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Kathryn Andronowitz

University of Connecticut, kathryn.andronowitz@uconn.edu

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The Fashioning of Individual and Group Identities in the ThriftTok Community

By Kathryn Andronowitz

Abstract

In the wake of the Covid-19 lockdown, a noticeable surge of videos focused on thrifted clothing appeared on the social media platform TikTok, coinciding with an increase in offline thrift store traffic. Individual contributors to these trends comprise a networked community of popular creators and lifestyle followers of these thrifting videos on TikTok, or “ThriftTok,” based on the commonly-used hashtag of the same name. The ThriftTok community is not monolithic. Its productions encompass a spectrum of videos ranging from flea market explorations and goth-style thrifted fashion, to reselling tips and “thrift with me” videos. Its participants range from indie band members to *Twilight* fans and teenage entrepreneurs. Through a small-scale cultural analysis, this study explores how North American youth engage with thrifting-related TikTok videos. The objective is to understand the cultivation of group and individual identities through shared customs, the app’s affordances, and the symbolic meanings of the clothing itself. This analysis describes how networked users interconnect through the practice of thrifting. The community’s distinct styles assist in crafting and displaying identity—a process that occurs alongside nostalgic sentiments and self-satirizing humor. It also explores disharmony within the group identity and how this relates to broader frustrations about commodified identities, as well as consumer capitalism’s emphasis on fast-fashion at the expense of fair labor practices and sustainable policies.

Introduction

In @deathbythrifting’s TikTok video captioned “today i looked for skirts...”, a young man with short red hair takes viewers into the women’s section of his local Goodwill to, indeed, look for skirts. In one clip, he shows off a corner of the store containing walkers and crutches. In another, he records himself wearing a t-shirt reading, “a special grandfather” paired with black and white striped pants. He tells us, “this was one of those Goodwill trips where I blacked out for about two hours and don’t remember what I bought or put into my cart.” He sometimes layers his own voice in an off-putting, singsongy manner to emphasize certain statements, such as, “clothing is genderless.” He tells us that he saw fast-fashion brands like Shein and Zara, but still

bought them, hinting at a conflicted disapproval of these items. The second half of the video, filmed in his bedroom, shows @deathbythrifting modeling fifteen of his new skirts. With pronouns listed in his account as he/him, @deathbythrifting styles himself using thrifted skirts as his medium for playing with gender norms.

To someone unfamiliar with this “side” of TikTok, the video might seem absurd or a frivolous time-waster for the video’s producers and consumers alike. Yet, this video reveals some of the most prominent themes on “ThriftTok,” the community of TikTok that enjoys engaging with content related to thrifted clothing. Like @deathbythrifting, members of this public are often young adults employing objects of a thrifted, alternative style to convey their identity. The ThriftTok community is linked together by their fashion consumption practices that reject ready-to-wear clothing in favor of thrifted ensembles that, like their own identity, require careful effort and serendipity to pull together. They approach this serious task of crafting identity with humor as well as a sense of nostalgia that appears as members encounter material traces of their younger years among the “old” clothes available at thrift stores. However, tensions within the community emerge on issues such as the ethics of fast fashion, what constitutes authentic identity expression, and the company policies of thrift store chains like Goodwill, to name a few.

Purchasing secondhand clothing out of choice, rather than necessity, is not a new phenomenon. Voluntary consumption of thrifted fashion in North America increased throughout the twentieth century, and especially after World War II. Operating outside of primary markets and mainstream culture, thrift stores provided the “raw materials for alternative political and cultural expression” (Le Zotte 7). Secondhand dress, carrying even greater symbolic potential than brand-new attire, allows for publicly

displaying individual and collective identities, especially as they relate to social causes or cultural movements.

As part of this longer cultural practice, the ThriftTok community can be understood as a generational critique of consumer capitalism in favor of self-fashioned expression. What is seen in the community gives insight into how young Americans grapple with a climate crisis, economic strains, and social injustices. The TikTok platform describes itself as an authentic, community-based driver of trends and culture (TikTok). Certainly, the app's individually tailored feed, called the "For You" page, makes it ideal for finding content that contributes to and represents select aspects of one's identity – while connecting the individual with like-minded users.

With this context in mind, the following qualitative investigation centers around three main research questions:

1. How do young people engaged in thrifting form a networked community on TikTok?
2. What techniques do ThriftTok community members use to signal their identity as unique individuals?
3. What tensions are present within the community, and how do they relate to broader social, environmental, or economic concerns?

With this purpose, the community is examined in the context of previous research on generational cultures and subcultures, thrifted fashion's history and implications, and identity formation through social media.

Literature Review

Culture

From a cultural lens, ThriftTok may be understood as a networked youth community centered around thrifted fashion. The larger meanings, practices, and motivations have yet to be fully examined. Likewise, the various subcultures that form and interact within the ThriftTok community await study.

Culture has a notoriously ambiguous definition, with varied theories defining it as a standard of aesthetic excellence or an anthropological way of life (Hebdige 8). For this study, culture will be regarded as “the ordinary.” Raymond Williams argues that culture is the unorchestrated, unprescribed common meaning shared by society, which is constantly being made and remade in the minds of individuals (Williams 93).

Similarly, scholars in semiotics see culture as a set of latent meanings embedded into everyday objects and actions, prompting our observance of seemingly superficial or trivial objects.

Culture and consumption are closely interrelated. Access to cultural consumption is the basis for social development, where interests like labor and capital take less precedence in this larger process (Miller 162). In *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, Neil McKendrick explores how the middle and working-class in nineteenth century England gained more access to culture. After the Industrial Revolution, these groups secured an increased capacity to consume cultural goods and acquire cultural capital that had previously been reserved for upper classes. The effect of the democratization of consumption is clearly exemplified through clothing: as the production of apparel became cheaper and more popular in the 1800s, the decreased ability to discern status by wardrobe threatened the identity of the upper class (McKendrick 55). This sartorial

homogeneity eventually prompted the higher ranks to shift their tastes in fashion toward more inconspicuous but expensive details in order to distinguish themselves (McKendrick 56). Similar practices of delineating an upper-class status – like purposely underdressing or incorporating vestmental “mistakes” – extend into the present (Davis 65-66).

In an advanced consumer society where all classes have access to similar material goods, “taste” acts as a stand-in for differentiating identities by outward appearance. Many scholars agree that taste is a social construction greatly influenced by class, based on access to cultural materials or practices (Jenkins 81). Bourdieu theorizes that the “cultural nobility” creates its own norms and definitions of legitimate culture, which are inherited or taught implicitly. In this realm, an object holds significant meanings only if it can be decoded through “cultural competence,” which assumes knowledge of a particular code beforehand (Bourdieu 2).

As such, mainstream and mass culture are often looked down upon or regarded with antipathy (Miller, viii) because many popular consumptive practices do not meet the standards of the monied class. Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* argues that mass production turns our society into a simulation founded upon signs and symbols that override meaning. This constructs a hyperreality of signs only in reference to each other, wherein the only real culture is the manipulation of signs (Baudrillard 78). The mass culture critique deems these objects superficial and not worth investigating, and ignores how activities of the mass populations may point to the future developments of our society (Miller 166).

Still, a variety of people seek ways to escape the mainstream through distinctive group identities of anti-culture (Davis 166) or the curation of unique tastes. Collective

identities formed by subcultures, for example, are typically seen as disruptions to mainstream society that challenge established conventions of the dominant culture. Subcultures, particularly those driven by youth, create their own codes that go against the grain of what is “normal” (Hebdige 101-102). Members of these subcultures are often marginalized groups with some social, economic, or political incentives to gather their underrepresented interests and viewpoints. Subcultures must paradoxically make sense to their members while signifying disorder to the dominant culture on the exterior (Hebdige 100). Style is key to this practice, providing symbolic visual material to display group identity or values.

Changes in mass media, family structure, school, and leisure are all channels that differentiate groups into subcultures (Hebdige 81). Due to this phenomenon, a singular dominant culture no longer exists; instead, it has fragmented into various subgroups. This fragmentation also manifests in the subculture because, while members of a subculture seek a sense of belonging to a group identity, they also strive to preserve their individuality (Davis 158). Additionally, disagreements between “strands” within a subculture can destabilize it. The contributing and competing strands of the punk subcultures - like glitter rock, mod, and reggae - exemplified the level of diversity and discord that can exist within a subculture (Hebdige 25-26). Unity is the ideal for a group identity, but one that is near-impossible to achieve. As Hebdige puts it: “The meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force” (3).

In theory, participatory culture resists social hierarchies, limiting forms of culture, and other forces that would fragment and isolate the public (Jenkins 181). *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture* defines participatory culture as

“a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created)” (Jenkins, et al. XI). Participatory culture can have forms that are resistant to mainstream culture, as well as normative and niche forms that are distinct but not explicitly resistant (Jenkins, et al. 15-17). Unlike subcultures, participatory culture realizes the capacity for positive collective action in a networked society of individuals, not just disruption of the mainstream.

Participatory culture is not necessarily internet culture, but it is often linked to digital networks (11-12) because they facilitate free expression and displace barriers. In dealing with networked communities, one must recognize its dimensions. The platform, practices, and people all structure the space. This space, connecting invisible and asynchronous members together, results in an imagined collective.

Participatory networks have the potential to foster democracy and diversity (Jenkins 25), but social media is often utilized in a way that empowers individuals at the expense of the public good (Jenkins 26). Rather than maintaining openness, people tend to create new status hierarchies based on subcultural capital, or displays of coolness (Boyd 129). Research on virtual communities like ThriftTok is a timely matter as media and communications shift under the influence of these digital networked technologies (Jenkins, et al vii-viii).

Thrifted Clothing as Communication

Clothing is a form of material culture— an artifact that gives form to expression through the process of objectification (Miller 81). When worn, clothing is able to visually communicate in symbolic ways; it acts as a sign, a vehicle of implicit meaning composed of a signifier (e.g., a skirt) and a signified (femininity) (Barthes 225). These clothing codes can elicit different responses from different social groups and are subject to the larger currents of the fashion system (Davis 10). Fluctuations in the history of fashion provide clues about society and the economy (Miller 65). To understand the meaning of a clothing article, it must be read with these broader contexts in mind. The variable meanings of secondhand fashion in particular can point to “anxieties surrounding class status, an erratic economy, and the growth in the importance of carefully curated identities” (Le Zotte 3).

Barthes and other scholars emphasize the dynamic nature of the fashion system, defined by change and time: “Fashion refuses to inherit the past, it experiences itself as its own right” (Barthes 273). New styles can surface from the “historical reservoir,” as time can reopen or reinvent what is possible in fashion (Barthes 179). The fashion market is no longer singular – styles can originate and be diffused from various places at once (Davis 107). Davis cites this pluralism, as well as exhaustive capitalization of the apparel industry, the loosening of class boundaries, and faster communications via electronic media as factors for the shortening span of the fashion cycle (107). Written in 1992, Davis’ work also outlined the emergence of a plethora of microcycles which appeal to different identities in the fashion market (157), accurately anticipating the “micro-trends” observed today as a result of increased income and consumer choice (Penn 7).

Social identity stimulates the fashion system and is responsible for the multiple meanings buried in dress (Davis 21). Style is context-specific and with high social variability. According to Davis, the instability in social identity is fashion's fuel (17). The fashion system functions because people aim to signal their identity in order to conform to different groups, while also maintaining a display of individuality. This requires a balance in the paradoxical functions of marking and masking differences.

Thrifted fashion bears a unique history that has been studied far less than the fashion of primary markets, resulting in a skewed perspective of American consumer culture (Le Zotte 4). Preowned objects at the beginning of the twentieth century were tied to social, moral, and hygienic concerns – concerns which faded as secondhand trade grew through Protestant salvage businesses and chains like Goodwill (Le Zotte 18). These charitable yet profitable “thrift stores” flourished in the industrializing, Progressive-Era United States (Le Zotte 19). Secondhand clothing provided expanded options for sartorial expression and high-fashion appropriation, especially among working-class and urban immigrant women (Le Zotte 22).

In the 1920s and 1930s, artists, elites, and others began voluntarily shopping for secondhand goods. During this period, rummage sales – predominantly run middle-class, native-born women – became a means of seeking out novelties that reflected nostalgia of pre-industrialized “simpler” times (Le Zotte 36). Rapid social changes and mass production generated interest in these styles (Le Zotte 37). Correspondingly, the invention of “vintage” clothing in this period presented a significant shift in the value of secondhand clothing, as privileged consumers used this as a method of fashionable distinction (Le Zotte 122).

Opposite to this vintage exhibitionism was the practice of dressing in secondhand clothing as a signal of elective poverty, often for political causes. In the late 1960s, New York's liberal elites became "radical chic" by taking up causes of minority groups (Le Zotte 154), perhaps out of "nostalgie de la boue" or "nostalgia for the mud" (Le Zotte 155). Writers of the Beat generation, feminists, early environmentalists, and antiwar activists dressed in an electively poor appearance, materializing their distress and aligning their causes with the oppressed (Le Zotte 158). In either scenario, the use of secondhand dress was almost always to divorce from middle-class constrictions and associations (Le Zotte 125). Le Zotte affirms that "[t]he sartorial bricolage 'dramaticized ambivalence'" regarding their social identities and class guilt (155-156).

Used clothing also became material for costume and entertainment in absurdist movements that responded to twentieth-century anxieties, as with the "Theater of the Ridiculous." Hippie groups, like the Diggers, established "free stores" featuring preowned goods to protest against capitalist society, founded upon corporatized systems and monetary exchange (Le Zotte 173). One narrative of the thrifted style of postwar youth suggests it represented common anti-establishment sentiments, even if these goods were still partly reliant on establishments (Le Zotte 181). The nineties grunge movement was able to successfully consolidate many of the preexisting trends in "alternative" secondhand style and music, while simultaneously becoming rapidly commercialized and mainstreamed (Le Zotte 218).

In each of these waves, thrifted attire has acted as a medium for collective change, especially in underrepresented groups. As Le Zotte puts it: "The motives of the wearers and the perception of the viewing public differed from across the decades, but both performers understood and leveraged the powerful meanings of pre-owned goods..."

” (2). The niche and diverse secondhand markets have historically been studied far less than primary markets (4). Le Zotte concludes her work with eBay as the most recent innovation in secondhand trade and does not delve into the expanded communication of fashion trends presented on the internet (243).

Identity on TikTok

Sartorial expression, body language, and everyday interactions are all ways in which one’s identity can be conveyed. Erving Goffman examines this through a theatrical lens, where everyday actions are a performance of a role or social identity. The broad form of communication “given off” in everyday life rather than the given, explicit expression (Goffman 2). Individuals attempt to control their appearance because it is in their best interests to be able to influence the definition of the situation as others see it (Goffman 6).

This impression management is a critical social skill that can occur at the individual or group level. When individuals form an “action group,” they cooperate in maintaining a collective image of the team. Even within a team, cliques will often form to protect individuals from different ranks (Goffman 84). The many layers of identity performance indicate its social significance.

Because these roles are sign vehicles being used in the real world, they are subject to disruption, and even the slightest “chink in symbolic armor” can make the whole appearance seem fraudulent (Goffman 59). To stay consistent with a part, especially the role initially projected, one must suppress feelings that would not match (Goffman 9). Slang labels such as “poser” or “fake” are common on social media for those who seem inauthentic or intrusive to a particular internet community. In the case of online

influencers and microcelebrities, creating an unambivalent, consistent personality is particularly important to elicit strong associations among consumers (Khamis).

Since its publication in 1956, certain social norms in middle-class America have loosened up. Globalization and connectivity through the internet have also assisted in the diversification of roles. This is reflected in today's range of acceptable fashions, which are instrumental in identity performance.

Social media adds a new realm of open interaction where one can stage their identity to an audience. In the age of vlogging, self-presentation on social media has allowed people to share their private spheres with a larger audience in the public sphere. The curation and presentation of a persona are of more significance in a climate of neoliberal individualism which encourages branding of the self (Khamis). Socialized in this context, youth gravitate towards this new media to generate a virtual presence through images, text, audio, and video. In this digital world, identity is "written into being" (Boyd, 129).

TikTok is an increasingly popular video-based social media platform that attracts Gen Z users. Of its one billion monthly users, sixty-two percent of those are between the age of ten and twenty-nine (Doyle). TikTok's popularity increased during the Covid lockdowns because of the increased time people spent at home, possibly leading to feelings of boredom and isolation (Sadler). The app revolves around "the algorithm," rather than the people a user follows or is followed by. Users find the content on the algorithmic "For You" page consistently entertaining and provides social currency through exposure to memes and cultural references (Bhandari). Furthermore, dynamic elements like commentary, clever editing, audio, and movement featured in most viral videos solidify TikTok as a highly performative, action-oriented platform.

As a whole, TikTok presents a diverse array of content offerings, but engagement with specific content can lead the user to different publics, often referred to as the “sides” of TikTok (Krutrök). Those who watch, follow, and comment on thrifting-related content will soon have a personalized media feed of these types of videos. This becomes a source for self-creation, feeding users visual content that can be collected to represent their identity. These patterns of consumption form a bricolage that constitutes their sense of self. Additionally, multiple authors have noted that people tend to seek out content from similar users, a concept known as homophily. This may result in identity bubbles, where the individual’s network strongly reinforces or informs their sense of self.

Methods for Defining a ThriftTok Community

The community referred to as “ThriftTok” throughout this paper is focused on the online group of networked individuals in the U.S., mostly in their teens and twenties, post videos related to thrifted clothes on TikTok. This will pick up where Jennifer Le Zotte left off in *From Goodwill to Grunge: A History of Secondhand Styles and Alternative Economies* focusing specifically on thrift store chains, like Goodwill, and alternative styles.

This small-scale, qualitative study analyzed TikTok videos as cultural texts using a combination of methods in the field of cultural and digital media studies to investigate three primary research aims:

1. How do young people engaged in thrifting form a networked community on TikTok?

2. What techniques do #ThriftTok community members use to signal their identity as unique individuals?
3. What tensions are present within the community, and how do they relate to broader social, environmental, or economic concerns?

This involved a preliminary examination of data from the top twenty-five videos under #ThriftTok, #GoodwillBins, #ThriftHaul (using Apify's TikTok Free Scraper), while also reading across other popular videos, hashtags, and user profiles in the app to gain an understanding of common topics and conventions. Finding content relevant to the scope of this study required a screening of videos, hashtags, and users not predicated on thrifted clothes (e.g., pearl extraction videos dominating #SustainableFashion, #ThriftWithMe videos focused on antique furniture, etc).

Following this review, certain videos emblematic of general emergent themes were selected for further analysis; music, sound effects, text, humor, and comments were all examined. Comments were also scraped from chosen videos using ExportComments.com to see which had the most likes and to search for repetition and keywords. Additionally, relevant information was collected from official company accounts and sites, like Goodwill's TikTok account (@goodwillintl), the TikTok Newsroom, and the "about" pages on clothing resale websites. Data and information were extracted from June through September 2023, and may be since updated.

TikTok's setup was not conducive to the methodology of broad hashtag analysis due to the platform's emphasis on personalization via the algorithm. However, this format lends itself to small-scale studies on specific online subcultures and communities, like ThriftTok.

Findings and Discussion

Sharing Thrifting as a Practice in a Networked Community

The internet has made knowledge acquisition more widely accessible, and TikTok is a hub of cultural information especially among youth. The ThriftTok community on TikTok comprises users who are united in the shared practice of thrifting. Although this community is international and spans various age groups, videos are mainly from thrifters in North America in their teens and early twenties. This networked community of invisible, asynchronous members creates an imagined collective by sharing tips and experiences, imitating popular or funny videos, using community language and slang, and inviting other members to view elements of their private life. These users also bring aspects of their virtual selves in the ThriftTok community to the “real” world offline.

Seasoned thrifters contribute to this community by sharing lesser-known tips and insider knowledge, often gaining a sizable following count in doing so. A twenty-year-old from New York City, Wesley Breed (@needforbreed), presents himself as a community expert, posting high-quality educational videos on celebrity style, designer and brand histories, trend origins, and vintage style guides. His account bio invites audiences to “Come learn something cool about clothes.” In his video from May 23, 2023, the creator gives “valuable tips to people who are new to thrifting: why you should look for full-grain instead of genuine leather, how authentic vintage 90s shirts will have single-stitching on the sleeves, and how to check the size of jeans without trying them on. The sophisticated production and editing of @needforbreed’s videos are elevated from that of a casual TikTok, supplementing his narration of tips with visual material. For example, he includes a borrowed diagram to help viewers understand the different layers of leather and why genuine leather is less upscale than it sounds. He also records

himself modeling different thrifted clothes, displaying “authentic” vintage tags and seams, and demonstrating tricks like measuring the fit of a pair of jeans by wrapping the waistband around your neck. Between these segments, the creator includes filler clips that pan around a thrift store, achieving a polished appearance for the video.

One convention of ThriftTok creators is to bring viewers along to “thrift with me,” recording on their phone as they search through nonprofits such as Goodwill and Salvation Army, for-profits like Savers and Plato’s Closet, and other thrift stores. Creators using this video format treat the viewer as a familiar peer, implementing a less formal tone than “tips” videos. Many of these “thrift with me” videos take viewers to the Goodwill Outlets, generally referred to as “the bins,” where products go if they do not sell in retail. Unorganized items are placed in large bins, and priced by the pound. In these videos, the creator records at the bins while a voiceover provides commentary on their experience. The blunt, down-to-earth, and humorous narration gives insight into the common experiences of this shared practice, which include hygiene concerns, the element of luck, and the chaotic atmosphere.

A video by Karly (@spiderfingers) titled “thrift with me +bins 101” (where the title is the main text over the video, as compared to the caption below the video) provides an inside-look at this aspect of the thrifting experience. The video cycles through clips of other people, the store, and herself searching unorganized piles of clothes. She talks to viewers about what the bins are, why she brings her own bags, the items she comes across, and the intense, tiring environment. The creator explains that she wears nitrile gloves after encountering dirty underwear in the bins. Despite hearing similar “horror stories”, like finding a whole rotisserie chicken among the clothes, the creator still ventures to the bins in search of lower prices and better finds than

traditional retail thrift stores. Her willingness to shop at the bins signals stronger commitment to the practice than many others in the community who would not go into physically demanding and potentially unsanitary conditions, while also competing with other hardcore thrifters. At the end of the video, the creator showcases some of her unique finds one by one, including a corset, a zebra-print halter dress, and a few pairs of cargo pants. She adds the text, “total: \$6”, over a clip of her bag on the scale at the checkout before showing off her bag to the camera outside the store. The video’s celebratory conclusion communicates the creator’s ultimate satisfaction with the payoff of her endeavors.

One way the conversation within the community takes place is through the comments that viewers leave in response to videos. Many viewers respond to the popular video by asking for tips and follow-up haul videos, a type of video in which the thrifter will display, often by trying on, and talk about what they bought. These “hauls” come from the ability to bunch A “thrift with me” video by @sammybanh features these comments. The creator, a young woman, is recorded by her companion, appearing in the video wearing a black crop top, baggy green cargo pants, and sneakers and holding a large Urban Outfitters bag. She presents herself in a friendly manner, including a clip of her laughing and speaking in Vietnamese with an older woman as they search the bins side-by-side. Many indicate a desire to imitate the creator’s style, like @studyingleo asking, “oo where are your green cargos from?” and @going_downhill_ch asking, “Where is this? 📍 [location pinpoint emoji]” Other comments share the creator’s enthusiasm or express jealousy at their luck with good finds; @milktea.meg says, “THRIFT QUEEN more please!!”, while @ramonsgirll asks, “why can I never have this kinda luck”. More practical questions include those like @matt.j.jimenez, who asks,

“What time did you go?” and @sanniexsatan, who asks, “do they have plus size clothes? or is it hard to find?” The creator may respond to a handful of these in the comment section, opening up a two-way dialogue within the community.

The video creator or other community members can also contribute to an ongoing conversation by responding to a video or commenting with a video of their own. They may do this with a reply (the creator records while displaying a previous comment they received in their new video), stitch (which links the first five seconds of one video to their new one), or duet (the new video plays alongside the previous one, either through a split screen or a layered green screen effect). In another follow-up “thrift with me” video by @spiderfingers on February 21, 2023, the creator replies to a comment on her previous “thrift with me +bins 101” video from @virtualibuprofen that says, “the bins are straight from hell.” In this new video, the creator brings along “backup,” a team of offline friends who join her, and online community members, in this thrifting adventure. She also discusses interactions with other offline community members, like the girl next to her who found a wedding dress and all the people who bring their dogs into the store. She touches on a few other comments from the original bins video, and the caption reinforces the open communication between creator and audience by asking viewers, “would you go to the bins??”

The communication in the video itself is highly visual and layered. As she is speaking about how her “backup” made the experience more enjoyable, she also displays a mini Hello Kitty mailbox tin, an embellished cowboy belt, and a large bandana with a printed image of a horse. These visuals of quirky items, which do not match the narration, communicate a separate message to the audience— one that acts like an inside joke, which only certain members will catch or appreciate. Later in the video, she adds

text unrelated to the subject she is narrating to point out a man in camo pants that match the ones she is wearing. Details like these pack the eighty-three-second video with a variety of information, humor, and imagery.

TikTok itself plays a role in encouraging community formation and shared behaviors. For example, the company explains how it encourages “comment culture,” the formation of new subcultures, and new conversation topics through its reply features (TikTok). This is read by both advertisers and content creators, who may shift their practices to reach consumers in new ways. When hashtags become popular enough, they merit their own landing page. Such is the case with #ThriftWithMe, where top videos containing the hashtag appear together. TikTok displays the number of views and a short description of the hashtag: “Dig through the racks and show us what you find”. In like manner, on the #Thrifted landing page, it says, “Whether you’re upcycling fashion, or finding your own style, show us what you’ve #Thrifted”. TikTok mirrors the community’s language with phrases like “dig through the racks,” and encourages the users to show “us” their thrifting experience by posting on the platform. It endorses community language with these and other affordances, as with most social media platforms (Hautea).

Additionally, TikTok spotlights the positive aspects of thrifting, like upcycling, finding unique clothes, or curating a style. This plays into TikTok’s corporate interests in promoting their company as a community-driven, positive-impact hub. TikTok’s commodification of these communities may blur or distort its authentic values.

The more frequently a TikTok user consumes thrifting videos, the more likely they are to encounter the range of niche interests within the networked community. As the user gets deeper into ThriftTok via the algorithm, they may become familiar with

hyper-specific jokes and references. In turn, users feel that they are among a more private, exclusive audience. These “backstage” spaces where they do not perceive outsiders allow community members to act informally and make fun of, or even criticize, themselves (Goffman 128). A common focus for satire is the community’s love of big thrifted pants. In a video uploaded by @jon.klipp on January 7, 2022, the creator shows off his outfit, consisting of a green jacket and oversized jeans. The words, “omg did you thrift those jeans? 🥰🥰 [heart-eye emojis]” pop up on screen, serving as a stand-in for fashionistas who appreciate the style of baggy pants. The creator then removes his jacket, revealing comically large jeans so long that they are belted around his chest rather than his waist.

This humorously underscores the extreme lengths ThriftTokers will go to to wear a desired clothing piece, while also joking about the common practice of selecting oversized and “grandpa-style” clothes. A comment from @smeller, which refers to “nursing home core,” highlights how the influence of time can reinvent an outdated or “grandpa-style” fashion (Barthes 179). It also confirms an understanding of the “antifashion” fads in some subcultures in the community, understood only by “insiders.” Youth, in particular, are free to engage in the bizarre trends of antifashion, because they typically do not have commitments within stricter social structures and institutions (Davis 167). However, with so many variations of alternative styles like these, it is difficult to discern a clear, intended message of these oppositional antifashions (Davis 187).

Those outside North America often comment things like “only in America” or “I wish we had thrift stores like this in Europe.” Under the popular creator @meliss.com’s video from June 29, 2021, in which she brags about how the “thrift gods” are on her

side, @savannahhhhw commented, “i need to go america with an empty suitcase” and @kusemakk commented, “Crys in Europe, who's coming to US with me??”¹ This porous networked community reaches an international audience, especially in videos like Sophia’s (@cuntycowboy) from June 25, 2021. Despite her base in the Midwest, there are a notable number of comments that are not in English.

Curating Identity through Aesthetics

The trend of “finding your aesthetic” on TikTok and other social media is a practice of artistically categorizing styles, objects, music, and images to convey a set of ideas and personality traits of the person who adopts or creates that “aesthetic.” Some of these aesthetics are highly specific and cohesive, with names like fairycore, coquette, light academia, southern gothic, and gorpcore. This trend is also present on ThriftTok, where various subcultures wear thrifted clothes to present their aesthetic. The umbrella term “alternative” aesthetics applies to any that strive to escape mainstream and embrace individuality, and often use thrifted or “vintage-style” clothing to do so. These have a number of variations – indie sleaze, vintage indie, grunge, e-girl, goth, punk, etc – and arguments over the accuracy of their presentation.

Aesthetics act as a cultural code that conveys one’s identity, if able to be decoded. The image projected through items of a certain aesthetic can facilitate recognition between individuals with similar style. Although some qualities of objects can be described by and shared with language, objects have a greater potential to create a bridge that expresses the unconscious (Miller 99). People attempt to signal their

¹ This user’s content is no longer publicly available online as of September 2023.

personality traits, interests, and values by adopting an aesthetic. The “mood” of a fashion style is received and not read (Barthes 229-232); this kind of meaning comes out of a series of differences or constraints (Barthes 161). In her video from August 8, 2021, Kaiulani Prado (@cyberkaiu) films herself standing in the aisle of a Saver’s thrift store, hiding in embarrassment from a “hot goth girl” because today she has dressed like a “normie.” The caption, “help me find her i need to redeem myself 🥺 [emoji of smiling face shedding a tear] #goth #alt #thrift #thrifting #thrifftok”, underscores the yearning for recognition, understanding, and validation from those seen as peers as well as romantic interests. The comments echo this, the top one being, “I feel this to an ASTRONOMICAL degree bestie” from @cornsyrupbandit with 33,872 likes. For those who don’t speak ThriftTok, this user is expressing sympathy for @cyberkaiu’s dilemma in being caught not dressing like herself. Another comment by @sagehaleyofficial asks, “And WHY aren’t you in uniform?” 😂 [laughing emoji].” This shows the self-awareness subgroup members possess with regard to the signifying power of their wardrobe. The varied definitions of the word “uniform” hint at the identity ambivalences that arise in a unique individual who also wants to express belonging to a uniformly-styled community. There is an additional layer of meaning in the comment; it is a nostalgic pop culture reference, quoting from an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants*. In this meme, Squidward makes Spongebob act as his maid, and asks why he is not in the “maid” uniform (“Spongebob Squarepants - Why Aren’t You in Uniform.”). This humorously calls out the ways in which subcultural dress codes can be taken to the extreme, dictating a particular uniform to convey belonging.

Users like @cyberkaiu who identify with “alternative” style typically do so to

reject “mass” culture in some way. Subcultures must paradoxically make sense to its members while signifying disorder to the dominant culture on the exterior (Hebdige 100). As seen in the above example, style is a crucial facilitator of this practice, providing symbolic visual material to display group identity or values. However, many scholars have pointed out that culture is so segmented that a singular dominant culture does not exist. As such, it can be unclear what alternative styles are opposed.

Many users parody the traits associated with their aesthetic (or similar aesthetics) which have become highly recognizable to this young TikTok audience. A video uploaded on March 25, 2023 by @mindseyeband with the caption “time to get a stinky fit! #indiemusic #edgy #indieboy #thrift #gatekeep #cringe” gives a satirical point-of-view scenario of going on a thrifting date with the lead singer of an indie band. Although the singer is on a date with a girl, he says he is looking for “mysterious short-haired thrift gurlies,” projecting the selfish desire to pursue a romantic partner that will complement their visual aesthetic and thus, their identity. He rejects a t-shirt his date found that says “YOLO” because it is a mainstream saying, but then goes back later to pick it up because “maybe it could be ironic.” His comment parodies aspirations of indie band boys, and ThriftTokers as a whole, to distinguish themselves from mass-produced or lowbrow goods. Furthermore, it displays the layers of cultural meaning that can be derived from a clothing article— how it could be a regular t-shirt that says “you only live once,” a flagrantly mainstream product, or an item with ironic symbolic potential.

The creator relies mainly on a bricolage of material (products, brands, media) to convey the identity of an indie aesthetic boy. The indie singer carries a tote bag around the store because it is “edgier” than a backpack. It holds a DVD of *The Lighthouse*, a paperback of *Fight Club*, a record, a vintage radio, and sage. The man playing the lead-

singer role (who is, in fact, in an Indie band called Mind's Eye) highlights the impracticality and absurdity of extreme commitment to a role by carrying these unnecessary items in his tote and by only presenting the items that are congruent with his performance of identity. In other words, he does not advertise objects like a wallet or car keys because they do not hold as much symbolic value and could even create a “chink in symbolic armor” (Goffman 59). The video is heavy in 1980s cultural references like Billy Idol, The Smiths, and Quentin Tarantino, and brand names like Harley Davidson, Doc Martens, and Carhartt. In one instance, he gets angry that there is no Carhartt, and therefore nothing to make him “look like a construction worker.” This nods to the fact that Carhartt is traditionally a workwear brand, but many of its wearers (presumably “indie boys” like himself) are middle-class and do not use the clothing in settings of manual labor. It recognizes some irony in paying more for “the look” of old, tattered clothes.

Through lampooning stereotypes of indie band members like himself, he asserts his own cultural awareness. The character he plays in the video is easily upset, condescending to his date, and unaware of his poor behaviors – all of which prove that the creator does not associate himself with these characteristics. While he may not realize it, his sophisticated manipulation of symbols in reference to each other embodies the hyperreality of signs.

In contrast, some users earnestly promote the thrifted look. The user @vintageandy_ presents an aesthetic comprehensively and neatly, posting almost all of his videos with a formula: briefly show the thrift store before pointing the camera down at the shopping cart, followed by quick cuts of each clothing item in the cart as they stack up to the music's beat. The folded and neatly stacked clothes in the shopping cart

contrasts the disorder of most thrift shop racks. Additionally, each clothing item's brand, color, and style fits in as part of the aesthetic. The creator @vintageandy_ sells these thrifted clothes on the popular resale site Depop, linking his storefront into his TikTok bio. By consistently posting this curated content, @vintageandy_ is advertising within the ThriftTok community to profit off of those seeking to buy unique clothes to match their specific aesthetic while also belonging to a distinctive group identity. Community members strive for a balance between marking and masking differences through their style, incorporating sufficient individualized components to demarcate themselves without straying too far from the broader style spectrum of the group.

While the concept of “discovering an aesthetic” typically revolves around selecting clothes and objects to fit a preexisting idea, in many cases, the clothing can take on a life of its own, especially when it has a history of its own. Certain clothing items are referred to with the pronoun “she,” giving them more personality and lifelike characteristics. For instance, @kennedytach's February 22, 2021 video gives viewers a “sign to go thrift with your [bff]”, as she takes them inside a thrift store alongside her best friend. She showcases jackets, boots, and handbags, accompanied by remarks that underscore each item's distinctive features and why she “had to get her”. In this case, the “her” is a striped sweater. In one segment where she is trying on a red leather jacket, the voice-to-text remarks on the item: “she is perfect”. Subsequently, a clip of a red collared sweater contains the text, “[R]alph [L]auren reminds me of [R]achel [G]reen”. Another clip shows a mustard-color fleece dress with rope detailing, which she associates with Kasey Musgraves. These are just a few illustrations of how a preowned clothing article can take on lifelike quality, invoking associations with a character from the TV series *Friends* or a country music star. These cultural images increase the item's

value because of its capability to represent one's identity.

Kitschy Nostalgia

ThriftTokers often make cultural references to the 1990s and 2000s, a timeframe most of them grew up in. Users ironically embrace tacky and garish clothes, especially graphic T-shirts with media characters like Hannah Montana or Hello Kitty. Explicit references to music artists and styles associated with this period are also common, like in an aforementioned video by Sophia (@cuntycowboy). In this video, she flaunts some of her Goodwill bins finds, adding quick remarks about each clothing article with text that is read in the automated voice feature. She says the first item, a black zip-up with “Lucky Brand” in stitching, gives off “[E]nya vibes.” This refers to the musician, Enya, popular in the 90s and 2000s.

Another clip displays a faded black t-shirt featuring the Deftones band logo below the image of an old car. Following this, the creator displays a zip-up top that she describes as “goth indie scene y2k e-girl moment.” She then shows a “90s velvet butterfly dress,” which she remarks that she is so lucky to have found, along with some “Y2k beauties”, styles associated with the 2000s. Comments like “THAT BUTTERFLY DRESS 🙄🙄 [exasperated face emoji]” (@katttsaw) and “THE DEFTONES SHIRT 🛑 [hand emoji, indicating “stop”] OMG” (@rogettesmith) weigh in on the excitement of these finds.

One of the most prominent, recurring references is the *Twilight* book series and movie franchise. A video posted by Julia (@juleshehehoo), has the text “iM SCREAMING OH MY GOD” laid over the display of a hoodie printed with the image of

the three main characters as they appeared in the theatrical release poster for *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 1*. Unconventional clothing choices like these can act like subcultural capital; the wearer's introduction of a quirky item is considered uniquely tasteful but still remains within the boundaries of established style norms. Moreover, it is a way of embracing a childhood obsession or fandom in a way considered acceptable within the community since the lack of complete earnestness maintains a degree of distance. Not only can these clothing articles assist in expressing identity, but they play a role in co-constructing it by taking advantage of the various cultural meanings they can communicate.

An enjoyable element of thrifting may be this unexpected rediscovery of goods that existed during a specific period earlier in one's life. Historically, nostalgia for "simpler times" has driven the demand of secondhand goods, elevating their value (Le Zotte 7). These sentiments may act as armor against life's hardships and complications. Now, mass-produced, pop culture items imbued with personal nostalgia find their way into thrifted fashion ensembles in ways that would not have been conceivable when they were new on the market. This appreciation for the pop culture kitsch also contrasts other alternative, thrifting subcultures' disdain for objects of mass culture.

The music chosen for these videos complements the evocation of nostalgia, creating a link between the audio and visual to craft what feels like an immersive moment from the past. Top creator Emma DiMarco's December 2021 video shows her "[finding] a piece of American history at the thrift today." This hyperbolic text appears over a clip of jeans made by the Apple Bottom brand, with Flo Rida and T-Pain's song "Low" playing. The song's chorus begins with the familiar (to this audience) lyrics: "Shawty had them apple bottom jeans (jeans) / Boots with the fur (with the fur)" (0:15).

The song unifies the community, allowing them to join in on a common joke. The humor also lessens the impact of the bittersweet realization that something from one's younger years is already "history." The more solemn undercurrent of this video recognizes how in some sense, one's past selves could be considered a relic, materialized in defunct brands and objects that resurface in thrift stores.

Along this less ironic vein, the community embraces nostalgia in its use of paradigms, such as the trend of "picture day" videos. These videos cinematically play out the shared experience of dressing up for one's school photo, and call on the creator to act the part of different "types" of students, each identifiable by their fashion sense and self-presentation. This trend calls to mind movies like *The Breakfast Club*, *Clueless*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. An example of this is "Its Picture Day in 2004," in which Alexah (@e4rthcrosser) dresses in mostly thrifted clothes as different character stereotypes— the "super nice artsy girl", the rebel, the fashionista, the popular girl, the tomboy, and the free spirit. In this mini-film, the creator walks in from one side, sits on a stool, smiles at the camera, and then walks to the other side. The rebel character walks into frame wearing a black t-shirt, plaid high-top Converse sneakers, and green cargo pants with a studded black belt. Her hair is pulled into two buns on the side of her head, and she sits with her legs spread out, giving an intimidating, serious look for her photo. Contrastingly, the popular girl, wearing a light blue skirt and white blouse, walks in fixing her hair while distracted by a cellphone. She politely gives a wide smile, her legs to the side and hands in her lap.

The sophisticated production through costuming, acting, music, and video editing demonstrate the theatricality of this genre, wherein thrifted clothes act as a medium for this type of creative expression. These trends display the playful ways in

which notions of self and group identity are inextricably linked to individual and aggregate material objects, a clothing article and an outfit. It also shows how an object – especially atypical clothing found while thrifting – can elicit a distinct association with other visual elements, personality traits, body language, and settings.

Another intriguing aspect of this video is how individuals in the comments resonate particularly with the rebel and tomboy characters. These stereotypes are embodied by an androgynous look of baggy jeans and sweaters with muted colors. Certain subsets of the ThriftTok community appreciate the unpredictability, abundance, and loose categorizations of secondhand clothing stores, allowing for play and experimentation in gender expression. As discussed by Le Zotte, thrift stores invite imagination instead of regard for classifications (184). Existing outside of traditional markets and in a state of limited ownership, secondhand goods offer more potential for interpretation or gender transgression (Le Zotte 183).

Community Tensions and Concerns

Although the ThriftTok subculture is cohesive enough to form a loose-knit community, it also has several conflicting strands. Within the ThriftTok community, there appears to be competition between those thrifting for personal reasons and the “resellers” who thrift cheap clothes solely to make a profit by remarketing them through online peer-to-peer services like Poshmark, ThredUp, or eBay. Depop, the app mentioned previously, is an especially popular site among the young, trendy, “alternative” members of the ThriftTok community. It brands itself as “the fashion marketplace app where the next generation comes to discover unique items.” (Depop). The company encourages the entrepreneurial, individualistic spirit that many of its

buyers and sellers identify with, and appeals to members' sense of doing good by "helping reduce fashion waste."

Despite describing itself as "community-driven" and "shaping culture for the better," where people can "show up as their full selves," the site is a particular point of contention on ThriftTok. On October 19, 2021, Isabella (@lil1zzyvert) posted about "when you thrifting and the depop indie girls show up". The video shows a girl with an overtly angry facial expression aggressively grabbing handfuls of hangers before the "depop girls" can get to them. The video's sound, fittingly labeled as "drama effect background" by Not Me, adds to the dramaturgy of the video. This video lampoons the thrifter-type that only sees the monetary value of symbol-rich thrifted goods as the girl morphs into a competitive, possessive thrifter who grabs all she can.

While many users (e.g., @spiderfingers, @vintageandy_) link their Depop storefront into their bio, they do not necessarily call themselves resellers. The antagonism falls on resellers who went thrifting solely to capitalize on their finds, rather than going to find items that speak to them on a personal level. These resellers were often on an outer layer of ThriftTok, differentiated by an older age, a more mainstream personal style, and/or a lack of familiarity with the inner language, humor, and conventions of ThriftTok.

The self-identified reseller, Kelsey Mikula (@mellowstate), fits this description. In her bio, she labels herself as a "PT [part-time] reseller" and posts informative content for others hoping to make money through thrifting. Her May 2023 video is covered in blocks of text explaining how reselling has allowed her to: pay off student loans, pay for a post-weight loss skin removal surgery, save 5,000 items from the landfill, and find an "awesome community of people". Behind this text, she appears sitting in her car, simply

drinking a boba tea beverage. She does not clearly communicate her individualized style or personality in this video. Most comments laud Mikula's initiative of making extra money and supposedly saving items from the landfill, but a top comment by @sleepingsilence_ says, "I Fcking hate resellers, as a collector. Go eat bricks." This user, who categorizes themselves as a collector, strongly disapproves of the fact that resellers treat thrifted clothes solely as a commodity, rather than an item with rich symbolic potential and character. In other words, resellers do not treat their thrifted clothes as a treasured "she."

Idealized arguments on both sides have fallacies. While resellers might be doing good by destigmatizing thrifting and making preowned clothes accessible to people who cannot or will not go to places like the bins, they may better service those with the privilege of not needing to go for themselves. Instead, they are able to browse online for sartorial options and pay higher prices. Additionally, resellers argue that they save items from going to the dumpster. While this may be true in the short-term, it ignores that they may be contributing to a rampant consumer culture; since many people donate to thrift stores as a thoughtless, guilt-free disposal system, they are able to carry on with their frequent clothing purchases. This conceals the true extent of the damages of overconsumption.

On the other hand, those who police resellers like Mikula assert that they are taking quality clothing options away from the poor by purchasing them at a steeply discounted price and selling them at a higher rate. They also argue that resellers exploit and pollute the thrifting landscape with their lack of regard for an item's deeper meanings. Whether these arguments reflect their true values or if more self-motivated factors are involved (e.g., curating an aesthetic with unique clothing pieces) is uncertain.

Indeed, Mikula satirizes these self-righteous sentiments in a video from June 25, 2023. In this targeted video, a popular meme of comedian Bill Hader dancing in a mockingly carefree manner is layered over a background image of a thrift store. A text box in the top left corner reads: “Me after waking up to 15 hate comments telling me I’m giving away resellers secrets and should stop stealing from the poor.”

Another area of contention within the ThriftTok community is between shoppers and thrift store chains. Arguments aimed at Goodwill Industries indicate a larger ambivalence about thrift stores’ role in furthering or stifling social, economic, and environmental justice. Goodwill, a nonprofit whose mission is to strengthen communities by providing career opportunities to individuals with barriers to employment (Goodwill Industries), has faced backlash on TikTok for its employees’ pay and working conditions. A notable example is @lanasaintclair’s video from May 25, 2022 captioned “why you shouldn’t donate to Goodwill ! [red exclamation point emoji] #boycottgoodwill...” In the video, the creator backs out of the door with a garbage bag of clothes behind the text: “when you realize Goodwill pays its disabled employees under \$3/hr and donates only 12.5% of its profits to charity”. The song “Welcome to Duloc” from *Shrek* juxtaposes this message as it plays jestingly in the background, children’s voices singing cheerfully about their perfect town. While many users in the comments defend Goodwill’s charitable services, the majority of the video’s responses criticize the company for underpaying workers, overpricing clothes, and discarding most items, often adding in their own experiences.

On top of thrifting clothes as an economical option for constructing a unique identity, many ThriftTokers turn to preowned goods as a form of consumption that avoids the poor quality, unethical production, and environmental burden of fast fashion.

These motivations are typically vaguely expressed and secondary to the video's aim, which is usually to garner attention through TikTok humor and trends. The friction between fast fashion and thrifting is most noticeable in videos complaining about the fast-fashion giant Shein. This brand, known for its incredibly cheap variety of clothing – and labor law violations – is immensely popular among Gen-Z, and the U.S. comprises its most valuable market (Testa). Critics also worry that these clothes fuel overconsumption, as they are not designed to be worn for many years, placing an environmental burden on the planet. “Shein haul” videos, where a user shows off the clothing items they had purchased in bulk, demonstrate the company's presence in consumer culture.

A video sarcastically captioned “I love [S]hein” by @juliaa.vids from October 11, 2021 shows a pink cheetah print camisole, with text over the video asking, “I found this at the thrift store, is SHEIN an early 2000s brand?” In the background music, Squidward from *Spongebob Squarepants* sings about needing four-ply tissue when he cries. This audio captures both the video's humorous side and the creator's sadness from seeing Shein in thrift stores. This may be because the clothing is poor-quality and lacks the same character compared to authentic “vintage” clothes, and because the presence of such a new clothing item in a thrift store signals the tangible popularity of the fast-fashion brand. Regardless, members of the community are conflicted about buying brands like Shein secondhand and, like this video, do not address problems or possible solutions head-on.

Videos that give explicit messages about why thrifting is “good” usually have lower engagement – fewer likes and comments, with a more general, mainstream audience. Despite being one of the largest U.S. charities, @goodwillintl's TikToks

typically have under fifty likes and five comments. One slideshow video uploaded on April 17, 2023 with the caption “Stay green this spring with Goodwill and try these simple ways to live more sustainably. 🌱 [plant sprout emoji] #Goodwill #EarthWeek #Sustainability” received thirty-eight likes and one comment. Two of these five tips directly support Goodwill’s functions as an organization: donate your wardrobe and shop secondhand. Goodwill attempts to connect with a younger audience’s environmental values by equating thrifting to sustainable living. The minimal engagement shows that, although many thrifters rely on the organization as a consignment store, its online (often promotional) content does not resonate with the ThriftTok audience.

A video uploaded by @tiktokforgood on August 17, 2021 starts with a young woman asking viewers, “do you know how many pounds of clothing are saved from the landfill because of thrift stores? The answer will shock you.” She then explains how shopping secondhand encourages the recirculation of clothing already produced, saving energy and resources. She informs viewers that it takes four hundred gallons of water to produce enough cotton for a t-shirt and that thrifting saves thirty-eight million pounds of clothing from the landfill every year. This information is ultimately to persuade viewers to thrift for sustainability. The verified account with one million followers describes itself as “TikTok's social impact hub: inspiring our community to drive positive impact” in its bio. Despite their one million followers, the video has less than ten thousand likes and sixty comments. Still, the video is more successful at implementing the conventions of the ThriftTok community than Goodwill’s more apparent commercialized content.

Lastly, ThriftTokers post videos complaining about the practice of thrifting

becoming too mainstream. Subcultures often value and gain influence from their subversiveness and outsider status. However, this disruption can be naturalized and incorporated into the mainstream if their differences are denied (Hebdige 97). If the practice of thrifting is entirely accepted by society, no longer stigmatized on the basis of hygiene or class, then the subgroup loses the distinct, binding element of subversiveness.

For example, a video by @kairogrs posted on March 10, 2023 is titled “thanks for ruining thrifting guys 😏 [straight face emoji]” and shows a clip of a “musty” zip-up priced at forty-five dollars. The background sound, a monologue taken from the TV show *Breaking Bad*, angrily stresses this message: “We had a good thing... It was perfect, but no, you just had to blow it up. You, and your pride, and your ego.” Many comments point the finger at who is to blame for a narrower selection and higher prices: resellers who capitalize on the cheap excesses of clothing, wealthy thrifters who do not need to buy secondhand, or the thrift stores themselves for raising prices in response to an increase of in-store traffic and customers willing to spend more. The anger about thrifting being “ruined” goes hand-in-hand with the shift in secondhand stores becoming noticeably saturated with fast fashion brands. Cheaply-made clothing is highly accessible but made with microtrends in mind, not longevity. So, even as donations to thrift stores increase, the availability of high-quality clothing that low-income shoppers rely on decreases (Paz).

Similarly, the mass production of once-distinctive styles decontextualizes or engulfs meanings. Many companies mimic the thrifted look with “vintage-style” or “vintage-inspired” clothes that are entirely new. These are often “old” band tees, jeans, and oversized sweaters with faded and distressed features. Similar to Shein, brands like

Pacsun commercialize and mainstream the thrifted “alternative” look. On social media, integrated shopping features or embedded links to online stores allow for a seamless app-to-shop experience. Moreover, consumers frequently turn to video platforms to research their potential purchases (Hughes). Coupled with the looming presence of brand-sponsored influencers and resellers on TikTok’s highly individualized “For You” page, this can pressure users to purchase more of the commodified aesthetic they identify with.

As mentioned in the case of resellers vs thrifting police, members of ThriftTok outwardly disapprove of what they consider to be inappropriate behaviors in the thrifting community. Depending on the subgroup, the condemnation may fixate on underpaid workers, thrift stores’ wastefulness and inefficiencies, disregard for an object’s deeper meanings, or upper-class individuals who take advantage and mainstream the consumption of secondhand goods. Members who embrace the role of monitoring community standards as part of their identity performance might also idealize their role to match societal values (Goffman 35). Posting videos can help promote one’s public representation as a “ThriftToker”: an authentic thrifter who cares about environmental and social justice causes, as well as access to high-quality, meaning-imbued clothing items. But, their dramatic expressions may inhibit real action for these issues (Goffman 33).

The community contains members who may or may not embrace these ideals and could be masquerading behind the idealized role. Even if they do truly identify with these values, their actions in consuming, reselling, or promoting an aesthetic may not align with the execution of their beliefs. For example, a seemingly harmless “thrift haul” video is akin to the “Shein haul” prototype. Haul-style videos normalize buying clothing

in excess and reinforce the cultural emphasis on crafting an individual aesthetic, which can fuel overconsumption as identities are constantly changing. Or, take users like @vintageandy_, who blend in with the community, yet profit from peers and commodify the thrifted aesthetic by linking their Depop storefront.

Conclusion

In sum, the complex, multilayered messaging produced by the diverse participants and subgroups that make up the ThriftTok community can be understood as a generational critique of consumer capitalism's emphasis on fast fashion at the expense of fair labor practices and environmental sustainability. Members turn to secondhand fashion as an alternative market, attempting to avoid these issues.

It is equally a rejection of marketed identities in favor of self-fashioned expression. Thrifted fashion has a greater ability to signal opposition to norms, transcend categorizations, and invoke nostalgic associations from the past. Thrift stores offer unique options in dress that contribute to a personalized aesthetic. Presenting this style on TikTok can act as a code, revealing shared values and experiences to other subcultural insiders. Thus, the messages communicated between members and through thrifted styles assist in the formation of both individual and group identities.

The networked ThriftTok community shares insider language, tips, humor, and cultural references. Videos feature complex, layered communication, with subtle signs and references that outsiders might not pick up on. Members of ThriftTok subgroups will often make fun of themselves in niche ways.

The network is far-reaching and contains many diverse subgroups. Discord in the community reveals that this community is not in complete unity. Some users express

frustration with resellers who take advantage of the cheap, unique donated clothing items available. Others criticize chains like Goodwill, pointing out their increased prices and underpaid workers. Others still reproach less established thrifters who mainstream the practice and do not represent an “authentic” ThriftToker identity. Tensions within the community show that secondhand consumption is not without many of the same social, environmental, and economic problems associated with firsthand consumption.

This analysis will add to the nascent body of qualitative research on TikTok subcultures. More research must be done on how value expressions online do or do not translate into committed offline action for their stated causes. Further investigation is also necessary to understand different aesthetics and subcultures within the ThriftTok community. The recent addition of a full-service TikTok shop may alter or even make impossible authentic identity fashioning in these spaces.

Only by digging deeper into microtrends and their counter-trends can we begin to explain how and why they permeate into society at large (Penn 6). Generation Z’s current conversations, dreams, and fears can provide insight into future social, environmental, and economic developments. These are clues towards the kinds of decisions and policies they will make soon as they gain control of the workforce and political landscape.

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