

EVALUATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VIRTUAL THRIFTING MARKETPLACE IN INDIA

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Introduction

Thrifting is the concept of shopping for pre-loved clothes which are in good condition or a good investment in the eyes of the buyer. Thrift stores are widely popular in the West. Though in the last few years, we have seen a steady rise in India too. Thrifting is very commonly associated with selling or purchasing clothes and accessories like Sunglasses, Vintage Jewellery, Footwear, and more. In some stores old furniture pieces, artifacts, and other household items can also be found. While thrifting, the intent is either to make some small amounts of extra money by selling items that are no longer in use or saving by going for pre-loved items which can be upcycled and re-created. People who shop from thrift stores are themselves creative and believe in sustainability. Fast fashion creates the largest amount of carbon waste in the world which makes thrifting even more necessary.

In the hard and most unprecedented times of COVID-19, where everything has taken a shift, shopping has found its way online too. Everything that was initially offline and in-person now has been replaced by screens and virtual meets. Specifically for thrifting, virtual thrifting has stepped in and is booming in India. It means that all mediums of shopping and selling have moved to online platforms either through social media or websites. Virtual thrifting is an approachable concept for potential small business owners and fashion-loving individuals to create a platform for potential buyers and sellers to connect. When someone says they are going for thrifting, it means they are either going to a thrift store, a flea market, or a place where things can be bought at discounted rates. While thrifting and shopping from a flea market might sound close to each other, there's a significant difference. In a flea market, finding a variety of shops to purchase from at a lower price where the shops are purely there to make profits is easy. While shopping from a flea market, one also might have a list of items to purchase and abide by it. However, when shopping from a thrift store, sometimes items are purchased from non-profit stores that wish to help people with lower wages. Also, in a thrift store, one doesn't necessarily go with a list. Thrift shopping is more about the hunt than locating one particular item and since thrift stores are full

of vintage and off-season goods, shopping becomes a more interesting activity overall.

While in the 1960s thrifting was associated with hippies after the revolutionized ideologies in the 1990s, among younger audiences, shopping at thrift stores is becoming increasingly popular. One of the most obvious reasons is our wallets. Thrift stores sell items at a fraction of the original price, considering that they are pre-owned items which are a win in the times of pandemic where one might mostly dress for themselves. Consumers are increasingly conscious of the way their purchases impact their environment and thrift stores offer them a way to reduce their carbon footprint while supporting their community. There are two sides to every coin, thrifting has a dark side too. It takes longer to find things one might need urgently. If something is needed today, thrift shopping might work, but it's not a completely reliable option. Another major bane is how thrift stores shop for cheap items from local flea markets in bulk. They commit to make small changes in them and sell them at a higher price. When the job of a boutique is taken over by a thrift store, things get out of context. In India, the Instagram thrift scene is a thriving one with more and more new sellers setting up shop. In the buyers' segment, it's finding resonance among students and those starting on their careers. The small business community has taken over with the trends like thrifting, tie-dye apparel, acrylic jewelry, etc.

Background

In an earlier era, nothing went to waste. In the West, if a dress got worn out, it could be worn as a dungaree for the daughter of the house, and when that got trashed, it would be torn and stuffed into the chairs. Similarly in India too, thrifting has very closely run in our families for generations. The parents would buy a piece of garment for the eldest child of the family and once the shirt would look too short or the jeans laddered up the ankle, it would pass to the younger siblings as suitable candidates for the garment. Thrifting is known to have different origins in different parts of the world. In America, cities grew rapidly—partly due to the historical surge in new arrivals during America's biggest wave of immigration. The industrial revolution introduced the mass-production of clothing which started changing the game. The cheaper it became to shop for new clothes, the more people thought of garments as easily disposable. While buying second-hand was still considered to be a symbol of low wealth and standing, tons of this conservative thinking changed when religious-affiliated groups began to use these secondhand products to assist the poor and homeless. The history of thrift store shopping changed drastically with the arrival of the Great Depression within the 1930s. Demand was so high for secondhand items that thrift stores at the time couldn't continue. In Europe, Second-hand clothing bazaars were common as far back as Elizabethan England. Citizens donated used goods purchasable with the proceeds getting to provide for the visually impaired. As noted, the Salvation Army began its thrift shop work. So effective were these shops that by 1929, half the organization's income

came from its thrift shop sales. Goodwill, which started its thrift shops seven years later, had a fleet of 1000 trucks by the 1920s. The organization also provided services to go to the homes of donors to pick second-hand goods (Tryvst, 2020).

Wanting to find vintage items from second-hand stores is not as modern of an idea as one might think. As early as the 1950s, things started to evolve. Many people began to attend thrift stores in search of vintage couture items. That trend of finding something beautiful from back within the day has carried thrift stores all the way through into the 21st century. Of all the factors increasing the recognition of what has come to be called “thrifting,” nothing has played a more significant role than the web and therefore the development of second-hand goods’ online sales. Many consumers might know that eBay and Craigslist both debuted online in 1995. Most wouldn’t recognize, however, that these were worldwide thrift shops. In the 25 years since online sales of used goods took hold, the movement has exploded. Thrifting, both online and in brick-and-mortar shops, may be a major global economic force. Researchers report that about 17% of young consumers engage in thrift shopping per annum. The money spent by thrifters every year in numbers is the estimate just for apparel resale is \$18 billion (Tryvst, 2020).

By 2021, the online and in-person resale industry has appallingly drawn \$33 billion and this success can be linked mostly to social media platforms riding on the trend of thrift culture (Tryvst, 2020). Platforms like Instagram have already got many shops and products from different parts of the world—all to utilize its algorithms of e-commerce thrift shops. Meanwhile, YouTube channels by famous influencers are promoters of thrift culture. The market of thrift continues to accelerate, and shows no signs of depression. This concept exists persistently as a response to the high demand for second-hand goods. Furthermore, with the help of technological platforms and its uninterrupted leap within popular culture, the thrift industry will remain an eco-friendly fashion staple and a growing enterprise. As the youth of India starts to follow and look up to western trends, it is not hard to find tens of thousands of stores run by teens who are firm believers of both sustainability and empathy. They empathize with the youth of low-wage classes who deserve to celebrate and experiment with their style in their young years. These thrift stores also aim to provide a larger variety of goods and clothing items to society, not just the upper classes but also to economically vulnerable groups by facilitating online commerce.

Discussion

The stores moving to online platforms makes it easy for individuals to start without too much investment. This investment would initially include heavy amounts of funds for a brick-and-mortar store in the main street market or a well-organized inventory so that brick-and-mortar anyone who enters the store does not go empty-handed. As the stores have moved to platforms

like websites and social media pages, the number gets hard to calculate every day with the increasing thrifting trend and new individuals willing to join the sector. The rise is so rapid and even though thrifting is growing at the speed of a rocket, there's research yet to be done in this sector, especially in India.

In the United States of America, thrifting is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry (NARTS, 2021). The economic status of the owners of these brands can range from middle to upper-middle-class families in India. These upper-middle-classes are more environmentally conscious and also have the proficient resources to run a fully functional store. These resources can broadly be stated as living in a metropolitan city where shipping services are easily available, families being open to ideas by the youth of the family even if there are minor losses, money is not a huge constraint and experience has an upper hand, etc. For the same reason, thrift stores can easily be located in developed or developing cities across the world.

With the ideologies of individuals willing to enter this sector and conscious consumption, loving it in mass numbers makes it have a lot of pros to it. Consumers today have a very different approach towards investing in clothing and other fashion-related items than they had 10 years ago. Today, when a customer shop for a birthday outfit is found, they consider things like reusability, quality, reliance, customer reviews, and the brand's social involvement. A very common fact runs in the crowds that a single cotton T-shirt takes about 659 gallons of water to produce from scratch. With that amount of water being used just for a single shirt made and 3,781 liters of water to make a pair of jeans, we are threatening our water supply.' (Nashuproar, 2021). This being said, it becomes excruciatingly important to use high-quality items for longer durations of time and recycle them by upcycling or thrifting. Another fact is that fast fashion has the highest carbon footprint (Vagabondary, 2017).

All large brands like BCC, Forbes, Vogue and other media sources have this topic in the limelight. By choosing preloved items over newly produced pieces, shrinking of this massive carbon footprint takes place. With this, prevention of the exasperate amounts of natural resources being used in the process of making a particular garment and of it ending up in a landfill waiting to decay for another 100 years is also prevented. Other than this, time and energy used to ship these items to the warehouses, to the shops, and then to one's doorsteps is also saved (Vagabondary, 2017). As thrifting becomes a trend in almost all parts of the world, it brings a lot of thought to the decision-making process of the customer. It makes the customers more aware of the illnesses of fast fashion rising at an alarming rate and makes them more conscious of it. Apart from the environmental factors that play a huge role in the early generations of the era, expenses are another necessity of survival. A huge factor to jump right into thrifting is our wallets- very essential and unavoidable. It is always a steal for negotiators at such stores and they rarely go

empty-handed. In some parts of America, these thrift stores are run for charity which helps in job recruitments or is a source to provide the basic need for clothes to all classes of society (Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries, 2020). This becomes a cherry on the cake average to good earning individuals to be able to prevent environmental hazards, help the needy and save! COVID-19 has allowed each of us to dive into our childhood hobbies or try our hands on something new. During the same time, a lot of young entrepreneurs have been established. The easy online store settings have allowed many to earn from home and make some extra money. This has introduced a sense of entrepreneurship in the youth of the nation by handling small accounting cases, learning to moderate goods, and make profits at the same time. Those brands that managed to grow and found their way into the market, have seen the bigger picture of these small activities like myself.

While thrifting offers a variety of positives, it should be noted that there is a negative side to it too. With things evolving, thrifting has taken a non-appreciable upsell to it. **“Thrift store gentrification”** is a phenomenon in which affluent shoppers voluntarily buy merchandise from second-hand clothing stores or in India, from local flea markets (during the times of COVID-19) to resell those same items at much higher prices. When this happens, Goodwill, eBay, and other thrift stores raise their prices to meet the demands of their consumers, essentially defeating the purpose of buying second-hand items in the first place (Grey journal, 2021). While shopping from a flea market and reselling is just one of the harsh realities, we must not forget how all the profit made by the stores only stays with these middle-income influencers and still does not trickle down to the labor workers who initially made the product. This demotes the idea of making second-hand clothing items more accessible to all classes of society. The main purpose of these stores was originally to provide employment to the poor and also run a place that helps immigrants be able to afford more clothes. Now that “vintage” looks have come to be “stylish” and “cool”, the target audience has moved away too. After it becomes a trend and teenagers can be found hunting for vintage items online for hours, the stores know that the price can be raised as their audience moves to more elitist societies. All this is great, but it still defeats the main purpose of it being able to serve low-income families. The original demographic for thrift stores are being driven out by more affluent shoppers hoping to make their own money or fit in with current trends and eventually slide from their main motive (Deccan Herald 2021).

While this continues to happen, the huge fast fashion brands continue to hold their place in the large market. Forever 21 was a \$4 billion juggernaut, catering to young adults in the high growth, fast fashion category—smart, affordable, trendy of the moment—often setting the bar for the category and the competition (Forbes, 2019). Brands like H&M and Zara too are under constant criticism for using child labor and underpaying their workers. In the entirety of it, they play a huge role in the economic bias and degradation of the worker class and only support influencers and then name their styling videos of mass fast fashion shopping- “Hauls”. There is a

reason why fast fashion is also known as disposable fashion; the significant amount of waste associated with it. With consumers understanding and accepting the lesser quality of the garments in substitution for lower prices, they are quick to throw away the items and move on to the next trend. Although this is nothing new in the fashion industry as there have always been trends causing a large surplus; with fast fashion however, the amount of pollution has increased at a tremendous rate (Edology, 2021). Zara is the paramount fast fashion trendsetter. For Zara, online sales increased 50% in Q1 compared to the year 2019 with April seeing a 95% increase since 2019. Two decades ago, Zara was revolutionary for offering hundreds of new items a week; Nowadays, Asos adds as many items as 7,000 (The Atlantic, 2021). The same was observed with Swedish rival H&M which saw a 38% spike in sales from March to May in 2020 while overall sales halved (Digicommerce, 2020). Retailers such as H&M are focusing on the long term and looking at solutions to reduce their environmental footprint. Although these large fashion brands are one of the main culprits of flooding the world with inexpensive clothing, they often recycle the goods in the countries where they originated. The fabric is reprocessed into different goods such as blankets, insulation, carpet padding and pillow stuffing (Edology, 2021).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

To conclude, thrifting is an ancient art that has evolved and found its way into the 21st century after being in the limelight for a while now. While this trend is borrowed from the West, it's booming in India at a very high pace. The intent of emerging thrifting stores was initially to help the immigrants and refugees being able to afford clothes at a much cheaper rate and provide employment to the local workers and slowly changed to helping the low-income classes of society and for charity raising funds for recruitments and providing livelihood. When the COVID-19 took over our lives, thrifting too moved online to social media platforms. Young entrepreneurs have been established and have gained a wide range of skills for their upcoming years. From worn by the hippies to being a global trend filled with teenagers styling the "vintage looks". Thrifting is sustainable and extremely healthy for the environment by avoiding carbon prints and pollution caused by fast fashion. People now are more environment conscious which hypes the concept of thrifting and makes it more relevant to today's generations. With all this, thrifting has taken an unfair path to resell items after buying them at cheaper prices from flea markets manufactured by underpaid multi-billion-dollar-a-year workers and more. Even after all this, huge fast fashion brands still dominate the market by a huge degree.

To make thrifting more fluent and more approachable and the initially approached audience, making small concentrated groups where reaching out is easier and only focuses on the low-income classes. For offline thrift stores, having them in more not-developed cities and towns is where the audience exists. The power that social media holds in today's time can change a lot of

small things if spoken about. Similarly, it is important to deter and bring notice to anyone not to more people about the unfair means of thrifting by some of the stores and not support them. It is the common consumers of such items that make it more convincing to other stores to follow the same loop. As consumers, being careful and checking the practices of any thrift store be it in terms of hygiene or morality is necessary. As an owner, not following any of these practices and only looking to help the needy should be the main idea. The most important aspect to solving ethical issues is following laws implemented by the higher authorities that enforce brands to be more environmentally conscious and morally ethical. Laws like Green tax for environmental sustainability and labour laws to avoid exploitation of the workers can be implemented. The higher authorities can make sure proper executions take place for things to work smoothly and thoughtfully. Keeping minimal costs apart from making profits should be a must before proposing a price for a particular piece of garment. Every brand has its own aesthetic and so stealing or copying ideas only makes one's own brand more negatively viewed. To avoid this, following personal beliefs and aesthetics can make a brand look a lot more special and personalized to the audience. Another thing noticed about Instagram thrift stores is that they invest too much in packing the items. They use several layers of plastic while packing and shipping items. Plastic consumption should be as less as possible and other healthy alternatives would be unbleached parchment paper decorations and paper-jute mailers. Being socially aware and honest is the biggest commitment one can give to nature.

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