

THRILL OF THE THRIFT





As the youngest child in my family, I have been the recipient of hand-me-downs for as long as I can remember. When I was four, I'd wear the toddler-sized clothes my sister once donned eight years earlier. I have a set of pictures of me and my sister wearing the same Grandma-knitted sweater from preschool picture day, posing with the same cheerful smile. Who is who? When I was nine, I started to scorn everything my sister once wore, eager to grow out of only being a younger version of her. Instead, every few months our family friends would drop off their favorite pieces they'd outgrown. I felt so cool as I tried on their

collections of Aeropostale zip-up sweat-shirts, flowy camisoles, and bat mitzvah-ready dresses. These pieces, once adored and now tragically too small, allowed me to embody the older girls I admired. They felt like a sign of growing into what I had once looked up to. The real coming-of-age came in my teens, when my Aunt Ilana started giving me the hand-me-downs from her 20s that she wore and loved and has accepted she would never need again. There's a pink floral midi skirt she sported the first time she met my parents. This summer, it came with me to live on my own in New York in a tiny apartment in Nolita, where my roommates and I could break onto the roof and smoke joints with our coffee. That skirt made me feel empowered, feminine, and mature all at once as I traipsed through the city on my own, mimicking adulthood. There's also a little black dress she donned from work to nights out when she lived in the Upper West Side as a photographer.

I wore it from work to nights out as I interned for a fashion company and tested the capabilities of my fake ID. Now, whenever I go to my grandparents' house, I scour through generations of clothing. There's a crewneck from Tanglewood, the outdoor music venue where my grandparents met. It's pine green with a line of trees in shades of pink, a reminder of young (and old) love. I find my mother's wedding dress, and maybe someday I'll wear it to a wedding of my own. In one closet, there's a set of heather grey sweatshirts with blue writing; remnants from my great-uncle's senate campaign.

Rediscovering these old clothes, mementos of times long gone elicits a simultaneous sense of excitement and nostalgia, of remembering the past and creating new memories in the present. With my friends, I mimic this feeling of searching through old clothes and stories in pursuit of timeless pieces with a unique kind of flare. We explore cities through their second-hand clothing selections, searching the internet for the best village improvement stores or Buffalo Exchanges. In my closet, trendy pieces lie next to vintage Levi's that fit me just right or men's Dickies from the 1960s with the perfect high waist. Thrifting has become an activity, a way to feel nostalgic for times we only know through clothes left behind. It's a way to give vintage pieces a second life, to take what was once old and make it new again.

Over the last few years, hand-me-downs have taken a new form as shopping secondhand has easily become one of the biggest trends in fashion. Now, a trip to a thrift store or a carefully styled vintage piece is one that can invoke intrigue and envy from fashion fans everywhere. From vintage hauls and thrift flips to brand partnerships with online secondhand platforms and the ultimate prize of responding to a social media commenter's inquiry into



the origins of your piece with “thrifted,” young people are all in on this particular type of digital fashion content, an ironic combination of old and new. While the future of fashion is constantly evolving, trend forecasters are predicting big things for the future of secondhand clothing. In recent years, secondhand has been outgrowing mainstream fashion and some experts are declaring that the industry, which is already worth over \$30 billion, will grow 18% each year through 2024. And like nearly everything else, the future of secondhand clothing may be digital. Increasingly, apps and websites dedicated to secondhand vintage and thrifted clothing are popping up all over the internet and, with them, the opportunity to participate in the trend without ever leaving your home.

Companies like The Real Real, Depop, and ThredUp offer consumers a range of secondhand and thrifted items from luxury designer pieces to affordable clothing from mass brands. Online, buyers can filter their options by color, type, size, or brand, making the experience much simpler than shopping in-person in a thrift or vintage store. But, the less-committed shopper can also easily get in on the fun by renting secondhand clothing through platforms such as Nuuly and the iconic Rent the Runway. As a result, the life cycle of fashion, both trends and individual pieces, has shifted from a short lifespan before an eternity in a landfill to a longer rollercoaster with numerous owners along the way. A shirt that may have been simply thrown out when no longer wanted now has a greater chance at

a future through a Depop sale or thrift store donation. And as different eras of fashion are recycled into the trends of today, the clothes of the past get a new life that they might not have previously.

Thriftling appeals to younger consumers in a variety of ways. First, its eco-friendly premise serves as a way to reduce the immense waste from the fashion industry while simultaneously resisting the ever-increasing influence of fast fashion. And, with the acceleration of trend cycles, semi-vintage clothing just keeps coming back, like flare jeans and Ugg boots. Thriftling also works as a way to fulfill Gen-Z’s yearning for uniqueness, a way to secure almost one-of-a-kind pieces that will inspire envy. It’s also a form of entertainment; searching through racks and bins of clothing in search of the perfect piece feels almost like a game. And, perhaps most importantly, second-hand clothing allows consumers to buy high-quality pieces at more affordable prices.

The creation and digital rise of this trend have also allowed luxury fashion to become more accessible. For so long, exclusivity has been the hallmark of luxury brands. Most people were never meant to possess it, only admire it and wish for it. But buying secondhand, where prices are lower yet the quality is equally as good, puts the products in the hands of people who might normally have been able to reach it. Whether renting or buying, some of the most expensive and most popular brands in the world now have a new audience in

resale. And all the buzz around thrifting and secondhand clothing has even drawn attention from more mainstream fashion brands, such as H&M, who are looking to cash in on the trend.

Within the last decade, brands have introduced sustainability programs to accommodate their consumers' increasing concerns about the environmental effects of their shopping habits. But some brands are going past clothing rental or recycled materials and are aiming higher with the help of the resale market. In September 2021, H&M launched their own resale portal, called H&M Rewear, in Canada. With it, people have the ability to buy or sell clothing that doesn't even have to be from H&M, in exchange for money or H&M store credit.

But fashion lovers, particularly members of Gen Z, aren't just interested in buying secondhand but also selling their own clothing as a quick and easy way to make money. The number of online platforms for buying and selling secondhand is growing and clearly, the internet is the future of thrifting and the future of thrifting is extending far behind the t-shirts and sneakers that are trademarks of Goodwill and Salvation Army stores across the country. With the help of online markets, someone can purchase a good quality Birkin bag or Christopher John Rogers dress from the comfort of their own home and for a fraction of the original price, something that is incredibly important in a time when many luxury brands, such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton, have declared that they will be increasing the

prices of their products. The original gatekeepers, exorbitant prices and discriminatory and rude sales associates, no longer hold the key to enjoying luxury.

That is not to say that these systems are immune to gatekeeping and exclusivity. In fact, some of the key discussion around the rise of thrifting and resale platforms has centered around the potential repercussions that thrifting as a trend may have for populations that are dependent on thrift stores. When people who have the socioeconomic privilege, time, and money, to shop around numerous thrift stores for cheap pieces to either wear themselves or resale, it can harm the people who need the clothing. The type of thrifters who unfairly prey on the thrift store often argue that thrift stores usually receive more clothes than they can ever sell and frequently have to throw away clothes, ignoring the way fashion trends and style work. While there is a surplus of clothing in thrift stores, these thrifters are snatching up the fashionable, on-trend clothes that are most desirable and leaving behind their leftovers for those who cannot access these trends and will not be able to participate in them any other way.

The thrifting side of social media cultivates a culture of gatekeeping there too. Often, when people are asked where they bought their clothes by commenters and admirers online, they simply write "thrifed" in lieu of commenting the actual brand names, so that others cannot replicate their look. This

gatekeeping furthers the exclusivity that rules fashion, particularly on social media. There is a constant need to create unique content and looks, but the systems of exclusion that are ingrained in the fashion world, that hamper thrifting as an activity, will never be dismantled until these damaging gatekeeping strategies are truly confronted. Still, nothing compares to the joy of sifting through piles of clothes at your local thrift store, searching, hoping for the perfect vintage find. Like many other Harvard students, I take the T with my friends to Central Square, visiting stores like the Great Eastern Trading Company, combining a new home with old pastimes. Undoubtedly, numerous secondhand pieces can be found all across campus on members of the Harvard community. While the way people access this clothing has evolved from childhood hand-me-downs and Salvation Army, the interest is at an all-time high; a nostalgic reminder that life goes on and trends always come back.





