Reframe, Reuse, and Re-Style:  
(De)Constructing the Sustainable Second-Hand Consumer  

by  

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Introduction

For anyone living in the United States today, mass consumption is likely not an alien concept. Portrayed as everything from the motor of human progress to the root of societal ills like “affluenza,” the phenomenon of mass consumerism receives no lack of media or scholarly attention (Samuelson and Nordhaus 1998; James 2008). The explosion in consumerism is understandably hard to ignore. In the U.S., material consumption rose 2.8 times more than population over the last century, and total consumption increased by fifty-seven percent between 1970 and 2000 (University of Michigan Center for Sustainable Systems 2013). Yet, the sheer magnitude of material waste we accumulate as a result is difficult to grasp. In a recent exhibition entitled “Intolerable Beauty: Portraits of American Mass Consumption,” photographer Chris Jordan sought to capture the enormity of this refuse. Vast landscapes of discarded cell phones, charger cords, and piles of sawdust became terrains of swirling insect-like masses, oppressively dense thickets, and eerily beautiful mountain ranges. I may have been writing about it, but never had I seen such a breathtaking, horrifying depiction of the topography of human waste.

Quite simply, the ways in which we engage with the material world have undergone a radical transformation in recent decades. From a current vantage point, the consumer appetite for new goods may seem infinite, as does his/her capacity for waste production. Meanwhile, the resources on our planet sadly are not. In the absence of any indication that consumption trends will abate in the near future,
diverting waste streams through reuse might be the most viable method for reducing our highly unsustainable environmental footprint.¹

A growing presence on the commercial stage, second-hand reuse markets receive relatively little consideration in the current dialogue on consumer culture. Second-hand consumption, with its rising popularity in the United States (Raulli 2005) and Western Europe (Gregson and Crewe 2003) seems a particularly fruitful area in which to examine the intersection between Western notions of consumerism and the pursuit of an environmentally sustainable mode of existing in a resource-finite world (Dresner 2008). Although there are a multitude of proposed avenues for achieving more sustainable consumption, second-hand commerce may be one of the more pragmatically compelling tactics. Proponents of “green” markets are saddled with the rather impossible task of defining green production, and radical approaches to sustainable living – such as “voluntary simplicity” – give the impression of trivializing consumption’s social significance (Elgin 1993). Not only is second-hand consumerism an intriguing middle ground for considering a reduced-impact lifestyle, but it is also a unique mode of consumption that has yet to be adequately examined within social theory.

While theoretical discussion of consumer practice has merited its own subfield within sociology, the tangible impacts of its manifestations – borne out across all societies – have been largely disregarded by policymakers. This oversight is particularly evident in the current policy discourse on sustainable development, where

¹ The ecological footprint is defined in environmental literature as “the total area of productive land and water area required continuously to produce all the resources consumed and to assimilate all the wastes produced, by a defined population, wherever on earth that land is located” (Zhou and Amura 2011: 171). According to the Global Footprint Network (2014) we would need five planet earths to sustain the human population if everyone adopted the material lifestyle of Americans.
the focus remains fixed on global productive forces and heavy regulation of the world’s industrial centers. Meanwhile, nations frequently lauded for their reduced (production-based) greenhouse gas emissions, such as Denmark and Norway, maintain startlingly high consumer-based carbon dioxide inventories (Davis and Caldeira 2010). The large discrepancies between consumption and production-based emissions, revealed by a multitude of studies, indicate that consumer behavior is one of the most significant and understudied factors causing the ever-mounting carbon dioxide content in the atmosphere (Druckman and Jackson 2009; Davis and Caldeira 2010; Wiedmann et. al. 2011; Wiebe et. al. 2012). It seems equally apparent that any domestic or international climate initiatives going forward should endeavor to understand and account for these behaviors.

With the following study I hoped to elucidate such consumer behaviors within the realm of second-hand markets. Granting reacquisition habits and the markets they generate the proper consideration is crucial for the study of sustainable consumption on both a practical and conceptual level. Reuse, as anyone familiar with the green triangle on recycling bins knows, is one of the three basic tenets of waste reduction (Environmental Protection Agency, 2014). Understanding the basic mechanisms at work in the applications of this principle seems a worthy endeavor. More abstractly, emphasis on multiple-cycle consumption as an increasingly relevant phenomenon may help to decentralize production in current dialogue on sustainable development, and to reorient focus onto consumption regimes.

With these goals in mind, I set out to answer the following questions: How do notions of value get established in post-first cycle consumption? How are second-
hand consumption spaces constructed to serve the objectives of the market? Do these markets have any objectives outside of value-creation? What kinds of consumer practices materialize within these spaces? Given these market conditions is second-hand consumption viable as an alternative mode of sustainable consumerism? Specifically, where is there potential for greater sustainable development in these markets, and where is the potential for improvement most limited?

Chapter One of this paper provides a historical overview of second-hand markets. It then delves into social theories of consumption, as they pertain to the current discourse on second-hand consumption. The chapter identifies a variety of consumer-types that emerge in the literature, and sets forth a framework to be referenced in later chapters.

Chapter Two is an analysis of three different second-hand consumption spaces in Middletown, Connecticut. The comparative study examines the construction of value-creating narratives within second-hand stores, as illustrated through in-depth interviews with their founders. This section draws conclusions about how owners of stores with differing claims to status seek to attract both ideal and non-deal consumer types. It also demystifies complex spatial hierarchies operating in second-hand markets.

In Chapter Three I look at the effects of regional affluence on the second-hand consumer narrative. A study of New York City Goodwill stores reveals the nuanced ways in which socioeconomic factors influence the commercial space, and more overtly impact the consumer narratives that are told within it. The chapter also
examined the case of Goodwill itself as uniquely structured second-hand chain with a rich history and hugely successful business model.

Chapter Four synthesizes the findings of my own study with the preexisting work on second-hand markets, to evaluate the validity of a sustainability claim within reuse markets. The chapter highlights five consumer-types that emerge prominently in my research, and the relative resource-intensities of the practices they enact. A few of these practices are found to be compatible with a sustainability ethic, while many are not. The discussion then shifts to propose strategies for expanding or increasing accessibility to second-hand markets that facilitate sustainable consumption behaviors.

By the conclusion of this study, it was clear that little about the second-hand market is straightforward. The marketplace is occupied by consumers and sellers scrambling to make and assert structural and behavioral scripts, within a commercial sphere that is untethered from the means of production. I came to the disillusioning realization that only a few of the prevalent modes of consumption within these markets can be considered truly sustainable. Reusing is antithetical to reducing in ways I had not anticipated. Nonetheless, within certain sectors of the second-hand market there is potential for a sustainable consumption ethic, which may be promoted through improved information structures and reform of second-hand business models.
Chapter 1

Second-Hand Markets and the Modern Consumer:

A Historical, Theoretical, and Empirical Review

Before delving into my analysis of second-hand consumption sites and practices, I will present a brief overview of second-hand consumption as it has come to be understood by historians and social theorists today. A historical account of second-hand markets will set the stage for a discussion of current empirical work on second-hand consumerism as it relates to prevailing theories of consumption.

The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of Second-Hand Consumption

The history of second-hand markets can be divided into three distinct periods: emergence and expansion; decline and stigmatization; and destigmatization and renewed popularity.

Emergence and Expansion

Historically second-hand markets are not a new phenomenon, even though few records of second-hand consumption practices exist prior to the twentieth century due to the informal nature of the trade. Beverley Lemire (1988) explains that the second-hand market in England was a “largely an invisible trade” because “it did not involve the manufacture, finishing, or refining of raw materials or sale of new commodities” (p. 1). Effectively, the characteristics that have made second-hand trade such a compelling area of study for the examination of sustainable consumption,
such as its low material inputs and distance from means of production, also make it an incredibly difficult phenomenon to capture via records or statistics. Nevertheless, examination of early references to second-hand sellers in advertisements, legal documents, business licenses, and bills of sale reveal that the used goods trade was a widespread phenomenon in Europe as early as the eighteenth century. Madeleine Ginsburg (1980) describes this trade as the market dealing in “need and [social] aspiration” (p. 121). By the mid-nineteenth century, business was booming. One of the larger clothing exchange venues in London brought in over eighty-thousand pounds per year (Ginsburg 1980).

A wide range of second-hand outlets existed in Europe during the Victorian era. Second-hand goods were exchanged in all manner of commercial spaces; ranging from the more formal antiques dealerships, to estate auctions, to street stalls and illegal markets for the fencing of stolen property. These markets evolved from a variety of material divestment practices. Often, servants and other household workers would act as middlemen between their noble employers looking to dispose of items and used-goods dealers in urban centers. Ginsburg (1980) notes that used nobility clothing – clear emblems of status – had to be handled carefully by servants, suggesting symbolic second-hand consumption from the outset. For a servant to dress in a nobleman’s finery would likely have been viewed as tactless and absurd. It was necessary for servants to recognize the difference between items that should be kept and those that it would prudent to sell at a profit (Ginsburg 1980), a matter of social and cultural understanding. Even these early methods of second-hand exchange revealed the need for a more nuanced cultural capital to mediate the rather crude
mechanism of conspicuous consumption.

The sale of previously owned goods through estate auctions of the deceased was also a common practice of early second-hand consumption. A study of these so-called “vendities” revealed a unique and detailed portrait of a lively second-hand commercial sector in Erembodegem, Flanders throughout the second half of the eighteenth century (Van Damme and Vermoesen 2009). An analysis of primary sales and tax documents showed that ninety-one percent of households in Erembodegem attended and made purchases at vendities in the 1750s, irrespective of the class of the sellers. Poor and rich alike auctioned their goods and patronized others’ auctions, perhaps undermining a more recent historical narrative that second-hand markets were initially sought out exclusively by the poor and desperate.

The nineteenth century also gave rise to pawn brokers as major dealers of second-hand wares. Taking out loans against household items to finance daily living costs became fairly common practice among the working poor during this period. Workers would hand over their most valuable possessions on Monday (often their Sunday Church attire) to be retrieved on Saturday after they had been paid. However, if items had not been bought back after a certain length of time, the pawnbroker was allowed to either sell or auction the merchandise to recoup his losses. In addition to pawnbrokers, a variety of niche commercial professions emerged around the second-hand industry in this period. Rag collectors would go from street to street gathering people’s old clothes, and more skilled merchants would specialize in the repair, restoration, and reselling of these garments to the working poor (Ginsburg 1980). Overall, it appears the second-hand trade in this period was a robust industry that
engaged individuals from all classes of Western European society.

Lemire (1988) postulates that the rise in popularity of second-hand markets in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was due in large part to the rise in the market and distribution channels for new goods in Europe during this period. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, domestically manufactured goods were becoming more plentiful and accessible to consumers in “every corner of the British market” (Lemire 1988:6). Furthermore, most families were living just above the household income required for subsistence, allowing for more active consumerism in non-essential markets. The poor working class, for whom spending money was available but new quality products on the traditional market were as yet unaffordable, became the primary consumer of resale goods. Lemire (1988) suggests that in the fledgling stages of an industrial era, second-hand consumption channels were the original spaces where poor and lower classes had access to the market. It was a transitional trading practice, pre-mass production, where the vast majority of society learned to consume and to cultivate attainable consumer desires.

Since the emergence of the second-hand market was historically a product of mainstream market expansion, it continued to be reliant on this growth throughout the nineteenth century. Conventional and second-hand markets evolved via a mutualistic relationship, in which flourishing second-hand markets were made possible by the rise of trends, and second-hand markets provided a viable option for goods divestment by the wealthy trendsetters. Fast fashions in the twentieth century promoted shorter commodity life spans, due to the “impossibility of altering 1910 styles for the 1920s or 1920 styles for the 1930s” (Lemire 1988:131). When fashions
or technologies fell out of style, they flooded into second-hand commercial spaces. Many tailors in the nineteenth century even offered discounts to customers who brought in their old clothes, encouraging them to discard belongings that had lost their trendiness value. Thus, even while second-hand markets extended the life of products they were built on the notion of disposability. Whether the dynamic of mutual dependency still exists in today’s second-hand markets is a vital question in this study, as it has a great bearing on the potential of second-hand markets as a vehicle for sustainable consumption.

**Decline and Stigmatization**

By the turn of the twentieth century, the demand for second-hand goods in Europe had plummeted. The variety of cheap products offered by mass production allowed consumers to buy new items of greater quality at affordable prices (Lemire 1988). Buying new products from mainstream sources became a point of pride for working class consumers; it was a new form of social agency and independence promoted by mass marketing and ad campaigns. Turning to second-hand outlets quickly became a last resort for many consumers (Ginsburg, 1980). Of this change in consumer habits and preferences, Van Damme and Vermoesen (2009) note that thrift increasingly became a sign of poverty in the era of industrialization – “something unclean and unworthy of polite and civilized society” (p. 289). Second-hand consumption was also made less appealing by the decreasing quality of mass-produced goods. The lifespan of products became shorter as materials became “lighter, more breakable, and less durable” (Van Damme and Vermoesen 2009:295). Investing in these goods no longer appeared to be a wise consumer choice, in the way
that it may have been a few decades before. For much of the twentieth century second-hand consumption became a stigmatized practice, associated with those poor and destitute compelled to use the discarded goods of others.

Destigmatization and Renewed Popularity

At the conclusion of her historical overview in 1980, Madeleine Ginsburg was beginning to witness a revival of second-hand consumption in the United States and Europe. This trend continued to accelerate throughout the 2000s, and the markets second-hand are among the fastest growing in the United States. Though statistics are somewhat scarce on the subject, one study revealed that used merchandise stores in the United States represent a $4.1 billion per year industry (Thomas 2003). Between 1992 and 1997, profits in the second-hand industry increased by thirty percent, and in 2000, 40% of consumers in the United Kingdom had made purchases in second-hand markets during the previous twelve months (Raulli 2005; Williams and Paddock 2003). A 1999 US Survey revealed that 43% of American’s have made purchases at rummage sales (Raulli 2005).

Reacquisition may not be the dominant mode of consumption in contemporary society, however it is surely a phenomenon within current consumer culture worth exploring further. While current literature tends to characterize second-hand markets as “alternative” or marginalized consumption spaces, historical analysis reveals the deeply consumerist origins of second-hand markets (Williams and Paddock 2003). Prior to the turn of the century, reacquisition practices were commonplace in Europe, and might have even been considered a fundamental part of economic life. The stigma attached to second-hand consumption practices is a relatively recent
phenomenon, linked to the onset of mass production at the end of the nineteenth century. Of importance here is that neither the institutions of disposal, which fueled second-hand markets, nor the matters of prestige and quality that contributed to their downfall have any basis in an ethic of sustainability. Whether second-hand consumption took on a different character upon its reconstitution as a destigmatized practice is a matter for this study to shed light on.


Current work on the social mechanisms embedded in second-hand consumerism is relatively limited, especially compared to the greater body of work on consumption theory. Today, the number of theoretical and empirical studies in this field is quickly expanding. When contextualized within the greater body of social theories on consumption, a more robust portrait of current second-hand consumption begins to emerge. While consumption theory tends to put forward broad and all-encompassing narratives for why Western affluent societies consume, second-hand consumption literature predominantly offers varied and nuanced explanations for second-hand consumer behavior. Accepting that people are complex consumers with varied and fluid incentive structures, scholars in the field have tended to favor examinations that allow for many motivations across groups of consumers as well as within individuals. Few have proposed a singular dominant mechanism at work in all forms of reacquisition.

To effectively present the prevailing theories on the rise of second-hand consumption is to illuminate the unique framings of the current second-hand market, and position each perspective within the broader theoretical frameworks from which
it has arisen. There are many ways to accomplish this, but for the purposes of this study I have identified four overarching conceptions of the modern consumer: the symbolic consumer, the leisure consumer, the empowered consumer, and the practicing consumer. Each of these, as applied to second-hand markets, produce their own distinct consumer-types that will come up throughout this study.

**Second-Hand Markets and the Symbolic Consumers**

Perhaps the greatest body of work on the sociology of consumption is devoted to the notion that objects are a medium for cultural meaning and messages in society. The acquisition of material objects as representation takes many forms in second-hand markets. In the literature they appear frequently as cultural elitism, ambitious individualism, or critical consumption.

**The Cultural Elitists**

Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1992), the father of consumption theory, introduced the concept of “conspicuous consumption” in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Writing at the turn of the century, Veblen saw the wealthy leisure class as assuming a social role of unadulterated, highly visible consumption. The upper echelons of affluent society - tasked with consuming the surplus product created by the working class – engaged in lavish displays of consumption. The ability to waste money, time, and goods was a matter of prestige. In this way, Veblen ([1899] 1992) understood “conspicuous consumption”– visible consumption with the intent of expressing wealth or status – to be the primary mechanism driving all consumer behavior (p. 64). All social classes engage in this phenomenon, with every class of individuals trying to emulate the consumer habits and practices of the class above them. Consumption is
conceived here as a highly strategic practice with an integral role in establishing and maintaining social hierarchies. The quantity and quality of consumed commodities connotes social station. Veblen ([1899] 1992) was vocally critical of this phenomenon that he believed skewed judgment and priorities, and valorized wastefulness. The result, he feared, would be a society of people compelled to consume items they may not be able to afford, in order to attain prestige and reputability (p. 70).

Although themes presented in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* remain salient in much of the current literature on consumption, Veblen’s depiction of the conspicuous consumer has been deemed outdated by most scholars. Exorbitant displays of wealth – of the kind Veblen ([1899] 1992) purported to witness – became less socially acceptable with the onset of the Great Depression (Trigg 2001). In subsequent eras, expressions of class and financial success were arguably a subtler affair, with upper classes turning to charities and cultural foundations as more appropriate outlets for displaying wealth (Trigg 2001). Exhibiting class became more about knowing what to spend money on, rather than the capacity to spend money in the first place.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984; [1986] 1997), writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, elaborated on the concept of the discriminating consumer. He proposed a more complex and nuanced apparatus by which consumption practices perpetuate class divides. Like Veblen, Bourdieu (1984) believed that the upper classes of society are responsible for establishing dominant “tastes” (p. 56). These preferences are learned via the accumulation of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1984:23). Distinct from economic capital, cultural capital is “external wealth converted into… a habitus,” a
set of values, tastes, bodies of knowledge, dispositions, and social practices acquired through a person’s social upbringing and education (Bourdieu [1986] 1997:48). Cultural capital, Bourdieu ([1986] 1997) argues, is exhibited through the symbolic appropriation of goods, as well as through the rejection of certain aesthetics in favor of others. The consumer may only need economic capital to purchase a good, however he/she must have cultural capital to utilize it in accordance with class expectations (Bourdieu [1986] 1997:50). Bourdieu (1984) notes that the upper and upper-middle classes are constantly trying to culturally outmaneuver and set themselves apart from the “pretentious” middle classes by embracing new aesthetics, even appropriating looks from lower classes of society (p. 176). The ability to distinguish between different commodities in relation to socially defined criterion is the mark of cultural wealth. Its accumulation allows for the ascension of the social ladder.

While Veblen’s conspicuous consumer (of the luxuriantly excessive aristocratic variety) may seem archaic and obsolete in today’s consumerist landscape, modes of symbolically projective consumption are hardly absent in contemporary society. Rather, as Bourdieu would suggest, these class performances have taken on more subtle forms that require a refined cultural acumen to successfully enact. The popularization of the “worn” or “second-hand” aesthetic is precisely one of these forms of symbolic consumption situated in class-based cultural scripts. David Brooks (2000), in his sardonic critique of modern consumerism, refers to this trend as the “Bohemian-Bourgeoisie” or “Bobo” aesthetic. As a backlash against their bourgeoisie predecessors, the contemporary cultural elitists desire to cultivate a look
reminiscent of the “peasant,” rather than the “aristocratic” lifestyle (Brooks 2000:59). There is a growing demand among the affluent for “never-before-owned hand-me-downs” that bear a worn or “distressed” patina (Brooks 2000:58). The trend towards commodification of the “second-hand look” even extends to consumers that do not want to purchase pre-used items; hence the emergence of stores like Urban Outfitters offering “new vintage looks” (for which the irony is almost palpable).

The constitution of class through consumption has significant implications for Marx’s theory of production. In Modernity At Large, Arjun Appadurai (1996) suggests that consumption is the “work” of the post-industrial society in a globalized market. Peter Corrigan (1997) echoes this sentiment in his introduction to The Sociology of Consumption: “Now the majority of the populace have access to the ever-growing consumerist fruits of the productivist tree, and so perhaps it is time to stand Marx on his head and claim that consumption, and not production, is the central motor of contemporary society” (p. 1). This quote can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, several of which will be further elucidated in the remainder of this chapter. One ostensible reading may come from Brooks (2000), who suggests that we now live in a society where our class identities are increasingly defined by our relation to our means of consumption rather than our means of production (p. 61).

Ambitious Individualists

More current consumption theory focuses on symbolic forms of consumption as it relates to the construction of the self and individual identity. Grant McCracken (1986) laid the foundation for this body of work in his conceptualization of consumption as a process by which meaning is transferred from the “culturally
constituted world” to the individual via objects of consumption (p. 71). This framework allows consumption to relay any number of cultural and social meanings, including, but not limited to, class affiliations. According to McCracken (1986), meaning originates in the broader socially constructed world, and proceeds in a directional flow. It is first projected onto material objects, and then assumed by individuals who claim the objects. Through this transmission of meaning, cultural categories become manifest in the material world and gain visibility. Certain goods become associated with specific groups or ideas, and thus become the conduit through which individuals can access the cultural ideas and values they wish to may their own. Consumers learn to navigate this complex system of symbolic appropriation and dissociation via the consumption rituals of exchange, possession, and divestment (McCracken 1986:78).

This framework paved the way for current theorists to focus on the individual as the primary site for consumption-derived identity in contemporary society. Zukin and MacGuire (2004) discuss “young people’s social practices of self-expression, individuality, and sociality” as a part of a generational expectation of self-realization (p. 178). Bourdieu (1984) might argue that individual tastes are the product of habitus rather than the spontaneous manifestations of human uniqueness and creativity, but more contemporary literature focus on the shift in affluent democratic societies towards an individuality imperative. In an era where birth-status or parental occupation are not considered legitimate determinants of future social position, there is an expectation that the social actor will take an agential role in his/her identity formation (Giddens 1991). The compositional work of realizing personhood is
entrenched in consumption, as individuals situate themselves in relation to identity categories that are performed through consumption. It is the project of the modern day consumer to pick and choose among available goods to create a material profile that best reflects his/her unique identity. Robert Grafton Small (1993) describes the artistry of this process within the context of wearing an heirloom from his grandfather: “I am bound to speak with and through the medium of these various artifacts, deriving my poetry, even, by giving an account of my life and personality through the choices I make between the limited possibilities available to me” (p. 42).

Further, it is the norm, if not the expectation that any one individual will have a multiplicity of identities, any or all of which are subject to reinvention or disposal (Giddens, 1991). Twitchell (1999) declares in his essay “Two Cheers for Materialism”: “We live through things. We create ourselves through things. And we change ourselves by changing our things” (p. 18). The implication of the actively self-constituting, ever-changing postmodern individual is that increased consumption provides more opportunities for constructing new complex identities.

The identity-seeking exercise of aesthetically distinguishing the self is particularly notable within resale markets, according to most scholars. In Second Hand Cultures, Gregson and Crewe (2003) refer to this phenomenon as “capturing difference”: the act of consuming second-hand objects to visually set the self apart from others (and thus validate a claim to individualism) (p. 4). The ambitious individualists seek items outside the mainstream, mass-produced body of goods to set themselves apart. Guiot and Roux (2010), in their qualitative study of second-hand consumers in two French cities, identified “the originality of the products” and “self-
expression through the restoration, repair, or transformation of objects” as two major motivations for second-hand consumption (p. 387). They conclude that pre-owned goods are often coveted for their “unusual character, rarity, or geographical, biographical, or historical origins” (p. 384).

Colin Williams (2003), through a series of in-depth interviews with consumers of varying household incomes in Leicester, England, found that this desire for novelty in second-hand markets occurs most markedly among the upper classes. Interviewees in the most affluent ward that Williams surveyed described second-hand shopping as an opportunity to stand out, or to buy things that “make a statement about who you are” (p. 103). In another study on vintage clothing consumers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Delong, Heinemann, and Reiley (2005) assume a stance very reminiscent of McCracken’s “directional flow of meaning” hypothesis when explaining the cognitive transition that takes place when second-hand consumers make the logical leap from “I like that” to “I’m like that” (p. 27). They expound upon this message, writing “The ‘way we look’ involves not only how we perceive and discriminate clothing, but how we create a unique appearance through selecting and combining pieces of clothing, designing the body, and the reasoning that goes into that process” (p. 34). This concept is also applicable to all manner of second-hand goods outside of the garment trade.

The Critical Consumer

The notion of identity construction through consumption is just as much about distancing the self from certain meanings and messages as it is about aligning the self with others. Participation in second-hand markets is also thought to aid in identity
formation in this manner, providing alternative channels of consumption for critical consumers desiring to disassociate from the mainstream market for moral or ethical reasons. Separation from the conventional market manifests in a variety of ways in studies of second-hand markets. Almost all of the researchers make a point to highlight the oppositional undercurrents supposedly at work in these alternative consumption spaces. Conscious distancing from the first-hand market often stems from the idea that “second-hand shopping… constitutes a system in competition with traditional retail outlets, which implies the existence of retail expectations that traditional channels cannot satisfy” (Guiot and Roux 2010:383). Pierce and Paulos (2011) call this self-conscious form of consumption “critical reacquisition”: reacquisition constituted as a value-laden activity through which social, political, ethical, or environmental concerns may be expressed (p. 2388).

One of the most commonly cited ills of the traditional market is the “culture of disposability” – the ruthless pace of trend-setting in the mainstream market that makes most commodities obsolete or out-of-style within a dizzyingly short period of time (Raulli 2005:9). Such a system encourages high turnover rates for consumer possessions, and quick divestment of products. Guiot and Roux (2010) noted an assertion of “anti-waste ideals” among their interview subjects, as well as a desire to consume more “ethically and sustainably” (p. 392; p. 387). They observed a renewed value placed on the utility of a product rather than its role as a status symbol, which they termed the “reversed Veblen effect” (p. 387). The effect entails a rejection of the trendy or fashionable in favor of something useful durable in quality. Whether consumers truly act on these stated values and preferences will be discussed at length
in later chapters. The use of market spaces as platforms for vocalizing ethical allegiances and principles is important to the theory that second-hand consumption is made appealing by its vast potential for unique identity constructions based in distinctions from the “mainstream.” In essence, much of this literature on second-hand consumerism is an extension on the theoretical notions of constructed selfhood.

**Second-Hand Markets and the Leisure Consumer**

The role of consumption in recreational and leisure practices is another major focus of consumption theory. Most current literature on second-cycle consumption indicates that the relationship between consumption and leisure plays a hugely significant role in the operation of second-hand markets, giving rise to enthusiasts and collectors who patronize second-hand markets to reap recreational benefits.

For several theorists, the role of consumption in leisure is due in large part to the changing character of production and consumption time. The centrality of consumerism in today’s late capitalist societies stems from a Marxian understanding of work and leisure, in which leisure is the result of production time efficiently or effectively carried out. This implies that work time and free time are distinctively separate spheres, and that leisure is a reward for work time well spent. Appadurai (1996) adopts these definitions in his discourse on Western consumerism, arguing that as a result of this dualist framework, “consumption evolves as the phenomenological marker of time left over from work, produced by work, and justified by work” (p. 79). The desire to equalize the material output and personal satisfaction received from leisure time and the productive input given to work time drives hyper-consumption. Consumption, Appadurai (1996) theorizes, is an easy way
to maximize the utility of leisure time, which is often scarce relative to work time. In this way, the commoditization of leisure time has become the modern day corollary to Marx’s commoditization of labor time.

In *The Harried Leisure Class*, Staffan Linder (1970) discusses the acceleration of consumption patterns as a function of constrained leisure time. This is particularly relevant in contemporary American society, where “work time” is an ever-increasing proportion of time lived (Pontusson 2005). While Appadurai (1996) suggests that people maximize leisure time by engaging in activities and taking vacations, Linder (1970) notes that in the day-to-day it is often more practical or achievable to “buy more of everything” than it is to “do more of everything” (p. 83). Linder (1970) specifically examines the relationship between time and consumption, noting that for “equilibrium to prevail,” increasing “yield per time unit in consumption” is needed to match rising “yield per time unit in production” (p. 79).

*The Enthusiast and The Collector*

This desire to augment the material rewards of leisure may explain the reconstitution of consumption as a leisure activity in itself. Such a framing of consumption effectively allows people to “do” and “buy” more simultaneously. Many of the studies on second-hand consumption note that the process of shopping in uniquely configured second-hand commercial spaces is often perceived by consumers as producing recreational value that is more difficult to attain in first-hand retail spaces. This produces a type of second-hand enthusiast that derives pleasure from engagement in second-hand consumption spaces. Pierce and Paulos (2011), in their investigation of dispossession and reacquisition practices of second-hand consumers
in Pittsburgh, termed this behavior “experiential reacquisition” (p. 2388). In an analysis of British car boot sales (where individuals sell their used wares out of the backs of cars) Gregson and Crewe (1994) discuss how alternative second-hand spaces contrast from “rigid modes of participation in formal consumption spaces” (p. 264). Second-hand markets give consumers the opportunity to participate in variety of activities uncommon in conventional markets, such as rummaging, “treasure hunting,” outdoor shopping, and bargaining (Guiot and Roux 2010: 387).

The value of purchasing second-hand becomes not just about the use value or the symbolic value of the product in these instances, but about the recreational value of searching for an item and the satisfaction attained when it is found. In Raulli’s (2005) survey of thrift shoppers in Denver, she found that the majority of people claimed that “the thrill of finding cool stuff” was the most important reason why they patronized thrift stores (p. 54). One of the interviewees in Williams’ (2003) study referred to attending car boot sales as her family’s “‘weekly entertainment’” (p. 105). In a society permeated by consumer culture, it is no surprise that second-hand shopping, and collecting found items, has become the sport of consumers.

There are limits to the recreational utility of second-hand markets. The features that make these space appealing for an enthusiast may render them impractical and alienating for those who do not see shopping as a leisure activity or do not have the luxury of leisure time. One of Pierce and Paulos’ (2011) interview subjects admitted that her recreational second-hand shopping constituted a privileged niche behavior that not all consumers can afford to adopt (p. 2388). All the qualities that may make second-hand spaces fun, unique, and exciting can also make them
unreliable, bewildering, and time-intensive commercial outlets. When seeking to fulfill basic consumer needs second-hand outlets are not always the most practical choice.

**Second-Hand Markets and the Empowered Consumer**

In the era of mass consumption, some theorists have argued (counter to Veblen’s conception of ossified class divides) that consumption has become an instrument of social mobility and individual empowerment. The empowerment narrative may be especially salient in second-hand spheres, where even the highest quality goods may be found at affordable prices. However the rhetoric of empowered consumerism highlights both those who take fullest advantage of the stratified market – the savvy consumers – and those who feel perpetually disempowered by their exclusion from the mainstream market – the need-driven consumers.

Increases in material consumption across income levels reveal that, in today’s market, significantly more may be purchased on less income through retail outlets geared towards spend-conscious consumers (Raulli 2005). Market participation among people of all classes and income levels creates a perception of “the viability for improving oneself through consumption” (Zukin and MacGuire 2004:181). Twitchell (2000) calls the process of consumption “emancipating,” in that “it free[s] us of the strictures from social class. The outcome of material life is no longer pre-ordained by coat of arms, pew seat, or trust fund. Instead, it evolves from a never-ending shifting of individual choice” (p. 25-26). In his ode to consumer culture, Twitchell (2000) interconnects the ideas of rising individualism, consumption, and the expanding sense of personal freedom.
These notions of freedom even come to be likened to political empowerment by several scholars. In their overview of moral perspectives in market societies, economic sociologists Fourcade and Healy (2007) note the prevalent liberal market view – espoused by the likes of Friedman and Hayek – that economic freedom is tantamount to personal liberty itself. Effective participation in the market may thus garner a similar, if not quite as potent, feeling of fulfillment as engagement in the political process. In post-industrial societies with strong roots in capitalist economic systems, “consumer sovereignty,” can be viewed as “political freedom in another guise” (p. 289). Twitchell (2000) goes so far as to assert: “If you want to understand the potency of American consumer culture, ask any group of teenagers what democracy means to them. You will hear an extraordinary response. Democracy is the right to buy anything you want. Freedom's just another word for lots of things to buy” (p. 20).

There is a sense that the standardization of goods in today’s commercial realm has more than just a theoretical, but a tangible democratizing effect in society, as cultural and class divides become less and less visibly apparent (Schudson 2007). Furthermore, the establishment of credit economies in many of the world’s developed nations has allowed consumers to enhance “buying power in the face of huge salary differentials” (Appadurai 1996: 80). Thus the market for most goods has become accessible to wider range of people.

**The Savvy Consumer**

Empirical studies of second-hand consumption frequently allude to a consumer empowerment component within resale markets. The clever, or “savvy
consumer,” as I will refer to it, emerges within this context as the shopper who takes ownership of his/her consumer skills as part of an identity. Several empirical studies note variations on this figure. Raulli (2005) observed that several of the thrift shoppers in her study derived pleasure from displays of shopping “prowess” in second-hand settings (p. 60). The premise here is that there is pride to be gained from finding a bargain for a given object; to essentially have obtained an item of a certain perceived quality or worth for less than it would cost others on the mainstream market. Gregson and Crewe (2003) refer to this as the act of “capturing value,” a crucial component of the motivational structures at play in second-hand consumption practices (p. 4).

Guiot and Roux (2010) identify “bargain hunting,” a form of savvy consumerism, as a primary economic motivation for second-hand consumption (p. 388). Although bargain-hunting shoppers could probably fit into both of the previous conceptions of consumers quite nicely, I believe they are most accurately represented through the empowerment narrative. Consumers assume a feeling of gratification and autonomy when they are able to take “intelligent advantage of products that other people no longer want,” thus becoming “smart shoppers” (Guiot and Roux 2010:387). Raulli (2005) reveals that over eighty-four percent of the middle-class consumers she surveyed reported “bragging to others” about their bargain thrift store purchases (p. 61). Empowerment is fueled by the ability to save money and purchase items that are otherwise unaffordable on the first-hand market. Second-hand markets, in this respect, provide a greater number of people with consumer choice.

Williams (2003), in his in-depth interviews with consumers of varying income
brackets in Leicester, England, offers a variation on this notion of savvy consumerism. He asserts that second-hand commercial venues, with their hodgepodge of inconsistent, highly variable merchandise, offer an ideal space for people to be “seen buying the right kinds things” among a mass of junk (Williams 2003:91). Such purchasing practices require a learned skill: the capacity to recognize value and to know a good deal when it is presented in more obscured settings. In the context of vintage shopping DeLong, Heinemann, and Reiley (2005) refer to this as the “ability to discriminate the authentic product, and revalue it in a new setting” (p. 24). It is this talent that transforms the average consumer into a connoisseur. The elevated level of taste needed to perceive value without the assistance of a price tag, and the ability to achieve an expensive look at a low cost, are both talents that would garner high esteem in consumer societies. Thus, “savvy consumerism,” as a project of empowerment includes symbolic elements of turning second-hand spaces into a stage for the performance of cultural proficiency, as well as leisure elements derived from the associated pleasures of “captured value.” In a society where the consumer has in many ways become synonymous with the self, the ability to engage in strategic, smart shopping is a matter of autonomy and capability.

**The Need-Driven Consumer**

If second-hand markets highlight the ways in which consumers cultivate skill sets in order to tap into the font of individual “power” and “freedom” contained within markets, they equally emphasize the way that consumers of limited means become disempowered in the first-hand market. While people might turn to second-hand retail channels for any number of reasons, one of the most salient and
chronically under-theorized incentives is pure economic necessity. Williams and Windebank (2002) demonstrate how lack of access to first-hand markets can be detrimental to the poorest classes of society. The researchers observed a correlation between detachment from the labor market and detachment from the formal consumer market, with no-earner households consuming far more of their belongings outside of formal retail outlets than multiple-earner households. Overall, Williams and Windebank (2002) found that the lowest-income members of these communities “perceive their inability to buy new goods from formal retail outlets and their reliance on alternative retail channels (e.g. family and friends, car boot sales, second-hand shops), when most people are not, as ways in which they are excluded from mainstream consumption practices” (p. 509). Within the context of consumption as empowerment, a lack of consumer choice would in a sense denote a lack of individual freedom. Twitchell (2000) has a particularly dramatic interpretation of the stakes here, but his words are nonetheless poignant: “The penalty of intractable, trans-generational destitution is not just the absence of things; it is also the absence of meaning, the exclusion from participating in the essential socializing events of modern life… The poor are truly the self-less ones in commercial culture” (p. 21). Of course, the term “self-less” here does not mean unselfish, but rather “lacking a self,” which, if the self is equated with the commodities the self consumes, (though I’m not sure it should) is a valid concern for the financially constricted populations lacking basic consumer choices. Further, if the market is a democratic institution beholden to consumer desires, then removing a body of consumers from the primary producer-consumer relationship may effectively render their preferences inconsequential.
Within my study, I hope to explore this issue further. Do perceptions of consumer disenfranchisement pose real limitations on consumer markets? And further, how might these notions of exclusion be addressed?

**Second-Hand Markets and the Practicing Consumer**

Alan Warde’s (2005) work on theories of practice encompasses all of the above-mentioned functions and figures of consumer society. He advocates for a more nuanced, comprehensive approach to the sociological work on consumption, commenting that symbolic motivations for consumption may be overstated in current literature. Current bodies of work, he contends, are “in danger of seriously neglecting the fact that most action is not directed towards communicating with others but towards the fulfillment of self-regarding purposive projects” (p. 147). Further, daily consumer living is just as fraught with mundane or unremarkable consumption as it is with conspicuous consumption. These acts of consumption are no less valid or meaningful than exhibitionist consumption if viewed within a different theoretical framework.

Rather than seeing consumption as a single coherent body of practices within society, Warde (2005) examines consumption as a pivotal moment of acquisition occurring in almost every social practice. Whether people are cleaning, coin collecting, studying, or searching through sale racks, all practices necessitate certain consumer behaviors. Consumerism is not a product of personal expression as much as it is a byproduct of the practices people choose to engage in. The same object can have very different meanings or functions depending on the practice for which it is consumed, and the way the consumer is situated within that practice. Viewing consumption
within theories of practice may allow for a better understanding of “the orderliness and predictability of people’s actions when faced with apparent free choices, both within a particular practice and across different practices” (Warde 2005:140).

In this approach, overall increases in consumption can be thought of as having less to do with rising materialism and more to do with society’s adoption of new, ever more complex and interconnecting practices. Constructing identity, performing civic duties, and engaging in politics may all fall under the umbrella of “practices” as Warde (2005) defines them. Satisfaction comes from achieving success or prestige within a practice, rather than from the accumulation of goods in themselves. Even though some practices will inevitably garner higher status than others depending on who is practicing them, the feeling of success that comes from excelling in any particular practice may be very much the same across practices.

Within Warde’s (2005) framework, consumption as a crucial moment in cultural practice exists even among those who choose to consume less. Extrinsicating the self from consumer society is an altogether silly notion when consumption is viewed not as a step that must occur for the successful carrying out of almost every other human practice. It may be prudent then, to focus on second-hand use as the most plausible avenue for reducing consumption-related emissions in the short term, because it does not assume that consumption is inherently “bad.” Further, the premise that second-hand consumption, like all consumption, is a set of practice rather than a single phenomenon, is key to my analytical framework moving foreward.
Conclusion

Both the historical and empirical literature on second-hand markets have illuminated the fact that second-hand consumption practices do not operate outside of mainstream consumer culture, but within mainstream consumer culture. While spatially and temporally they may offer “alternative” consumption spaces, they primarily cater to consumerist desires and learned consumer behaviors. Second-hand consumption is a phenomenon fraught with paradoxes: it is driven by the trend mechanism even as it stands in opposition to it, and it is positioned against a culture of disposability while its very survival depends on the regular divestment of material objects. Historically, second-hand markets likely played a significant role in creating the modern consumer, and they are perhaps not as antithetical to mainstream consumption practices as some authors have argued. They allow people to consume more at lower prices, and certainly do not blatantly deter behaviors of consumption. If anything, they may encourage consumers to take on commodity-finding as a sport of sorts. This review also highlights the potential limitations of second-hand commercial spheres that lack convenience, organization, information transparency, or the benefits of consumer empowerment. Within these spaces emerge several prominent consumer identities: cultural elites, unique individualists, critical consumers, collectors, enthusiasts, savvy consumers, and disenfranchised need-driven consumers. Several of these consumer-types will be featured prominently in my study.

Given the literature on the history of second-hand consumption and observations of current consumer practices, it may seem silly to propose that ethical and ecological concerns can really be addressed via expansion of second-hand
markets. However, I would hypothesize that the key to second-hand market potential resides in the characteristics of the various spaces and commodities markets themselves. This study seeks to illuminate the ways in which second-hand practices operate across commercial spaces and socioeconomic consumer groups, in order for these behaviors to be properly evaluated with respect to environmental sustainability. Chapter two will identify salient market practices across different types of second-hand spaces, and chapter three will examine emergent trends in commercial spaces marked by varying levels of affluence. I have been unable to find a study that takes a similar approach to the assessment of sustainable reuse markets, but given Warde’s framework for analyzing consumption I believe this method will prove the most fruitful.

The purpose of this study is to elucidate the capacity for second-hand markets to replace first-hand markets for various commodities, and thereby reduce overall material consumption. I do not intend to argue that ethical and ecological concerns are currently an integral part of second-hand consumption practices. With this in mind, I predicted that a lacking conservationist ethos would not undermine reacquisition as resource and energy-conserving modes of consumption. The potential for more sustainable consumption, as either an intended or unintended consequence of second-hand market expansion, is worth exploring from a sustainable development perspective.
Chapter 2

Methodology

The methodological framework for this study was constructed with the intent to attain a multidimensional perspective of second-hand markets. The first portion of the study looks specifically at second-hand market practices across differing commercial spaces. The second part of the study seeks to observe the effects of consumer affluence on second-hand markets. The third stage of the study looks at all of the collected data comprehensively, in order to evaluate the potential for second-hand markets to promote and generate sustainable consumption. This approach necessitated a three-part protocol, each portion of which presented with its own methodological advantages and difficulties.

Part I: An Examination of Second-Hand Spaces in Middletown, CT

Middletown, Connecticut is an optimal location to study second-hand consumption venues because the city hosts a great variety of both formal and informal second hand commerce spaces. There is a vibrant second-hand market in Middletown, which finds outlets in stores, churches, and backyards. Thus, Middletown encapsulates both urban and suburban modes of second-hand consumerism. Although much second-hand exchange occurs in transient, informal settings such as tag sales and flea markets, this research occurred exclusively in fixed second-hand retail spaces. This was necessary both to obtain observational data on multiple occasions and to enforce the level of consistency among spaces required to
ensure the relevance of a single set of observational standards across spaces. A set of predetermined commonalities among cases is also conducive to engaging in fruitful comparative analysis. Nonetheless, this framework does impact the generalizability of my findings, as my sample cases cannot be said to be representative of all second-hand market spaces. The geographical constraints (all case study sites were within a three mile radius of one another) also poses some issues for claims to generalizability. However, within these marked constraints the study sites chosen exhibit significant variability in terms of spatial characteristics and modes of goods acquisition. Each space chosen had a unique rhetorical self-characterization, as well as distinct aesthetic and organizational schema. The three spaces studied are as follows:

1. Never Say Goodbye: A mid-sized antiques dealer located in a wood frame house off a major commercial road.
2. Estate Treasures: A massive estates dealership located in a refurbished factory a short distance from a main shopping street.
3. Rag and Bone: A small second-hand retailer located in a storefront on Main Street proper.

Phase One: Field Observations

The first stage of my research consisted of taking field notes in hour-long observational periods in each of the second-hand spaces. During these site visits data was collected on a variety of factors, including but not limited to: the size of the space, the organization of the space (signage, merchandise presentation, etc), the range of products sold in the space, the pricing on different types of products, the overall quantity of products, the number of people coming into the space, the number
of people shopping in different sections of the space (if it is separated by commodity type), and the interactions between consumers and employees in the space.

Each site was visited three times for such observational purposes. Repeat visits were undertaken to account for the variability in several of the areas under observation, such as customer flow, movements within the space, and even spatial organization. Second-hand outlets are also subject to an extraordinarily high degree of inconsistency with respect to the abundance and range of goods being sold. For some of these locations the merchandise available for sale may differ significantly from day to day, or week to week. Such inventory turnover may even necessitate an entire reorganization of the store itself.² At the very least, there is no guarantee that any specific item will be in the store from one observational visit to the next.

**Phase Two: Long-Form Interview with Store Owners**

Long-form interviews were conducted with the founders and still-current shop owners of each case site. Two of the interviews took place outside of the owner’s respective second-hand stores, and one took place in-store. The interviews lasted from approximately forty-five minutes to over two hours. The interviews were semi-formal. The rigidity with which I adhered to my interview template was highly dependant on the talkativeness and area of expertise of the sellers, but in all cases new questions were asked in response to the information provided. However, in each interview several key topics were addressed: the founding of the business; how the

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² Such cases of reorganization were commonplace in Rag and Bone. Dale, the storeowner, explained this organizational flux as such: “I don’t have like shelves that I stock like a regular store has, here’s where appliances go and here’s where these go and here’s where these go. It’s like if I have a pile of action figures and I hang them on the wall here, and then I sell them and I don’t have them any more, then that’s not the action figure section any more. It’s pretty much like, if I sell something what goes there? I’m not just replacing it with the same thing. I shuffle things around.”
venue relates to other types of second-hand stores; the method of goods acquisition; the method of assessing the value and setting the price for acquired goods; the way the value of different second-hand commodities has changed over time; the reasoning behind the organization of the space; the pros and cons of selling online versus selling in the store; the types of consumers that come into the space; the kind of relationship that the owner has with these customers; and the qualities that make a second-hand item sellable. These interviews were audio-recorded, and then transcribed and coded for emergent themes.

Although the initial intention of this study was to carry out an additional consumer-oriented study in each of the cases, practical difficulties were encountered. All of the locations had admitted difficulties attracting walk-in customers, and on several of my site visits I encountered no other customers throughout the entire observational period. I therefore determined that acquiring adequate consumer samples in these spaces might not be possible. Further, it would be nearly impossible to carry out random sampling under these circumstances, leaving my findings open to bias.

Part II: Examining the Effects of Consumer Affluence on Second-Hand Markets

In this part of the study I selected two branches of the same charity shop retail chain, located in different neighborhoods of New York City for my case sites. Goodwill was chosen for the purposes of this analysis because of its relatively large consumer-base and extensive network of stores adhering to a high level of spatial and aesthetic uniformity. This allowed me to control for most of the factors I sought to

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3 Although all the sellers interviewed engaged in online second-hand markets to varying degrees, the primary focus of the analysis will be on their on-site businesses.
distinguish in the previous study, such as business history, methods of product acquisition and evaluation, organizational schemes, aesthetic cultivation of the space, and employee functions within the space. Any disparities between the two stores with respect to these features would be indicative of something other than differing business models. Further, the consistently high level of in-store consumer presence provided ample opportunity for random sampling within the greater consumer population.

It should be noted that this methodological framework does struggle with issues of generalizability and causality. Although Goodwill may attract a wider range of consumers than any of the Middletown locations studied in Part I, the charity shop in no way constitutes a neutral commercial space. On the contrary, the aesthetic and organizational strategies employed by Goodwill are fairly unique compared to many other second-hand outlets, and especially compared to the other retail spaces examine in this study. Thus the consumer groups and consumer behaviors witnessed in this portion of the study cannot be disassociated from the type of spaces they are occurring in. The ability to generalize about the impact of consumer affluence on second-hand consumption behaviors in any outlet other than a charity shop, or even a Goodwill store for that matter, is minimal. It is also important to make clear that despite my best strategic efforts, there is no way to isolate for consumer affluence within the design of this study. Consequently, issues of potential spuriousness arise at a few points during my analysis, and I attempt to address them honestly when they do.
The sites in the study were selected by the relative affluence of the populations in the neighborhoods they are located within. Affluence was operationalized as a combination of five socioeconomic variables: median household income, median rent, and unemployment rate, college education among 18 to 24-year-olds, and percentage of families living below the poverty line. The data for these measurements was obtained from United States Census Bureau 2008-2012 profiles for ZIP Code Tabulation Areas. The 2010 census profiles for Manhattan’s twenty-eight Neighborhood Tabulation Areas were also consulted to gain a better perspective of neighborhood demographics that postal-code based data collection may not capture. The data revealed that the East Harlem and Gramercy Goodwill locations were situated in locations with substantial demographic disparities, likely to yield a fruitful comparative analysis. The relation of the consumers to the neighborhoods they were found shopping in was established via the interview question “do you live or work in the neighborhood?”

At each of these locations one field-observation was done prior to the start of consumer interviews, similar to the ones carried out in Part I. During subsequent visits, observational data was recorded in between short interviews. In total, interviews were conducted with twenty-five consumers and two store employees over the course of three visits at each site. Consumers were approached randomly and asked for verbal consent to partake in my study. If they agreed, they were asked the following questions:

1. Why did you come here today?
   Follow up: Is this the typical reason that you come to Goodwill?
2. Do you live or work in the neighborhood?
3. Do you come to Goodwill, or similar thrift stores often?
4. When you come to a store like Goodwill, what do you consider to be great find?

5. Is there anything you would not purchase second-hand or that you would prefer not to purchase second hand?

6. What is the number one reason that you thrift shop?

7. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience shopping in Goodwill or any other second-hand store?

Due to a widespread desire on the part of subject to not be audio-recorded, all interviews were transcribed either during or immediately after the short exchanges, on a mobile device. Interviews themselves lasted from two to eleven minutes, with the typical interview taking four to five minutes. Thirty-one total consumers were approached at random for interviews, however six subjects declined to participate in the study. After the interviews had been completed, responses to the questions were compiled for both sites, and coded for thematic content.

**Part III: Evaluation of Second-Hand Markets to Support Sustainable Consumption**

A sound assessment of the capacity for second-hand markets to promote sustainable consumption must first, of course, define terms like “sustainable development” and “sustainable consumption.” Such definitions are also necessary to justify interchangeable use of phrases like “resource conservation ethics” in later chapters. In 1987 the Brundtland Commission published a report entitled “Our Common Future” which put forth what is today the most widely-regarded definition of sustainable development: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Report 1987). To apply this concept to sustainable consumption then, would be to define it as consumption that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future to meet their own needs. As current rates of
use for nearly all resources associated with production – from “rare earth” metals like
platinum to freshwater – threaten to greatly deplete reserves for future generations,
the resources and emissions embodied by current consumption profiles in most
Western nations far-surpass what might be considered sustainable. Sustainable
consumption is not just about consuming less. It is about locating channels of
consumption where goods have lower absolute resource and energy inputs – hence, a
conservation-oriented consumerism. The various second-hand practices identified
will be evaluated against this standard as a litmus test for sustainable and
unsustainable consumer behaviors.
Chapter 3

“Dear, we call it ‘vintage,’ not ‘second-hand’:

Narrative Constructs Across Second-Hand Spaces

My exploration of second-hand markets begins in Middletown, Connecticut, where a surprisingly large array of second-hand consumer spaces has emerged within the past decade. This study will focus on three of these spaces: a nineteenth century house-turned-antique-shop, a converted warehouse specializing in estate sales, and a Main Street situated second-hand store. Each of these stores has a distinctive character and structure providing a fairly representative sample of the range that exists within the realm of second-hand consumer venues. My cross-sectional view of second-hand spaces is unavoidably partial, as there are near-infinite permutations of the second-hand retailer, each with its own aims, schemes of acquisition, and selling practices. Despite the limited framework, a fair amount of variation in types of operation has been attained, as the remainder of this chapter will attest to.

This chapter expounds upon the ways in which spatial, rhetorical, and social narratives implemented in second-hand spaces serve to legitimate value structures. It then further dissects the role of social relations overcoming industry weaknesses such as lacking transparency and pervasive mistrust. The analysis reveals that value is re-created primarily across spatial contexts rather than across commodities types. Contrary to my predictions, no single type of second-hand commodity has greater inherent value than any other. Further, the research indicated that there is little
association between use values and monetary values in the second-hand sphere.

**Commodity Valuation In Second-Hand Spheres**

A traditional economic perspective locates markets at the intersection of producer supply and consumer demand; the product of an autonomous relationship that transcends the “social,” and operates outside of culturally situated values and institutions (Polanyi [1944] 2001). In a study of second-hand spaces this understanding of the market is unworkable. The second-hand market disrupts the dynamics of supply and demand. Commodities may accumulate in resale markets absent any real desire for them, and conversely high demand for products may not elicit a responsive change in supply. The second-hand market also creates an impenetrable distance between the primary producer and the ultimate consumer, to the extent that the ambitions and desires of one have little direct impact on the other. How these fractured markets persist is perhaps a great mystery to the economist. The nature of second-hand markets dictate that they be analyzed from an economic sociology perspective, which recognizes markets as existing within, rather than independent of, communities. The “self-regulating market” that transcends social relations, Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2001) argued, is essentially a fallacy. Social structures are embedded in, and inextricable from, the market. Using this axiom as a point of departure, this chapter examines the ways that market spaces and commercial interactions are formed to give rise to functional second-hand markets, capable of creating discourses of exchange and established concepts of value outside of the mainstream market.
The construction of each of the second-hand spaces studied here is a manifestation of the shop-owner’s understanding of how second-hand markets operate, and more specifically the seller’s perception of his/her positioning within the resale industry. These crucial inferences are gleaned through years of experience, interactions with customers and fellow purveyors of second-hand goods, and familiarity with a vast spectrum of commodities passing through multiple cycles of use and reuse. The challenge confronted by all purveyors of second-hand goods is the re-creation of monetary value post first-cycle consumption. In mainstream markets prices may be determined formulaically using metrics such as manufacturing and labor costs, and desired profit margins (Samuelson and Nordhaus 1998). However, in second-hand markets input costs are often greatly reduced or negligible as the production side of the supply-chain is once-removed. Only transportation and refurbishing costs may remain.

Establishing prices, and consequent commercial status, is a constant struggle under such conditions. Value restoration involves an implicit contract between the buyer and seller, in which the buyer recognizes both the worth of the item being sold and the validity of the mechanism employed by the seller to establish this value. Gregson and Crewe (2003) define this process as a “‘birth of value’: in which people create the conditions for value to emerge, in the context of transactions” (p. 2). It might be more aptly termed the rebirth of value, as sellers must re-establish value for items outside of the context that generated their initial valuation.

In this context values are not only highly variable but also contested and vigorously negotiated within second-hand commercial spaces. This becomes
glaringly apparent when disparities between buyer and seller valuation emerge, and the nebulous foundations upon which sellers assert value come to light. As Ed, one of the shop owners explicitly states in his interview, “Sometimes you think something’s worth a lot, [but you] can’t sell it. Nobody wants it. And that’s an issue of not what it’s worth, but who wants it.” Another seller, after countless anecdotes about her experience in the antiques business, queried, “Can you see how, something that would be very meaningful to you may be nothing to someone else?”

Robert Grafton Small (1993) – drawing heavily on Saussure’s theories of semiotics – grappled with the issue of meaning exchange and reciprocity inherent in any commodity exchange. Small (1993) concentrates particularly on those objects with complex consumer histories, such as a family heirloom: “It is now senseless to suppose that each party to an exchange will necessarily draw the same inferences from any combination of goods and circumstances, however common they may be… If my grandfather’s bow tie is not understood as the symbol I would want it to be, I am obliged to make good the deficiency or else forget the whole affair” (p. 42). The experienced second-hand sellers appear to be all too aware of this ultimatum, but they also perceive a third option that Small overlooks; that of influencing the conditions under which the meanings are produced. The second-hand shop owners I spoke to strive to run successful businesses on this very premise. The ability to manipulate space and social relations is critical to reaching some sort of mutual understanding of value in second-hand contexts, if not an agreement on meaning.

The ultimate goal then, of second-hand sellers is to minimize the gap between the posited value of the seller and the perceived value of the buyer. Although Gregson
and Crewe (2003) assert that sellers “are shown to be unable to regulate counter-readings of second-hand exchange,” my stance on this point is a more ambivalent (p. 3). While not a simple venture, alternative-readings of second-hand objects may be confronted and reconciled through careful composition of consumption narratives. The second-hand vendors interviewed here achieve this narrative construction with varying degrees of success.

Value Creation Through Spatial Narratives

Never Say Goodbye, the priciest and presumably most high-end venue of the three, is a space cultivated with a highly intentional, self-aware precision that looks anything but calculated. When it comes visual description, the antique shop defies true written encapsulation. The instruction given to me upon my first visit was to simply “explore,” and it would be nearly impossible to do much else in such a maze-like, exhibition-oriented environment. Everything about the space invited consumer interaction and tactile engagement, from the racks of fur coats swinging in the wind outside the entrance to the trays of bedazzled accessories sitting on ornate furniture interspersed around the shop. Antique puppets and 1920s cloche hats and Victorian children’s formalwear hang from the low ceilings. The entire space is bathed in a warm dim lighting that speaks to the homey atmosphere the entire shop projects – as if your grandmother’s attic outgrew its creaky confines and overtook a quaint but sizeable two-story house on a busy commercial road. Faith, the woman who owns the store with her husband of forty years, described the hoped for aesthetic as such:

What I wanted was this magical, almost crazy place, where you would walk in the door and you’d go “Oh my God!”… it’s so jam-packed but it’s still fabulous and fun… and you want to keep up that diversity, you want to keep up that “look”… what I would call “the mystery and the fantasy”… It’s like
creating something different than anything else. [Customers] can come in and say “Oh, I’ve never seen anything like this. This is phenomenal.”

The effect can be overwhelming but also endlessly enticing for a consumer looking for an appropriately engaging shopping experience. The design is inextricably linked to consumer perceptions and the resultant creation of commodity value.

Faith is forthright about her intention to elevate the value of her merchandise through the cultivation of a “look”: “[It’s about] the display of these items. Really, you can go to a tag sale and buy it for ten cents, and even if it isn’t even worth a lot of money, you can turn around and sell it for twenty-five dollars because it has that ‘look.’ So everything is in the vignette.” There’s an acute awareness here that the items she is selling have tenuous value at best. In the wrong setting her entire inventory could be viewed as little more than a collection of used junk. Faith views her role as one of revitalization of something that has reached the end of its primary commercial lifecycle. The ‘vignette’ she refers to is created via processes such as “surrounding,” “rebranding,” and “reframing.”

I will tell this story over and over again, about how you surround your items… If you just go to the auction or go to the flea market, and you take a piece of anything, and you just put it there, you could probably see that all over the place. Maybe the Goodwill, a thrift store of some sort. But, when I surround it, for instance in the way you would use it in your home, so that they go “Oh! Oh, that – that kitchen blender looks fabulous with that vintage toaster.” All of a sudden now, not only do they have an idea, they may end up buying a whole bunch of things that relate to, let’s say, a fifties kitchen. And you talk to them about it. And everybody just loves it!

If you can’t reframe, if you don’t know how to reframe, it’s difficult… display and interior design, all those things differentiate you. So you ask yourself, why would a person drive from New York City to buy a piece of pyrex in Middletown? Why would a person come from New Jersey to buy a mink jacket? Imagine how many stores she would be going through – through New Jersey, through New York City, through everywhere under the Sun, and online – and drive all the way to Never Say Goodbye. That tells you something.
Particularly within the realm of antiques, where an item may be decades or even centuries removed from the traditional mainstream market in which it once existed, the creation of narrative appears vital. Otherwise these items become decontextualized, othered, and subsequently devalued. The consumer likely does not have the relevant knowledge or a comparable consumer script in the mainstream market with which to assess an antique and accord it value. Providing narrative does what stores like “Goodwill” may fail to – it establishes the foundation for a mutual recognition of value between consumers and purveyors. Most for-profit second-hand sellers cannot maintain the low prices set by Goodwill and like stores, yet consumers will expect these low prices regardless if value-enhancement cannot be justified.

The other second-hand venues struggled with this type of value-creation to varying degrees. The owner of Rag and Bone, a small second-hand store on Main Street with an eclectic assortment of newer and older resale items, attributes his difficulties creating a cohesive aesthetic to a lacking discrimination in his collection:

[My merchandise is] not selected enough yet. I haven’t curated it enough yet. I’m still working through stuff that I wouldn’t necessarily have chosen, but I have it so I’m gonna try and sell it… Ideally, when I look around I wouldn’t see anything that I just think is ordinary stuff… Everything should be interesting to some degree, and not just… stuff that you could just buy at WalMart. That’ll never happen though because if I can sell, you know, a toaster oven – let’s say I get a brand new toaster oven, and WalMart sells it for thirty dollars and I can sell it for ten, then I’m gonna sell it.

There is a tension that exists between the desire to sell any item for a profit, and the riskier aspiration to offer a narrower selection of items in order to achieve a cultivated aesthetic that might raise the merchandise values as a whole. As such, Dale, the shop’s owner, admitted that although he would like to have the kind of store that
Faith’s consumer base might patronize, he did not feel that his current collection and store atmosphere qualified him as an antique or vintage shop. Faith, like Dale, recognized that the resale market for electronics or appliances (like toaster ovens) could be hugely profitable, however she would not sell them in her store because ultimately the incongruity “wrecks your persona, it wrecks your whole imaging.”

Estate Treasures, an estate sales shop converted from an old factory, seems to have little concern with cultivating a cohesive or consistent aesthetic. It is enormous and maze-like, with at least four distinct rooms and numerous small side corridors filled with merchandise. There are few if any visible signs, and upon first glance no real discernable logic to the order in which the items are displayed, although the organization of the products became clearer as I moved through the space. The first room is well lit, carpeted, high ceilinged and equipped with central air and heating. It displays all manner of knick-knacks and antiques, on shelving units and surrounding larger pieces of furniture or household items. The next room contains the majority of the electronics and appliances. It is unfinished and dimly lit with a single fluorescent light on the high ceiling, exposed brick and concrete walls, and little or no heating. Smaller items sit haphazardly on metal shelving units and larger appliances like refrigerators, washing machines, and sound systems line the walls. The third and fourth rooms have atmospheres similarly disjointed from the first and second.

Rather than focusing on creating a cohesive look or ambiance, Ed, the storeowner, is primarily concerned with organizing the space for efficiency:

When you walk in you can see from one end of the building to the other. We try not to do aisle ways, so… you don’t have to go down the aisle, out, and back in [if you see something you want across the room]… And we
try to keep things together so if somebody comes in and says ‘I’m looking for silverware,’ [we can say] ‘Okay go to room three, in the door, turn right.

Such an approach echoes the Goodwill organizational mentality of laying everything out in open spaces for high visibility, and separating commodities into rigid departments (this will be discussed in much greater depth in the following chapter). However, the space does not lend itself easily to narrative. Rather, it may appeal to an audience of consumers looking for a more classic retail experience, who would perhaps be deterred by the congested, overwhelming atmosphere of Never Say Goodbye.

The behaviors and motivations of consumers in these venues, if such information can be accurately gleaned from the sellers themselves, seems to follow from the practices that differing spatial constructions and valuation frameworks encourage. Faith characterizes a large portion of the Never Say Goodbye patrons as relatively affluent collectors and second-hand enthusiasts; in other words, those willing to accept the value-enhancing narratives that she is trying to market:

I think, the people who go to Goodwill and Savers, they’re not gonna come in and buy certain things, they may come in and buy things that I have underpriced… I think in one sense, we have more of an upscale [clientele]… the type of person you want most is a pure retail customer, it doesn’t get any better than that. The worst that you can get is the person that will come in and go “Oh I just got this at a tag sale for ten cents.”… My mother used to go, “Listen, if you’re looking for something at that price, you know what? Just go to K-Mart.” And now it’s like “Go to the Goodwill.” That’s fine, but that isn’t our customer… Our customer comes in and goes “Oh my God, look at that hat!”

Faith makes it abundantly clear what type of consumer makes purchases at her store. Never Say Goodbye is not an outlet of last resort for those who cannot afford to make purchases elsewhere, nor is it necessarily a store for the average bargain seeker.
Rather, the antique store is a space orchestrated for indulgence and appreciation. It caters to those customers who truly appreciate old, unique goods on display and those who take recreational pleasure in “exploring” the space. Customers seeking the cheapest version of an item or the most efficient shopping experience are not only unlikely to purchase anything but may also be rather confused by the design of the space itself. The very design of the store is selective, as those who are unwilling or unable to recognize the added-value schemes being employed will not engage in the consumer experience.

Rag and Bone straddles various second-hand consumption spheres and consequently struggles to construct a coherent space. Dale, the shop owner, explains the current status of his operation as a hodgepodge of different acquisition methods: “People bring stuff in, I have consigners, I’ve done estates… Second-hand everything. I’ve done everything.” As a business that has yet to establish an identity for itself, Dale has yet to be able to attract a concrete client base. The space sends mixed messages, because, by Dale’s own admission he, “[hasn’t] narrowed it down yet. I was picturing more funky, vintage-y, antique-y, but at the moment whatever I come across I have to try and sell it, so pretty much I have everything.” Thus, the space does little to dictate how the consumer should behave or even to establish the conditions on which a mutual understanding of value might be reached. Rather than creating a space that demands value-recognition, the space more passively anticipates consumers that arrive with a pre-existing desire for certain items. Due to the vast range of commodities and types of second-hand goods he offers (“I had one Asian piece that was roughly two hundred years old, all the way through stuff people bought
at Target yesterday”) he has trouble appealing to the demographic of consumers he most desires, which seems to be the same enthusiasts that might go to Never Say Goodbye:

I don’t seem to have like a certain typical customer; I don’t feel like I do. I mean, the best customers are really actually the ones who get a kick out of thrift store shopping, or resale shopping, or consignment shopping… Those people are awesome, generally…[but] it’s a total mix. I get all the local people, you know, I’m a shop where they can buy stuff, if they need something. If you need a DVD player because yours just broke, they’re not running to WalMart. They’ll walk downstairs and see if they can find one.

Dale prefers the type of shopper who takes pleasure in the practice of second-hand shopping while simultaneously creating a space that can serve as an alternative to WalMart. In Rag and Bone the lack of merchandise selectivity, and a professed lack of “method” for organizing the space has perhaps resulted in a generally unfocused appeal.

Ed, by contrast, is both aware and welcoming of the divide in the consumer base at Estate Treasures, operating the space accordingly. His apparent disregard for a consistent aesthetic in favor of a more easily navigable and searchable space speaks to the fact that he does not choose his merchandise or necessarily aspire to attract a certain type of consumer base. Rather than curating a collection from a predetermined commercial vision, Ed acquires the vast majority of his merchandise from his moving and clean-out business. He consequently has little control over what ends up in the store. The sentiment that best summarizes his attitude toward his commercial venture is this: “I’ve got all this stuff, and I’ve got to get rid of it.” To this end, Ed tries to appeal to as broad a spectrum of second-hand consumers as possible. He is especially conscious of the fact that, “Most of the time people come in
here because they just can’t afford to go to a store and buy something brand new.”

These need-driven consumers may not necessarily be looking for the recreational experience of scavenging for great finds. They may simply want a shopping experience analogous to that of a department store, at reduced prices. However, the store also tends to accumulate a lot of antiques and specialty items that would appeal to niche consumer groups, collectors, and vintage connoisseurs. Ed splits these clients into two groups: “I’d say probably fifty percent of my customers wouldn’t set foot in Goodwill. On the other hand, the other fifty percent go there regularly, and look for bargains.” Ed’s conceptualization of his distinct consumer bases may explain the rather disjointed aesthetic of the space. Upon closer inspection, the more decorative and antique items are set up in a way that echoes the hodgepodge, visually tantalizing setup of Never Say Goodbye, while the utility items like appliances and furniture have a more logical, uniform placement. The broadened consumer appeal is also made apparent by the vast price ranges in the store, which varied from five dollars to five thousand dollars, and could be anywhere in between.

Value Creation Through Rhetorical Narratives

Just as value can be enhanced through the strategic employment of spatial organization, the worth of an entire inventory might be elevated through the use of rhetorical narratives. Faith was by far the most avid proponent of this method. She constantly emphasized the importance of talking about and writing about products in deliberate and thoughtful ways, in order to provide consumers with vivid, fantastical narratives: “So everything I’ve ever created [is about]… creating a story that is true, but some people aren’t able to do that… I have pages and pages and pages of
descriptive words. I went to the dictionary once, and I wrote down twenty pages of pure descriptive words. That’s how you market!” Faith discussed at length her role as a purveyor of stories as well as goods. In a commodity realm so infused with such complex historical and cultural meanings, it is the job of the seller to compose an accessible and attractive narrative from the multitude of possible meanings that these objects could convey. In Faith’s estimation, the consumers wants the story just as much as they want the commodity.

Faith is also aware that every descriptor she uses carries with it a whole host of implications for the consumer with a particular habitus, or accrued cultural capital:

I will say things like, “We are selling the contents of our stores that were in Martha’s Vineyard, New York City, and various locations in Connecticut.” Now what does that imply? The implication is that this is not junk. So I have a reason why I do what I do, and I say what I say. Because I know the picture that is gonna be drawn in someone’s head. And to me, that is the difference.

Clearly, certain pre-existing bodies of knowledge are required to appreciate or even understand the marketing scheme at work here. Her consumer must be literate in geographies of wealth in order to decipher her description. Consequently any consumers who rises to meet Faith on a platform of mutual understanding of value on the basis of her rhetorical strategies are likely to be of the specific socioeconomic bracket that she seeks to attract.

Specific rhetoric is also employed by the shop owners to explicitly position their business within the wider scope of the second-hand industry, aligning and distancing themselves from different types of spaces accordingly. Although most of the previous work on second-hand consumer spaces focused on the way that these venues are organized and structured in relation (and distance) to first-hand consumer
spaces (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Pierce and Paulos 2011), the store owners I spoke to seemed just as, if not more concerned with differentiating themselves from the multitude of other second-hand outlets available to consumers. I first encountered the importance of semantic accuracy within the second-hand sphere upon visiting the Manhattan Vintage Show in New York City. I entered the booth of a woman named Dee, began to explain the purpose of my study, and was immediately cut short with an icy stare and the clipped response: “Dear, we call it ‘vintage,’ not ‘second-hand.’” In a commercial sphere where the boundaries between a high-end vintage boutique and a charity shop retail chain are more fluid and permeable than a seller would probably like, demanding adherence to certain rhetorical constructs may be one of the most effective ways to safeguard against the contestation of value. If vintage and antiques occupy the uppermost stratum of the second-hand hierarchy, than my linguistic faux pas could very well constitute a challenge to her mode of valuation, or at least a failure to engage in the mutual recognition of meaning. In this a context Dee’s reassertion of status is understandable.

While none of the Middletown shop owners I interviewed were quite so unyielding in their use of interchangeable terms, they all preferred to characterize their stores using certain descriptors, and perhaps more importantly, not others. Faith, as the proprietor of an antique and nostalgia shop, identified cultivated design aesthetics as a main feature distinguishing antique shops from second-hand outlets of less repute: “There’s a lot of people who don’t understand, they just put the stuff on the shelf. Like right next to a vacuum cleaner might be an antique. It is random and messy – terrible. That to me is a thrift store, that is not an antique shop, or a
collectibles shop.” Dale dissects the different sectors of the second-hand market as a way of framing his own aspirations within the industry:

Well the term thrift shop, to me – it’s not official – but when I think of a thrift shop I think of the charity place where you donate bags of stuff into a bin and then they sell it. The non-profits and stuff… Goodwill is a \textit{thrift} store. I’m second-hand. But I’m trying to be a cross between a second-hand store – which is just somebody else’s stuff that they don’t need anymore – and an antique shop. I’m not really an antique shop, although I’d like to have enough antiques that people who go to antique shops will come my store.

Thus a tiered ranking is either implicitly or explicitly shared amongst those operating within second-hand markets in which prestige (and consequent higher values) are accorded to certain types of second-hand spaces over others. Charity shops such as Goodwill seems to universally reside at the bottom of this hierarchy and the status slowly rises as the selectivity and curation of displayed merchandise increases. Creating a terminology that captures these distinctions is crucial to establishing the foundation for valuation on different levels of the market.

\textbf{Value Creation Through Social Experiences}

Fostering a meaningful rapport between buyers and sellers is a vital aspect of the second-hand business, as sociality may in large part comprise the recreational value of the second-hand consumer experience. In such a fickle industry, ensuring a loyal customer base is perhaps the most critical component of success. Faith explains, “People will come back again and again, even if they have to pay a little bit more, because again it’s… a really unique and wonderful shopping experience. Personalities. [My husband] is great with people, I love people. People come back because they like that.” Faith recognizes the client relationship as a greater part of the “experience” she has set out to construct. Further, she endeavors to cultivate a unique
consumer-seller dynamic within the store, consciously allowing for the freer scavenging mode of consumption she knows her customers look for. Essentially, she wants the consumer to feel cared for, but not watched: “Being followed… [is] a terrible feeling… We don’t do that. We take into consideration [that people might steal], especially in huge stores. What are you gonna do? Have ten people, one in every room? No. So the way we look at is, there’s gonna be some problems but that’s part of doing business.” Conceding a certain amount of trust and autonomy to the consumer is part of establishing the authenticity of the space, which is sought even at the expense of some financial loss. Customers at Never Say Goodbye are invited to touch, examine, and try on anything they want. The agency given to the shopper to act as they please is both one of the more distinct aspects of the experience, and one of the most recreationally compelling.

Ed also highlighted the crucial social aspect of the industry. While display and atmospheric framing may not be one of the stores strengths, Ed knows that offering engaging personalities is equally part of the experience:

It becomes a relationship. Oh well that’s the joy part. People come in here and, you know, I’m a hug person. And I’ll come around the corner or they’ll come back here and say “get out here and give me a hug!” I get so much pleasure [from it]… It’s very rewarding. And you know, people come in and go “you know, I was telling everybody about you, this is great, I had to come back.”

While he may not be able to compete with Goodwill in terms of pricing, or Never Say Goodbye in terms of display, he recognizes the significance of consumer connections in ensuring customer loyalty. In this way he may just as successfully attain a loyal customer base of people who enjoy an environment intimate familiarity as Faith, who creates a space of unhindered exploration.
Value Augmentation: Why It Matters For the Consumer

If value in second-hand markets is, to a large degree, arbitrary, why might a consumer agree to the various value-creating schema that shop owners like Faith seek to employ? The most compelling answer I can think of returns to the concept of leisure consumption discussed in Chapter One. Appadurai’s (1996) theory of maximizing the utility of leisure would likely support the proposition that consumers might accept a higher price-tags when the consumption experience is made sufficiently more pleasurable as to warrant elevated monetary value. As we have seen, this is achieved through the creation of tantalizing consumer spaces, exciting commodity narratives, and meaningful social interactions. This process is analogous to a mode of leisure-time maximization that Linder (1970) refers to as “simultaneous consumption” in which time is made more valuable via the indulgence in multiple items or activities at once – essentially, multitasking (p. 79). The sellers here provide consumers with a variety of opportunities to enrich the experience of consumption through multitasking: the consumers may shop while they socialize with the employees, while they treasure hunt, or while they marvel at a vast array of unique and historical objects. The spectacle of these spaces may render them endlessly entertaining and thus create an ideal space for the union of commodity consumption and leisure.

Social Devices and the Cultivation of Consumer Trust

The formation of social bonds is also crucially important in second-hand markets because of their tendency to produce trust. All three sellers discussed the various ways in which consumer distrust consistently plagues the second-hand
industry. Terminally insufficient information structures are an undeniable challenge for most vendors, because they breed skepticism among consumers. To an extent, all the shop owners admitted to the validity of these anxieties, making some variation of the claim that it is impossible to know the consumer history for most acquired goods. Ed tended to dismiss the fears associated with these uncertainties, providing this anecdote when asked about consumer attitudes towards pre-owned goods:

There are people who get nervous about second-hand. They’ll buy mattress… I get a woman who’ll come in here and say, “do you have any new mattresses?” I say “No I only have used.” [She says], “Oh I wouldn’t buy a used mattress.” “What do you mean you wouldn’t buy a used mattress?” “Oh, no no. I’d only buy a new mattress. I wouldn’t sleep on a mattress somebody else slept on.” “Oh gee, that’s interesting. When you go on vacation and you rent a hotel room, do they bring in a brand new mattress for you to sleep on? Or are you sleeping on a mattress somebody slept on last night? When you buy clothes, are you buying clothes nobody’s ever tried on before?”

Part of Ed’s job, ostensibly, is to assuage consumer apprehensions about the second-hand nature of his merchandise, and to reframe it in more normalized, acceptable terms.

However all three of the sellers interviewed discussed spheres of resale trade in which they felt a degree of consumer apprehension was warranted, because of tendencies for consumers get cheated or tricked. Faith discussed the prevalence of mass-produced antique reproductions sold as authentic artifacts, and the resale of goods acquired via cleanouts that were not pre-screened for functionality. Ed mentioned the various ways in which clients get ripped off or misled when dealing with consignment, a second-hand arena in which he does not partake. Dale for his part, discussed the difficulties of dealing in goods for which the histories are often
unknown and decontextualized from the outset (due to being purchased in storage auctions, for instance). There is an unspoken admission here that the sellers aren’t even always assured of the quality and condition of every item they put up for sale. The general dearth of information within the second-hand industry produces all manner of reliability issues surrounding undisclosed or undiscovered problems with resold items.

As will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter, some second-hand commercial spaces cope with these informational and structural deficiencies by establishing visual cues to indicate a sense of regulated cleanliness and accountability. Charity shops in particular make use of these organizational schemes, drawing on department store aesthetics and constructing sterile seeming environments to alleviate consumer concerns over the safety and security of second-hand consumption. However, Gregson and Crewe (2003) point out that prioritizing anxiety-reducing operational elements through visual schemes often comes at the expense of value-enhancing spatial construction practices: “Indeed, in attempting to regulate out certain readings of second-hand through particular spatializing practices, second hand retailers may well have written out the very spatialities of ‘difference’ that enable buyers to constitute value through second-hand transactions” (p. 4). While Goodwill may not be particularly concerned with this a restricted capability to generate value (for reasons that will become clearer in later chapters), the other second-hand venues in this analysis simply cannot afford to forfeit an effective value-creating device for the sake of consumer peace of mind. In lieu of aesthetic changes,
on which they may be unwilling to compromise, sellers rely on social devices to combat consumer fears.

According to Faith, strong consumer-seller relationships can effectively compensate for the general distrust that seems to pervade much of the second-hand industry: “Now, because of the multitude of places that you can go to, that personality… is a huge part of the attraction. And trust – trust is extremely important.” Faith goes on to explain that second-hand consumers may not necessarily have an innate trust for the second-hand industry in general, but if they can trust the seller then this cognitive hurdle is eliminated. The perceived accountability and honesty of the seller may come to stand in for actual information. Goodwill, by contrast, is inhibited from employing these social devices due to their large-scale workforce and more impersonalized business model, as we will see in the next chapter. There is no illusion that the Goodwill employee has any influence over, or knowledge of the merchandise being sold in the store on any given day. Faith, Ed, and Dale are all familiarized with their inventories to varying degrees and are permanent fixtures within their respective stores that consumers can depend on.

Value Augmentation Narratives and The Role of the Disenfranchised Consumer

At the conclusion of this cross-spatial analysis it is crucial to acknowledge which actors thrive and which remain excluded in these constructed narratives, from a consumption perspective. It is well understood by all three sellers interviewed, and presumably by a great many purveyors of second-hand goods in the market, that they operate in a commercial realm where monetary values are fluid and subject to fluctuation. As such, much of the task lies in locating the right customer – the
customer who, after all efforts towards spatial and rhetorical and social value creation have been made, will consent to the modes of valuation at work and pay for items accordingly. So, who is the ideal customer for most of these sellers, then? The sellers identified these desired consumers as the collectors and the enthusiasts, who tend to most value the items themselves or the experience of engaging in alternative markets. These prestige clients are catered to; they are provided with services such as informational sources (reference books and written descriptions) and personal calls when certain items come into the store. For sellers like Ed and Dale, the need-driven consumers are taken as a given, if not a nuisance for their bargaining tactics. If the sought after consumer in almost every context is the discretionary spender willing to accept greater costs of items for their “patina” or difference value, then the financially constrained consumer becomes, in effect, excluded once more (McCracken 1990).

Williams and Windebank (2002) examine the notion of a disenfranchised consumer at length in relation to the mainstream market, however they fail to grasp the ways that financially restricted consumers may become excluded once again in the second-hand market. They touch on the way such marginalization may make them susceptible to the deceptions and unpredictability of the second-hand market, but there is little discussion of how these consumers are perhaps most vulnerable to forms of fraud and trickery because they enter into sectors of the market that are rarely frequented by the collector or the enthusiast. These are often markets for items like large household appliances and medical equipment. Faith discussed how her experience working in the industry opened her eyes whole sectors of the market where dishonesty and fraud go unchecked:
But you do need to note that there’s a tremendous amount of deception that goes on, especially where a lot of people that don’t have any money, they have to scrounge and save to buy that refrigerator, or buy something really important – a walker – and you are not being told the truth… people get it home, they come back right away and they say “this doesn’t work,” and [the seller just says] “Sorry.” How do you justify that?

Faith elaborates that these types of transactions most often occur in circumstances where goods are acquired extremely cheaply through house cleanouts or storage auctions and then fail to be inspected or assessed for working condition before resale. The Williams and Windebank (2002) study highlights the widespread nature of such occurrences, stating that “some thirty percent of those who had acquired their refrigerator second-hand from people previously unknown to them told stories of poor quality goods being sold and how they felt they had no protection” (p. 507). As has historically always been the case, there is little regulation within the second-hand industry and consumers consequently have few remedial pathways to pursue should they get scammed. Further, as discussed above, sellers have minimal incentive to gain the allegiance of these low-income buyers as repeat customers.

It is also worth noting here that certain commodities are naturally easier to assess for condition than others. While an the consumer may be able to check article of clothing for quality issues with relative, items like appliances and electronics are more difficult to evaluate prior to purchase. Unfortunately, it is often these complex, hard-to-assess goods that are sought after by economically restricted consumers, because of their high per-unit costs on the mainstream market. Thus, the consumer groups that are often more adversely affected buy the lack of security in the second-hand industry are those financially-motivated disenfranchised consumers unlikely to have any recourse for such situations.
These trends have far-reaching implications for the consumer sovereignty of the need-based shopper. As discussed in the introductory overview of consumption theory, there is a profound association made between capacity for consumer choice and personal empowerment in consumer societies like the United States. The ability to consume freely and autonomously is valued almost as much as the ability to participate in political institutions (Fourcade and Healey 2007). Not only does the initial removal from primary consumer-producer relationships render these consumers involuntarily excluded from supply-demand relationships, but further injustices done in the second-hand realm may leave them feeling thoroughly alienated and disempowered.

Charity shops then, which implement storewide uniform pricing structures, are perhaps the safest outlet for the economically-oriented consumer. These types of retail outlets are not necessarily as motivated by price maximization because they receive all of their merchandise for free. Further, the standardized low pricing creates a space in which no particular type of customer is desired over another. Negotiating is not an accepted practice in these venues, and the resulting lack of pricing variability means that many of the concerns surrounding mutual recognition of value are not applicable. These shops are often more focused on incorporating consistency and dependability into their business models, or at the very least providing remedies such as return policies, should the items purchased be faulty or defective for any reason. The charity shops is a unique realm of second-hand exchange, due to its accessibility to the widest range of potential consumers. In the next chapter I delve
deeper into the various consumer groups who patronize these types of second-hand venues.

**Conclusion**

As Pierce and Paulos (2011) concluded in their study of second-hand markets, “everything potentially has value in the right context” (p. 2392). Ultimately, as we have seen it is the task of the purveyor to determine this context and exploit it accordingly. The construction of experience through space, the carving out of market niches, and the negotiation of customer-seller relationships are all strategies of manipulating context to produce value. Excluding these methods of value-creation, second-hand spaces may find themselves profitable by focusing on the reincorporation of disenfranchised consumer groups. However, such practices tend to come at the expense of prestige. Thus, if hierarchies in the second-hand realm exist, they exist across types of consumer spaces.

At this juncture, it is important to clarify that the sellers’ understanding of their customer’s motivations should not be conflated with the first-hand account of consumer motivations. Despite the intimate familiarity of many of these storeowners with their clientele and the dual subject-positions they occupy as both purveyors of second-hand goods and avid consumers themselves, I do not intend to posit that these sellers can speak on behalf of their consumers. This chapter was merely an attempt to capture narrative constructions in second-hand spaces as a reflection of perceived consumer practices and incentives. Nevertheless, it is compelling that the sellers accounts provide a complementary narrative to those set forth by several previous consumer-oriented studies. The creation of product characteristics via rhetorical and
visual devices, the creation of spatial characteristics via aesthetic cues and organizational schemes, and the appeal to economic concerns via affordable pricing structures reflect Guiot and Roux’s (2010) four overarching motivational categories for second-hand consumers (“Experiential motivations related to product characteristics, experiential motivations related to space characteristics, economic motivations, and critical concerns” (p. 385)). The only aspect crucially lacking in the seller accounts is critical consumerism driven by ethical or personal principles. The insignificant or non-existent presence of this consumer group within the consciousness of the second-hand shop owner is telling, and will be examined at greater length in a later chapter. The next chapter will provide a more in-depth examination of my own finding on consumer motivations and shopping behaviors from the consumer perspective.
Chapter 4

“Rich people equals good thrifting”:

Constructions of Class and Wealth in the New York City Charity Shop

In the previous chapter we examined accounts of second-hand spaces from the perspective of those who created them. These were enlightening, but incomplete explanations of how second-hand spaces operate. In this chapter I will take a consumer-focused approach to analyzing second-hand spaces by providing an in-depth look at two Goodwill sites in different neighborhoods of New York City, with a briefer juxtaposition of these spaces to the Goodwill store Middletown, Connecticut. The intent of this approach is to begin understanding the effects of affluence on the construction of second-hand commercial spaces and the consumer practices that occur therein.

Goodwill stores are optimal case study sites for this analysis due to a variety of reasons. The second-hand chain and 501C3 non-profit organization operates stores all over the United States and adheres to a coherent, relatively homogenized business model across locations. Within New York City, the charity organization runs fourteen separate stores and donation centers in neighborhoods of vastly different socioeconomic climates/conditions. The prolific nature of the chain allows the effects of wealth on both real and perceived second-hand consumption practices across consumption spaces to be observed in sites that conform to a relatively uniform organizational and aesthetic scheme (La Ferla 2009). Thus, observing spatial,
organizational, and behavioral differences across Goodwill locations in
demographically disparate neighborhoods may help to elucidate the ways in which
socioeconomic factors characterize the consumer-producer relations in otherwise
intentionally homogenized commercial spaces. Any departures from the essential
Goodwill “look” may be viewed as an intentional move on the part of the brand to
reflect the desires, motivations, or distinctive attributes of the people who shop there.

Goodwill stores, just like any other consumer space in which a similar study
could be undertaken, are by no means neutral spaces in themselves. Quite to the
contrary, the rich and lengthy history of the Goodwill Organization has endowed
these commercial spaces with an array of associations, relations, and values that
cannot be overlooked. Rather than imply by omission that it is a space devoid of
meanings and messages, I shall first discuss the evolution of the Goodwill
organization and business model as well as the nature of the organization today.

**Goodwill: A Brief History**

Goodwill was founded at the turn of the twentieth century in Boston’s
“poverty and vice-ridden” industrial South End by Methodist Minister and
Progressive Era activist Edgar J. Helms (Lewis 1977:18). Goodwill originally
evolved from programs run out of Helms’ church, Morgan Chapel, which in the late
nineteenth century began offering nursery programs for working mothers, evening
skills training courses for adults, and later job-placement programs for the South
End’s many unemployed. All if this, of course, was entrenched in Bible study
programs for the children and Saturday evening “temperance lectures” for the “bums”
who might otherwise spend their weekly earnings on spirits and gambling (Lewis
The church educational programs were aimed just as much, if not more, at building character as they were aimed at providing vocational training and access to employment (Lewis 1977: 59).

In John Fulton Lewis’ (1977) adulatory chronicling of the charitable organization’s founding and development, he wrote effusively of the organization’s Christianity-infused goals, most notably eradicating the South End of “vice lords” and “harlots,” to be replaced by “respectable tenants” of “reputable background and inclination” (p. 56). In his own writings, Helms emphasized the religious origins of the self-cultivating moral actor narrative that he espoused: “The great significance of Christianity lies in its practical relation to life… it insists that [man] act as a reputable and responsible member of human society” (Lewis 1977:62). In Helms’ esteem, the deserving poor were those Protestant Ethic adherents desiring self-improvement and moral cultivation through work. Goodwill’s mission was therefore to “give any who were willing to work, regardless of handicap or circumstance, ‘a chance, not charity’” (Lewis 1977:68).

Like many Progressive Era organizations, Goodwill Industries was founded on the principle of self-empowerment through employment. Although Goodwill no longer has a church affiliation, it still retains its cores values, relying heavily on the motto “Believe in the Power of Work” in its promotional materials. Today, Goodwill charitable efforts are focused on providing skills training and job-seeking assistance for consistently underemployed demographics such as youth, seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, and those with criminal backgrounds (Goodwill Industries 2014).
While its philanthropic goals have remained relatively unchanged since the inception of the organization in 1902, the commercial side of the organization has expanded massively over the last few decades. In 2012 alone, Goodwill opened over two hundred new stores in the United States and Canada bringing the total number of North American outlets to 2,800 (Goodwill Industries International Annual Report 2012) According to the National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops (NARTS), Goodwill Industries experienced a sixty-seven percent increase in sales from 2001 to 2007. A 2007 article on the globalization of second-hand trade cited Goodwill profits as exceeding $1.8 billion in 2006 (Claudio 2007:452). This number had increased to $2.69 billion by 2010 (NARTS Industry Statistics and Trends 2010), and saw another fifteen percent increase in sales over the course of 2012 bringing the annual sales revenue to an astounding $3.5 billion (Goodwill Industries International Annual Report 2012).

My Study Sites

The New York City Goodwill sites chosen for this study are located in neighborhoods whose populations differ markedly in terms of affluence. The Goodwill on 122nd street and Third Avenue is located in an East Harlem neighborhood with a median household income of $26,214. Median rent in this neighborhood is $658 per month. In 2012, unemployment stood at 13.1% and only 45.3% of the 18 to 24-year-old population had attained or was in the process of attaining a bachelors or associate’s degree. 35.1% of families were living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau 2008-2012).
In stark contrast to this demographic portrait, just five-miles downtown the Gramercy Goodwill on 23rd street is situated in a very different socioeconomic landscape. The store is located in a ZIP code with a median household income of $95,556. Median rent for a housing unit in this area is upwards of $2,000. The neighborhood has an unemployment rate of 8.1%, and 77.4% of the 18 to 24-year-olds residing around the store were either in the process of or had already achieved a degree in higher education. Only 5.2% of the families in this neighborhood live below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau 2008-2012).

The data collected at these two locations was highly informative when determining the role of wealth and class in the construction of second-hand commercial spaces and the consumer narratives that are assembled within them. In a discussion towards the end of the chapter I will compare both of these sites to the Middletown Goodwill location in order to better highlight what I perceive to be important social mechanisms at work within the organization itself.

The Goodwill “Look”

The first impression upon walking into both New York Goodwill stores observed in this study was that despite obvious spatial differences they were nothing if not recognizable in their highly cultivated, aggressively uniform aesthetic. The East Harlem Goodwill resides in a standalone cement structure in the middle of a city block. It is a mammoth retail space, with three sprawling floors covering 25,191 square feet (New York City Department of Finance). The Gramercy store is unassuming and small by comparison. Wedged between a podiatry center and the more high-end City Opera Thrift Shop, the 23rd street Goodwill occupies the first
floor of a residential building – and only part of it, at that. However both of these Goodwill outlets, and presumably many more like it, are alike in their rigorous organizational schemes, bright and open interiors, and easily navigable spaces. The design of Goodwill emphatically stresses three principles: cleanliness, orderliness, and cohesiveness.

The bright fluorescent lighting, large open spaces, grey tiled floors, and white painted walls with vividly colored accents give the environment at Goodwill an almost sterile feeling, perhaps designed to combat the notion that reusable goods are dirty or tainted. Upon first glance it would be hard to fathom that such a contaminant could exist in this exceedingly sanitary space. The lack of partitions also makes the departments on each floor easily locatable. The department labels are painted in large lettering on the walls, or on signs hanging from the ceiling. At the Harlem location, all written materials are translated into both English and Spanish, and pricing charts are hung from the ceiling on large blue poster boards. Within each clothing department, most garments are displayed on long parallel clothing racks evenly spaced across the width of the store. All employees and personnel in Goodwill stores wear some sort of uniform, whether it be an insignia-bearing polo, vest, or t-shirt. All of these aesthetic devices are presumably employed to highlight a level of organization and professionalism in the establishment reminiscent of a mainstream department store.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the store tacitly pledges its trustworthiness and reliability in an industry struggles with information deficiencies and questionable assurances. Although consumers may not know where the goods
they purchase come from, they can take comfort in knowing that such an organized enterprise is responsible for deciding which items are and are not safe or desirable for re-consumption. Furthermore, the easy navigability enables consumer efficiency in a commercial arena often plagued by inconsistencies and labor-intensive shopping requirements. Goodwill attempts to make it as easy as possible for the customer to find what they are looking for and to view the full selection of such items within a single section of the store. In this sense it is much more akin to a traditional retail outlet and less like second-hand stores which seem purposefully haphazard or convoluted.

The color-coordinated rather than size-coordinated approach to apparel organization is perhaps the only considerable divergence from the efficiency-oriented structure of the stores. In this respect, a choice is made to accentuate cohesion and selection over accessibility. Organizing by size would facilitate a more directed shopping experience (bargain basement outlets often employ such a strategy), but would also highlight the incoherency of the merchandise and detract from the overall aesthetic. Organizing items by color initially obscures the lack of homogeneity in the merchandise, and gives off the impression of regularity and unity among items.

Several second-hand consumption theorists have noted similar tendencies within certain second-hand spaces, and particularly charity shops, to mimic the business models and outward features of first-hand retailers. Julie Ann Raulli (2005) referred to this trend as “upscaling”: the making-over of second-hand venues to more closely approximate the appearance of a higher-end retail department store (p. 11). Raulli (2005) argues that upscaling is largely responsible for “pull[ing] many middle
and upper-middle income shoppers into thrift establishments” (p. 11). Further, this appeal to a broader, wealthier consumer base is by no means an unintended side effect of the spatial modifications taking place: “‘Doing better’ to attract more customers, especially middle-class professionals, is central to the transformations taking place within the thrift industry” (Raulli 2005:74).

While this chapter will delve further into both subtle and overt references to class and socioeconomic status within Goodwill locations, as they certainly exist, I am wary of including all aesthetic and organizational changes in these stores under the umbrella term “upscaling.” Such a characterization conflates “professionalization,” as Gregson and Crewe (2003) refer to it, with status, which is not always or even frequently the case. Goodwill does not engage in many of the value or status-augmentation strategies that other stores are prone to utilize, nor does it display mastery of a more nuanced consumer-seller discourse that exists in these venues. Instead, Goodwill relies on the most widely-recognizable spatial narrative available, that of the traditional department store. The visual allusions to this classic retail space may seem obvious or even crude to the truly “cultured” consumer, well versed in the scripts of both mainstream and alternative consumption spaces. Relying on such an institutionalized commercial template renders these spaces comprehensible to the largest possible consumer audience, irrespective of class or cultural proficiency. The changes Raulli (2005) observed, then, may be just as much an attempt to retain lower and lower middle-class consumers who have an array of first-hand discount store alternatives (and might turn to these retail outlets if the
construction of second-hand spaces is made unrecognizable to them) as it is a endeavor to attract new affluent consumers.

In general, Goodwill’s attempts to echo the look of a department store inevitably, at times, serve to underscore areas in which it differs markedly from an actual department store. This dissonance is most noticeable in the 122nd street Goodwill. Many elements highlight the ways in which the Harlem Goodwill is not in fact a luxurious for-profit retail outlet: the high, exposed steel-paneled ceilings with hanging fluorescent tube lights; dangling cardboard signs; flimsy and utilitarian metal shelving units along the walls; mostly locked dressing rooms; cheap and highly conventional looking aesthetic of the painted walls; an ever out-of-service escalator and a wide steel-railed staircases; and one or two disheveled-looking mannequins in the windows. The 23rd street and Middletown stores do a marginally better job of cultivating the conventional retail outlet aesthetic. The ceilings are paneled with inlaid light fixtures and the dressing rooms are generally available to customers. Even so, the spaces have the distinctive air of “trying” to be something without necessary succeeding.

The look of the East Harlem Goodwill is particularly fascinating in this respect, as it highlights the way that commercial spaces, similar to consumers themselves, enact cultural scripts with varying levels of success. Certain elements of the 122nd store depart from uniform Goodwill design, seeming to suggest what the space might be if it weren’t constructed fit into an uncompromising aesthetic mold. Wall murals on the first and second floors (one depicting the history of Goodwill, and the other various neighborhood scenes) appear to be an attempt at giving the store a
culturally and community-situated appeal. However, it is such a jarring departure from all the other utilitarian elements of the space that its does little but to highlight the strangeness and arbitrariness of such an artistic endeavor on the back wall behind the shoe racks. The ultimate effect is confusing. It is not even entirely clear what the organizers of the space are trying to convey with these choices.

Gregson and Crewe (2003) are also critical of the efficacy of schemes employed by British charity shops to “emulate practices in the first-cycle… seek[ing] simultaneously to constitute their shops as examples of ‘proper shops’ and to erase the spatial distinctions between first and second-cycle retailing that both retro retailing and, in a very different way, car boot sales for example rest on” (p. 44). Unlike Raulli (2005), Gregson and Crewe (2003) believe that vying for first-hand status ultimately does a disservice to these stores because they effectively lose their ability to legitimately assert value as a function of distance from the first-hand market. In the absence of other options, these outlets must remain competitive in terms of pricing, which becomes more difficult as discount establishments begin to creep up on Goodwill’s low prices. This is a fair point, and admittedly one that I have grappled with considerably in this study. First, I will say that second-hand charity shops will always have an edge over discounters due the quality of goods they may be capable of offering. Mainly though, Gregson and Crewe’s (2003) argument fails to grasp what seems to be apparent in my study: that the primary objective of charity shops such as Goodwill is to amass the largest possible consumer base, rather than the most commercially literate consumer base. To this end, Goodwill succeeds by identifying the lowest common denominator among their highly differentiated
clientele: a desire for good deals and a desire for cleanliness – two demands that seem to apply universally for consumers in this study. As such, I’m not entirely sure the success or failure to imitate first-hand retailers matters, insofar as value creation is concerned.

Comparing Consumer Narratives: East Harlem vs. Gramercy Locations

A close inspection of the Goodwill “look” demonstrated the clear intentionality and goals embedded in the orchestration of these spaces. While this may help predict how consumers engage in these spaces and interpret their options therein, only the accounts of the consumers themselves can provide insight into the nuanced incentive structures that motivate them from the time they enter a retail space until the moment they leave. The following section illuminates the varying rhetoric employed by consumers in the East Harlem and Gramercy Goodwills to characterize their second-hand consumption habits, aspirations, and material desires.

*East Harlem Goodwill*

In response to my first question, on why consumers chose to come to Goodwill on the day in question, a vast majority of interviewees explicitly stated that they came in just to “browse” or that they come to Goodwill frequently for broad unspecified purposes. Dean, a middle-aged man browsing through men’s shirts, stated: “I come here when there’s something missing in my wardrobe and I want a good price.” However, when asked how frequently he shops at Goodwill he answered with an unequivocal “once every two weeks,” indicating that the shopping occurs habitually, and presumably (at times) without the prompting of a missing wardrobe item. Most interview subjects said they lived or worked in the neighborhood of the
Goodwill they were found shopping in, and at least four had stopped in without any previous plan to do so. Only a four of the participants came to Goodwill on the day in question to fulfill material requirements, and two of them were shopping in a professional capacity.

The motivations behind such pervasive consumer dedication, as exhibited by Dean* and many other frequent patrons of the East Harlem Goodwill, fell into various categories. When asked to state their number one reason for shopping in Goodwill or similar second-hand venues, most interview subjects failed to choose just one. Two thirds of the interview subjects gave “bargain hunting,” “cheap prices,” “saving money” or some variation of an economic imperative as at least one of their primary incentives for shopping at Goodwill. Nearly half isolated it as the singular reason for expending their consumer energies at Goodwill. Five of the Harlem location interviewees also cited the unique and interesting quality of the items a as compelling motivation for thrift shopping, although only one participant offered this as his singular greatest motivator. Tara, a young woman in the house wares section, stated that “fashion” was one of the major reasons she shopped at Goodwill. However, of all of the East Harlem store interviewees, only Heidi, a middle-aged woman browsing shelves of knick-knacks on the lower level, explicitly mentioned fun as a primary motivator when she told me that “finding a deal is the fun of it.”

Further, when framing their money-saving behaviors and discussing the items they coveted in these endeavors, many of the participants indicated that they sought to purchase items they may not otherwise be able to afford. Both Dean and Nell, an

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* All names in this portion of the study have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the interview subjects.
elderly woman, showed me specific features of the items they intended to purchase, such as brand name, fabric quality, and garment construction, that would have likely made them too expensive to purchase on the mainstream market. Dean boasted: “See, this is a wool jacket, with a silk lining in good condition. And it’s normally $10 here but today it’s going to be $6.50… that’s a good find.” Lena defined great finds as, “vintage items, [or] something that’s worth a lot or that I might not be able to afford otherwise.” Goodwill enabled these consumers to purchase items of a quality that would not have been available in their price range on a traditional market. These forms of visible consumption are entrenched in bodies of culturally-situated knowledge about brands, materials, and fashions. My study does not quite disprove studies that link second-hand consumption with “a refusal to adopt conspicuous behavior” (Guiot and Roux 2010:392); however it provides ample evidence to contest it. Within the rhetoric of money-saving and bargain hunting is the implication that these items are associated with a more affluent lifestyle that would be unattainable outside the context of the resale market. There is an unmistakable empowerment narrative at work here, in addition to evidence of symbolic consumption.

**Gramercy Goodwill**

At the Gramercy Goodwill, a wider range of vocalized consumer motivations presented themselves than at the Harlem Goodwill. Fewer than half of the interview subjects mentioned prices or saving money as a primary incentive for shopping at Goodwill. Four consumers indicated that it was the major reason they shopped at Goodwill, however the rhetoric used in these cases was often quite different from those at the Harlem location. Noa, a college freshman, said that she usually came to
Goodwill when she needed something “for cheaper than at a regular store,” but then elaborated that this mostly included “scene stuff… something for a costume, when I don’t want to spend a lot of money ‘cause I’m only going to use it once.” Simone, another young interviewee, laughed when I asked for her number one reason for thrift shopping, responding: “To waste lots of money on cheap stuff!” Mike, an elderly man, framed his answer to the same question as such: “To find something special, that was once very expensive.”

Unlike Dean, who took pride in finding a new integral item for his wardrobe at an affordable price, or Lena who discussed her desire to find things she would not be able to afford on the mainstream market, Noa and Simone discussed their savings in more trivial terms. Noa sought out cheaply priced items she knew she would dispose of, and Simone characterized her bargain-seeking behaviors as an act of frivolity; wasting money on “stuff” rather than saving money on items she needed or even actively desired. There is a degree of affluence implied by the ability to dispose of items, or simply waste money. Mike, construed his shopping endeavors as treasure hunt rather than an economic necessity; instead of looking for things that are cheap, he desired items that used to be the most expensive, which connotes a level of cultural elitism.

Among the other interviewees at the Gramercy Goodwill, three shoppers identified on of their goals as finding valuable designer items to “flip” (i.e. resell for a profit). Similar to Dean, William – a young man perusing the men’s shirts section – showed me the items in his hands and said “Here I’m about to get two to three J. Crewe shirts for five dollars a piece. I love New York thrift shopping because it has
cheap designer clothes.” Whether William intended to keep these shirts for himself or resell them (as he admitted to sometimes doing) was unclear, but the narrative he constructs around this consumption experience is far-removed from Dean’s.

William’s priority seems to be less about maximizing value in terms of product quality, and more about exercising the necessary cultural capital to recognize the cast-offs of the wealthy. Joanna, a vintage dealer, relayed a similar narrative, calling a good find “something vintage – thirty, forty years old, or older.” The criteria these purveyors use to determine quality is more discerning than that of Dean, Nell, and Lena, who referenced general fabrics, brands, and undefined notions of “vintage,” rather than specific designers or eras. All of them seek to maximize value, but they do so with different standards manifesting from differences in accrued cultural capital.

The frequency with which those seeking high-end vintage and designer apparel were encountered at the Gramercy Goodwill relative to the Harlem Goodwill is revealing of merchandise one can expect to find in these outlets. William was very attuned to the way that socioeconomic conditions impact the quality of inventory at different thrift store locations: “I was in Savannah recently, and I was expecting the thrift shopping to be great but it wasn’t at all. I was really disappointed – but, you know, they still haven’t recovered from the recession, it’s not a city with a lot of money. How good a thrift shop is really depends on how wealthy an area is. Rich people equals good thrifting.” Especially in donation-based second-hand markets, the goods in the store, to an extent, reflect the quality of items in the homes of people living in the area. There is a causal link that may be proposed between the affluence
of the donators and the affluence of the consumers, irrespective of whether the consumers live in the neighborhood.

With the exception of four participants, (Mohammed, Calvin - the only interview subject to state that he always came to Goodwill for a specific reason, in order “to supply a need,” and two costume designers) most of the consumers at the Gramercy store characterized thrift shopping as a leisure activity of some sort. Maggie, a woman in her twenties cited “fun” as her number one reason for shopping at Goodwill, and Lisa, a Swedish professor on sabbatical admitted that she primarily comes to Goodwill because she “has a lot of time on her hands.” Even when monetary savings were discussed, they were framed less in terms of necessity and more in terms of reduced-guilt excess or access to luxury indulgences.

Contrary to my expectations, none of the young shoppers I spoke to at the Gramercy location mentioned individuality or uniqueness as a main reason for pursuing second-hand modes of consumption, and only three consumers mentioned these factors at all when discussing their motivations for shopping second-hand. Perhaps the assertion of individuality through style is so obvious among youth today as to not need explicit vocalization. Despite this gap in my data, I still believe that the ambitious individualists have a discernable presence in second-hand markets. It is very possible that this is a case in which the non-neutral character of the space biases the results. Due to the nature of Goodwill as a low-priced charity shop, capturing value may tend to take precedence over capturing difference within the consumption narratives (Gregson and Crewe 2003). “Difference” value may fail to come up as
frequently as it would in, say, in a high-end vintage store capitalizing on such
narratives.

**Goodwill Shopping and Displays of Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu ([1986] 1997) argued in *The Forms of Capital* that cultural capital
entails not only purchasing the right items but in knowing how to use them according
to class values. As the last section showed, Goodwill creates a context in which
people of all socioeconomic backgrounds can be seen buying the “right” things. Such
a level playing field also serves to draw out distinctions between economic capital
and cultural capital in a way that few other consumer spaces can. According to
Bourdieu ([1986] 1997), the inability of members of lower classes to become literate
in social codes and to amass forms of non-economic capital impedes their
achievement in societal institutions. Without knowing what objects to consume, or
how to properly display them, it is difficult to succeed in institutions structured
around the dominant preferences of the elite (Bourdieu [1986] 1997). The ways in
which people consume differently in Goodwill, or construct varying narratives around
their consumption, may be a product of differing cultural capital. In “Beyond the
High Street and the Mall,” Gregson and Crewe (1994) note that middle class women
can afford to cultivate a “shabby chic” second-hand look, because they “possess the
cultural capital to enable them to risk looking poor” (p. 265). Those with enough
cultural cachet to make dressing down look like a choice, through a visual strategies
such as pairing second-hand garments with expensive first-hand retail items, may
flaunt the nature of their second-hand purchases rather than obscuring them. Brooks (2000) would probably categorize these stylistic choices as “Bobo” chic.

The desire to cultivate a “shabby chic” aesthetic was never overtly stated in any of my interview, but the desire to obscure the origin of second-hand purchases did arise in several of my interviews at the East Harlem Goodwill. Tara stated that she would not purchase anything in a second-hand store that looked like it has been “worn or used.” Alicia, another young woman, explained to me: “Some people are against buying second hand because they think there's something wrong with it, but I just throw it in the wash and it's as good as new. I'm buying things cheaper and you can't tell, I look just as good as anyone else.” Although Alicia isn’t uncomfortable with her decision to consume second-hand, her acceptance of pre-owned goods is conditional on her ability to make it look “good as new.” Gregson and Crewe’s (1994) assertion that second-hand retailers hold less of an allure for young working-class women (who do not feel they can afford to exhibit any “shableness” in their appearance) captures a reality without necessarily being true. This study clearly indicated that Goodwill holds an appeal for consumers of all wide variety of ages, races, and income levels; however conceptions of desirable and undesirable items may differ. The Bobo aesthetic is not sought after by everyone. On the contrary, Tara and Alicia would likely reject items for which previous signs of use cannot be erased. This is particularly important with respect to clothing, because clothes are the most widely-seen material manifestations of the identities people hope to project to society.

Williams and Windebank’s (2002) work provides a fuller portrait of low-income consumers outside of second-hand apparel markets that this study fails to
capture. In a survey of residents in low-income neighborhoods of two English cities, they found that clothing was one of the items least likely to be purchased second-hand among the working poor. For those that did engage in second-hand clothes purchasing, few viewed it “as a long-term strategy. They perceive it as a sign that they are no longer capable of getting by and of their inability to be like everybody else” (Williams and Windebank 2002:209). For these groups, shopping for new items in “bargain basements” might even be preferable to buying highly visible items, like clothing, second hand.

The Power of Pricing

Differences in pricing at the two Goodwill locations were admittedly difficult to perceive. The price-hiking mechanisms, when employed, are subtler than expected, and might not have been noticeable at all without same-day visits of both retail sites. For the most part, both stores have the same base-level prices listed on the poster boards that hang from the ceiling. Prices according to the chart ranged from $2.99 for men’s t-shirts to $19.99 for men’s suits, with most men and women’s garments costing between $4.99 and $7.99. However, browsing through the racks reveals a different story. For the most part, items at the 122nd street store tend to be priced according to the signs. Notable exceptions are new or designer items. At the Gramercy store, it is fairly common to see garments with individual price tags. Items without formally listed prices, such as ties, also tend to be more expensive at the Gramercy location. Even the sales in each store are slightly different. On one such
occasion both Goodwills were having Martin Luther King Day sale, with 45% price reductions at the Harlem compared to 35% at the Gramercy store.

There are evidently different pricing schemes at work in these two locations, although they are not readily apparent on pricing charts. The pricing differences in these locations could simply be a difference in operational costs for the two venues, although it would be difficult to believe that the rent and upkeep costs of the 23rd street location is greater than that of the vast Harlem space, even with prices adjusted for relative property values. The higher prices could also be attributed to the greater incidence of high-end designer goods at the 23rd street store. A recent *New York Times* article on the Goodwill rising popularity revealed that this is likely the case, and through no lack of awareness or intentionality on the part of Goodwill:

> The group has [not] abandoned its low-income customers… Selective price-hikes, however, support the non-profit’s mission… Before donations are shipped to different stores, they are photographed. “If something catches our eye — say an Armani button-down shirt — it’s going to head down to one of our better boutiques,” [a spokesman] said. (La Ferla 2009)

This same article offhandedly notes at the end: “the Goodwill store on Third Avenue and East 122nd Street in Manhattan has yet to segregate designer brands like some of its sister shops” (La Ferla 2009). Goodwill seems to assert more agency in terms of inventory cultivation the average consumer may realize. The pricing reveals a significant manipulation in terms of merchandise placement, that reveals the equal importance of donator and consumer affluence in determining the character of the store itself. In broadening the scope of its consumer appeal, Goodwill has employed unobtrusive ways of adapting to consumer groups of varying financial means.
The Goodwill Identity: A Site-Specific Comparison

Goodwill’s tactics may become somewhat less innocuous when this hyperawareness of ranging consumer audiences begins to influence the interplay between its commercial and philanthropic goals. Perhaps the most glaringly apparent difference between the Goodwills I observed was the way they framed the organization’s charitable mission. In the East Harlem Goodwill a mission to “enhance the quality and dignity of life for individuals, families, and communities” through “the power of work” is printed in large letters on the wall right next to the entrance, under photographs of Goodwill employees engaged in various work activities. Fervent declarations and platitudes run along the walls of the store, proclaiming things like:

“Believe in the Power of Work! Cree en el poder del trabajo!”
“Serving people since 1902! Sirviendo la comunidad desde 1902!”
“Helping create a better community! Ayudando a crear una mejor comunidad!”
“Good Prices… Good Cause… Goodwill!”

The mural on the back wall of the store is dedicated, it seems, to the glorification of labor. On the far left is a black and white portrait founder Edgar Helms’ smiling visage. Workers in various eras are interspersed with what appears to be depictions of goodwill stores through the ages. A crowd of workers stands in front of a factory-like building in one section. In another portion of the wall-painting two men toil under the benevolent gaze of a woman with a halo bearing the phrase “Goodwill Industries.” One cartoonish illustration shows a man as the iconic vision of the “laborer” – with boots, overalls, gloves, a neckerchief, cap, and pencil tucked behind his ear – heading towards a Goodwill store in a wheelchair. As the mural
progresses, it opens up to a blue sky with several more intricate portraits of men and women in various styles of professional attire surrounding different Goodwill buildings. All the way on the right is the Goodwill logo next to an American flag. The mural makes depicts men and women of all ages and races, all brought together by their engagement in the uplifting exercise of work.

The 23rd street Goodwill is much less oppressive in its value-laden promotional schemes. While there are some quotes and phrases that line the walls, they are often partially hidden behind shelving units or are easily overlooked due to their small print. The rhetoric used is also very different. Rather than using directives or proclamations, the phrases here are framed as the private values and goals of the organization: “Learning: We challenge each other to strive for excellence and continually learn,” and “Empowerment: Only Goodwill unites caring and enterprise to empower people to build communities that work” are the two of note. There is no effort to implicate the consumer in these statements; the “we” of Goodwill is distinct from you and me. Tonally, these statements are relatively neutral. They relay information rather than commands. Further the phrasing of these statements aims at communicating a complexity of thought to a presumably literate, intellectually capable audience. The wording used in the Harlem Goodwill seems condescending and forceful comparatively, to say nothing of the visuals.

By total contrast, the Goodwill in Middletown CT – a part of the Easter Seals Goodwill network rather than the Goodwill Industries of Greater New York – makes no moralistic or ideological overtures towards its consumers. The mission statement in this store simply says: “The mission of Goodwill is to enhance employment
opportunities and the quality of life for people with disabilities and other special needs.” The consumers reading this statement is not necessarily being asked to take on a role in this narrative, and if they are it is as the helper rather than the one being helped. Signs hanging in the store illustrate the “Goodwill Donation Cycle” where: “1. Your donations generate… 2. Store sales that fund… 3. Employment programs to help… 4. People become more proud and independent.” The store provides a veritable flow chart to show how “I” the consumer am distinct from “him,” the man at the end of the chain who I am helping. I, as the consumer am not that person; I am a good four steps removed from that person – but I may contribute to a good cause by donating and purchasing at Goodwill.

In promoting its philanthropic goals, Goodwill makes a dangerous leap, from recognizing and responding to its different consumer bases to attaching value judgments to those populations. Whoever Goodwill believes the Harlem consumer to be, there is the tacit assumption that this person needs to be told to “Believe in the Power of Work!” while the Gramercy shopper and the Middletown shoppers do not. At this juncture the distinction between the commercial and moral interests of the organization become murky, perhaps illuminating a problem at the core of charity shop establishments.

**Conclusion**

As homogenous and unchanging as Goodwill may seem upon first glance, it becomes more apparent with each new layer of analysis that under a façade of uniformity is a highly adaptable commercial framework unconstrained by the limitations of conventional markets. In a sense, Goodwill has turned the common
second-hand critique of inventory inconsistency on its head and reframed it as versatility. There is no fixed consumer-base for a brand that has no fixed products, and no consumer expectations other than the possibility of coming across “great find” – which will mean something entirely different for every shopper. While the commercial spaces that house Goodwill stores adhere to a high degree of conformity across locations, the inventory within each can vary drastically in terms of range and quality of available goods. This in turn impacts the consumers that patronize the store and the practices they engage in. The next chapter will evaluate these reuse practices, which have emerged through both the consumer and seller narratives, as potential environmentally sustainable modes of consumption.
Chapter 5


One of the major questions posed at the beginning of this study concerned the potential for second-hand markets as channels of sustainable consumption. The appeal of resale markets are quite obvious from a resource conservation perspective; after all, the energy and material inputs required to maintain second-hand commerce may seem negligible when compared to mainstream markets. The ReUse Development Organization states that practices such as second-hand consumption “keep materials out of the waste stream… reuse requires fewer resources, less energy, and less labor, compared to recycling, disposal, or the manufacture of new products from virgin materials” (ReUse Development Organization 2014). Depending on the venue and resale procedures, often the input costs for a second-hand item is limited to the energy and materials needed for sanitizing and transporting the item to a selling venue. In effect, second-hand markets create large-scale networks of reuse and recirculation of goods. These markets endow products with a second “life,” elongating their life spans before final disposal in a garbage dump or recycling plant.

Tim Cooper (2005), an advocate of slower consumption, argues that life extension strategies for products are necessary to combat the current “throwaway society” that many consumers in the United States currently operate under (p. 52). A culture of disposability affects not only consumer practices but also production standards, thus plaguing efforts towards a sustainable consumption ethic (Cooper...
Theoretically, the multi-lifecycle approach to commodities that second-hand markets facilitate could decelerate the pace of material and resource consumption.

Valerie Thomas (2003) agrees that, in theory, second-hand markets could eliminate much of the environmental impact for commodities with material and energy-intensive manufacturing costs. She also notes that the mutual dependency of first-hand and second-hand markets may prevent expanded second-hand markets from effectively diminishing consumption of new goods. As much as the consumer of resale goods may try to escape a culture of rapid obsolescence, the industry itself is dependent on the voluntary disposal of still-usable goods (Thomas 2003). The more quickly consumers on the mainstream market divest themselves of goods, the newer the items in second-hand stores are likely to be.

An intuitive notion of reacquisition as a low-impact mode of consumption may then be at odds with the realities of second-hand consumer behaviors. Gregson and Crewe (2003) certainly expressed their doubts that second-hand consumption has any significant impact on the overall resource-intensity of consumer behavior. Concerning is the notion that second-hand channels offer consumers the opportunity to buy more rather than an incentive to buy used goods over new ones. One of these modes I will call supplemental consumption and the other substitutive consumption.

In this chapter I seek to answer the following: When put into practice, does reuse offer a viable remedy to overconsumption? Under what conditions does second-hand commerce function best as a sustainable market, if such conditions exist?

To begin grappling with these questions of resource conservation potential in the second-hand commercial sphere, it is imperative to deconstruct the phenomenon I
have been referring to generally as “second-hand consumption.” Rather than conceptualizing second-hand consumption as a social phenomena that is comprehensively more or less sustainable in nature, it is perhaps more prudent to adopt Warde’s (2005) framework and approach it as a body of practices, each of which may claim or reject sustainable principles on its own grounds.

Both Warde (2005) and Douglas Holt (2012) provide compelling arguments for the efficacy, and even the necessity of this practice-oriented approach when attempting to grasp the real world implications of consumer culture. Warde (2005) framed consumption as a feature of a multitude of socially enacted practices, each of which endows the act of consuming with a contextually unique character. To address all consumption as a one coherent phenomenon, he argued, is a vast oversimplification of the huge array of behaviors situated within many different social performances. Consumption in itself is not so much a practice as it is a pivotal moment of acquisition in almost every other social practice.

Douglas Holt (2012), in his essay “Constructing Sustainable Consumption,” takes similar issue with the current body of work on sustainable consumption as Warde (2005) did with consumption theory as a whole. He challenges the “Ethical Values Paradigm” within sustainable consumption literature, which focuses primarily on the rehabilitation of consumer culture and on creating educated consumers with the right “values” (p. 238). This approach relies on the untenable assumption that “consumerism” is a singular “set of values that orients our lives around consumption” and inevitably results in unsustainable consumption (Holt 2012:238). The implication of this premise is that people acquire a fundamental belief system towards
consumption that applies across all types of market settings, when realistically most empirical evidence suggests that consumer values can shift dramatically depending on a variety of factors (such as the commodity or commercial space in question). Consequently, consumption should be addressed as a specific social behavior embedded in specific market structures. He proposes the “Market Construction Paradigm” as a more efficacious approach to promoting sustainable forms of consumption:

The market construction paradigm demonstrates that consumer culture is not a general force structuring consumer actions but, rather, is better understood as a skeletal metacultural logic – centered on channeling desires and identities through consumer choices and actions – that gets articulated in very different ways across different markets. (Holt 2012:240)

Within this paradigm the ethic surrounding consumption is a product of the unique conditions of different markets. No single “ethic” towards consumption is likely to emerge. The most effective way to broach the concept of sustainable consumption is to dissect the features of various markets and determine their compatibility with a conservation ethic.

This chapter examines various facets of the second-hand world that have come to light through my empirical research, and attempts to gauge the potential for environmental progress within each. Drawing on both Warde (2005) and Holt’s (2012) frameworks I will consider the observed norms and expectations that exist in different second-hand consumption markets and through diverse consumption practices. Such an account is perhaps best presented by referring back to the ideal consumer-types I identified in the introduction. Not all of these archetypes materialized in my study, but five certainly did: the collector, the enthusiast, the
need-driven consumer (who I will call the economical pragmatist), the bargain hunter, and the critical consumer. To claim that these categories are mutually exclusive would be an oversimplification; these designations are by no means an attempt to locate specific consumers within any single category. On the contrary, it is likely that individuals occupy different roles across spatial and material contexts. Each of these figures embodies a specific set of consumer practices and motivations that may help clarify the distinctions between sustainable and unsustainable second-hand consumption behaviors.

The Collector
The collector, though rarely encountered at Goodwill in the course of my research, was a figure that was highly familiar to all of the second-hand shop owners interviewed. A collector is a discerning buyer who specializes in acquiring a highly specific type of commodity, often made valuable by its age, historical significance, or limited availability on the market. This type of consumption occurs almost exclusively within the realm of rare goods, as part of the desirability of collector’s items comes from the difficulty in finding them.

The market for collectible items is largely one of wish fulfillment rather than need fulfillment. It is distinguished from other markets by its near total disregard for utility-value. The collectibles market is disassociated from ever-fluctuating needs and demands of the broader market. The items in highest demand in a collectors market can often be arbitrary and not indicative of any greater societal demand. As the owner of Estate Treasures explained in his characterization of this sector of the second-hand industry: “There’s collectors for everything, that’s the thing. No matter what you’ve got, there’s somebody that collects it.” The owner of Never Say Goodbye echoed this
sentiment, expressing her own shock when she learned that a Snoopy mug she
overlooked at a tag sale could have sold for three hundred dollars in a collector’s
market. All the second-hand sellers I spoke with attested to the fact that there is no
true market logic behind what commodities accrue value in this realm of second-hand
commerce. Particularly within an auction setting, all that is required for an item to
soar in value is two avid collectors who both seek to acquire it. Dale’s story of
selling an antique eel spearhead on E-Bay perfectly exemplifies the mentality within a
collectibles market:

Sometimes E-bay’s better, because people know what something is. Like I had this eel spearhead… The handle was broken off and it was really old, probably a hundred years old, maybe a little more. I did minimal research ‘cause I’m like, “Well, it’s cool, somebody will want this, how much should I sell it for?” I settled on sixty dollars… And it was in the shop for two months, nobody wanted to pay sixty dollars for it. I put it on E-bay and within a day the bid was up to ninety-seven dollars, and it was sold for a hundred and thirty dollars. So it was more than double what anybody was even thinking about paying me in the store. People wandering into the store say “Oh, that’s a cool thing,” but unless somebody comes in going “Oh wow, you have an eel spearhead!” [they won’t value it]…If they’re really collectors and they want something, Ebay will send them an e-mail when somebody lists what they’re looking for.

There are several moments in this story that reveal a great deal about the nature of the
collectibles market, and the motivations of the collectors who operate within them.

For one, the item under consideration is unlikely to have an equivalent counterpart on
the mainstream market. Due to technological progress and the antiquated nature of
the object, this tool was probably rendered obsolete long before it was resold on the
second-hand market. Furthermore, in the small likelihood that a fishing instrument
from over a century ago would still serve some practical purpose for the modern
(recreational or professional) fisherman, this particular eel spearhead is presumably
non-functional; it is missing its handle, making it effectively useless in regards to eel fishing. It must then be inferred that the buyer perceived some value in the item independent of its use-value. Additionally, the collector is willing to spend far more money on an item than the average consumer who does not possess the specific knowledge of the collector. Lastly, the collector is a highly sought-after customer due to his/her propensity for paying much larger sums for an item than the typical layman.

The practice of the collector is supplemental, non-substitutive, consumption in its purest form. In many instances the notion of a tradeoff inherent to substitutive consumption is not even applicable, because there is no comparable commodity on the mainstream market. Often, these items attain their very status by having a claim to uniqueness and exclusivity, borne out of scarcity or absence in the mainstream market. Further, these items are usually not purchased for a concrete pragmatic purpose. This negates any argument for a slower consumption principle, as the utility of the item is not prolonged with its lifespan. Even if collectible goods could be used towards some end, they are often intentionally preserved in their purchased state because retaining their condition is of paramount importance to collectors. Collectors are unique consumers consistently locate great value in a very specific, often arbitrary commodity.

The high worth accorded to collectible items may come from the recreational pleasure attained through the practice of collecting, a desire to indulge in nostalgia, or simply an innate emotional fulfillment derived from the act of ownership and display. Whatever the particular motivation of the individual collector, collecting in general is
a ritual of accumulation and of holding. It is a practice deeply rooted in the acquisition of material objects, and seems to have little basis in anything resembling a conservation ethic. Collectors may have little regard for the resources required to obtain an item, such as energy-intensive long distance transport. They are perhaps the most likely second-hand consumers to acquire goods from afar rather than locally.

It may be concluded that second-hand retailers specializing in collectibles do not have any claim to sustainability. Furthermore, if the collector is the ideal consumer for second-hand seller, as the shop owners in this study have intimated, what does that suggest about the nature of second-hand industry as a whole? It is difficult to reconcile this version of a second-hand market with a vision of sustainable re-use touted by ethical proponents of second-hand markets, particularly when this sector of the industry is considered by sellers to be the most profitable.

The Enthusiast
The second-hand enthusiast does not collect any particular kind of good, but enjoys pursuing alternative modes of consumption. This is an individual who may have an affinity for the “retro” aesthetic, a passion for the “treasure hunting” aspect of antique and vintage shopping, or a genuine appreciation of the histories attached to reacquired objects. These consumers are more concerned with finding something “fantastic” and “unique” than with finding a good deal. Several of these types of consumers were encountered during my consumer interviews, most notably Andy, a photography stylist who proclaimed to love shopping in all types of second-hand outlets for unique and vintage items. He said of his purchasing preferences: “I look for stuff of good quality. Interesting styles or fabrics… of course, vintage is always great. It doesn't matter the price, even if it's expensive - because you know you're
getting a good deal for what it is. Really, it's about the quality.” The second-hand enthusiast, like Andy, may be willing to spend more money to acquire an item he/she considers truly special.

All notions of environmental activism aside, these consumers may choose to patronize second-hand outlets over first-hand outlets out of personal preference and consequently engage in forms of substitutive consumption. Once second-hand shopping begins to take on the character of a hobby, the sustainable potential within this practice is to some extent undermined. The recreational shopper who patronizes second-hand outlets for fun irrespective material need may be inclined to engage in supplemental consumption. Dale noted this behavior among some of his customer: “Some people just wander through, and they tell you like ‘I don’t know, I’m just waiting for something to catch my eye… I have no idea why I’m here, or what I’m looking for, but when I see it I’ll know.’” Ed said of the enthusiasts who frequent Estate Treasures: “They’ll come in and just spend hours, and just look at everything. They’ll be in here once a week or once every two weeks, and they love looking through stuff.” Although recreational consumers may not need to purchase something each time they enter a second-hand space, the framing of consumption as leisure detracts from a conservation ethic. It sanctions purchasing behaviors that satisfy recreational desires (exclusive of need or use-value of a product), and promotes the habitual patronage of commercial outlets.

Still, if shopping as entertainment or pastime is a feature of contemporary capitalist society that is unlikely to recede in the near future, then the second-hand enthusiast may have a smaller ecological footprint than his/her leisure-oriented
counterpart on the first-hand market. Further, the behavior of the second-hand enthusiast may well help to promote a “slower consumption” by instilling products with multiple lifecycles and implicitly fostering a consumer preference for goods that will survive long enough to become “retro.” As I have relatively little evidence to analyze with respect to this type of consumer, I will leave these ideas as conjecture.

The Economical Pragmatist

The economical pragmatist, also referred to as the “necessary reacquirer” by Pierce and Paulos (2011:2388), is the consumer who pursues second-hand avenues of consumption out of economic necessity. This mode of consumption is distinct from bargain-seeking behavior in that financially constrained shoppers might prefer to make their purchases on the first-hand market and do not necessarily derive pleasure from the act of saving money. Restricted financial resources compel these consumers to purchase second-hand due to the prohibitive cost of new items or the poor quality of new items that they would be able to afford. Tara, Alicia, Noa, and Calvin from the previous chapter are all examples of the financially restricted shopper. None of them had a particular affinity for second-hand consumption as an ideology or recreational practice. Rather, they sought out second-hand consumption sites when presented with a particular material need that monetary costs prevent them from meeting on the first-hand market, such as, in Alicia’s case, a formal dress for an upcoming event.

These purchasing behaviors are perhaps most visible in markets for traditionally pricier goods, particularly in the current retail landscape, where bargain basement and discount department stores abound. While first-hand outlets for discount clothing and shoes provide a viable alternative for consumers with an
aversion to resale consumption, second-hand outlets for items such as furniture and large household appliances still manage to greatly underprice most mainstream retailers. The lower per-unit cost of clothing could explain why eighty percent of the low-income consumers in Williams and Windebank’s (2002) study could afford to purchase their clothing new, while only fifty-eight percent of surveyed consumers had been able to purchase their last piece of furniture or their refrigerator through first-cycle consumption (p. 505).

Two of the shop owners interviewed in this study experienced frequent dealings with this type of economically motivated shopper. Due to Ed’s multi-faceted business as a cleanout and moving service as well as an estate sales purveyor, Estate Treasures deals largely in the type of costlier household items that need-driven buyers often seek out. Over half of the massive warehouse space Estate Treasures occupies is dedicated to the sale of commodities such as furniture, large and small household appliances (ranging from stove tops to vacuum cleaners), electronics, and homecare medical equipment. Ed spent a significant portion of the interview relaying stories of consumers with limited means who have come to him for all manner of need-based purchases, from couches to prosthetic limbs.

Economically motivated consumption is not relegated to low-income consumers, though this demographic might constitute a large portion of economic pragmatists. Faith discussed how changing economic circumstances in the United States have impacted the perspective of her customers: “With recessions and the way things are going in our country, about the last thing people want is more, more. They don’t want the common things. If they’re gonna buy something, they’re gonna love it.
And they’re gonna need it.” Faith’s claim that people “want” less during hard economic times is suspect, but her portrayal of attitudinal changes in response to shifting financial circumstances is revealing. Even the most thrift-conscious patrons of Never Say Goodbye are unlikely to be destitute, yet she claims there is a tendency towards more substitutive forms of consumption when financial restrictions become a key factor in the decision-making process. She implies that within such a context her business gains a competitive edge, because consumer choices are made more deliberately, and a higher premium is put on the uniqueness or better quality of antique items. Within mid-to-low price ranges, the items offered via alternative second-hand consumption channels might effectively compete with mass-produced or shoddily constructed items at comparable costs in the mainstream market.

Economically-motivated practices are most closely linked to substitutive rather than supplemental consumer choices in second-hand spheres, even when ethical concerns are not at play. These consumers often make purchases on the second-hand market in place of some equivalent item that they have expressed a desire for on the first-hand market. It is noteworthy that certain commodity markets lend themselves to substitutive consumption more naturally than others, and that these markets overlap a great deal with markets heavily patronized by need-driven consumers. Both societal notions of how the home is structured and practical spatial constraints dictate the ways in which household goods are placed in the home and in what quantity. There are standards for how many fridges, televisions, or washing machines one household may reasonably own. Transgressing these norms (by, for instance, having personal mini-fridges for every occupant of a house) appears absurd
and wasteful. There are functional limitations on most household appliances, electronics, and furniture. Apparel, by contrast, is much more easily accumulated. For commodity markets where there are typical, fixed per capita or per household consumption quantities, it can be concluded that a purchase on the second-hand market is made instead of rather than in addition to an equivalent good on the first-hand market.

The potential for resource conservation lays not only in the behavioral patterns and incentive structures of the consumers, but in the complementary characteristics of the commodity markets they patronize. Both the consumer practice and the market construction make the second-hand market a viable space for consuming a full range of commodities as substitutes for new commodities. One area of concern here is the relative energy efficiency of new versus old goods for certain items. With this exception, thoughtful substitution-oriented consumption is perhaps the version second-hand consumption best suited to a resource conservation ethic.

Yet, as we have seen in previous chapter, the second-hand market for complex, high cost goods patronized most frequently by low-income consumers is rife with barriers. Williams and Windebank’s (2002) study revealed that these disenfranchised consumers often feel compelled to consume through second-hand channels that lack sufficient information structures or safety nets to protect against fraudulence. As I will discuss toward the end of the chapter, there are several ways these market failures might be addressed.

**The Bargain Hunter**

Although bargain-hunters may appear similar to the economical pragmatist in their money-saving motivations, the consumption practices they engage in are akin to
that of the enthusiast as they are primarily recreationally driven. The rhetoric employed by bargain-hunters to frame their consumption habits is different that of the shopper need-driven shopper. This is not to say that bargain-seeking consumers might not face the same financial circumstances as the restricted shoppers. On the contrary, the bargain-shopping ethos demonstrates the ways in which similar socioeconomic circumstances can manifest in distinctive consumption practices within second-hand spaces. Bardhi and Arnould (2005) capture the merged economic and recreational motivation of the bargain-hunter as such: “shoppers turn thrift shopping, which is ostensibly an economic shopping context, into a hedonic context in which they can indulge their fantasies and pursue surprise and the unexpected” (p. 232). Financially restricted consumers are not necessarily destined to consume sustainably by virtue of their smaller bank accounts; rather, they may be just as likely as the enthusiast to engage in practices of supplemental accumulation.

The vast majority of the interview subjects in my study patronized Goodwill stores in similarly frequent and casual manners, often times with the intention of coming upon a “good deal.” Bargain hunting, for many of the consumers, was closely linked with recreational browsing behaviors. Seventy-two percent of those interviewed said they came to Goodwill often, and twenty percent specified that they came at least once every two weeks. All but two of the consumers who visited

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4 Practices like generalized recreational browsing are particularly difficult to evaluate within the limited scope of this study. All brick-and-mortar institutions facilitate recreational browsing behaviors to varying degrees. As all the sites in this analysis are located within fixed commercial properties there is potential for sample bias with regards to the frequency with which such behaviors appeared among my consumer subjects. A study of online second-hand retail platforms may generate different results, as search-term based shopping practices could promote narrower, more goal-oriented consumer behaviors – even while making it drastically easier to satisfy every whim and passing material desire that may arise. Within this context it might be fruitful to do a more in-depth comparative study of in-store versus online second-hand consumption behaviors.
Goodwill habitually also discussed engaging in bargain-seeking behaviors, with some directly linking the two phenomena. One of these consumers, Alan, explained his shopping routine to me as such: “I usually come to find bargains, and because I like vintage fabrics you can't find anywhere else. I’ve been coming every Saturday, for as long as I can remember, because they always get new stuff and I want to get the first pick of everything to find the best stuff.” In this excerpt, Alan causally links his regular patronage of Goodwill with his desire to obtain the best deals: items for which the disparity between real and perceived worth is greatest. The bargain-seeker may feel compelled to return to a second-hand consumption site on a consistent basis due to the high inventory turnover rates, which constantly replenish these stores with new goods. The opportunities to find good deals in such a context are nearly infinite.

Some of the bargain hunters I spoke with had elevated Goodwill shopping into a regular ritualized activity, but many simply decided to stop in the thrift shop impulsively on the day in question to browse. Nell, a woman in her sixties, admitted, “I shouldn't even be in here. I usually go to the [Goodwill] near my house on 135th. But I was coming out of church and I passed by, so I decided to come in and have a look around.” In the course of the interview Nell mentioned saving money on several occasions, but cited “finding bargains” as her most compelling reason for thrift shopping. When asked if she had made any good finds she held up a pair of brown slacks and said matter-of-factly: “These pants. They won’t fit me but I like the way they feel. Not sure what I’m going to do with them.” In this case, as with quite a few others, the appeal of saving money served as the initial impetus for entering the store, though the allure of getting a bargain ultimately caused Nell to buy an item that she
did not need and would not even be able to use. The bargain hunter is different from the enthusiast or the economical pragmatist, for whom the spectacle of the browsing experience may be enough to satisfy a recreational yearning.

Bargain hunting, like collecting, is about exhibiting forms of expertise or savvy consumerism through effectively capturing value. This skill requires that the consumer be able to recognize value in something others might overlook. The boastfulness with which some of the interviewees spoke of their prowess in this arena would suggest that bargain hunters may be a modern day incarnation of the Veblenian conspicuous consumer; those who seek to find cheap items with status-conferring features that indicate their “true” worth such as brands and quality materials. Proper identification of these status markers is predicated on the possession of cultural capital. This second-hand practice locates pleasure within the act of purchase (as value can only be captured through acquisition) and therefore the recreational object is only attained through consumption. For Nell, adopted the captured value of a good-quality garment actually overrode the use-value that pair of too-small pants obviously lacked.

The bargain-hunters I interviewed rarely alluded to entering the store with any explicit purpose other than to find a good deal. More often than not these consumers refused to qualify or narrow their search any further than that. Several outright stated that there was nothing they would not buy at Goodwill, and that they peruse through the entire store every time they go. Towards this end, most Goodwill consumers could be seen navigating the second-hand space circuitously, meandering from clothing to furniture to dishware and back again. The bargain-hunter, in most cases I
encountered, was a second-hand omnivore who dabbled in all sorts of commodity markets without expressing an inclination towards any one specifically. Rather than entering the space to find a desired item, these consumers come to second-hand outlets with the intent of finding and item to desire. Simone captured this ethos best in her goal to “waste lots of money on cheap stuff.”

The bargain-hunting approach to second-hand consumption is not aligned with a resource conservation ethic, nor is it always associated with economical behaviors (even when those who practice it speak profusely of their thriftiness). There is little planning or fulfillment of pre-existing needs involved in bargain seeking, a practice that the majority of Goodwill consumers engaged in to varying degrees. For those shoppers who come every week to scope out the new merchandise consumption may regularly occur irrespective of material desires. Consequently, supplemental purchasing of items the consumer may not have even thought to look for on the primary market are expected. In essence, the bargain hunting philosophy is not about buying less; it is about buying more for less. Such a mentality is unlikely to reduce overall consumption profiles, or even to impact an individual’s consumption in other commercial channels. The most that can be said for the bargain-seeker with respect to sustainable consumption is that the most dedicated of them expressed buying nearly all of their clothing second-hand. This indicates a partial retreat from the mainstream market into the reuse market.

The Critical Consumer

The critical consumer, an admittedly rare bird within the realm of second-hand consumption, makes conscious choices to engage in reacquisition due to personal beliefs or value systems that renders second-hand modes of consumption
more appealing than their first-hand counterparts. This type of consumer is discussed under various titles in nearly all of the current literature on second-hand consumption. The critical consumer usually adopts an oppositional stance towards a problematic aspect of the first-hand market, which the second-hand market presumably transcends or overcomes. While the critical consumer did not have a very pronounced presence in my research, glimpses of this figure could be detected here and there.

The first charge wagered against the mainstream market came from an avid Goodwill consumer who felt that the mass-production on the firsthand market undermined efforts to express a unique individualism. Reflective of theories that frame contemporary consumerism is aimed primarily at self-construction of a distinct personhood, Greg claimed that second-hand outlets were the best way to acquire goods that “other people aren't going to have, things you wouldn’t find in a department store.” The implication here is that department stores are where consumers go to purchase the same things as everyone else. In order to escape the homogeneity and find something “unique” he seeks out alternative retail channels.

Another common critique of today’s mainstream market is the “throwaway culture” that it has produced. The argument put forth by scholars like Swan (1972) and Cooper (2005) is that the primary-consumption market normalizes and even encourages people to frequently dispose of the goods they own in favor of new ones by accelerating the trend cycle and even instilling products with planned obsolescence. Though it is often argued that throwaway culture the work of corporations interested in increasing product demand, Linder (1970) notes the
tendency on the part of consumers to accelerate “successive consumption” rates as a means of enhancing the commodity-intensity (and the utility) of leisure time (p. 79). In this model, the amount of time spent with each belonging is effectively shortened. This is a commonly observed practice among consumers who receive fleeting gratification from a purchase before losing interest and seeking out newer products. Linder (1970) notes that “accelerating consumption leads to a throw-away system” through this process (p. 90). This theory would suggest that “planned obsolescence” is simply a response by producers to a consumer desire for short-lived possession of items (91).

The throwaway culture places a high premium on newness value, and undermines the incentive of producers to create durable, long-lasting products. Ed perceived this discontent with today’s primary consumption market in his dealings with various customers:

People like being able to buy something that was made fifty years ago [because] it’s solid. Like, you pick up a piece of furniture [from the] 1960s, it takes two men to carry it. You buy something that’s [from] IKEA, you can pick it up with one hand. That’s the difference. The stuff you buy from a second-hand shop, when you get tired of it, nine chances out of ten you can sell it. And get your money back. You get something from Bob’s or IKEA, when you’re done with it you throw it away. ‘Cause no one’s gonna buy it – it’s probably gonna fall apart before you really outlive it.

In this instance, the appeal of the second-hand market resides in the perception that goods from an earlier era were constructed for longer-lasting use. The consumers seek out second-hand markets in order to attain these more resilient, superiorly crafted goods that will retain both their functionality and market value. Such an argument does not apply to all commodities, especially within electronics markets where a newness value can hardly be overlooked. However, there are certainly
consumers who refuse to partake in trend-chasing within these spheres – by, for instance, refusing to take the bait every time a new version of the iPhone comes out. There are class connotations inherent in “disposable culture” and its oppositional movement. There are divides between who can afford to prematurely cast-off goods and those who cannot, as well as those who cannot and those who critically choose not to.

Lastly, there is evidence in my research to suggest that some second-hand consumers do take environmental concerns into consideration in their purchasing habits, though it is scant. Marie, a middle-aged woman at the East Harlem Goodwill said, “I like to come here because it’s cost effective and I feel like I’m doing something – it’s good for the planet.” Dale, the owner of Rag and Bone, also expressed the desire to sell more recycled and repurposed goods in his store, though whether this was because he sought to promote more sustainable forms of consumption or because he simply appreciated the aesthetic of these objects was unclear. In response to a query about why he started his business in the first place, Dale spoke of wanting “rescue” items that still had “value and potential” from being thrown away, which suggests that the inspiration for the business was at least in part a reaction to his disdain of waste. Neither of these declarations provides a particularly compelling case for the existence of a conservation ethic among second-hand consumers, particularly in light of studies that that reported a similarly sparse existence of environmentally conscious consumerism in a variety of other second-hand markets (Pierce and Paulos 2011; Gregson and Crewe 2003).
While it certainly does not hurt for a critical consumer to have professed environmental awareness, it is not required for critical consumption practices to be deemed more or less sustainable. An aversion to the primary market that results in a consumer lifestyle favoring reuse markets over first-hand markets may be sufficient to argue that the practice of critical consumerism is well-adapted to low impact modes of consumption. Yet, there is still the question of whether these value-oriented consumer philosophies tend to bear out in practice. Beard (2008) terms the dissonance between stated ethical concerns and enacted consumer behaviors the “consumer’s conundrum” (p. 449). The discord between beliefs and actions is often most conspicuous when the added costs of “ethical production” result in higher market prices that the consumer is expected to pay. The Myth of The Ethical Consumer (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010) examines this disheartening phenomenon at length, lamenting how “survey radicals seem to turn into economic conservatives at the checkout” (p. 2). Holt (2012) further notes that the “value-attitude-behavior model, which was in vogue in the 1960s and 1970s, has all but disappeared from contemporary theory because it provides little insight or explanatory power” (p. 240). With regard to ethical consumption in second-hand realms, Bardhi and Arnould (2005) argue that thrift shopping is a mode of “personal indulgence” under the guise of “frugality” (p. 225). The conflict between consumer ideology and consumer practice is particularly salient within the realm of environmental ethics. Bamberg’s (2003) discussion of two different meta-analyses undertaken on this topic concluded that environmental concerns explained at most “10 percent of variance of specific environmental behaviors” (p. 22).
Although these critiques of consumer ethics have merit, there is reason to believe that value-driven consumer behaviors could be realized in second-hand markets. The most commonly cited deterrent for enacted ethical consumption is substantially elevated internalized costs for “green” goods. As we have seen, a large sector of the second-hand market deals in goods that are competitively underpriced, even when compared to prices in discount superstores like Walmart and Target. The consumers in second-hand markets may be able to avoid grappling with the tradeoff between theoretical values and concrete savings that so often becomes an issue in mainstream “green” markets. Acting on stated environmental concerns may therefore become more feasible for the economically conservative consumer.

None of the second-hand practice that have emerged in this study are singularly ideal modes of sustainable consumption. Some do not even come close to approximating the sustainable paradigm, and others present with more potential. All of them undoubtedly have their critics. In the concluding chapter, I consider the sustainable potential of the market more comprehensively and seek to offer some insight into what a sustainable second-hand market might look like.
Conclusion

Sustainable Consumption in Second-Hand Markets: Myth or Reality?

The evaluation of sustainable potential across various practices, market sectors, and settings of second-hand-consumption has yielded mixed results. Clearly not all second-hand consumer behaviors can be construed as sustainable in character. Neither can every commodity market or consumption space, for that matter. The goal of this exercise was primarily to identify whether there were existing segments of the second-hand markets that could, on their essential premises, be better adapted for sustainable consumption efforts. Suitable candidates for further study in this arena may comprise a rather small subset of the whole second-hand consumer sphere: some enthusiasts, economical pragmatists, and possibly the critical consumers. Nonetheless, it is important to discuss how these practices and consumer spaces can be further facilitated, and that is the endeavor I will conclude on. First though, I will take a step back and examine the bigger picture of the second-hand market as it stands now.

Second-Hand Markets: Then vs. Now

To conclude this analysis, let us return back to the beginning, and start to decipher the underlying nature of the second-hand market as it relates to the first-hand market today. At their inception, most spaces of reacquisition were either extensions of the mainstream market or dependent on them for a steady flow of goods. It is no coincidence that second-hand markets geared towards the emerging
lower class consumer exploded at the same time as the successive pace of trend cycles began to rapidly increase. Not only did the second-hand market provide a socially acceptable channel for the divestment of unfashionable items (perhaps facilitating a throwaway culture from very early on), but it also established some of the first commercial spaces in which lower classes could educate themselves in the scripts and practices of consumerism. At its very foundation the second-hand market arose in cooperation with the first-hand market, not in opposition to it. This begged the question: are primary and secondary consumption markets, as they exist today, in competition with each other, or are they engaged in a positive-feedback cycle driven by ever-expanding consumer appetites?

Surely it is possible that the character of second-hand markets has changed since they first appeared on the retail landscape. If the reader recalls, that was even my hope. There are some things that have changed. In the destigmatized market, a “second-hand aesthetic” has emerged and paved the way for middle-class second-hand consumption. The Bobos (and even the “rappers” they listen to\(^5\)) hail the virtues of the old, worn second-hand “look.” The markets have also become much more institutionalized in the modern retail landscape. There are second-hand chains with brand images like Goodwill, “mom and pop” shops like Never Say Goodbye, vintage “boutiques,” and even the neighborhood convenience second-hand stores like Rag and Bone. Second-hand retail is now integrated into retail hierarchy at nearly every level.

However, despite obvious differences, consumption and divestment practices observed in contemporary studies of second-hand spaces are strikingly analogous to

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\(^5\) See: Macklemore.
those carried out by those bourgeoisie trend-setters of two centuries ago. In Second
Hand Cultures, Gregson and Crewe (2003) examine the act of “casting out” that precedes and brings forth the reintroduction of goods into the market: “[Casting out] we show to be… linked to acquisition, in the sense that ‘casting out’ is frequently allied with making room for more… What gets cast out, then, to where is argued to be a highly regulated, disciplined practice, one that depends on being able to ‘cast out’ respectably and on being able to replace and/or substitute goods” (p. 6-7). Similar to Ginsburg’s (1980) discussion of nineteenth century divestors, Gregson and Crewe’s (2003) characterize the suppliers of second-hand market as individuals who may be seeking out new items for themselves. When reframed as an institutionalized outlet for ritualized disposal, second-hand markets may be seen as promoting demand for goods on the mainstream market rather than diminishing it.

Though the majority of current accounts would suggest that second and first-hand markets are equally complicit in the promotion of unsustainable consumer behaviors, my work indicates that not all acquisition practices are reliant on deliberate acts of disposal like the ones discussed in Gregson and Crewe (2003). A crucial sector of the reuse market, overlooked in most of the literature, functions to reabsorb goods that are divested through large scale purging events like estate auctions, storage auctions, and home cleanouts. The original lifecycles of these goods may have come to an abrupt end due to the death, relocation, or financial hardships of a primary owner. The lifecycle of goods is usually framed as wholly determine by the choices of people, but the lifecycles of people naturally result in passive divestment of goods. Casting out, then, is not an accurate term to characterize all the manners by which
goods may end up in second-hand markets, as it assigns agency to the “casters” which may not exist. It is more valid to argue that spaces such as Goodwill, which rely entirely on voluntary donations, partake in the “throwaway culture,” than it is to say that estates dealers like Estate Treasures “legitimate” a doctrine of premature disposal. On the contrary, these businesses are in the practice of “rescuing” goods from disposal, as Dale might say. When the alternative option for these goods is to sit in a landfill, then channels of reentrance into the market surely promote less wasteful societies.

On a more theoretical level, there is an argument that second-hand markets justify a claim to sustainability through the reinforcement of existing unsustainable consumption patterns. Pierce and Paulos (2011) struggle with this ideological conundrum, engaging Tony Fry’s (2009) Design Futuring in their discussion: “We wish to take more seriously the claim that the very notion of consumption may be flawed and ‘the rhetoric of sustainable consumption either knowingly or unknowingly legitimates the unsustainable’ (p. 193)” (p. 2386). Rather than constructing spaces that critiques dominant consumer mentalities, the second-hand market tacitly validates consumer tendencies towards premature disposal. However, it is equally true that operating within the mainstream market could provide more concrete short-term progress that trying to operating outside of it. Yes, the throwaway society is detrimental to projects of sustainability, but in the absence of cultural revolution, it is preferable for divested items to become revitalized in second-cycle markets than to end up in a landfill.
This approach, admittedly, may seem so aggressively pragmatic as to read a bit nihilistic. I do not intend it to be so. Nor do I intend to downplay the criticisms of those purists who expect more from proposed solutions to the problem of overconsumption than a tentative pledge to consume second-hand. Reuse markets faces very real struggles to enact, promote, and engage sustainable behaviors. However, the harshest critics of a sustainable second-hand consumption vision fail to see its merits, and the waste-diversion it often does accomplish.

**A Model For Moving Forward**

In her theoretical model of second-hand markets, Thomas (2003) grapples with similar questions about the nature of the first-cycle and second-cycle market relationship. She concludes that the expansion of the second-hand market will only draw demand away from the first-hand market under specific conditions: newness value must be low, product durability must be high, or second-hand transaction structures must be strong. In non-ideal circumstances, second-hand consumption tends not to detract from demand in first-hand markets. When newness values are high, product durability is high, and transaction structures are weak, agency-driven consumers have little incentive to substitute a first-hand good for a second-hand one. Need-driven consumers, Thomas argues, do not really engage in substitutive consumption because they don’t have the option to purchase on the first-hand market and were never factored into first-hand consumer demand. The conditions for substitutive markets are restrictive, but at least Thomas (2003) provides a framework that proponents of sustainable reuse can begin to work within.

**The Obstacles of Newness Value and Durability**
The first hurdle to confront in the creation of competitive second-hand markets is newness value, and its implications for durability. In the E-SCOPE survey discussed in Tim Cooper’s (2005) work, respondents claimed that their number one concern with purchasing longer-lasting or pre-owned appliances was that they would become “out of date” (p. 60). Creating competitive second-hand markets for products with a high inherent newness value is incredibly difficult among consumers of ample means. Extending the lifecycle of these products is antithetical to value creation in innovation-based markets, where long-term ownership renders objects functionally obsolete or unfashionable. It is important to clarify in Thomas’ (2003) work that second-hand markets struggle to compete not only when product durability is low, but when desired product durability is diminished. Ingrained newness values and low durability impose the greatest limitations on the sustainable potential of reuse, and erect what seem to be insurmountable barriers within the current consumer climate. It is perhaps most useful then to focus greater attention on confronting the third barrier: weak transaction structures.

**Transaction Structures and Maximizing the Potential of Sustainable Second-Hand Markets**

There are two main avenues for improving sustainable reuse via the altering of transaction structures and methods: expanding markets deemed to have a solid foundation in sustainable practices, and exploiting areas in the second-hand market that have as yet unrealized potential to encourage more sustainable behaviors. In regards to the first method, it is crucial to alleviate the various barriers currently faced by substitutive consumers within certain second-hand commercial spheres. Perhaps the most salient deterrent that currently exists in many second-hand markets is
deficient information structures (discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2), which create a multitude of problems for consumers. The lack of uniform standards or regulations within second-hand realms make it difficult to know what kind of inspections an items underwent prior to being put up for sale. Neoclassical economics dictates that perfect information is necessary for markets to function, however some markets have greater transparency than others (Samuelson and Nordhaus 1998). Particularly in cases of complex commodities that may be difficult for consumers to assess on the spot there is greater potential for exchange under false pretenses. Cooper (2005) discusses the double standard that permeates the resale electronics and appliances market, where individuals encourage the reacquisition of their own items, but are skeptical of consuming from these same resale markets:

“The E-SCOPE survey found that most householders, when replacing functional appliances, want to see them utilized rather than disposed of as waste… Almost one-quarter of all discarded appliances (24%) were donated or sold and the reuse of computers (67%), hi-fi and stereo (44%), and video equipment, microwave ovens, and toys (around 35% in each case) was particularly high. Focus group participants were asked about their view of second-hand appliances… Attitudes were generally negative, although some people expressed a willingness to purchase them if they offered good value and were sold with adequate guarantees.” (p. 61)

Under the right conditions those ambivalent survey respondents could be persuaded to engage in substitutive second-hand consumption practices, and it is important to consider how these conditions might be met. Implementation of publicized inspection procedures might be too labor intensive for one-man operations like Rag and Bone, but could perhaps be more feasibly undertaken by larger enterprises like Estate Treasures. Further, offering remedial channels such as return policies, in the event of incident, may help to ease consumer skepticism.
Bolstered information structures can also help to reduce consumer unease with respect to issues of cleanliness and safety in the second-hand market. Concerns surrounding hygiene and security pervaded nearly every consumer interaction I had in the course of this study, with most Goodwill customers citing fears about bedbugs or disease when identifying specific items they would not purchase second-hand, such as linens, underwear, and utensils. Several consumers mentioned that it was nerve-wracking not to know where their second-hand goods came from. Assurances by sellers that furniture and linens have undergone inspection for bedbugs might be a good start to begin confronting these consumer anxieties. Better cataloguing systems for items, in cases where goods aren’t totally decontextualized at the time of acquisition, may also provide a resource for consumers who want to know where the items they’re purchasing have come from. Additionally, it might be prudent for stores to broadcast standard health and safety practices for second-hand consumers, such as washing clothing in hot water before first use and putting items like pillows and couch cushions in the dryer to rid them of potential contaminants.

One case of a second-hand market that has benefitted immensely from the extensive quality-control infrastructure is the used car market. While not examined in this study, the resale market for pre-owned vehicles is both one of the most well-established and widely patronized areas of second-hand consumption. It is also a quintessential example of a market that has arisen as substitutive alternative to cost-prohibitive first-cycle market. In recent years, a variety of websites and businesses have emerged to address a lack of information and accountability in the used vehicle market. Carfax.com compiles vehicle history reports for prospective buyers from a
multitude of available data sources, while Kelley Blue Book provides standard pricing metrics for used cars that consumers might reference (Carfax 2014; Kelley Blue Book 2014). Still other businesses provide third-party appraisal services for used vehicles. The motor vehicle industry has also adopted internal certification mechanisms in response the growing demand in the second-hand car market. Cars that have undergone standardized inspection and refurbishment procedures by the car manufacturer or other licensed institutions can receive a “Certified Pre-Owned Vehicle” label that indicates the functionality of the vehicle to the shopper. These certified vehicles often come with an extended warranty, for further reassurance of the reliability of safety and quality checks (Kelley Blue Book 2014).

The motor vehicle industry, for obvious reasons, is more highly regulated than most second-hand commodity markets are (or are ever likely to be). The data available as a result of this regulatory framework cannot truly be matched in any of the commodity markets we discuss here. Nevertheless, there is potential for development of informational infrastructure in other sectors of the market such as household appliances. One solution might be the establishment of certification agencies that provide a “seal of approval” to businesses that pass an inventory inspection or agree to adopt quality assessment protocols. Faith discussed the necessity for such third-party appraisal businesses with respect to another type of market deception, that of individual sellers getting cheated by acquiring dealers. Another solution might be a platform akin to Consumer Reports or Angie’s List, where consumers in the same geographic region can inquire and share information.
about the reliability of second-hand channels in online forums. This could serve a similar function to reviews and approval ratings on sites like E-Bay.

These forms of market protection and oversight are not only important for encouraging substitution-oriented second-hand consumption practices, but also for empowering the need-based consumer population in general. The ability to provide for oneself or one’s family, especially in terms of basic household goods and appliances, is equally determined by the adequacy of means and the accessibility and reliability of consumer channels. Second-hand markets have their own role to play in poverty reduction (a relevant issue in areas like East Harlem, where over one third of families are living below the poverty line). Creating better infrastructure not only expands the appeal of second-hand markets but also serves to protect those who are compelled to consume in these channels despite poor regulation. Securing channels by which consumers may pursue a better quality I crucial, as most theorists and policy-makers agree that this is the first step towards meaningful progress in the adoption of sustainable lifestyles. The most current conceptions of a “Sustainable Development Paradigm” make clear as much: “Efforts aimed only toward ecological health and integrity, in the absence of efforts to alleviate poverty… and redistribute economic opportunity, may produce trivial results at best” (Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause 1995:879).

In the way of exploring potential to promote sustainable consumption within untapped areas of the market, I would also look to information structures as a way of facilitating intentional goal-oriented shopping practices within second-hand realms. Initiating substitutive consumption in any meaningful sense requires some degree of
pre-existing intentionality in the consumerist gaze. However, as the previous chapter
discussed, consumers may tend to avoid second-hand stores when engaging in need-
specific consumption activities because they feel that such outlets lack reliability and
consistency. The process of either formally cataloguing goods (in large-scale
enterprises like Goodwill) or maintaining a up-to-date information on inventory (as
Faith does) may help consumers to gauge the availability of a product before coming
into the store. The laborious and frustrating experience of searching futilely in a thrift
shop may be circumvented through better inventory accounting procedures. This can
in turn encourage people to seek out second-hand outlets for need-oriented shopping
pursuits.

Within voluntary donation-based consumer spaces like charity shops,
exchange programs might also be established to promote second-hand replacements
for those items being “cast out” by divestors. Such programs could operate on a
similar model to stores like Buffalo Exchange, which provide either a store credit in
exchange for contributions or a significantly smaller cash reimbursement. Similarly,
Goodwill stores might consider offering donation-based store credits as an alternative
to the tax rebate that normally serves as the economic incentive for donation. If the
credit exceeded the rebate in value, this may create an especially compelling
framework in which second-hand goods are traded internally rather than dumped in
resale markets in order to make room for new goods.

Lastly, on a more conceptual level, in order for second-hand markets to truly
coc-exist with the mainstream market in a substitutive rather than supplemental way
(for those consumers who have the option to patronize both), second-hand items must
acquire real value in their own right rather than just the appeal of being “cheap”. If the appeal of thrift items resides solely in cheap pricing, then it seems inevitable (a revolution in consumer practice notwithstanding) that a substantial portion of consumers will engage in broad-scope bargain-seeking behaviors that do not ultimately reduce consumption on the first-hand market. Only when purchases on first and second-hand markets are considered to be status-equivalents will agency-oriented consumers begin to view second-hand purchases as substitutes for new products. The practices of symbolic value creation through narrative construction may serve to culturally elevate second-hand items in a way that translates into increased monetary values. These methods bring second-hand items closer to approximating the worth of mainstream market goods, and within this context the two markets may interact more competitively. Although greater financial commitment in the second-hand realm may deter some value-seeking consumers, a gradation in pricing could encourage a view towards second-hand consumption in which first and second-hand purchases are interchangeable and therefore more substitutive in nature.

Final Remarks

I approached this study thinking that there was the possibility for sustainability in second-hand markets irrespective of prerequisite consumer intentionality. My hypothesis was that if the industry itself was more foundationally sustainable than its first-hand counterpart, the absence of an ecological ethic among second-hand commodity seekers might not detract from the overall potential for resource conservation. In clung to this hope, in large part, because the overwhelming body of literature indicated that the majority of consumers are either unconcerned
with ethical imperatives or fail to act on these stated beliefs. Thus, I optimistically wondered: might not consumer intentions be irrelevant to the overall sustainability of the market if the framework therein was intrinsically geared toward a less resource intensive trade and longer-lasting commodities exchange?

The answer, clearly, is no. Consumer intentions and the practices they engender not only matter, but they are quite possibly the greatest determining factor in evaluating the potential for sustainable consumption within second-hand markets. Second-hand outlets may exist in many and varied forms, but there is potential for both accumulative and conservative consumption behaviors to occur in each. As Alan Warde (2005) and Douglas Holt (2012) suggest, consumer practices and their complementary market constructs are key. Many modes of consumption behavior and the markets they support have little consequence for overall accounts of sustainable resource use. These second-hand spheres have little if any impact on conservation efforts that sustainable developers seek. Yet, there are sectors of the market compatible with a sustainable consumption agenda. Although these realms of second-hand face their own sets of difficulties and limitations, especially in markets where newness value predominates, there is reason to believe that these markets have potential to expand and to promote substitutive purchasing practices, with some improvements.

The strategies I propose for reforming the second-hand industry may not produce the kind of fundamental societal changes that many believe need to occur before we achieve true sustainable consumption ethic. But this was never was it a paper about reconstituting consumer culture. On the contrary, both theory and
experience suggests that such an endeavor is perhaps misguided, and so daunting as to seem futile. Instead, this was a study intent on identifying those second-hand spheres with a firm grounding in conservation-compatible values and practices.

Sustainable second-hand consumers, should they exist, will only truly emerge when the second-hand realm can meet the needs that arise in all facets of their lives, not just when they assume the roles of bargain hunter, collector, or enthusiast. Reimagining the infrastructure and possibilities for second-hand markets is the first step in realizing a wholly-engaged, self-fulfilled sustainable consumer.


