cheap and fashionable clothes on a large scale; the most common examples in the United States are Forever21, H&M, and Zara. It is commonly understood that the fashion cycle begins with the high fashion houses then disseminates down onto other fashion brands. This is known as the “Trickle Down Theory” (Abbasi). Looking at this chart, we can see how a trend enters the market, rising in popularity until demand declines and it is rejected.
With fast fashion this occurs repeatedly in a very short period of time. What this thesis is interested in is what happens to clothing once it has entered the “rejection” phase, as well as the reemergence of trends and its affects on the perception of style. This rejection phase can be understood as

the rejection or discarding of a style just because it is out of fashion is called consumer obsolescence. Since consumers are no more interested in buying, manufactures stop producing and the retailers will not restock the same styles. Now it’s time for a new cycle to begin (Abassi).

However clothing does not simply go away but rather it has a second life. The remnants of past styles require new forms of interpretation in their wearability and it is the used clothing market that gives these castoffs new value. Ultimately this arrowing leading off to right should curve back upwards into a circle, as the clothing trends reenter the market through a seemingly cyclical cycle of style and presentation preferences. Through an analysis of the vintage clothing market this thesis explores the ways in which this is done.

This thesis is divided into four sections, to be followed by a conclusion. Before diving into the secondhand clothing market it is first important to understand the history and theory behind clothing and its role in social presentation. Chapter One will survey current theory and literature on the topic of fashion and used clothing. It will cover the history of (fast) fashion and how it follows the history of industrialization as a product of a consumer society. The chapter covers social theory as it applies to the interpretation of clothing as fashion (regarding class) as well as authenticity—highlighting a gap in current literature on the consumption of used clothing in the United States. The next chapters each discuss the three used clothing markets explored in this thesis respectively. Chapter Two dives into the world of Etsy, discussing the
ways in which its online form affects the personalization and presentation of vintage while comparing it to the sale of fast fashion online. This chapter demonstrates the complexities of the perception of authenticities, ultimately setting up the next two chapters to highlight ways in which vintage clothing is valued differently from that of tradition fast fashion. Chapter Three discusses the presence of secondhand clothing at flea markets, conveying the complexities of social interactions involved in creating the authenticities of vintage, such as through the role of the shopper’s experience with haggling. This chapter further illuminates the role of personalization and shopper experience in this process. Chapter Four will delve into the last of three markets, thrift shops, and explain the role of presentation in the valuation of vintage and highlight the affect of this on differing interpretations of the authentic at different shops. These three chapters serve to convey the dynamic dimensions of the vintage clothing markets, their similarities and differences demonstrating the complex nature of an interpretation what is on trend or fashionable. Ultimately vintage clothing is not immune to the fashion cycle, and the preference for this style remains within this model of trend preferences. What this thesis hopes to illuminate is the ways in which the transformation of used clothing into a “styled” vintage is a class reaction to the mass consumption of fast fashion. Applying the three dimensions of presentation, personalization, and shopper experience to the three markets conveys the dynamic interpretations of “authentic” used clothing, ultimately making it difficult to distinguish between the world of fast and anti-fast fashion.
Chapter 1: Historical Overview and Literature Review

GLOBAL CONSUMPTION AND FASHION

Before approaching current literature and research on the consumption of secondhand clothing, it is important to first look at the role of contemporary fashion and the powerful impact that globalization has had on it. Up until the mid to late nineteenth century the history of popular fashion in the Western world was reserved for the bourgeoisie and the upper classes; it was not until industrialization that the working class was no longer excluded from this sphere. The rapid expansion of mass production brought on by industrialization led to the rapid expansion of mass consumption, and “since then mass consumption has to an increasing extent assumed the form of symbol consumption, that is it takes place so as to bring about an identification with what the consumption item stands for” (Svenden 38). Neil McKendrick similarly discusses this, explaining through his analysis of Braudel that the history of fashion had not previously progressed on any large scale way before industrialization. Once items became available to mass consumption “then its potential was released, and it became an engine for growth, a motive power for mass production (McKendrick 66).” As clothing became more available, the idea of fashion and style became more embedded in society, creating its own set of social codes and symbols. On a mass scale then, clothing took on a new role beyond its utilitarian purpose. Before proceeding, it is important to make a clear distinction between fashion and clothing. In their article *Vintage or Fashion Clothes? An Investigation inside the Issues of Collecting and Marketing Second-hand Clothes*, authors Catalani and Chung clearly describe cloth, and what I will consider as clothing as well, as an item of utility, used to cover and protect oneself. In
contrast, fashion is clothing that carries social power, and therefore is subject to change both aesthetically as well as in terms of perception (Catalani 3).

IDENTITY AND CLASS

With the mass production and consumption of clothing, fashion has become a way in which both personal and class identity is presented or expressed. A sort of tug of war between the two, fashion can be seen as both a form of self-expression as well as a form of class identification. These two ideas appear opposing in a way, as self-expression suggests individualism while class identity suggests conformity. This contradiction suggests that fashion has “the double function of which consists of revolving within a given circle and at the same time emphasizing it as separate from others (Simmel 297).” Here we begin to see the way in which certain dimensions relate: the role of presentation is aligned with the consumer’s goals—whether it be class association or differentiation. Yet within the upper classes, differentiation is highly valued. They can afford to self-express due to their high cultural capital and their taste. In his work *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that “to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ’class' (Bourdieu 1).” Bourdieu goes on to argue that working class tastes therefore work primarily as a foil, their aesthetic being constantly defined in terms of upper class tastes, by the upper class (Bourdieu 41, 57). Jean Baudrillard takes it one step further, theorizing that personalization is an industrial creation (Baudrillard 89). The idea of making oneself unique, of molding oneself into becoming different, is founded upon a “code of differences”-- marginal differences which hierarchically establish signs, signs that are “based not on objects or goods, but on differences (Baudrillard 90).” It is not
necessarily a style or a fashion that is the “code of difference” here, but rather it is the expression of an understanding of a style and a taste. Therefore, according to Baudrillard, even the goal or motive of genuine self-expression has been commodified. Individuality within a social class is a reference point to be sought and consumed. Fashion is simply a signal that differentiates both classes and as well as individuals within a class.

TRENDS, STYLE AND CHANGE VIA CLASS

This “democratization” of clothing leads to, as Georg Simmel argues, the progress (or at least the constant change) of fashion. If the upper class needs to distinguish themselves from other classes then fashion is always changing. (Assuming it is the upper class that has the cultural capital to lead taste and accepting the idea that lower-classes adopt established fashion trends later on). Georg Simmel explains this in his article Fashion, writing:

Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on (Simmel 299).

Fashion is therefore always in a seemingly transitory state, as it the minority becoming the majority, “the nature of fashion is to be transient (Svenden 31).” Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas on taste and distaste can then be applied to Simmel’s idea of the upper class’s rejection of trends once they gain mass popularity. Bourdieu argues that a “positive identification” (Svenden 113) must have a negative connotation as well, and “it is no accident that, when [tastes] have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes (Bourdieu 56).” Svenden gives a good example of this with his statement: “I am not a hippie because I am a punk rocker (Svenden 113).” The negation here being “I am not a hippie” and the positive identification being “because
I am a punk rocker.” This apparent sense of (mostly class) antagonism is what perpetuates fashion onwards-- fashion is made up of both conformists and those who differ, and they are always in dialogue (Simmel 294). Though Svenden does not clearly state from whom this differentiation is made, one can assume it is a differentiation from popular culture, or in this case popular style and trends. This sense of contradiction is necessary to propel fashion and trends forward.

The ability of the upper class to successfully distinguish themselves from “mass trends” is reflective of their ability to superiorly navigate cultural spaces. The same accessibility and breadth of knowledge of the internet that provides a platform for the proliferation of vintage clothing online also has an affect on the upper class and the ways they consume. In his book Privilege (2010), Shamus Khan explores the world of the prep school elite and discusses the ways in which they easily interact within various social and cultural spaces— calling them “culturally omnivorous” (Khan 7). This idea can be applied to the consumption of trends by the upper class as they too are omnivores of changing fashion styles. For Khan this ability to adapt to various social/cultural situations is due to the accessibility of today’s open society:

They no longer define themselves by what they exclude, but rather their power now comes from including everything. What marks elites as elites is not a singular point of view or purpose but rather their capacity to pick, choose, combine, and consume a wide gamut of the social strata (171).

They have the time and resources to do, and in this case of this thesis, and to wear many different things. Their ability to pick and choose trends differentiates them from other classes and affords them the power to set the tone. Applying this to used clothing, by being culturally omnivorous
the upper classes can consume used clothing out of *choice* and not *necessity*—essentially turning used clothing into the more styled vintage.

**FAST FASHION**

The mass production and consumption of fashion within the past 15-20 years can thus be seen as the exaggerated, the sped up version of this antagonism-- fashion trends last only a couple of months before they are collectively dismissed. If fashion is the minority becoming the majority, once a trend’s predominance is reached the fashion cycle moves onto the next one, discarding last season’s (or month’s) styles. To put into perspective the scale of this, the popular UK clothing brand Topshop posts on average 400 new items onto its website every week (Cline 96). Furthermore, according to Sole 4 Souls, in 2009 Americans threw away more than 300 million pairs of shoes (Falasca-Zamponi 16). From this phenomenon has emerged the term *fast fashion*, “a retail style that consists of the expedited production and distribution of short runs of trend-based fashion. Short runs mean seasonal sales are unlikely, which increases the pressure to buy quickly (Hoskins 70).” As a result, clothing is now disposable. Consumers buy up fashion with the expectation of discarding it in the future as new trends come along. Tansy Hoskins highlights the pervasiveness and significance of the role of fast fashion and mass consumption by mentioning Forbes’s 2013 Rich List: 1, Carlos Slim Helu the telecoms billionaire; 2, Bill Gates of Microsoft; 3, Amancio Ortega of Zara; which can be summed up as “telecoms, computers and fast-fashion (Hoskins 22).” With fashion existing on this massive and technological scale and with a high value being placed, as Baudrillard theorized, on “personalization”, the lifespan of clothing increasingly shrinks. As one strives to constantly personalize themselves, and if fashion has become a fluid idea (minority to majority cycle), then we are constantly seeking new and
innovative fashions. It is not that the utility of a piece of clothing has decreased, it is that the 
utility of that fashion trend that has; the point of these fast fashion corporations is “not to satisfy 
the needs of consumers have but rather of creating new needs (Svenden 130).” The result is the 
majority of the population getting their clothing from similar places—giant fast fashion 
corporations such as Forever21 and H&M, ultimately posing a problem for the search 
personalization. This begs the question, has this traditional source of fashion lost its value as a 
source of stylistic personalization? Of authenticity?

SECONDHAND CLOTHING

The rise in popularity of secondhand clothing can be viewed as a direct reaction to fast 
fashion. In her book The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy, Pietra Rivoli explores the 
affect of globalization on production and consumption. In the chapter “Where T-Shirts Go After 
the Salvation Army” she discusses the affect of all of this on the used clothing market. Unwanted 
clothing is commonly donated to various charities with the oftentimes made assumption that they 
are desperately needed, an assumption Rivoli quickly debunks:

The Salvation Army at one time tried to sell all of the clothing in its stores or to give it 
away, but the supply now so far outstrips domestic demand that only a fraction of the clothing 
collected by the Salvation Army stays in the United States. There are nowhere near enough poor 
people in America to absorb the mountains of castoffs, even if they were given away (Rivoli 
216).

The (many) pieces that do not make the domestic thrift store cut are sorted by rag shops, to be 
reused as fabric, turned into fibers, or sent abroad—mostly to African countries. Clothing is 
sorted into a fourth category at these shops, that of vintage. These rag shops sort out the more 
valuable items to be sent abroad, and specifically with “its insatiable demand for trendy
Americana, Japan is usually the largest customer for American used clothing (221).” Throughout this chapter Rivoli astutely weaves the various paths through which discarded American clothing is exported to various international markets based on differing demand. Yet her only discussion of secondhand clothes being sold as vintage is this single point of discussion. This can be viewed as the most common, or traditional, form of vintage: Rolling Stones band tee’s, jean jackets, cowboy boots. While this analyses is demonstrative of the affect of mass clothing production/consumption, it fails to touch on the intricacies and nuances of the domestic used clothing market.

Whereas fast fashion offers cheap clothing that is usually low quality but on trend, secondhand clothing offers an alternative source of cheap clothing, some of it low quality but some of it of significantly higher quality as well. Baker makes the important note that vintage as it has informally been accepted for the past three decades is different from that of previous denotations of vintage in the Western world, as

In contrast with the production and consumption of antiques and reproductions in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, it was the objects associated with the ordinariness of the everyday and the working classes that became valuable signifiers of status (Baker 324).

Whereas nineteenth century Europe and the United States also practiced the consumption of secondhand goods, it was the consumption of used goods specifically of a higher quality, whereas currently the popular consumption of vintage is the consumption of the seemingly ordinary. Yet this search for the ordinary should not be confused with popular fast fashion, as it is the idealized ordinary that is sought, not common fashion trends. The rise in popularity of vintage has to do with the fact that “fast fashion today is rarely exclusive”-- this idealized
ordinary seems to have become exclusive in contrast with mass produced fashion. It can be argued that part of its value is derived from the fact that it is scarce, and therefore carries distinction and symbolic values in this way as well (Svenden 50).

Furthermore, there is a sense of authenticity in vintage fashion, as it is felt that pre-fast fashion apparel is made with better quality and due to its scarcity as well, the “find” it is more valuable (Palmer 194). Philosopher Agnes Heller theorizes that authenticity is “the single most sublime virtue of modernity, for authentic people are the people who remain true to their existential choice, who are pulled and not pushed, who are personalities (Heller 227).”

David Muggleton explores the idea of authenticity through his analysis in Inside Subcultures, where the cycle of fashion trends can be understood through the idea of bricolage, “an act of transformation by which a new and original style is formed through plunder and recontextualization as a challenge to the hegemony of the dominant culture (Muggleton 131).” This theory of bricolage, or the “authentic stylistic resistance” transforms and creates a new and original style through a recontextualization. For example, a modern day student might wear an old jean jacket as a form of style, while its original owner might have been a construction worker who bought it for work. This bricolage is then co-opted through the commercialization of this original creativity by the mass media. This second part can be understood through the absorption of upcoming trends and modes of presentation by fast fashion. In the case of the jean jacket, it is Urban Outfitters selling a “pre-worn in” jean jacket on a mass scale for three times the price. This barrier of authenticity between vintage and fast fashion can be better defined through ideas of “selling out” and the threat of commercialization. If, as described by Simmel, fashion is the minority becoming the majority, then Muggleton is correct in positing that “on one hand, there is
the desire to protect the scarcity of subcultural capital and thereby retain one’s originality; on the other, the need to have this affirmed by a larger following (143).” A vintage clothing-wearer who is seeking an “authentic” look for the sake of individuality needs the style to remain in the minority to majority limbo in order to maintain this individuality. Yet this “style” can only be affirmed by ultimately traversing the minority to majority spectrum. The difference between vintage clothing and fast fashion (even if it is a similar looking item) is that vintage style adopts used clothing and reinterprets them to create an “authentic vintage aesthetic,” whereas fast fashion brands are constantly adopting the latest trends in hopes of selling to the masses. The inauthentic, as Muggleton explains, is when it is a phase, pure replication or “posing”, which falls in line with the operation of fast fashion, the quick turnover of trends (142). Therefore, though authenticity comes in part from the type item being sold (true vintage versus a replication), a lot of it in part has to do with the presentation, or setting of the piece for sale. It is this interpretation of authenticity then that helps to separate the value of vintage from that of fast fashion.

Baudrillard might dismiss this idea of authenticity as a “reference ideal,” an identity of difference that can be achieved by “subscribing to a model and conforming to a ready-made code (Baudrillard 96).” It is not individuality or personal individual discovery that Baudrillard is discussing here, but rather it is the commodification of this search for and idealizing the authentic self, turning it from a natural [valoir] to show-off/present oneself [se faire valoir] (96). The popularity of secondhand clothing can thus be placed in this model, as the search for authenticity through vintage can be understood as the search for personalization through through contemporary forms of consumption.
Buyers

Baudrillard’s model can be further thought of in terms of cultural consumption, which Catalani and Chung explain as a social activity where what and how we consume is used to help explain and publicly express who we are or would like to be (Catalani 4). As mentioned above, wearing secondhand clothing can be a form of fast fashion independence and rejection of popular fashion trends. Yet this can still be seen as a search for a model, the reference point here being an “anti-fashion” statement perhaps. Baudrillard would argue that this is simply a fashion style, still using signs to express one’s identity within the fashion system. Since fast fashion is rarely exclusive today, and secondhand clothing has an air of exclusivity around it (if only from its scarcity), vintage has become commodified (Palmer 174). Furthermore, Simmel’s theorization of fashion being the moment when a trend is moving from the minority to the majority helps explain why the anti-fashion characteristic of secondhand clothing confirms secondhand clothing as a form of fashion consumption:

From the fact that fashion as such can never be generally in vogue, the individual derives the satisfaction of knowing that as adopted by him it still represents something special and striking, while at the same time he feels inwardly supported by a set of persons who are…actually doing the same thing (Simmel 304).

Two points here highlight the reason for which secondhand clothing, even as anti-fashion, is still a form of fashion. First, if the subject knowingly dresses in an anti-conformist or alternative manner, it still represents a fashion statement; he is still seeking some sort of validation about his identity through his clothing, such as from his social group, perhaps via envy. Second, the positive feedback he/she receives demonstrates that they have achieved (at least proximity to) a
certain reference ideal, thus fitting in with Baudrillard’s model of industrialized personalization. For Baudrillard, the rejection of consumption remains the ultimate form of consumption. After establishing that personalization is the pursuit of social status through differentiation based on signs, the “paradox of underconsumption” can then be understood (Baudrillard 90). As conspicuous consumption becomes easily accessible, as fast fashion allows trends to become easier to consume, according to Bourdieu upper class tastes have to find a way to remain differentiated from the tastes of other classes (distaste). The reaction of the upper class is therefore a shift towards “inconspicuous consumption.” According to Baudrillard, this underconsumption “represents a further degree of luxury” as it is done by choice (90). Moreover, it highlights how the choice to consume differently/less is still a form of consumption— it is what Baudrillard calls “metaconsumption”, and it is a form of the consumption of differentiation. The distinguishing factor behind this is that this is a choice, “it is on the basis of luxury that the lost simplicity is consumed (91).” Therefore, we see how even anti-fashion, in this case secondhand clothing, is still a form of fashion. It is still a sign of wealth and class distinction for the upper class (or anyone with enough cultural capital) as it is a conscious and conspicuous choice. In this way a goal of secondhand clothing is to wear it as a styled vintage to express individuality and class distinction.

**Sellers**

Besides high-end boutique vintage, the majority of secondhand clothing falls somewhere between mass production and high culture. For example, many vintage clothing stores exist in borderline neighborhoods, and feature some sort of deconstructed charm. All of these themes fit into Bourdieu’s idea of new cultural intermediaries, a “new petite bourgeoisie” that provides
symbolic goods and services, between producers and consumers—“Faced with the double competition of the producers, auctores, and the legitimate reproducers, lectore,...the new cultural intermediaries...have invented a whole series of genres half-way between legitimate culture and mass production (Bourdieu 325).” New cultural intermediaries can be seen as middlemen, such as is the case for secondhand clothing, mediating between the producers and consumers; a sort of curator. Bourdieu goes on to explain that oftentimes these new cultural intermediaries can have an air of pretension or distinction to them, this coming from their familiarity with a specific subcategory of culture (362). Applied to secondhand clothing sellers, they mediate between the clothing’s original owner (the producer) and the consumer who is looking to buy a pre-worn garment. It is for this reason that the seller must have a strong enough knowledge base in order to successfully curate and sell secondhand clothing so that it comes off as valuable rather than simply as another person’s discarded goods. As Baker describes it, “in a symbolic and a material sense they stand between the original manufacturers, designers and owners of objects and their future customers (Baker 625).”

The successfulness of being a secondhand clothing retailer necessitates a strong knowledge of the product, the ability to navigate different spheres of production and consumption as well as social classes, and the skill to present these pieces as valuable. First, the ability to accurately discern poor product from good when rummaging through used clothing requires a certain level of taste. Rivoli calls this the ability to spot a “snowflake”, requiring a sense of “tacit knowledge” that cannot necessarily be learned (Rivoli 211). Though the secondhand clothing retailer is not always in the social class to which they hope to sell, their caliber of taste and distaste must be high enough to attract customers with a high level of taste.
via product offerings and presentation. Bourdieu understands taste as “the source of the system of distinctive features which cannot fail to be perceived as a systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence (Bourdieu 174).” Baker explains that these vintage sellers are reevaluating the product, judging it based on its cultural, social, and aesthetic value (Baker 628). Their ability to pick out the right clothes to sell is something that cannot easily be learned in school; it requires a certain level of cultural capital to be able to gain the correct tastes. Second, the source and the destination of secondhand clothing is oftentimes not the same; as Baker puts it, retro retailers “perform a division” between the producers of the item, its original owner, and the future owners (632). She goes on to make the interesting point that these zones of production and consumption are less clear cut than might be assumed—secondhand clothing vendors are producers of the clothing as a piece of secondhand fashion, yet they are/were consumers of the same item as well—complicating the lines between production and consumption, between culture and economy (633). Furthering this idea of fluid boundaries, Baker argues that it is the entrepreneurial members of subcultures who are able to successfully navigate the realm of vintage retailing— they have to “demonstrate their cultural capital when talking to customers, and have to be capable of legitimating their own tastes. They also require the appropriate knowledge to be able to buy objects in house clearances in more working-class areas (636).” They need to have a foot in both doors, and this ability to perform multiples negotiations and to navigate both spheres of taste and product sourcing as well as engage in arbitrage make their position particularly unique among cultural intermediaries. It is these skills that allow them to transform secondhand into vintage, a form of value creation that relies as capturing a sense of authenticity, whether it be through the presentation of product offering or
themselves. Taking this idea one step further, it will be interesting to explore how cultural intermediaries take advantage of the ability to discern monetary value from this transformation. How present is arbitrage in the role of these new cultural intermediaries?

It is important to note the role of locationality in the sale of secondhand clothing. Just as the production and consumption of secondhand clothing exists in a fluid state (it is always being bought/sold or changes in sources), the location of the physical shops can have a sense of liminality to them as well. As Crewe and Gregson explain, “inscriptions of the “alternative” in the retail landscape – particularly when constituted in opposition to the “mainstream” – are inherently unstable geographically (Gregson 33).” The association of physical secondhand stores with the alternative oftentimes results in the establishment of retail stores in transitory neighborhoods, otherwise known as “up and coming”. They are sometimes involved in the gentrification of these neighborhoods, whether by choice or on accident (Baker 631). In their study of secondhand clothing stores in urban spaces, Parker and Weber highlight the benefits of secondhand retail to local economies as well as its contribution to local and vibrant neighborhoods (Parker 1099). Beyond physical retail spaces, the advent of the internet has completely changed the way we shop, and it has largely affected clothing retail as well. Mass-market fashion can be seen through online shops such as Asos, which has expected sale of £1 billion by 2015 (Hoskins 22). On the other side of this though are online secondhand clothing sites, specifically Ebay and Etsy. The question thus becomes as to whether these online shops will become complements to the secondhand clothing industry, boosting production and consumption, or a substitute to the physical stores. Though physical stores cater well to those who enjoy the treasure, or the “find” of secondhand shopping, online shopping reaches a broader
audience, saves time for shoppers, and cuts costs for retailers. Alexandra Palmer sees online vintage retail as an improvement, as it “completely removes consumers from the unsavory and conventional elements of second hand markets (Palmer 204).” Yet who’s to say there is no value in this “unsavory” quality of thrift stores? However, with online selling retailers not only have to worry about successfully curating their own collection, but have to compete directly with many other shops as well (211). If we accept that secondhand clothing is becoming a mainstream source of fashion, it is no surprise that it should follow similar trends as traditional fashion retailers.

CONCLUSION

The value of the retro aesthetic as a popular style comes in part from the adaptation of it by the upper classes. By purposefully choosing inconspicuous consumption, their fashion choices are in fact quite conspicuous. Whereas Bourdieu argues that this is just a matter of distinction by class chosen via taste, Baudrillard makes the claim that even personal attempts at individualization are the product of an organized code of differences. Yet neither of these theories leave much room for personal agency. Svenden critiques this mode of reason, writing that “it presents us as completely passive in relation to consumption, while we ourselves--with good reason--perceive ourselves as active and selective, and the criticisms thus seem irrelevant for our self-understanding (Svenden 116).” It is not clear as to how much self-understanding relates to others or how much Bourdieu’s foil is necessary to explore this.

Going back to the value of the retro aesthetic, it is unclear as to where the power of this style comes from. Though nostalgia (an idealized look to the past) is a common characteristic of a postmodern society, today’s vintage fashion has little dialogue with the past (Palmer 212). A
young woman is not commonly going to a thrift store to find a long suede skirt because it reminds her of the greatness of the 70’s, she is doing it for aesthetic reasons, for reasons of style and fashion. Yet this still does not explain where this power that vintage carries comes from? Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that wearing vintage has traditionally been associated with being artistic or eccentric, ideals of differentiation that fit into Baudrillard’s model of the industrialized search for personalization (Palmer 112). Ultimately, the popularity of secondhand clothes can be seen as a reaction to the mass-proliferation of popular clothing through fast fashion, it is a search for authenticity, a sort of subversion, and a refusal to inherit, a form of bricolage (Muggleton). Yet as vintage becomes more and more commodified, it is unclear as to whether it will be able to maintain its position as an “alternative” form of fashion. We’ve already seen the beginning of this with the vintage aesthetic being sold in stores such as Urban Outfitters and the expansion of secondhand retail onto the internet. Yet the supply of secondhand clothing is relatively fixed, if not shrinking. The poor quality of recently passed fast fashion apparel is not a viable substitute. So with supply decreasing and demand increasing, it will be interesting to explore how sellers are already beginning to adapt to this-- as it is the sellers who will be the first to be affected by these changes. Perhaps ultimately vintage is just a prolonged trend.

In summary, this thesis hopes to understand various dimensions of the valuation of secondhand clothing as vintage through two major questions previously touched on in this chapter. First, how is authenticity interpreted through vintage clothing? Second, the sale of used clothing is ultimately a commercial business just like fast fashion, therefore how does it convince shoppers of its portrayal as individualistic/personal within today’s contemporary forms of mass
consumption? An analysis of three popular used clothing venues (Etsy, flea markets, thrift stores) serves demonstrate the ways in which used clothing is valued. The different settings highlight the role of the various dimensions involved in both the authenticity and “individualistic” model created: the personalization of the products and store settings, the experience and motives of the secondhand shopper, and the presentation and curation (work) of the vintage seller. The varied interpretations ultimately suggests multiple understandings of that it means to be authentic, as suggested by the circularity of this thesis’s updated fashion cycle.

**METHODOLOGY**

This thesis explores three different secondhand clothing markets: Etsy, flea markets, and thrift stores. The first market I look at is the sale of vintage online, specifically through Etsy. It is important to note that I personally sell vintage clothing on etsy.com. Since June 2013 I have bought and sold used clothing on my own Etsy “shop” called BadMouth, where I sell women’s clothing and accessories ranging from $15-$70. It is from this experience that I first became interested in secondhand clothing. It is also where a lot of my initial knowledge on the subject derives from (such as my choice of thrift stores in Philadelphia). Furthermore, it is my background on Etsy that has made me interested in including it in my research. Etsy.com is an online marketplace-- somewhat similar to Ebay. Yet Etsy caters towards independent sellers, artists and craftspeople with an interest in entrepreneurship. It is a less saturated a platform from which more unique sellers can operate. For example, popular items sold on Etsy include hand crafted furniture, knitted scarves, homemade makeup and soaps, and pottery. Vintage clothing is only a sub-section of Etsy-- though it fits in very well with the website’s boutique theme. Anyone can become a seller. A seller has a “shop”, which features their shop name and logo, and a
display of all their items (usually well photographed) as well as customer reviews and an “about me” page. Most commonly the prices of vintage clothes on the site sell for $15-$100, though there is luxury vintage available as well ($100-$5000). Shoppers can browse the entire site for items to buy immediately-- no auctioning occurs. Although Etsy is based out of Brooklyn, buyers are international. In addition, buyers have the option of using a smartphone app as well. These aspects of Etsy allow for further customer reach, making it a great source of online vintage for buyers and an interesting and new perspective on vintage worth including in my research. A goal in exploring the Etsy marketplace is to discover patterns among popular shops. What is it about selling clothes specifically on Etsy that makes it so different from selling in person? Moreover, what is the appeal of Etsy to shoppers? From these questions among others I look at fashion trends and forms of presentation online to understand how they interact with the construction of value. For example, the “rummaging around” aspect of vintage shopping that is present in other spaces is not present online.

A second market I explore is flea markets, visiting two: the Punk Rock Flea Market and Philly Flea. The Punk Rock Flea Market is a biannual indoor flea market in Philadelphia that has over 500 vendors selling a variety of items such as old records, art, instruments, and a lot of used clothing. Catering to a more alternative crowd, this flea market offers a great chance to learn more about sellers, buyers, and the interactions between them. This setting fits in well with my interest in secondhand clothing as a fashion trend since it offers a concentrated mix of the types of buyers and sellers who cater to this style. On the first day of the flea market I attended the market personally as a vintage seller for my Etsy shop BadMouth, selling at a booth. However, I concurrently distributed an anonymous survey to shoppers to support my research.
This survey offered a 15% discount, asking questions such as demographics, style and price preferences, and favorite stores. This survey is helpful in looking at style and price preferences, while gaging the type of customers that might attend such an event.

The next day I returned to the Punk Rock Flea Market as a third-party observer to conduct ethnographic observations. This is the same approach I used while attending the Philly Flea, another indoors flea markets in the same location. During these fleas I looked at various aspects of the flea market, such a types of customers, types of sellers, styles and prices of items being bought and sold, product displays, and general trends on the various interactions between people. These observations support survey results as well as create an image of the aesthetics and social interactions around flea markets. If, as I believe, the Punk Rock Flea market is a source of “alternative” fashion and a social event, not simply a place to buy cheaper goods, then what are the signifiers of this? Additionally, I conducted an interview with Joey Soprano, the organizer of the Philly Flea. This interview confirmed trends observed as well as discusses changes patterns at flea markets. Through the various dimensions applied to this research the unique setting of flea markets serves to highlight the forms of valuation and interpretation of authenticity. Through a survey, observations, and informal conversations an analysis of flea markets gains a more multidimensioned approach towards what makes them unique as well as helps to draw comparisons between it and the other second hand mediums explored.

The third market I explored in this thesis is thrift stores, of which I visited six in the Philadelphia area to conduct ethnographic observations: two Goodwills, a Salvation Army, Circle Thrift, Philly AIDS, Retrospect, and Revivals. These type of stores generally sell a variety of used clothing ranging from 50 cents to over $1000. Apparel available at thrift stores varies from
low-quality damaged merchandise to higher quality “finds” and brand names. These stores vary greatly in a variety of functions, and for this reason I am interested in looking various aspects of these stores, including merchandise mix, pricing, store layout, types of customers and employees, and various social interactions. I then draw comparisons between thrift stores, using this to help understand how vintage is interpreted as valuable. Furthermore, I conducted an interview with Frank Ponponi, director of Philadelphia area Salvation Army thrift stores. This interview aids in not only supporting observations made, but sheds light on further ideas as well. What makes thrift stores interesting is that they perform a dual purpose, offering discounted used clothing to those who can only afford such, as well as offering a source of clothing for those who can afford otherwise but choose to seek an alternative and fashionable source of clothing here. It is this second function I am interested in looking at in order to better understand the value derived from these used clothing.

Through these different levels of analysis I hope to approach the complexities of both buying and selling vintage and the social value attached to it. The two sides of the process are closely linked in the valuation of vintage, and are therefore explored is by side. Traditional economics would categorize used clothing as an inferior good, yet for a certain group of people these clothes are deemed valuable in terms of style. It is this apparent contradiction derived from shopping experiences, forms of presentation, and the interpretation of authentic that I will weave through this paper. By exploring three different secondhand clothing markets their similarities and differences shed light on the transformation of secondhand into vintage.
Chapter 2: Etsy and Online Retail

INTRODUCTION

In an article published on November 20th in the Huffington Post’s Style section, journalist Sara Boboltz discusses trends in fast fashion and secondhand clothing stores. In interviewing secondhand retailers she highlights the increasing pervasiveness of fast fashion, demonstrating its effects on thrift stores. Susan Choi, an Etsy vintage seller, writes to Boboltz that “You get a clear sense of the over consumption prevalent in most of the United States by frequenting thrift stores. It's common to find items that were in trend only a year or two ago, and a vast quantity of them (Boboltz).” This trend highlights an increasing competition between fast fashion and thrift stores. Stores such as Forever21 offer a constantly changing inventory of on-trend pieces at a low price point, directly competing with some of the appeals of thrift: low prices and a diverse product mix. The result? Bill Gover, the vice president of merchandising and production at the NYC-based Housing Works, explains to that “To compete… he's trying to teach employees to look out for "on-trend" vintage -- older items that line up with current fashion trends and can fetch a slightly higher price because they're better made (Boboltz).” The increasing value of this skill is what Rivoli called being able to spot a “snowflake.” Furthermore, as fast fashion stores shift more and more to online direct to consumer sales, vintage it seems must keep up and go online as well (URBN Inc). This is where Etsy comes in. This chapter explores the Etsy marketplace and discusses the ways in which its postings are both similar and different to those of traditional online fast fashion retailers. It is then from this comparison that I will explore the ways in which authenticity is represented and interpreted in these two markets in
a seemingly similar way as both online retail spaces capitalize on ideas of personalization and presentation to enhance their product listings. This chapter ends with a case study of the online fashion retailer NastyGal to further question ideas of what is authentic as well as question where the individual seller ends and the corporation begins. Ultimately the presentation of fast fashion and vintage clothing operates similarly on a surface (visual) level, but beyond the surface level the value of each is derived differently.

EXPLORING ETSY

I first discovered Etsy when a friend gave me a pair of pants that she had bought from the website. Though perhaps a little odd to be giving pants as a gift, this pair was unlike most you could find at the mall. They were high waisted maroon knit capris with gingerbread styled little brown animals printed on them. Hard to imagine? Exactly. I went online to check out the site, curious about what type of store sold such pants. I was hooked immediately. I had always enjoyed browsing through thrift shops and I saw this as an opportunity to continue this hobby online. Typing in search terms such as “Kurt Cobain cardigan” or “70’s bell bottoms” allowed me to more efficiently hone in on styles I had in mind while still browsing through purely vintage collections. I no longer had to go from thrift store to thrift store desperately combing the racks whenever I wanted a specific vintage piece. With over 30 million listings, Etsy.com offers a curated mix of vintage and handmade items such as clothing, crafted goods, and antiques that are easily accessible by search terms and shipped directly to you. The company itself does not sell these items, but rather the website is made up of individual “shops” that sell directly from their homes. The site simply organizes these listings making them accessible to online shoppers
through search criteria. It is the seller’s responsibility to post photos, product descriptions, prices, and ship items sold. Etsy is simply the medium for these buyer and seller transactions.

**Selling online: the accessibility of the “independent shop owner”**

After spending enough money on online vintage shopping I soon directed my attention towards another side of the website—selling. Starting a shop on Etsy is open to everyone and easy to do—it simply requires filling out basic information and syncing your shop with a bank or PayPal account. The difficult part is finding and selling items, and I relied on my previous thrifting experience to find merchandise to photograph and sell at a higher price. Teaching myself and learning along the way, I’ve been selling through my Etsy shop since May 2013, and have sold over 90 items to customers in North America, Europe, and Asia. My usual routine for curating my shop begins with the buying. Since opening in 2013 I have found that not all second hand clothing stores are the same, and now almost exclusively visit certain ones in the Philadelphia area. At these shops I comb through every rack looking for clothing that is in good condition, priced below $10 usually, and appealing. I can be seen as stepping into the role of Bourdieu’s cultural intermediary, understanding market preferences to navigate between the worlds of secondhand clothing and offer my customers vintage. What is appealing and difficult about this step is that my curating is completely subjective and relies on my own personal taste. In this way my shop can be seen as having its own brand as the product mix is based on my personal tastes and style, creating an appealing sense of individuality and authenticity among Etsy shops—an attempt on my part (though only partially purposeful) to appeal to shoppers based on my individuality. As an example of this, my shops’ “About Me” page makes sure to
What makes Etsy appealing as a vintage clothing seller is therefore its general accessibility. As explained earlier, set-up is simple and the site only charges 20 cents for each posting, taking in a 20 cent fee for every item sold. Etsy describes themselves as “a marketplace where people around the world connect to buy and sell unique goods. Our mission is to re-imagine commerce in ways that build a more fulfilling and lasting world (Etsy).” Unlike Ebay, Etsy caters itself towards the “independent seller”, or the “crafter” and “artist.” Though both websites allow individuals to sell online, Etsy offers the ability for sellers to curate their shops and create a brand. Individual Etsy shops are easily browsable, have an “About Me” page and a customizable artistic banner at the top. It is important to keep in mind as well that although Etsy sells vintage clothing, the majority of their listings are crafts and antiques. The effect of this on the vintage listings can be seen as positive for the thrift sellers as this creates an online shopping experience with a more seemingly organic artistic atmosphere, further appealing to a general alternative idea of an authentic vintage aesthetic, an idea that will be returned to later in the chapter.

As I sell more and more I can better understand what styles customers do and do not like, but ultimately the aesthetics of my store relies on me and my preferences. Personally, I try to sell items that a friend or myself might wear, pieces that can be worn today though they were made 20-50 years ago. Etsy guidelines require that clothing sold on the site is at least 20 years old, ensuring that it loosely falls under a general category of dated vintage, what Baudrillard might call a “reference ideal.” The next step is photographing the pieces. I coax a friend into modeling
for me, posing in front of a white background in the garment. When posting, I attach a
description to the photograph describing the piece. I then price the item based off of what I see
my competitors doing, matching the price of similar items while simultaneously making sure I
charge more than what the item originally cost me. I then wait for it to be sold, answering emails
I might receive from potential customers inquiring more about some aspect of an item. The
ability of buyers and sellers to engage directly is a clever move on Etsy’s part to further convey
to shoppers the idea of independent Etsy sellers, enhancing the presentation of the individuality
of the shops—another attempt to personalize the experience. Lastly, once an item is sold I
package it nicely in a box or envelope and mail it, with the customers always paying for
shipping. Customers can then post feedback on my shop via a five star rating, which store
visitors can read through. These reviews help ensure Etsy shops act responsible, as their future
sales depend on good reviews. This is a constant process as I continue to update my inventory
and sell more items.

This entire process is filled with various steps, all of which I have adapted to fit my
interpretation of how to run a successful shop. It is important to note that though the way I run
my Etsy shop may be the general way what other sellers do as well, each step of the process is
different for each seller. Each shop sells different items, has various amounts of inventory, and
offers different pricing and customer service strategies. For example, some shops use models
while others do not, some photographs are professional while others are clearly taken on a
smartphone. It is possible that these, among other characteristics, are what differentiate the shops
and what make some more successful than others.
This analysis explores Etsy vintage clothing shops exclusively. Although Etsy offer a variety of shop categories, I will not be looking at them as it is only second hand clothing I am interested in. Furthermore, I chose to look at shops that fit a certain criteria within the category of vintage clothing: women’s clothing, and more specifically contemporary pieces (from the mid-twentieth onward). My decision to do this lies in the fact that I am looking at second hand clothing as a source of current fashion, not as a costume. This point of discrimination already highlights the different interpretations surrounding used clothing: I am looking at vintage as old clothing worn today on a daily basis, whereas others might view vintage as a more unique piece to be worn as a costume. It is important to acknowledge that though I have certain criteria for choosing the stores to analyze, there is a level of bias that occurs as I inherently take into account my tastes when deciding what is considered a “contemporary” Etsy shop. There is not one category of contemporary women’s clothing, but rather there are different segments within the market. This is where my tastes come in, as I choose what is deemed contemporary based off of my impression of trends based off of personal experience.

**Shopping on Etsy**

Before moving forward it is important to understand what exactly an Etsy vintage shop is and how it functions. This can perhaps be best understood by approaching Etsy as a buyer. Say, for example, you are looking to buy a pair of “bohemian platform clogs”. There are two ways you can approach your search. The first, and most common, is to type in criteria into the a search bar-- the more specific the better (you might add a shoe size and color for example). This search query will lead to a page of results listing all items that matched your search, having been sorted by relevance. This form of search pulls on listings from all Etsy shops, offering a picture, title,
and price for each item to be scrolled through. The second way you can look for an item is through individual Etsy shops. Each shop has its own page with a unique url (shopname.etsy.com). A shop’s homepage includes a logo/title at the top of the page, followed by a search box and then pictures of each listing. On the left-hand side is a menu with categories to pick from, such as tops, bottoms, accessories, etc. Though a shopper is not guaranteed to find “bohemian platform clogs” by browsing shop to shop, this search method is more effective for general browsing, especially if a shopper has certain shops they prefer based on style or sizes. Since vintage clothing are one of kind pieces there are no reviews available for each piece, but there are shop reviews, with feedback and a star rating left by previous customers. With this scene set, we can now begin to analyze the vintage clothing and shops on Etsy.

ONLINE COMPARISONS: ETSY AND FAST FASHION

Categories of shops

For the sake of this analysis, Etsy thrift clothing shops and fast fashion websites are split into three categories: upper shops, middle shops, and lower shops. Different shops are placed into these categories based on criteria such as pricing, inventory, number of items sold, and layout. Looking at Etsy first, “Upper shops” are shops that have over 100 items for sale, having sold on average 1000 items. Mean prices for this category fall within $30-$100. Another common characteristic of these top shops is the professional of photography used (such as what one would see in a catalogue). The photographs taken for each product almost always features a model, against a neutral screen, with high level resolution. “Middle shops” have an average price of $20-$60, with around 50-100 items in their inventory and having sold between 100-500 already. Their photographs, while not usually professional, all still well done, and feature an
edited photo of the garment, sometimes on a model. Lastly, “lower shops” sell at an average price $15-$40, with at most 50 items for sale and having sold less 100 pieces in total. The photographs in these shops range from cell phone pictures to semi-professional (meaning good resolution, but not edited or on any sort of commercial style backdrop). Though there are categories in this analysis, it is important to note that the caliber of these shops is more of a spectrum, not easily separated. This is only here done so for the sake of a clearer analysis.

Turning now to fast fashion, “upper shops” include stores such as Barneys and NET-A-PORTER, which have a high level of inventory priced on average around $100-$10,000. The photographs of items on these sites are professional, with models wearing the garments for sale, placed against a white backdrop and cropped. Middle shops, such as Urban Outfitters and Zara also have a large inventory, pricing $30-$100. Their photos are slightly more varied, ranging from models on a white backdrop to more “natural” scenes, such as outside or against a wall. Lastly, lower shops such as Target or Walmart have a large inventory as well, pricing on average $10-$30. Their photos are also professional, with a model against a white backdrop. The difference between the photos in these last stores and the others is more subtle. The last type of photographs can be described as more like a catalogue. The models are less styled, simply dressed with little make-up, posing head-on. The goal seems to simply be to show the garment, not to suggest a style or a brand. In addition, another key difference between the first two and third category is the emphasis on sales with the third. The lower shops have red and white logos all across their web pages advertising big savings and discounts.
Similarities

When looking at fast fashion and Etsy online stores, they appear at first glance very similar in certain ways. First, photographs for each listing most commonly feature a model wearing the garment against a backdrop (see page ___), this point will be explored in more depth in the next section. Another less obvious similarity between the two categories is the use of gift cards. Just as all clothing stores offer gift cards, both online and in-store, so does Etsy, suggesting an effort on the part of the company to present their shops as a legitimate gift card alternative to popular retailers. This digital e-card works the same way as a traditional gift card, and is meant to be given as a gift to purchase a “unique item”; and just like with most gift cards, customers can choose a card design-- further exemplifying the similarities between the Etsy e-card and the traditional retail gift card. Second, shopping on Etsy is made additionally convenient by an online shopping basket. All traditional retailing websites offer a digital shopping basket for items to be stored in, and Etsy is no different. Third, many sellers offer sales and promotions just as traditional retail sites do. More common among top Etsy shops, sellers can offer customers a coupon code (ex: BlackFriday14) to redeem a certain percentage off their items.

START OF THE SEASON SALE

SHOP SALE

40% OFF THE ENTIRE STORE

NOV 27TH-30TH
#BLACKFRIDAYSALE
The first banner is from Urban Outfitters and the second one is from a top Etsy shop called BOLOvintage. The similarities between the two are evident: both banners attempt to come off as creative and somewhat kitschy—an attempt at a personal touch. Yet it is important to note small differences. The Urban Outfitters banner writes “Your favorites from us to you,” suggestive of a company behind the sale. Contrast this with the Etsy banner, which writes “40% off the entire (!) store.” This “(!)” can be seen as a more personal touch, as if it is some sort of joke that risks being acknowledged. What is interesting is that Etsy itself does not organize any sort of Black Friday or Cyber Monday promotion, nor does it encourage its sellers to participate. Participation is fully through the initiative of individual sellers. All of this suggests that vintage sellers and fast fashion retailers might be competing in similar ways, whether it be through matching prices, presentation, promotions, or website design. It is already evident how similar the products sold are, whether it be clogs or kimonos. But to highlight the further degree to which this is done, below are two examples of photographs, the ones on the left from fast fashion websites and the ones on the right from Etsy:
Though these photographs have been chosen from hundreds, they represent a general trend seen among Etsy and fast fashion websites in terms of product. Both groups are in season with trends. It is fair to assume that upper shops are on trend as they are traditionally viewed as a source of trendsetting. Similarly, it is commonly known that middle shops adjust quickly to fashion trends, making it fair to say that their clothing is also fashionable. If we accept this point, looking at these pictures it is possible that both the fast fashion sites and Etsy shops present their items for sale as stylish, professional, and in similar ways—the garment itself, model and pose, photography style, and quality. These photo comparisons sum up well how it is exactly fast fashion and vintage compete in the e-commerce sector. By mimicking each other both markets present themselves as sites that offer unique, high quality, and trendy finds. From this comparison we can begin to question the idea of a single authentic. Both sets of photographs looks similar and have the same goal, it is only the context of each that differs—highlighting the powerful role of the presentation of the seller in the valuation of the clothing.
Differences
Now that the similarities between these two groups has been explored, it is important to look at their differences as it is these discrepancies that shed light on aspects of vintage clothing’s creation of value through the personalization of the product. To understand this, let’s pick the search term “kimono” to look at item postings from different shops. Typing in the term “kimono” into Barneys.com (upper), Topshop (middle), and Etsy leads to multiple results. I have picked a top hit form each site for analysis.

In this case, the Etsy hit falls more in line with the Topshop hit. I could have found a photograph on Etsy that fell more in line with the Barneys photograph, yet this did not appear as common. All three photographs offers models that are thin, young, and white. Though the Topshop result is against a gray backdrop and the Etsy one is against a concrete wall, both models are styled, wearing on trend outfits, such as high waisted jeans and a cropped t-shirt in the Topshop photo, Lennon sunglasses and a purple bob in the the Etsy photograph. This format hints at a more
accessible listing, as customers can visualize the piece within a stylized aesthetic. The Barneys photograph has the model wearing nothing but the item for sale, and crops out her face, lacking any form of personality. Moving on to the descriptions written for each garment, the kimono sold by Barneys titles the listing “FLEUR DU MAL”, the brand name, with a short description “Fleur du Mal white silk short-sleeve kimono trimmed with black banding (Barneys).” The Topshop listing titles their kimono as “AZTEC SPOT DUSTER KIMONO” with a short description “Fluid duster kimono in aztec spot print.” The Etsy listing is titled “Vintage Red Kimono Robe Smoking Jacket Duster”, with a longer description “This is a beautiful bright red vintage kimono with beautiful stitching on the back! One size fits all, but measurements are as follows: Taken with item laid flat: Across shoulders: 23” Sleeve: 22” Length: 40” There is not tie/belt with this Kimono (MissViceandVirtue).” The description for the Barneys item is short, and the title is the brand name, as that is the selling point. The description describes only what is needed to know about the kimono: it’s construction and details. The Topshop listing is more descriptive, using adjectives such as “slinky” to convey an image of what this dress is like. Though it lists the brand, Boutique, this is not the selling point of the dress (Boutique is one of Topshop’s in house brands), the pattern, the draping, and in general the style of the kimono is, further exemplified by the precious mentioned styling of the outfit. A vision is given to the customer for what type of kimono this is. Lastly, the Etsy listing features the most descriptives, both in the title and in the description. There are three possible main reasons for this. It in large part has to do with attracting as many customers as possible through key search words, where the more descriptives you give a listing the more search queries it will turn up in. Unlike traditional clothing websites, each item is in competition with another similar item. A kimono on Topshop’s website does not
necessarily compete with other kimono’s on the site. Topshop is happy if either one is sold, whereas Etsy shops might try to be as descriptive as possible in order to gain a customer’s attention. Second, an Etsy seller has to be additionally descriptive since these are one-time sales, and it is important that each customer knows what to expect once their purchase arrives in the mail (an unhappy customer can lead to bad reviews). Third, Etsy markets itself as an “independent” and “craftsy” online marketplace, and the unique items sold on the site have to match this setting. So a kimono with “beautiful stitching on the back” is much more successful at this than, say, “red kimono, floral pattern.” It is this last point that separates it from the other two listings. Its idiosyncratic product description creates a personalized listing. Attributes of the description such as the exclamation point and repetition of the world “beautiful” make it clear it was written by a human, and not simply a script used over and over again. It is the less conspicuous attributes such as this that lead a sense of individuality and creativity on Etsy.

**Authenticity**

Thinking about this in terms of authenticity, it is possible that both the Barneys listing and the Etsy listing are equally authentic as ultimately there are different types and sources of authenticity. The Barneys listing has a minimal amount of description and has a very simple photo of the garment on the model (no styled outfits, face cropped out), suggesting that the brand name is what sells the piece. A high quality brand can be viewed as authentic in terms of an original style with high level of manufacturing and extremely talented designers behind each piece. The Etsy kimono can be viewed as authentic in a different way, with a lengthy product description and quirky photograph that creates a presentation of genuineness or originality. It further creates a greater sense of personalization due to its apparent lack of professional
photography or description, a key attribute of Etsy shops. This analysis then begs the question, who is copying who? The sense of authenticity that is being presented to the customer through the on-trend clothing, the various styles of photography, and the detailed item descriptions are evident in both Etsy shops and even in some of the fast fashion stores, such as Urban Outfitters and Topshop. Which is the genuine, or valid source of creative clothing? We’ve already seen how the two sectors draw characteristics from each other. It is possible that both markets have authentic aspects to them. For example, looking at these pictures below, the photo on the left is taken from Topshop’s (middle shop) Instagram account while the one on the left is from a middle Etsy shop:

![Topshop middle shop Instagram](image1.jpg) ![Etsy middle shop](image2.jpg)

We can explore Muggleton’s ideas on authenticity through an analysis of these two photos. As explained in the Literature Review, Muggleton views bricolage as a reframing, or reinterpretation, of previous styles in a way that challenges current ideas on style through recontextualization (1) and co-optation (2) (Muggleton 131). Therefore in looking at these two pictures, they both create a similar image. First, both photos find pieces that appear to come from different decades or styles and reinterpret them in modern ways as to make them attractive to
shoppers. Yet these pieces each appear dated through the grungy form of photography and outfit pieces. Second, it appears as though both photos present the clothing in the context of a snapshot of a grimy, stylish party that is not meant to be seen. There is the the spirit of authenticity in both. Yet both shops are using these photos for commercial purposes. They are co-opting this specific aesthetic for profit-oriented purposes. Muggleton’s discussion of bricolage might suggest that the Etsy photo is more authentic; it features independent style subverting commercial fashion photography seen in traditional e-commerce settings (some of which have been included in this chapter). It might appear as though it presents an alternative style to go in line with the alternative trend of vintage, while the Topshop photo is recreating this idea. However, both photographs ultimately offer the same image with the same goal of selling an item for a profit. If the presentation is the same, how easily can one truly discern the more authentic of the two? Though the Etsy seller is presumably an individual taking the photo and selling the piece, how does the fact that they sell on Etsy, a giant soon-to-become-public corporation, undermine that dimension of authenticity? In general, in the internet age it is possible that “the authentic” is not easily found, and both sides borrow from each other to appeal to shoppers.

A Case Study: NastyGal

Ideas of authenticity and the line between vintage and fast fashion can be further understood through an analysis of NastyGal. A fast fashion e-commerce site that describes itself as “an international style source offering both new and vintage clothing, shoes, and accessories,” the brand had $100 million in revenue in 2012, affirming its place as a top online clothing retailer (Perloth). Yet NastyGal has humble beginnings, starting off as a one-woman show. Sophia Amoruso, the founder, began the brand on Ebay in 2006 selling individual vintage pieces
she scoured around for along the West Coast. In her autobiography #GIRLBOSS, Amoruso describes herself as a sort of outsider, recounting stories of hitchhiking up the west coast and dumpster diving. This identity is further exemplified in the origins of her shop, as she explains that “the contrarian in me...named my shop-to-be NastyGal Vintage, inspired by my favorite album by legendary funk singer and wild woman Betty Davis (Amoruso 22).” This, as discussed by Muggleton, is an example of asserting one's authenticity. By referring to a dated pop-culture reference, one is removed from (being seen as) being influenced by the media (Muggleton 139).

As Amoruso’s Ebay business grew, she made the decision to “give the customer more of what she wanted” and expand off of Ebay into traditional women’s clothing (Amoruso 41). NastyGal currently sells on trend clothing for women, matching popular styles and falling into the category of a middle shop. Amoruso justifies this transition to fast fashion, writing “I once believed that participating in a capitalist economy would be the death of me, but now realize that agonizing over the political implications of every move I make isn’t exactly living (94).” Her navigation from a vintage seller to a mega e-commerce site shows both sides of this vintage/fast fashion separation.

For me, the case of NastyGal appears at first glance a good example of selling out. Amoruso’s original Ebay shop can be viewed as an authentic source of vintage—one person selling used clothing she finds appealing and interacting directly with customers. Photos of her friends modeling in front of her garage was not a play (at least not directly), but rather it was using the means she had to run a small business. She know runs a fast fashion chain, the type of company that could be viewed as inauthentic due to its accessibility and imitation of trends. Yet NastyGal attempts to retain its alternative edge, keeping its original sassy name and the image.
Amoruso projects through her book of individualism—an attempt to make herself the face of the company. Interestingly, NastyGal continues to sell a small amount of vintage on its site, with this apparent attempt to retain part of its originally sense of authenticity highlighting the role of context. Perhaps the progression of NastyGal is simply a change in authenticity. Though it continues to be inauthentic in its replication of fashion trends, it has naturally progressed from a small-time Ebay shop to a multi-million dollar corporation, a projection many online vintage sellers would probably be happy to make.

Conclusion

Thinking back to the last two photographs of the grimy party scenes we can better understand how the cyclical nature of the fashion cycle questions the idea of a single authenticity. If the Etsy photograph is taken as a rejection of the traditional catalogue fashion photograph through the recontextualization of a formerly rejected style/trend, then once the Topshop photo co-opts it the photo style will eventually fall out of popularity according to the fashion cycle (rejection phase). Following this thought, according to our model once it has passed the rejection phase it is a candidate to be decontextualized again (perhaps in a now ironic fashion). This process is not necessarily inevitable, but demonstrates a possibility created by the somewhat polar relationship between fast fashion and vintage. What this explanation conveys is the circular path of fashion cycle and trends, begging the question who is copying who? Which one is the original and authentic source? The NastyGal case study suggests an interesting dimension towards authenticity in regards to the presentation of clothing. The original NastyGal was authentic as an individual seller, and it is authentic today as a professional and popular online source of clothing. Though Amoruso’s case is an extreme example of going all the way
from one value of authenticity to another, it demonstrates how the role of presentation in the
creation of authenticity is subjective. Where Muggleton fails to capture the dimensionality and
multiplicity of authenticities we see the complexities of the presentation of the authentic,
suggesting that both forms of shops have characteristics of the authentic(s). Though this chapter
highlights the presence of a plural authenticities, a major difference between the Etsy shops and
fast fashion retailers explored in this chapter is the individual/company behind the shop; that is to
say there is a strong difference in regards to the value systems behind their presentation. This
major difference can be understood through a further analysis of the valuation of vintage clothing
within different used clothing settings: flea markets and thrift stores.
Chapter 3: Flea Markets

INTRODUCTION

Philly Flea and the Punk Rock Flea Market

Flea Markets are the smallest scale and most local secondhand clothing market observed in this thesis as well as one of the more social types. The difference between a flea market and a thrift store is that a flea market involves a variety of different sellers coming together in one space to sell their various good. A thrift store is a business, a shop that is owned by one person or organization. Items sold at the two can be, and often are, similar though. Furthermore, flea markets offer a lens through which we can see exactly what vintage vendors and customers are like, survey the product mix, and perhaps most importantly, look at the seller-buyer interactions directly such as through browsing and haggling. There is not an online mask that that is present on Etsy nor is there a counter to separate the buyer and the seller; the small individual booths at flea markets offer a more personal shopping experience on both ends of the exchange, suggesting a more genuine and direct human experience. We can better understand this point through the ways in which flea market vendors present themselves as well as the ways in which they interact with shoppers. Of the three markets discussed in this paper flea markets are the only market where direct buyer and seller interactions were observed. Additionally, haggling is the most present at flea markets, adding to the value of the items sold there. What this chapter demonstrates is the way in which the social dimensions of the flea market serve to create the sense of an “individualistic” shopping experience through consumption. This can be understood through two dimensions: the role of the presentation of the flea market vendor and their booth and the “flea market experience” of shoppers through activities such as haggling and browsing.
Through these two social dimensions we can see how the seemingly unique or personal interactions serve as a reference ideal of the authentic. Furthermore, the presentation of the vendors as well as the recontextualization of the community market ultimately creates an image of authenticity (a reference point). After setting up the scene of the two flea markets visited for this thesis, the chapter will first explore the “individualistic” shopping experience through various forms of social interactions at the flea market. The chapter will then discuss the ways in which the cultural intermediaries in this setting present themselves in order to convey ideas of authenticity to the shoppers.

**TWO FLEA MARKETS**

*Philly Flea*

For my research I looked at two popular flea markets in Philadelphia. They both occur in the same space, a large warehouse right outside of Center City. The first is called “Philly Flea”, and is a bimonthly flea market that first began in 1987, organized by Tony Soprano, a local Philadelphian. He first started the flea market as a way for his condo association to raise money. “I happened to live across a parking lot that wasn’t used on the weekends” explains Soprano, “the condo association needed to raise money, so it
started off as a yard sale, mini flea market (Philly Flea Interview).” From there the event snowballed into the flea market organization it is currently, with events occurring twice a month that rotate between twelve center city venues. Each location offers a slightly different atmosphere, with the goal being to move around the city and get different customers. The Philly Flea slogan is “Philly Flea, coming to a neighborhood near you (Phila Flea Markets).” Soprano’s story is not only that of individualization, but that of local community roots as well, furthering an image of personalization. His ability to segment the market demonstrates the active role he plays in the creation of what Philly Flea looks like—challenging the idea that a flea is some sort of naturally authentic formation of a used goods market. This is an idea I will return to later in the chapter.

The flea event I visited was at their indoor winter location, and was a more high end flea called the “Antique & Vintage Market” and usually features over 100 vendors, ranging from clothing to antique furniture and books. The entrance was inconspicuous—a small side door with the words “Flea market entrance” taped onto it. In terms of layout, there were rows of tables and racks formed into a couple of aisles. The booths were not organized by any sort of category within the space but rather they were all mixed. You might have an antique jeweler next to a booth selling old postcards and drawings. Items for sale were laid out on tables or hung up on racks. Some jewelry was behind glass but everything else could be touched or even tried on. Pieces were displayed thoughtfully and table space was almost always used up with merchandise or decorative cloth. For example, vendors were selling furniture, but using it also as decoration to display more merchandise, creating a more pleasant display. Being there at 10am, the market was
well attended, but not overcrowded, and I could easily move find a parking spot and move around to browse items. There was no sense of urgency and the atmosphere was calm and quiet. 

Looking at the vintage clothing vendors at the Philly Flea specifically, it was a mix of women and men with an average age of 40-60 years old. There was a mix between exclusively vintage clothing booths and other booths that sold vintage clothing among other antiques as well as many booths that sold no clothing at all. Prices varied from $10 flannels to $200 Missoni dresses. Most items seemed to be on average of a higher quality and in good condition. For example, one stand called “Kittycat Antiques” featured exclusively vintage and vintage designer clothing. This booth had the best and widest selection of vintage at the flea, with well stocked racks of designer clothing dating back 60 years as well as a wide variety of styles. The clothing seemed recently pressed, and were neatly organized by category of clothing. Prices ranged from $15 sunglasses to $120 designer dresses. The booth was decorated with old magazines, doilies, and vintage accessories such as top hats and wooden mannequins. The woman who ran the booth must have been in her early 60’s and kept busy walking back and forth across her six foot booth tidying up and engaging with customers. She was put together and wearing clothes that could have been sold at the booth. Another clothing booth had less items, but all designer. She had an impressive stock that included a Dolce & Gabbana gown, Ferragamo shoes, and a Burberry coat. All of these items were very colorful and in great condition, priced $40 to $200. The vendor herself must have been in her mid-60’s, and had a short brown bob and was dressed up in clothing similar to what she was selling. These booths will be touched on again later in the chapter. These vendors appeared very professional, as many of them sell here or at other area flea markets most weeks. For example, one vintage clothing booth I looked at sold at the Philly Flea,
as well as another flea market in the area as well. She also sold items at permanent antique show as well. None of the booths I stopped at took credit cards. Since this is very easy to do, I attribute this to the average vendor age being older and not having the know-how.

Turning now to the flea market shoppers the average age here was younger, between 30 and 65, and I was one of the youngest people there. In terms of gender there was a good mix between men and women and I did not notice any strong majority in either direction. The population was mostly white. There were couples, groups of friends, and solo shoppers and mix of browsing and serious shopping. Many customers seemed happy to engage with the vendors, chatting about an item or the flea market in general. The flea market was not cheap, and its emphasis on somewhat boutique items suggests a more middle-class customer base. “I separate the market” explains Soprano, “I have a separate flea market that is more like a yard or garage sale (Philly Flea Interview).” At both these fleas, and almost exclusively so at the Punk Rock Flea Market, the crowd included young and trendy/alternative shoppers commonly known as hipsters. A difficult subgroup to define, Mark Greif, a professor of Literary Studies at The New School, comes up with a general definition of the term. At a panel titled “What was the Hipster?” that took place in 2009 at The New School, Grief explains that

The ‘hipster’ is the name for what we might call the ‘hip consumer’ or what Tom Frank used to call the ‘rebel consumer.’ The hipster is by definition the person who does not create real art...The 2009 hipster becomes the name for that person who is a savant at picking up the tiny changes of consumer distinction and who can afford to live in the remaining enclaves where such styles are picked up on the street rather than, or as well as, online (Greif 12).

Soprano confirmed this observation, explaining to me that more and more he has seen an increase in hipster attendance at his fleas (Philly Flea Interview). He credits this in part to his
push in a social media ad campaign as well as an example of hipster consumption trends. In
general the Philly Flea can be seen as a common, or stereotypically normal flea market. It is a
local community event with good quality antiques and vintage clothing and serious vendors.

Punk Rock Flea

Turning now to the second flea market, the Punk Rock Flea Market is a bi-annual flea market event held at the same location as Philly Flea organized by RS Productions, a local concert promotion company. Although this flea market is organized by a company called RS Productions, a local Philadelphia concert promoting company, keeping in line with the idea of personalization as a source of authenticity (in this case through a local business organization). The event occurs once in the summer and once in the winter (which is aptly called the “Holiday Edition”), both times it takes place at the same spot. The entrance was a large warehouse loading dock that had been opened up, allowing more people to enter at once, and a suggested $3 donation fee was collected at the door. Saturday I attended the event personally as a vendor, selling secondhand clothing at a booth, something I had previously done exclusively online. I took this as an opportunity to perform research beyond observations and
conducted a survey. On my table at my booth I had a written survey available to all flea market attendees, offering 20% off their purchase upon completion. On Sunday I returned to the flea market as a third party observer. Entering the giant warehouse the space is filled with over 200 flea market vendors and noticeably more crowded than Philly Flea, both in terms of vendors and attendees. This made it more difficult to navigate through the space and browse items.

Upon entering the space is a crowd of people hovering over one booth, a coffee booth. The coffee booth, Reanimator Coffee, is a local brewery that has emerged recently onto the Philadelphia coffee scene, adding to the flea’s presentation of community personalization. Booths are more organized by type here than at the Philly Flea and items for sale covered a much broader range as well. Though there were still antiques and vintage clothing available, there were also a lot of handmade goods such as handmade cards and dried fruit earrings, as well as old records and vegan baked goods. The back third of the warehouse encompassed exclusively vintage clothing booths with three rows of tables, racks, and bins filled with clothing, shoes, and jewelry. Most booths were overstuffed, with clothing from decent to good condition, priced from $5 bins to $40 dollars dresses. One booth consisted solely of a wide selection of $50 winter jackets and fur coats. At my own booth I priced items between $10 and $60, and ended up selling it for slightly less on average due to haggling, a topic I will return to later. Looking exclusively at the vintage clothing section, I noticed certain patterns among the vendors. Each booth was one or two tables long with room on the side for clothing racks. The sellers appeared on average to be slightly older than the average shopper, but significantly younger than the Philly Flea vendors-aged, perhaps 25-50. Almost all booths had at least two people working at them, whether it was a couple or a group of friends.
Walking through the flea the age demographic of the crowd was younger than the Philly Flea crowd, with an average of 18-35 years old and consisting of slightly more women. At both flea markets the population was almost exclusively white, including both vendors and attendees. Thinking more about the flea market attendees, upon entering the warehouse, a friend who came along turned to me and said “I didn’t realize I should have dyed my hair purple before coming here.” What they were referring to was the diverse and eclectic group of people roaming the flea market aisles. Though mostly white young adults, they varied from hair color, to clothing style, and tattoo coverage among other things. Looking back at Greif’s definition of hipster, many of these Punk Rock Flea attendees would fall under this category. This makes sense in terms of looking at the product mix at the flea—relatively cheap and an eclectic mix of artistic items that are not easily found elsewhere (though not always in the best condition). The fact that the event is organized by a local concert promoter adds to this alternative image. To add to this, a record sale was taking place across the street at the same time. The flea was advertised mostly online and through word of mouth. The Philadelphia Inquirer ran a news story on the event titled “18 must-see vendors at Holiday Punk Rock Flea Market” which featured vendors selling funny items such as drag queen themed candles, taxidermy items, and “feminist apparel” (Volpe). The quirky angle of this article highlights the alternative and unique theme to this flea market, something that was not present at the Philly Flea. Looking beyond the individual setup of each market and some minor comparisons, it is trends observed at both flea markets that suggest certain attributes of vintage’s valuation. By exploring the presentation of vendors and their interactions with shoppers we can understand the personalization that gives the clothing sold her an added value.
THE EXPERIENCE OF FLEA MARKET SHOPPERS

Browsing

A major attraction of attending flea markets is the opportunity to browse in a way that is much different from traditional fast fashion browsing. The role of the “find” or “treasure hunt” is very present here and creates an added value to the event as a form of entertainment. If shoppers have the experience of picking through items to find that one piece they adore, they get an added satisfaction from having gone through that. The mixed variety and quality of goods available helps enhance this atmosphere to create a dynamic shopping experience as well. In discussing the organization of the Philly Flea, Soprano explains how “For a while we had the flea running every week, but attendance started going down. The anticipation wasn’t there so we changed it back to every two weeks (Philly Flea Interview).” This anticipation seems to be an important factor in the success of a flea market. It is very likely that this is why the Punk Rock Flea Market was so crowded—it only occurs twice a year, building up anticipation. At a flea market there is endless browsing to be done. This is part of the appeal as a customer: endless options and stronger bargaining power.

Comparing a customer shopping at a flea market to a customer shopping online (Etsy) it is possible that the goals are different. At a flea market there is no strong guarantee that you will be able to find a certain item, altering the motives of shopper attendance. This is especially so at an event like the Punk Rock Flea where the flea occurs only twice a year. Even at the Philly Flea, Soprano explained how he changed the vendor mix each time. Contrast this with online vintage shopping, where you have a much greater chance of finding a certain item with much more ease as well. With this in mind, it could therefore be argued that a flea market has more utility to a
shopper as a form of entertainment where browsing does not always serve the purpose of looking for a specific item, but rather it has its own benefit in and of itself.

In addition to browsing, the flea market serves another purpose as an event to interact with other shoppers as well as vendors. It is a place to see and be seen, and I often spotted people running into people they knew. I came across only a few shoppers who were specifically looking for an item. Attendees were just as, if not more, interested in scoping out the crowd and experiencing the flea market as a sort of performance. This aspect of the flea market is not available with online shopping. Though Etsy does have “Forums” through which buyers and vendors can publicly interact through discussion threads, there is not a “people watching” aspect to it; it is primarily used as a way to exchange knowledge. Furthermore, this aspect of attending the flea market for social purposes could tie into ideas of the flea market as a more individualistic shopping experience. Keeping this in mind helps make sense of a discrepancy I received between survey results on “fair” vintage prices and actual prices paid by customers at the Punk Rock Flea Market. On the survey people said they were willing to pay on average up to $50 for a vintage item, though it depended on the piece (Punk Rock Flea Market Survey). Yet my own experience at my booth observed otherwise. People wanted to pay between $5 and $30 for items and no one went above that. Almost all of the survey takers were people who made a purchase, confirming this discrepancy. It seems possible that flea market attendees were not interested enough in buying items to commit to paying higher prices, they were here for other reasons such as to scope out the scene. There was a social value to be gained from the experience of simply attending the flea market. The difference between attending a flea market and some other form of clothing market is that this is an event. As explained by Soprano this is something
to look forward to with the crowd reflecting the uniqueness of the event. It is important to mention that this could also have to do with the fact that people who go to flea markets are looking to save, and seek more expensive vintage items elsewhere such as at boutiques or online.

**Pricing**

As mentioned above, there seemed to be an inconsistency between how much people said they thought was fair to pay for vintage and how much they ended up paying. Perhaps my survey question was too broad and should have specifically asked “How much do you think is fair to spend on vintage at flea markets?” The “treasure hunt” aspect of the flea market creates more value in the item for the customer. It is clear that this process of combing through piles of used clothing to find that one higher quality or special piece makes it worth more—in non-monetary terms. It can serve to self-affirm to a shopper their ability and skill to find the needle in the haystack. Yet in my experience both buying and selling at the Punk Rock Flea, this added value that is created from “the find” did not translate into a higher price. At my booth most people still haggled and I sold items between $5-$30, less than the average price on my Etsy shop where I sell pieces between $20-$60. This point can be thought of in terms of bargain hunting and arbitrage. Whereas with bargain hunting you are simply looking for a good price, in arbitrage you are looking for an item that has been priced too low so you can take advantage of this and resell at a higher price—a steal. I did not witness a lot of arbitrage and I suspect that if many flea market vendors were skillful enough to pick out the high quality items to sell, they are skillful enough to price correctly, especially at the Philly Flea. Either way, the added value of the find is still present here as items were one of a kind and broadly varied in style. Here again we see how the shopper’s experience helps to shape the presentation of the flea market as unique. This setup
Haggling

A well known part of flea markets is the presence of haggling. Though not present in all transactions it was a common occurrence at both flea markets I attended and something I dealt with in most interactions I had at my own booth. Haggling can be described as what happens when two people or two groups disagree vocally on the terms of an apparently commonly desired goal... Haggling is said to occur when there is ‘personal preference’ for it, where it can lead to advantage in subsequent transactions, or where it makes price discrimination possible (Mayhew 299).

It was interesting to see how buyers and vendors dealt differently with haggling and there appeared to be varying strategies surrounding this form of bargaining. Being a vendor at the Punk Rock Flea Market I was prepared for haggling and viewed it as a necessary part of selling there. As I prepared to sell I started a discussion thread on Etsy asking other sellers who also sell vintage clothing online what differences I should expect at a flea market. One of the common responses I received was to expect to haggle and therefore be flexible with my prices. I was told to think purely on the margin and in terms of any profit. One seller even said they do not sell at flea markets, writing “I don't flea market, I won't do them. Flea market shoppers are looking for deals, and haggle everything (Selling Vintage at a Flea Market for First Time! Tips?).” Another seller offered some strategy, writing

The only thing I would suggest is to add a little bit of FAT to your prices... This way you can come down a bit and it may help in your sales. If its a higher end flea market or lower end market people don't pay the asking price. So beware and don't get offended if
your offered a LOW BALL PRICE. Just the nature of the BIZ. Good luck. (Selling Vintage at a Flea Market for First Time! Tips?)

This would suggest that many flea market vendors inflate their prices in anticipation of haggling. As this was my first time selling at a flea market and I was able to figure this out it seems as if this information is commonly known. The question is then how much are buyers of aware of this or anticipate it?

The role of haggling here can be further understood through Mayhew’s definition in *Higgling*. First, a customer’s “personal preference” for it might be tied to the satisfaction they receive from a successful haggle. This goes back to the value placed on bargain hunting at a flea market—the lower the price the higher the value. A buyer presumably gains satisfaction or a sense of self-validation from being able to successful negotiate a lower price. Second, certain advantages on the buyer’s part could tie back to bargain hunting again. The lower the price the more consumer surplus they gain, it is a form of a steal. If they are participating in arbitrage, there is another buyer’s advantage in haggling as well. Third, the consumer and vendor are engaging in price discrimination by haggling. Defined as “a pricing strategy that charges customers different prices for the same product or service,” a vendor at a flea market will charge different buyers different prices for similar vintage items based off of the outcome of a haggle (Price Discrimination). It is ultimately the vendor who will gain more with this price strategy. If the outcome of haggling is based on who is more skilled at it, then the vendor is more likely to succeed since presumably they are more skillful at this due having to do it more often than buyers. A vendor would most likely not sell below the cost of an item. Keeping this in mind, a buyer’s haggling skill could be measured by their ability to find this price. From this we might
understand why a vendor would engage in haggling. They are on average better at it than buyers and will have a wider margin.

My own experience of dealing with hagglers highlighted some interesting aspects of this form of negotiation. I found myself frustrated with customers who countered with a very low price. I felt as though they were questioning my ability to properly evaluate the price of my clothing and suggesting that they knew better. It could also be that they were simply bad at gaging an item’s price and haggling. Yet other vendors invited, if not encouraged this. Some vendors would say either to me directly or to the crowd in general: “Prices are negotiable.” Were they no too offended by the seeming questioning of the buyers? Yet this was strategy. As mentioned above, a vendor usually could not lose money by haggling, they could just earn less, so by advertising negotiable prices they could attract more customers. Economies of scale tells us that you save in costs with a bigger scale. If you have a lot of merchandise to sell you can make up for smaller margins by moving more product. Looking at an example of this, the booth next to mine was selling what can best be described as a lot of random clutter. Items consisted of used barbie dolls, VHS’s, lamp shades, patches, and old magazines. The vendors appeared to be a couple in their early 40’s. The woman had a bleach blonde mohawk and facial piercing, while the man had a shaved head, a leather tattoo, and biker boots. Somewhat dissolved looking, these vendors shouted out sales pitches such as “Real punk rock prices here!” Their strategy must have been based on scale. Their profit was coming from how much they sold, not the profit on each item. They encouraged haggling because that is how they enticed customers to browse their booth. By presenting their prices as negotiable it is possible that vendors are also presenting a
stereotypical image of flea markets, something shoppers expect to see as an “authentic” flea market setting.

Not all shoppers were experienced with haggling though, and I came across a couple of customers who either had no interest or skills in haggling. My own haggling was definitely swayed by my personal experience of being on the receiving end of it the previous day. Personally, I was more conscious of my opening price and more appreciative when they accepted. For example, I bought a beautiful beaded oversized shirt at my offering price of $10 from the price tag listing of $15. My other purchase was two silk blouses, originally priced at $15 each, but I offered and they accepted a price of both for $20. I thought I paid a fair price for both these items—the same prices buyers at my booth wanted to pay. Thinking about why I bought these items, it was because I felt they were unique and genuine looking; that is I felt as though these items could not be found in regular clothing stores and this aesthetic was important to me, highlighting the different motives shoppers have while browsing through flea markets. In this case, it is based on personal taste and ideas of authenticity. The fact that these shirts were presented in the form of a flea market booth added to these qualities for me, and I am unsure of whether or not I would have bought these same items in a traditional clothing store.

For me when browsing all of the clothing racks, I was not looking for anything in particular, so my decision to want to buy something was based on more of a gut feeling, a sort of “I have to have that” moment. Though I was more conscious of finding a fair price, it still had to be a cheap price for there to be value in the item. For example, when showing my purchases to a friend later, I presented each item by saying how much I got it for: “Here are two silk blouses, which I bargained down to two for $20.” This is an important piece of information and aspect of
the shirt as it highlights how “the steal” of a flea market interacts with my personal tastes as well as the value in these purchases by simply being from a flea market. What these experiences reflect is the role of haggling in creating a personal shopping experience. Haggling, which is still a social interaction, allows shoppers to consume in a seemingly more individualistic manner through the “work” they put in to negotiating a price; with the affirmation of a successful haggle creating a sense of attachment and pride towards the garment in question.

**Haggling Online**

It is difficult for me to tell if I would have paid more for these items online, but my analyses in the previous chapter suggest that prices in general are higher. As a vendor online I rarely come across haggling. As of May 2013 when I first began my online shop, I have been contacted 10 times by customers asking to lower the price. Usually I will accept a slightly lower price but nothing more than $10 cheaper. Looking at Etsy Forum discussions on the topic, there seems to be no general consensus on whether to haggle or not. Some vintage clothing sellers say they are open to it while others refuse to negotiate prices. One vendor writes: “I've had a few people ask, and since I sell vintage, I'm not insulted. But I don't haggle, and my prices are already carefully considered. So I usually just thank them for their interest and state that my prices are firm (Hagglers).” This person’s explanation that their items are already carefully priced suggests that there is no price inflation in expectation of haggling on Etsy. Thinking about this more, perhaps it has something to do with what was discussed in the previous chapter, the point that a lot of Etsy clothing shops are presented like normal online clothing stores. It is possible that this model extends into pricing. Just as one wouldn’t/can’t haggle on a regular online store, some Etsy vendors won’t haggle as well. Another explanation could be that there is
more time and effort put into posting each item online (photographing, description write-ups, tagging), and that creates an added cost. This might simply explain the higher average costs on Etsy and not the refusal to haggle. All of the forum discussion participants seemed to agree though that haggling is uncommon on Etsy. A possible reason is that buying online is a more formal way of purchasing, and is therefore not viewed as a medium through which to haggle. Prices are traditionally viewed as more rigid by both sides of the transaction.

THE PRESENTATION OF FLEA MARKET VENDORS

The Booth: A Vendor’s Brand

Looking more closely at flea market vendors certain themes begin to emerge. Interestingly, many vendors seemed to look or dress similarly, aesthetic wise, to the items they were selling. This can best be explained with examples. The “Real punk rock prices” booth next to mine at the Punk Rock Flea that was selling the assortment of clutter matched this observation. Another booth was selling old army clothes and backpacks efficiently laid out on a camouflage green tarp. The single vendor, who was also wearing camouflage green, stoically stood up behind his table almost the whole day meticulously readjusting his spread of merchandise. At the Philly Flea I noticed this less though it was still present. Impressions such as these and others suggest a sort of brand that is projected by the vendors. The curation of a merchandising mix innately requires a level of personalization and creativity, yet with vintage clothing perhaps this aspect is amplified. Traditional merchandiser pick from current trends with specific customers in mind. But it seems possible that a small scale independent used clothing seller entered this business out of personal interest, a past history of vintage love, and is therefore more inclined to bring his preferences and personal taste with him when sifting through used
clothing to resell. If you’re not a boutique vintage vendor selling brand names, there are few other avenues by which to go when forming a product mix. It seems near impossible to remove one’s personal preferences from the equation. Speaking from personal experience this seems plausible. For example, a young girl, maybe 16, came up to my booth and asked me if I had sold here last year, as she remembered me from somewhere. I had not, so I asked her if she went to my high school which was in the area, she said no. I then knew immediately how she knew me, and asked her if she frequented the Urban Outfitters in Ardmore where I work. She immediately realized that is where she recognized me from. This story highlights the above point. I work at Urban Outfitters and am selling at the Punk Rock Flea Market. She frequently shops at Urban Outfitters and is attending the Punk Rock Flea Market. My job at Urban Outfitters can be viewed as an example of my tastes. It also seems fair to say that the merchandise at my booth is representative as well of those tastes to a degree—I picked out the items and the girl was interested enough to stop and browse. Therefore it seems possible that not only do booths match a vendor’s aesthetic, but they oftentimes match the customer’s as well. I noticed this in my observations. For example, at the “punk rock” booth with the “punk rock prices”, a common crowd over there was people slightly older than the average age of attendees, a little grungier looking. Even at my shop there was a noticeably younger crowd, a lot of teenage girls and women in their early twenties. This makes sense as any brand that is an extension of one’s own personal taste is going to attract similar types of people.

Ultimately this cohesion between the vendor and their products could add a certain level of authenticity to the shop in the eyes of shoppers. Survey results suggested the importance of authenticity to customers. In describing their style, many survey respondents wrote “eclectic”.
“unique”, or “natural” (Punk Rock Flea Market Survey). This last part is especially interesting. Along the lines of natural other responses were: “I’ve been wearing the same clothes forever” or “whatever is cute on me.” Buyers are looking not only for something unique, but something that seems effortless or “so them.” Yet at the same time they are taking the extra effort to come to this unique event, they paid $3 to get in for the Punk Rock Flea, and they are probably spending at least an hour combing through a lot of clothing. This does not seem that effortless to me. However they are trying to find clothes that match their authentic selves. It needs to be natural and seem effortless. According to the survey, a good find is one that fits, is a fair price, and has some unique aspect to it. With this in mind the products might appear more genuine if they are cohesive with the booth’s vendor. If it is assumed that the vintage seller has cultural capital in regards to this market than a buyer might be more willing to trust the authenticity of the products sold. Therefore, the aesthetics of a flea market vendor and how they relate to their booth can be viewed as an extension of the way their items are presented, giving them further value the more in sync the two are. It seems much more preferable, for example, to buy a floral maxi skirt from a woman wearing bell bottoms and a flower crown than from someone who does not seem like they would wear a hippie skirt. Whether these booth vendors are truly presenting themselves or playing it up for the flea market (do those punk rock vendors really gel their ten inc mohawks every day?) it serves as a reference ideal for the customer. Their presentation references an idea of authenticity that many shoppers seek out when attending the flea market, affirming the styles and images of genuine and effortless that buyers expect when searching for their “snowflakes.”

Flea market vendors can therefore be understood as cultural intermediaries. Vendors navigate the space between producers and consumers, relying partially on their perceived status.
as connoisseurs of the product to succeed. Philly Flea organizer Tony Soprano can be viewed as a cultural intermediary as well as it is his responsibility to decide which vendors will sell at the flea markets from week to week. In discussing with me his process for going through new vendor applications, he explains “I can tell who’s faking it, who’s selling stuff from their garage. For example if they stammer, there are certain buzzwords (Philly Flea Interview).” Soprano’s familiarity with this subcategory of culture allows him to successfully curate the Philly Flea. This example demonstrates how flea markets are formed. It is not an organic convergence of people selling cool clothes, but rather it appears to be carefully crafted by people such as Soprano to create the atmosphere that is expected, or even demanded, by customers. Taking this one step further, it is possible to suggest that Soprano and more so R5 Productions are somewhat recontextualizing (and almost co-opting) the flea market to be successful in appealing a broader and somewhat younger crowd. For example, Soprano admits to appealing to the “hipster crowd” and R5 Production’s “Punk Rock” flea market title refers to the classic example of “authentic stylistic resistance (Muggleton).” What Soprano and R5 Productions are doing is creating a new form of authenticity in the creation of their flea markets.

CONCLUSION

The ability of both the Philly Flea and Punk Rock Flea Market to consistently attract a high amount of attendance validates their appeal. In the age of online commerce and massive retail spaces these local community events continue to have a strong pull. One of the most attractive aspects of these flea markets is their diverse product offerings as a source of entertainment. Whether this is for social reasons or due to browsing, the flea market offers more than the simple sale of used clothing. The value of these items for sale is derived from multiple
dimensions. It is the various social interactions that create a more individualized shopping experience that present at a lot of traditional retail spaces. The shopper’s experience, through forms of browsing and haggling, enhances this aspect while it is the vendor’s “branding” serves as a reference point to create a sense of authenticity.
Chapter 4: Thrift Stores

INTRODUCTION

All three used clothing markets explored in this paper offer different modes of presentation and sale with varying forms of presentation conveyed through modes such as product quality, styles, and prices. Thrift stores are perhaps the most common form of secondhand clothing sale, due in part to their accessibility and diversity of offerings. They are often in strip malls or in shopping centers alongside traditional stores. Exploring thrift stores in the Philadelphia metro area I found that they vary as much between themselves as they vary from flea markets and Etsy shops. A common definition of thrift stores are shops that “actively seek donated merchandise to be sold in their retail outlets. The proceeds of such sales are then used for mission-specific benevolences (Mitchell).” Yet I have chosen to expand this definition to include stores that neither receive their merchandise from donations nor use their proceeds for charity. They buy low and sell high on a large scale, a scale large enough to fill a retail space. By including these types of stores in my definition thrift stores conveys the increasing presence of privately owned or for-profit vintage sale.

In conducting my research, thrift stores at first glance felt the most plain, or indistinguishable of the three markets. They appear most similar to traditional retail stores, lacking the quirkiness of flea markets and the scale and variety of online vintage. Though this may be the case, they remain a principle part the used clothing economy as the most accessible and common source of used clothing for many shoppers. Upon closer look it becomes apparent that they appeal to a broad customer base and come in many different forms as well as offering on average the lowest prices of the three markets. By visiting a variety of thrift stores I began to
understand these differences between them, rejecting the idea that they all follow one business model or serve one purpose. This chapter categorizes thrift stores into three groups—chain stores, charity shops, and for-profit businesses. The chain stores, Goodwill and the Salvation Army, are also charity shops, but are placed in their own category due to their scale and unique business model. The category charity shop refers to small, local thrift stores that rely on donations and use their funds to promote charities. The for-profit thrift stores are also small scale and independently owned, relying on their own sourcing in order to stock their shops and make a profit. The ways in which the shopping experience in individualized for the customers and the various forms of store presentation create differing senses of authenticity that are first explored in this chapter through a discussion of the three different categories of thrift shops. These dimensions are then further analyzed through a direct look at the various similarities and contrasts among the different thrift stores.

**TYPES OF THRIFT STORES**

*Chain Stores*

Exploring the different qualities of thrift stores serves to help understand their role in the secondhand clothing economy and more specifically to see how retail spaces affect the presentation of the products and their valuation. Looking first at chain thrift stores, observations were made at two local Goodwills and a Salvation Army. These are national chain stores selling used clothing alongside used house wears, relying on donations to supply their stores. They are usually in large warehouse style spaces, suggesting the valuable role of scale in turning a profit. The Salvation Army Family Store I visited in Collingdale, a suburb of Philadelphia, was on a busy commercial street around stores such as CVS and McDonalds. The Salvation Army is a
Christian non-profit organization that provides services such as rehabilitation and disaster relief. It operates over 100 thrift stores worldwide as a source of funding for its charity efforts (Family Stores). Interestingly, one of their recent commercials titled “Not Wasted” features rehabilitation participants and store employees shaking their heads saying “Not wasted.” At the beginning of the clip they are referring to discarded goods not being wasted (encouraging donation), but by the end of the commercial it is clear that they are referring to themselves. This marketing tactic is clever and interesting as it presents the Salvation Army’s sale of used goods as having a deeper meaning, creating a sense of personalization.

The Salvation Army store I visited is a free standing building with a fenced in parking lot. Upon entering the shop the women’s section takes up most of the first room, with men’s and furniture in a back room. Aisles were tight as clothing was over stuffed onto racks. The quality ranged from stained pieces to items that still had their original tags. Each piece of clothing was individually priced, ranging from $2.99 tops to $40 coats. Prices were written in sharpie on a tag. Salvation Army Thrift has a standard pricing model where each item has a price range (see image), suggesting of a general standardized method behind the stores. The only promotion I saw going on was a 50% red tag sale. Looking at what was placed behind counters, it was a mix of records, glass items, and jewelry and accessories. Nothing under the glass display appeared to be

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particularly valuable, and I suspect it had more to do with loss prevention and product damage. No higher quality brands were set aside, and from what I could tell, it was just mixed in with all of the other clothes (though there was not much anyways). The product mix included recent fast fashion brands as well as 20+ years old items.

The crowd of customers was all middle-aged, mostly African-American women. It is important to note that I was there on a weekday during the middle of the day, so I’m sure that skewed the type of crowd I saw. “We get a variety of clients” explains Frank Ponponi, director of the Philadelphia Salvation Army Family Stores, “bargain lookers, collectors, people shopping for new clothing (Ponponi).” I observed a combination of people buying a lot (more than five items) and people purchasing just one thing. Customers seemed to be meticulously combing the racks, touching each piece individually as they went down an aisle. This could be due to multiple shopping motives: simply looking for a specific item, some form of arbitrage, or they are looking for specific items (treasure hunting). The various reasonings for this shopping strategy demonstrates the different shopping experiences customers seek out at these stores, suggesting they will not derive value from the same pieces. One interaction between two women that I witnessed highlights the presence of both the “steal” and the “treasure hunt” at these chain thrift stores. While combing the racks and trying on clothes two women began to share with each other their “finds.” Specifically, one of them was bragging to the other about how she had recently bought a Columbia coat at this store $10, claiming that its original retail price was $160. It seems likely that this woman was asserting her skill of being able to spot a steal, a theme that was present at flea markets as well (i.e. “I haggled these shirts down to two for $20). This woman also appeared to be shopping for a job interview outfit here as well, as suggested by the clothes
she was trying on and her conversations with a friend. These interactions suggest that customers who shop here out of necessity still participate in the thrill of the find aspect of thrift stores. A lot of these stores’s appeal comes from this feature. Discussing this with Ponponi, he confirmed this, stating: “thrift shopping is different than traditional retailing, it’s more of a find. You’re browsing, you don’t necessarily know what you’re going to find, and you enjoy the browsing” (Ponponi).” The scale of the store allows shoppers to personalize it to their shopping preferences. I personally occasionally visit Salvation Army thrift stores looking for items I can resell online. Ponponi is well aware of arbitrageurs like me, and has a “good for them” attitude towards us. Though the Salvation Army does keep a slight tab on trends (he gave the example of raising graphic tee prices by a dollar or two), they do not try to make money off of collectors but rather they stick to their original pricing model shown above. The organization’s focus is their charity, it is important to keep in mind that the thrift stores are part of a much larger organization.

I noticed similar trends at the Goodwills I visited. Goodwill Industries International is a non-profit that “meets the needs of all job seekers, including programs for youth, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities, criminal backgrounds and other specialized needs (About US).” Through the funding they receive from their secondhand stores Goodwill Inc. provides job placement and career training for those in need. Shopping patterns appeared to be similar to those at the Salvation Army, with what appeared to be a lot of browsing rather than going straight to a section looking for something. Again this falls in like with the treasure hunt value of thrifting: one does not know what they will find, adding to the excitement. The scale at Salvation Armies and Goodwills has the ability to attract various types of customers who participate in this
hunting, highlighting the accessibility of used clothing and the diverse ways in which it can be interpreted.

Local Charity Stores

Local charity thrift stores are shops that do not operate on a national level but are non-profit as well. I visited two stores that fall into this category: Circle Thrift and Philly AIDS. Circle Thrift is located on Frankford Ave in Fishtown—a northern Philadelphia neighborhood that is in the process of gentrification. Surrounding businesses included a coffee shop, a bar, a garage, and a brewery. The inside walls of the store were painted orange and blue, and had posters of Johnny Depp, the Beatles, and a sign promoting sustainable agriculture. This last poster makes more sense in the context of the store’s organization. Circle Thrift is run by a group called The Circle of Hope, who “seek to bring hope to the challenges of 21st century urban life (Mission).” A community focused organization, through their two Circle Thrift stores in Philadelphia they offer inexpensive clothing, jobs, and charity funds. This information is not directly present in their store, but rather it can easily be found on their website. Described by City Paper as “a growing church that has attracted hundreds of young, hip congregants with a progressive message and relaxed religious services,” their website and social media pages feature photos of their members that match the types of employees who worked there (Briggs). The employees were mostly young, in their mid
to late twenties, with one older woman in her fifties working there as well. It was unclear if they were employees or volunteers, but I suspect a mix of both. The fact that Circle Thrift has this background of community roots and charity seems to add to its authenticity as a source of vintage clothing as it is locally based and not a national retailer. Similarly to the previous thrift stores, their goal is benevolent—there are not trying to “get ahead” for purely monetary reasons. Its customer base seems to be a mix of vintage hunters and people who shop there out of necessity, perhaps paralleling its physical location on the cusp of gentrification.

The store itself is relatively small, selling women’s and men’s clothing as well as some house wears, books, and CDs. It was well stocked and items were priced by category (i.e. tops, sweaters, skirts) with a sign at the end of each rack as well as tags on each item that were one of four colors. On a board hung behind the cash register were two promotions for tags of a certain color. One color tag was half off while another color tag was 50 cents. There was a student and senior discount as well and prices ranged from 50 cents to $6 for clothing across the store. The women’s section was by far the biggest and took up half of the store. Most popular items were shirts, shoes, and sweaters, then skirts and denim. The assortment ranged from mediocre quality to good quality with a mix ranging from Target brands to Ralph Lauren. On top of some of the racks were partial mannequins wearing “funky” outfits such as feather boas and sequin tops. In the ways the store was decorated and organized it appears as though Circle Thrift was presenting the store as a stereotypical vintage reference ideal, that of a creative or bohemian and eclectic space that was haphazardly put together.

The customers in the store were more diverse. There was a good amount of what appeared to be older working class shoppers shopping for specific items as well as a crowd of
alternative looking shoppers ranging from being in their young twenties to middle aged. One woman who appeared to be in her 60's had purple hair and was pushing around her pug in a shopping cart. People like this seemed to be filling up baskets and carts more, perusing for cheap thrift. Many shoppers appeared to be buying a lot, up to ten items. There was also a better mix of races and ethnicities shopping here than at the chain thrift stores. Interestingly, the store employees were predominantly white, the opposite of what was observed at the chain stores.

The mixture of low prices, a community based organization running it, and the location of the store in a gentrifying neighborhood creates a certain level of authenticity that attracts these vintage perusers. The store's transitioning neighborhood seemingly parallels Simmel's transitory view of fashion. If it is the minority becoming the majority, the unpopular becoming the popular, it can be viewed as a valid and stylish vintage clothing source. It has not yet been exploited by mass popularity (fashion cycle: introductory phase). In one instance I noticed a woman filling her cart with shoes. She had at least five pairs and was quickly pulling off more from the shoe rack, appearing to to snag a lot of the higher quality pairs. It is this intersection high valued items at low prices that creates a store that attracts vintage shoppers and arbitrageurs while maintaining a certain sense of authenticity as source of cheap clothing due to its charity mission and
neighborhood location. This state seems fluid or transitory though, and I can’t help but wonder if this store will still be here in five years.

The next charity store I visited was Philly AIDS, a shop off of the popular South Street that sells house wares, CDs, and books alongside men and women’s clothing. Other stores on the block include a bike shop, another thrift store, and a drug store. In this way it appears similar to Circle Thrift, though it is not in a neighborhood in the middle of gentrification. The store’s proceeds go towards local AIDS charities, and they encourage customers to donate and volunteer as they browse the store (e.g. announcements, signs). The clientele here is predominantly white, as were the sales associates. A lot of the customers appeared to be younger than what I have seen at other thrift stores as well. Interestingly, the atmosphere of the store is humorous. For example, there is a life-size cutout of a popular rapper outside of the store with a speech bubble encouraging people to come in and shop. Price tags on items each have an individual description, such as “Rawr” written under the price for a cheetah print top. Small qualities such as this highlight an attempt at personalization on the part of the store. This tag was obviously handwritten by a person, a person with a sense of humor, presenting a human face behind the store. In terms of entainment, this goofy aspect creates a sense of fun and unexpectedness as well. This lighthearted atmosphere extends to the setup of the space, with colorful walls, mannequins dressed up in costumes and wigs, and upbeat indie music playing in the background. It is aspects such as this that suggest that the
store is playing up a stereotypical vintage store feel just as Circle Thrift was. That is to say it is somewhat kitschy and disorganized in appearance, with a variety of used clothing styles for sale.

Clothes were organized into rooms through which customers explored the shop, weaving through different rooms on a sort of treasure hunt. There was a t-shirt room, a pants/skirts room, a shoe room, etc. Clothing were priced between $5 and $30, but there were two places where this was not the case. The first was on the ground floor in a space that had suits, coats, and formal outfits. These pieces were as much as $65. The second place was a room titled “Vintage Room,” with older, more traditional vintage pieces. Here items cost up to $50. Though the whole store seemed to play up a vintage stereotype, this room did so in excess. There were antique armoires from which you could pull out drawers and find more small items for sale, the space was decorated with beaded curtains and paintings, and the word “vintage” was everywhere. These two spaces that were set aside suggest the presence of arbitrage on the part of the store as well as an active attempt to present the items as vintage in order to raise the price, demonstrating the power of presentation in the interpreted value of vintage.

*For-Profit Stores*

In my interview with Ponponi, he admitted that there is increased competition for used clothing (Ponponi). The rise of for-profit vintage stores highlights the increasing popularity of used clothing and the increasing role of arbitrage in taking advantage of this. Similarly to online vintage clothing shops, these forms of thrift stores seek to appeal to the trend seeking and fashion searching customer who is willing to pay for it. I came across two such stores: Retrospect and Revivals. The store names themselves are interesting as they are suggestive of looking to the
past, a way to highlight their vintage qualities. First I will describe the two stores and their similarities then dive into their differences.

Retrospect is directly on South Street, a popular commercial and entertainment area. Other stores and businesses on the block include bars, smoke shops, a concert hall, clothing stores, and a record shop. Selling men’s and women’s clothing, the store markets itself as “the cure for the chain-store shopping blues (Retrospect Vintage).” The store is well organized, with clothing hung up by type then subcategorized by color. The front of the shop has mostly vintage house wares and accessories such as a typewriter, old suitcases, umbrellas, and belts. The rest of the store is evenly divided between men’s and women’s clothing with shoes along the back wall (also organized by color). There was so much vintage it was further sorted by style. For example, there was a sequin covered section, a suede rack, and a flannel section. This shop was probably that most stereotypically “vintage” I have visited in terms of clothing sold and setup. While other stores I’ve been to had a mix of dated pieces and current brands, this store had no recognizable fast fashion brands. Everything looked at least 25 years old (keep in mind that the store only opened in 2011). Each item was priced
individually with prices ranging from $14 to $70. Similar items that I had scene at a Goodwill or Circle Thrift were twice as expensive here. But Retrospect’s clothing was specifically vintage, something I did not see at other thrift stores. It is possible that it is this form of presentation that allows them to charge higher prices. By guaranteeing a purely traditional vintage product mix they create a level of authenticity—a reference ideal of what vintage should look like.

Furthermore, with the accessibility of traditional vintage clothing it is likely that the store attracts more customers whose shopping goal is to buy a certain vintage item. By selling this curated mix they can better guarantee that a customer successfully finds a vintage item they were seeking. This allows them to charge higher prices as well. This is a major difference between Retrospect and Philly AIDS. They are located in the same neighborhood only two blocks from each other, so it is fair to assume that their property values are somewhat similar. They both present themselves as stereotypically vintage stores (in different ways), yet Retrospect charges higher prices. It is possible that this is due to their respective layouts and product offerings. As previously explained, vintage items are easy to find at Retrospect. Their organization and offerings of exclusively high quality traditional vintage clothes allows them to operate charging higher prices. One is not guaranteed to come across vintage find at Philly AIDS. The store has much more a mix of higher and lesser quality used clothing. Additionally, Philly AIDS probably attracts a broader type of customer due to their more diverse product offerings and lower prices. For example, though they sell $35 leather jackets, they also sell $6 American Eagle jeans. Therefore, although both stores present themselves is vintage and are in a similar location, product mix and presentation allow Retrospect to charge higher prices. It is the work of curation and the store’s ability to present the items in a more stylized vintage that give the pieces more value.
The second for-profit thrift store I went to, Revivals, was a high end shop selling designer labels between $50 and $1400. It is located in an upper-middle class Philadelphia suburb in a shopping district. The store itself is a small free standing building with two floors, a small room downstairs and two smaller rooms upstairs. One has to be buzzed in. The space is filled with women’s clothing and accessories, with the most expensive items on the lower floor. Similarly to Retrospect, they are organized by type then subcategorized by color. Under and behind the glass counters are smaller items: jewelry, glasses, purses, and shoes. They are both some of the most expensive items in the store was well as items that could easily be stolen— matching observations made at most other thrift stores. The sales clerk is a young woman in her twenties while the store owner, who is in the back talking with a client, is in her fifties. They both offer me customer service but the space is intimidating as I am the only customer in the store for a while, and the constant anti-theft signage and the watchful eye of the clerk behind the counter keeps me on my toes. The store also offers personal shopping and private shopping on evenings and Sundays when the store is closed to the public. All of these aspects of the store are similar to that of an upscale department store or boutique: luxury items, an empty shop, intimidating space, and personal shopping. It is interesting how Revivals creates this atmosphere while selling what is still ultimately used clothing. Additionally, it is possible to view Revivals as an authentic source of vintage high fashion due to its presentation. All of these characteristics that make the store appear similar to a department store might contribute to a certain feel of luxury, adding to the value of the merchandise.

It is important to note that Revivals is a consignment store, meaning they resell clothing on behalf of the original owner, splitting the profit by an agreed upon amount. The most obvious
reason for the appeal of this method is that as a customer/supplier you can earn back some of the money you lost on an item you might not wear anymore. As the store you do not have to spend as much effort or time sourcing your items. Advertising to potential suppliers is still important but you do not have to actively find items the same way a traditional reseller would. My own visit to Revivals highlighted another reason customers might be motivated to participate in consignment. A woman in her mid-forties was in the store at the same time as me, and appeared friendly with the store clerk. She asked if “her bag had sold yet.” When the store clerk told her that “yes, they just sold her bag” she decided to buy a Bottega Veneta bag they had just gotten in for $1400. My impression of this interaction was that she was a regular customer who both bought and sold items here. This brings up an interesting idea about consignment and its affect on the goals of vintage shopping. Customers are not necessarily always looking to make a profit from selling their items, but rather they are seeking a way to fund the purchase of new used items — a cycle where the customer gains utility from both services that the store offers. It seems very likely that this process of buying and selling is entertaining as well. Revivals appears very aware of this, as their logo is “Sell. Consign. Shop (Revivals).” There could be an addicting aspect to this model as it keeps some customers coming back, a valuable asset to the store.

FURTHER ANALYSIS OF THE DIMENSIONS OF THRIFT STORES

Unique characteristics

Though I’ve just discussed all of the ways the term thrift store includes a lot of different categories of secondhand clothing shops, the broader common characteristics they share convey their major differences from the other forms of secondhand retail— flea markets and e-commerce. First, they can be viewed as the most economically successful of the three. This is not
to say that successful flea market booths or online shops cannot make a large profit. What I am suggesting is that a thrift store requires higher input costs such as leasing a shop, filling the large space, hiring employees, etc. It is believable then that running a thrift store requires a broader set of skills in order to succeed. Furthermore, it is the most permanent of the three forms. A flea market vendor’s booth is only there for the duration of a flea market, and an online shop can easily be shut down with the click of a button. Therefore a successful thrift store suggests success on more fronts. From this it is obvious that a thrift store is the largest of the three. This second difference highlights a major draw of thrift stores, their scale. Their offerings are much larger than a flea market booth and though Etsy has a lot more vintage in general, comparing it to an individual Etsy shop a thrift store has much more for sale. A booth or online shop might focus on a style or category of clothing in order to appeal to a certain customer base, yet a thrift shop has more to gain by attracting as many people as possible. For this reason they might offer both men’s and women’s clothes, shoes, accessories, and even antiques—a product mix I saw at all but one of the thrift stores I visited. Foot traffic is important and they want to attract as many people as possible. Third, thrift stores appear the most similar to traditional retail venues. This point of differentiation begs a more in-depth discussion.

A reason perhaps for what makes understanding thrift stores difficult is their similarity to traditional retail stores, as their general setup and operation run parallel. Many of the unique aspects of a flea market and selling online are more clear to me as they are almost niche markets, so different in their forms of presentation. Yet a thrift store appears very much like many other clothing stores, a reason for their success but also a reason they are more difficult to understand. The major similarity is their physical setup. As previously mentioned, the layout in a thrift store
appears the same as that of a traditional retailer. Both have racks of organized clothing separated by type or style. This makes for easier and more efficient browsing. Each item is individually priced as well, something present in Etsy shops but not always at flea markets. Furthermore, the price is fixed and there is no haggling done at thrift stores, just as one would not haggle at a traditional clothing store. Promotions were present at almost all of the thrift stores I went to, such as student discounts, red tag sales, or coupons, a common characteristic at other retail stores. Thrift stores also have counters between which customers and employees do the majority of their interaction and they have employees, either paid or volunteer, who help sell items. Neither flea markets nor Etsy shops have these characteristics. In these ways thrift stores operate within a traditional model of consumption, yet it is through their individual characteristics that they differentiate themselves from regular retail. It is these points of differentiation that highlight the ways in which vintage clothing’s forms of valuation differs from that of fast fashion.

**Differences In Presentation**

Retrospect and Revivals appear to be the most similar to traditional retail stores. Their prices are high and well organized with a selected product mix that is consistently in the best shape. This is somewhat ironic as Retrospect calls themselves the cure for the chain-store blues. Yet just as with all these other thrift stores, these two shops take advantage of the “treasure hunt.” Though they appear at first glance like retail chains (and they are similar in a lot of ways), they carry only one of each item and the product mix is always changing. You have to look closely to find pieces and this setup is what Retrospect sees as the cure. Furthermore, they clearly each have a “brand.” Both stores appeal to a more narrow type of customer. Retrospect does so through their more specific style of presentation and product mix. Revivals caters to a more
expensive customer by offering a more department store-like experience through their customer service and product mix. These varying forms of presentation within the more expensive side of vintage demonstrate the diverse ways in which a used clothing store can create a more individualized experience, catering to different expectations and demands for an authentic piece of used clothing.

This idea can be extended to the other forms of thrift stores as well. The local charity thrift stores appeal to customers by presenting themselves as quirky and kitschy, playing into to a stereotypical reference ideal of what a vintage store should visually look like. This creates more value in their clothing by appealing to an understood/expected image of authenticity—these stores contrast the most from traditional fast fashion retailers with their lack of organization and strong sense of personalization. In this case these stores might be catering to a crowd that is looking for a directly opposing shopping experience to the fast fashion experience. By being local charities these stores further enhance an anti-national chain image. Returning to the first category of thrift stores, the national charity chains are perhaps the most broadly accessible form of a used clothing store. Their scale and multiple locations offers a broad selection of secondhand clothing to customers. Again we can see how within the thrift store model the shopping experience is different. The national charity chains offer multiple different shopping experiences, such as those shopping there out of necessity versus choice, and the wide selection of current popular brands and lesser known older brands. What all of these different shopping experiences among the three categories of thrift stores suggests is the multiple interpretations that used clothing can have through its various forms forms of presentation.
**Authenticity**

This then begs the question, where is the authenticity in these used pieces of clothing? Returning to the local charity stores, this thesis demonstrates the ways in which they play up a vintage store aesthetic through the ways in which they decorate the store and present the used clothing. Does this make it any more vintage than the used clothing for sale at the Salvation Army and Goodwills? Both categories of stores offered a somewhat similar product mix with a combination of fast fashion brands and older pieces, yet it is the local stores that appear more authentic in terms of a vintage ideal. The chain stores almost appear like a Target or Walmart space through their warehouse design and efficient floor plan. Yet both categories have the same goal of charity, and one could argue that the chain stores are more authentic in the way they do not attempt to play up any sort of reference ideal. Ultimately it is up to the shopper to decide which stores they prefer based on personal preferences and how they interpret the different forms of presentation. One shopper could understand vintage as a wide selection of cheap clothing while another views it as dated high fashion brands; a third might interpret vintage as used clothing with community roots. What this suggests is the different ways in which authenticity can be expressed and understood, dismissing the idea of one ultimate form of authentic vintage.

*A lost persona?*

Perhaps due to how common they are, their accessibility, or their strong similarities to traditional retail spaces, my impression of thrift stores is a certain loss of charm present in other secondhand clothing settings. This could also be due to the fact that my visits to thrift stores fell towards the end of my research timeline. However, just as it can be argued that NastyGal’s persona changed once it was no longer Sophia Amoruso’s personal Ebay business, the same can
be said for thrift stores. Thrift stores carry a lot of value in their ability to capitalize on the “treasure hunt” as well as their important role in communities and support for charities. Yet as explained above, thrift stores are intrinsically more mainstream than the other forms of secondhand retail. What this highlights is a certain sense of symbiosis between between secondhand retail and traditional fast fashion. It demonstrates that circular nature of the fashion cycle as the seemingly inter-dependence between the presentation of the two, vintage as a form of anti-fashion and fast fashion, blurs the divide between the two. They draw on each other in the creation of their presentation, as highlighted by my impression of a loss of charm within the thrift stores.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the first thrift stores discussed in this chapter, the chain charity shops, their broad customer reach helps shed light on the way used clothing is interpreted. They do not engage in arbitrage, nor do they try to play up any sort of “vintage store aesthetic.” Yet some people continue to shop there browsing for vintage — demonstrating how these stores not only cater to those who use them as their primary source of clothing. The role of a store’s presentation and how it interacts with the shopper’s experience sheds light on the diversity within the thrift store category. Customers individualize their shopping experience, highlighting the subjective nature of how these used clothing stores are interpreted. For example, returning to Philly AIDS, one woman might find a GAP shirt and view it as a successful purchase, while another customer might find a dated polyester sweater and view that as a success. Both customers shopped at the same store with the same setup, product offerings, and prices, yet walked away with their own version of an authentic find. Extending this example to all thrift stores, it is possible to
understand how presentation can affect these interpretations, thus adding to the complexity of the valuation of vintage at thrift stores.
Conclusion

What extends a piece of clothing from simply used to a more stylized vintage is no simple process. In order to understand vintage and its presence today it is important to first look back on the history and theory of fashion. The emergence of the mass consumption of popular fashion can be traced back to industrialization and the rise in mass production. Since then, as clothes have become cheaper and faster to produce they have equally become cheaper and faster to consumer. The rise of fast fashion over the past few decades reflects general trends in increasing consumption, and the effect of the way we consume clothing has changed the way we consume fashion. The fashion cycle, Simmel’s minority becoming the majority, has sped up so that trends last only a few months before they are discarded. What this thesis finds is that these trends do not die here and it is after their initial rejection that can take on a new life as vintage. Vintage can be viewed as a reaction to fast fashion and the mass consumption of trends; it seeks an alternative to this through an exploration of authenticity and individuality. Yet vintage clothing still exists within the fashion model, as even anti-fashion is fashion as one is still seeking some form of validation through fashion. Applying Baudrillard’s model, as a reaction to fast fashion vintage clothing serves as a reference ideal in the search for authenticity. Through the various dimensions of (1) the personalization of the products and store settings, (2) the experience and motives of the secondhand shopper, and (3) the presentation and curation (work) of the vintage seller, authenticity becomes authenticities—highlighting the multidimensionality of vintage and its interpretation. Furthermore, though its sale still operates within a model of
consumption they buyer is able to create a sense of individuality in their shopping experience through these same dimensions.

These characteristics of vintage are revealed through an analysis of three used clothing markets: Etsy, flea markets, and thrift stores. In comparing Etsy product listings with those from fast fashion websites we see how both seem to capitalize on ideas of personalization and presentation to enhance their product listings. Looking more closely at the “grimy” photographs from Topshop’s Instagram and an Etsy shop listing we can see how the circularity of the fashion cycle might bring into question which one is the authentic? Or who is copying who? The visual presentation of both as well as product descriptions and promotions might suggest similar valuations, but through an analysis of other used clothing markets we come to find that though they might appear similar, the two markets derive their values differently. Looking first at flea markets, its social dimension creates a more individualistic shopping experience. Through interactions such as treasure hunting and haggling the flea market shopper is able to cater their shopping experience towards their preferences. Additionally, the presentation of flea market vendors (cultural intermediaries) serves as a reference ideal for the authentic through their sense of cohesiveness with the secondhand clothing they sell. Turning to thrift stores, their wide diversity suggests similar themes of personalization. Whether a charity store or a local boutique, different thrift stores seem to segment the market to attract different customers. With such varying forms of presentation and product offerings customers can interpret these stores to cater to their preferences and demands, finding an individualized shopping experience in today’s world of mass consumption. It is in this way that the valuation of vintage clothing creates a personalized shopping experience within the realm of traditional consumption. Furthermore, it is
these modes of the presentation of shops/vendors and the forms of their product mix that offer varied senses of authenticities to customers.

What all of this suggests is the subjectivity of these dimensions in understanding what it means to be authentic. In the search for an alternative to fast fashion, vintage clothing becomes an idealized substitute through its interpreted individuality (though, as explained above, this “individuality” is subjective and its form is dependent on the individual shopper). Yet the consumption of vintage is directly affected by/affects the model of consumption and the fast fashion cycle. “Whoever consciously avoids following the fashion does not attain the consequent sensation of individualization through any real individual qualification, but rather through the mere negation of social example” writes Simmel. “If obedience to fashion consists in imitation of such an example, conscious neglect of fashion represents similar imitation, but under an inverse sign (Simmel 142).” To take this one step further, Baudrillard would simply label vintage clothing as a commodified code of difference, serving only as a reference ideal for the authentic where ideas on authenticities are understood as anti-fast fashion and anti-popular trends. Both Simmel and Baudrillard suggest that any form of anti-fashion still exists within the fashion cycle, where the fashion cycle is more of a loop suggesting the cyclical nature of trends—both fashion and anti-fashion trends. This circularity then begs the question of where do trends or style preferences begin? This thesis demonstrates the ways in which both vintage and fast fashion parallel each other and draw on the other’s forms of presentation. This thesis also argues that though they may appear visually similar at times, the differences between the two is found through their differing forms of valuation. With this in mind, it is possible that the inception of trends is therefore found in the ways in which the two sides interact. If one side is a reaction to
the other in an attempt to gain minority status, the two sides depend on each other in a sort of see-saw relationship of stylistic trends. Therefore the valuation of secondhand clothing as vintage is found in how it reacts to fast fashion, while fast fashion’s value is derived from its ability to co-opt the trends that were initially a reaction to it, propelling fashion trends forward (or at least onwards).


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