DISSERTATION

FROM SHABBY TO CHIC: UPSCALING IN THE U.S. THRIFT INDUSTRY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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This study investigates the upscaling process taking place in the U.S. thrift industry by examining three thrift firms located along Colorado's Front Range. It employs a multi-methodological approach to explore what this process entails, why it is occurring, and to evaluate its social and political implications. Participant observation in stores, in-depth interviews with industry personnel, and a survey of thrift store shoppers demonstrate that upscaling is occurring at this strata of consumption. The upscaling process entails: 1) changing the look of the stores so that they are cleaner, lighter, more organized, and made to appear more like their low-end retail competitors; 2) changing the merchandise, which now includes antiques as well as new goods purchased from trade markets and cast off by giant corporate retailers; 3) finding new locations for stores in suburban, high-traffic shopping centers rather than urban areas; and 4) a "McDonaldization" of thrift stores, which attempts to rationalize and make more efficient collecting, processing, distributing and pricing the used merchandise sold in these stores. This study finds that thrift firms are upscaling stores in order to attract middle-income consumers, a shift from the previously poor clientele. A review of popular magazines, books, and television programs illustrates how media destigmatizes the consumption of used goods making it fashionable to buy resale. This study shows, however, that changes in the thrift industry are occurring at a time when increasing income and wealth inequality in the United States makes purchasing used goods economically necessary for lower-

income, middle-income, and even some upper-income shoppers. Together these trends render invisible social class inequities embodied and reproduced in the everyday practice of thrift shopping.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In many ways, this project was decades in the making. As a high school student in the late 1970s, I roamed Chicago-area thrift stores in search of everything from coats to kitsch. Back then, thrift stores were rather dark and dusty places where one had to glean through bins of clothing in order to locate something that might fit – and still there was uncertainly as to actual size, since wrinkles could shorten a garment by several inches. A fur coat to shield one from a Windy City winter could be had for a few dollars.

I continued to scour thrift stores through my collegiate years, especially during economically lean years when I was a sociology graduate student in the 1990s. At that time, aided by a sociological imagination, I noticed a change taking place in the shopping venues I had frequented since my youth. There were now "departments" in the thrift stores I visited. Clothing was pressed, hung, sized, even color coded, and compartmentalized for women, men, and children. Housewares were well organized on well-lit shelves, many items were even new, still in their original package. And, in some venues, there were "boutiques" with antiques, collectibles, and "vintage" clothing. The merchandise in these sections was priced accordingly; even taking inflation into consideration, prices of many of these used items were quite steep. Several of the stores with "vintage" or "retro" clothing sections sold the kinds of things that I used to pull from huge clothing bins. Something was going on here and I wanted to find out what it was.

What follows is a sociological exploration of the thrift industry along the Front Range of Colorado. My journey took me to stores, warehouses, processing centers, and managerial offices in and around the Denver metropolitan region. In addition to interviewing and observing people who work and shop in thrift stores, I ventured into the contested terrain of theories of culture and consumption. These theories have a great deal to tell us about the transformations taking place in the thrift industry – and in the larger resale market more generally – by elucidating the varied ways that culture, cultural producers, and political-economic context shape consumer practices. Moreover, they give us a better understanding of how a capitalist milieu that is global in scope and flexible in execution influences what we buy. Yet this investigation of what is taking place in one of the lowest strata of consumption reveals a shortcoming of much current consumption theory. While research and theory on elite consumption abound, little work has yet been done on the everyday consumption practices of middle-class and less advantaged members of our society seeking to clothe their families and furnish their homes in accordance with high U.S. consumption lifestyle standards.

Why Consumption Matters

Many of the world's most voracious consumers live in the United States. The average American consumes about fifty-three times more goods and services than someone from China (Taylor and Tilford 2000). Many of us know the oft cited figures that the United States makes up 5 percent of the world's population but consumes 22 percent of its fossil fuel and emits 24 percent of the world's ozone depleting carbon-dioxide (Taylor and Tilford 2000). Ironically, until quite recently, much of the scholarly work on consumption was done by Australian, British, and continental European sociologists rather than by those living in the United States where consumer spending helped sustain the longest economic expansion on record during the 1990s. While classical American sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1994 [1899]) explicitly examined consumption among the upper-class, and sociologist George Ritzer (1996; 2001) and economist Juliet Schor (1992; 1998) have written extensively on the subject for years, it is only quite recently that consumption has been taken seriously in U.S. academic circles.

A significant reason consumption as a social practice has received little attention by sociologists in the United States results from deeper theoretical rifts that exist in the discipline, and in the social sciences more generally, particularly recent debates within the Marxist theoretical tradition (Rosenau 1992). Consumption and its related analytical categories are often associated with postmodernism. Theorists identified with this perspective challenge the so-called "meta-narratives" of modernity, including Marxism (Baudrillard 1975; Lyotard 1979), and frequently focus attention on consumption rather than the political economy of production. Several theorize the relationship between media and consumer culture (Kellner 1995), and still others are concerned with the politics of representation and identity construction through commodities (Gabriel and Lang 1995). Production-oriented sociologists and social scientists meanwhile are typically unwilling to concede explanatory power to theories they perceive as antagonistic to their primary concerns: the centrality of labor, the exploitative social relations of production under capitalism, and the potential for class-based social transformation (McLaren and Farahmandpur 2000).

Yet it is important to resist a simplistic production-consumption dichotomy when we attempt to theorize social, political and economic life in the twenty-first century. There are several reasons for why consumption matters to sociology and the social sciences, not the least of which have to do with acknowledged changes in production. These changes include the globalization of production, the growth of multinational corporations, the global spread of media and information technologies, and the ideological triumph of neoliberalism around the world. The shift from Fordism to post-Fordist production/consumption strategies has led some social scientists to claim that "... in the early twenty-first century, the modern developed economies are characterised as consumer societies" (Miles et al. 2002). The confluence of these changes has enhanced the theoretical relevance of postmodernism, which in many ways illuminates – but perhaps too often celebrates – the fragmented character of contemporary life.

In their book, *The Unmanageable Consumer,* Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang (1995:188) highlight the fragmented nature of contemporary consumerism and underscore another simple but compelling reason for the serious study of consumption: "One cannot opt out of being a consumer, living in a non-consumer fashion, in a non-consumer landscape. Consumerism... has become part of our daily reality." If, as Gabriel and Lang suggest, the consumerist landscape is inescapable for those of us living in North America and Europe, understanding how consumption practices relate to other sociological realities, especially stratification and widening social inequalities, is important to the larger project of social change.

Finally, consumption matters to sociology and the social sciences because, as Alan Warde (2002) cogently argues, consumption is a socially embedded practice. Although the nature of modern consumption has been highly individualized, especially as a result of New Right rhetoric in the 1980s (Gabriel and Lang 1995), individual consumers are still social beings, affected by the many social forces that shape who we are and what we value. The study of consumption reveals, among other things, consumers shared meanings and aesthetic values, as well as systemic inequalities of power in decision-making, both in terms of what is produced and who can consume it (Warde 2002). The ideology of individualism reigns in the United States – and increasingly in others corners of the world – and individual consumer choice in the marketplace is glorified by economists and even by some sociologists (Bauman 1988). Yet, as Warde (2002:19) rightly reminds us, consumption practices, like other behavior "is collective and situational: and the appropriate methodological stance is collectivist or institutional."

The Sociological Significance of Resale Consumption

The collective, social nature of consumption is aptly visible in second-hand consumption, but relatively few studies have been done on this sector. Despite the fact that resale consumption has become an ordinary part of everyday consumer practice across North America and Europe in the form of yard sales, flea markets, auctions, and thrift stores, a recent book entitled *Ordinary Consumption* (Gronow and Warde 2001) ignores it. Countering this trend, Gregson and Crew (1997a; 1997b) provide rich ethnographic accounts of consumption practices in second-hand markets focusing on car boot or trunk sales in Britain. Their work highlights the performative interactions between buyers and sellers, where bargaining is expected and price is something that is socially negotiated rather than dictated by the invisible hand of the market.

Perhaps more than other forms, resale consumption illuminates the socially embedded character of consumption, especially how shared meanings and aesthetic values emerge and shape what people consume. In his article, "Consuming Design: Consuming Retro," Adrian Franklin (2002) explores how the varied meanings of now highly popular "retro" goods affect their desirability among certain groups of consumers. These previously-owned commodities are desirable to some people who define obtaining others' discards as a radical act. Franklin notes that when these products originally appeared on the market they were bought because of their newness, their "shock value," but on the resale market they are purchased because of their familiarity, their nostalgic capacity as it were. The nostalgia allure is true of older consumers, but also of younger ones who are familiar with these goods as a result of TV, film, and music (Franklin 2002).

Shared forms of media culture – certainly an integral part of the larger social and economic landscape – have helped to redefine the meaning of second-hand goods. This is true in the case of higher-priced resale goods such as antiques and collectibles, as well as the very bottom of the resale market, thrift. Popular magazines, which are integral to the inescapable consumerist landscape described by Gabriel and Lang (1995), extol the benefits of a flea market makeover for one's home, thereby shifting the meaning of used goods found in these shopping venues from discards to desirables. In addition to print media, television shows like *Living with Martha Stewart* and The Learning Channel's *Trading Spaces* not only destigmatize but popularize the use of second-hand goods for home decorating and remodeling projects – at the same time they provide advertising for Kmart and home-improvement companies. Television programs such as *The Antiques Roadshow* educate consumers about the current economic value of certain previously-owned goods, but also shape the way that ordinary people define their possessions – and what they desire to possess.

The power of these contemporary cultural forms to shape consumption practices should not be taken lightly. Before being found guilty in July 2004 for lying to federal investigators about a 2001 stock trade, Martha Stewart had an extremely successful magazine, television show, syndicated advice column, radio program, and website, which together reached 88 million people a month (Tyrnauer 2001; Wajda 2001). Many if not all of these often glorified the virtues of second-hand consumption. Like Martha Stewart's empire, the television show *Trading Spaces* also broadcasts the benefits of used merchandise for home redecorating projects to as many as 18 million viewers a week; spin-off shows, specials, books, and DVDs broaden the program's scope (Alexander 2003).

It seems reasonable to argue that home-improvement shows like *Trading Spaces* helped to fuel growth in the home-improvement industry, which was up $34 billion from 1991 to 2001, due in large part to wealthier baby boomers who the industry is courting by remodeling showrooms and adding more upscale items (D'Innocenzio 2003). It seems equally reasonable to argue that television programs and other media forms help to explain the burgeoning popularity of resale consumption. In the 1990s as the U.S. economy was booming, so was its market for secondhand goods. Americans spent nearly $12 billion on used goods in 1997, up 30 percent from 1992, after adjusting for inflation (Kaufman 2000; Thorpe 2000). From 1994 to 1997 sales of used merchandise surpassed the overall retail market; growth at resale stores grew 23 percent during this period compared with 15 percent at retail stores (Chura 1998). Resale is now one of the fastest growing segments of the retail industry (Curry and Taylor 1999). Ebay, the on-line auction venue where shoppers generally bid on used items, went from 10 million registered users and $2.8 billion in trades in 1999, to 22 million registered users and $5.4 billion in trades in 2000 (Shenk 2001). From yard sales and flea markets, to shopping at thrift stores and on-line auctions, buying, wearing, and using someone else's things has lost its lower-class identification – and consequently its stigma – for many Americans.

Why the Thrift Industry?

Formally a province for society's poorest members, thrift stores are now a consumer site for middle and even upper middle-income shoppers. And like the home-improvement industry, the thrift industry is responding by catering to this highly sought after consumer base. Thrift stores are undergoing significant changes, most notably what I call an "upscaling" process. This is evident in the look of the stores, which are cleaner, brighter, and considerably more organized than they were in the past. New items cast off by low-end retailers now line the walls and shelves of thrift stores, which in the past featured only discarded used goods. There has also been, to use George Ritzer's (1996) terminology, a "McDonaldization of thrift," with an increasing rationalization in the way second-hand goods are processed, priced, and displayed in thrift store venues to increase efficiency and, consequently, sales. There is also a homogenization in how the stores look, with stores being modeled or remodeled to look identical. Most significantly, thrift stores are now major retail players, consciously competing not only with one another but with retail giants like Wal-Mart, Target, and Kmart.

The growth in secondhand retailing and the ongoing dramatic changes in thrift store venues suggest the importance of seriously studying the thrift industry as a critical site of consumption. For while these sites were formally considered the province of society's most disadvantaged consumers, their broadening appeal illuminates fundamental issues of social stratification, especially the widening gap between rich and poor over the past three decades in the United States. A sustained inquiry into the thrift industry therefore elucidates a key facet of the politics of consumption.

While I will argue that changes in the thrift industry, coupled with mass media endorsement to buy resale, has encouraged more middle and upper middle-income consumers to shop at thrift stores, it is equally important to consider thrift shopping as a way to resist a culture of consumption and disposability. Some who buy used commodities do so not out of economic necessity or because it is trendy, but for philosophical or environmental reasons. Gabriel and Lang acknowledge the Janus, more complex, face of the contemporary consumer when they write,

> Some of us may, and do, from time to time, seek identity by browsing in front of shop windows, purchasing goods and internalizing their images.... At other times, however, our identities may be built around resistance to consumption and consumerism and the subversion of the symbolism carried by objects. (1995:98)

Understanding the Thrift Industry: A Multi-Methodological Approach

This exploratory study employs several social scientific methods to analyze upscaling in the thrift industry, and to get a deeper understanding of how this process might affect the industry's customers. Participant observation, in-depth interviews with industry administrators and store managers, a consumer survey, and content analysis of media representations of second-hand goods are all used to probe the industry and its customers. While each method has its strengths and weaknesses, using them in combination helps to elucidate the phenomenon from different methodological vantage points (Brewer and Hunter 1989). I take a decidedly qualitative approach to investigating the industry since one intention of this project is to apprehend the shift in meaning of second-hand goods in the larger culture – and consequently for individual consumers – and to posit how this redefinition might relate to upscaling in thrift stores.

Mindful of Alan Warde's (2002) assertion that consumers' behavior is "collective and situational" and thus the appropriate methodological standpoint is "collectivist or institutional," this project looks at three firms that are representative of the thrift industry to investigate the upscaling process. Twenty-eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with vice presidents, regional managers, and store managers in these three firms suggest industry-wide changes, as well as important differences that exist between organizations. A consumer survey administered to over two hundred shoppers at three stores in one firm provides demographic data regarding who is shopping at thrift stores and attitudinal data regarding why they are there. The survey and interviews for the study took place along the Front Range of Colorado, primarily in the Denver metropolitan area, from August 2000 to September 2001. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used for each firm and, when necessary, interview participants. Shoppers who took part in the survey were anonymous.

In addition to investigating upscaling in the thrift industry, this project examines what is arguably the most profound institutional influence on consumer behavior: mass media. I review various media forms, including books, magazines, and television programs, and use content analysis to broadly illustrate how the meaning of used goods has changed in U.S. culture. Just as individuals are politically socialized in institutions such as families and schools, so too are we socialized as consumers through various forms of mass media.

I argue that the upscaling of thrift stores is due in part to the destigmatization of used goods in media representations and I draw upon specific examples from popular culture to make this association. The destigmatization of used goods, in combination with the upscaling process, helps to pull many middle and upper-middle income shoppers into thrift establishments. But to suggest that even middle-class consumers frequent thrift shops without regard to need denies the considerable evidence that exists showing a growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest classes in the United States and the disappearing middle. My research finds that economic factors have propelled many middle-income consumers to shop at thrift stores. Data from my survey with thrift store shoppers must thus be interpreted in light of broader stratification research revealing the increased economic uncertainly of many middle-class consumers.

This study began with what I perceived to be occurring in a consumer venue I felt I knew quite well, and developed into, not a hypothesis, but rather a challenge to see if a case could be made for an upscaling process. While I certainly learned a great deal from the research process, I do not believe that anything was "proved." As David Wellman (1993:63) cogently argues, in laying out my methodological approach I, like other researchers, seek to make "a claim to credibility... to persuade an audience that what a researcher says is 'true'." But, in the end, it is up to my readers to determine if I have made a case for upscaling in the thrift industry.

Research Design

The three firms selected for this study are representative of both non-profit and for-profit enterprises in the thrift industry. The two non-profit firms, Helping Hand and Lifeline Ministries, were industry pioneers. The third firm, Ragtags, represents a growing trend in the thrift industry toward for-profit resale chain stores. Each of the three firms operates several stores in this region or district of the United States. In order to gain a better understanding of the industry, possible changes taking place, and thrift store customers, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following industry personnel: four administrators and seven store managers at Helping Hand; two administrators and eight store managers at Lifeline Ministries; and the District Manager and all six store managers in the Ragtags firm. Personnel changes made it difficult to conduct interviews with managers at every Helping Hand store. More importantly, I attempted to have approximately the same number of interviews per firm. Appendix 2 contains the interview schedule used in this part of the data collection.

Following the completion of all interviews with industry personnel, a consumer survey was administered in order to collect demographic and attitudinal data on thrift industry clientele. In order to control for differences between firms that became apparent while conducting interviews, three Helping Hand stores were selected as sites for the consumer survey. As a firm, Helping Hand was selected because it was midway between the other two firms with respect to the upscaling process: in short, not as far along in the process as Ragtags, but considerably more so than Lifeline Ministries. The three Helping Hand store sites were determined by the variety of store locations they represented. Broadcliff is a newly built store located in a middle to upper-middle income area within the city of Denver. Originally located across the street from where the survey was conducted, the store is therefore not new to the area. Radcliff is located in a suburban shopping center, and represents the industry trend toward locating thrift stores in these high-traffic shopping areas. Fairfax is a store located in a lower-income area of a suburb just on the outskirts of Denver. It represents a store with a lower-income, more racially and ethnically diverse clientele. Twenty percent of the total number of surveys were conducted in Spanish because so many of the shoppers at the Fairfax store were Spanish-only speakers. In all cases, permission to conduct the survey was granted by the store manager, with the additional permission and support of Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator.

Semi-structured interviews with thrift industry personnel – coupled with participant observation in stores and tours of processing areas – provided a rich understanding of industry operations and changes that were taking place within the three firms I investigated. While the consumer survey provided demographic information about who shops at thrift stores, it was less helpful in deepening my understanding of *why* people shop there. This question, which of course has tremendous theoretical import, would have been better answered by doing more in-depth interviews with thrift store shoppers. Obtaining interviewees, their consent, and the time needed to collect these data, however, were beyond the scope of this project. My answer to the question of why people shop at thrift stores comes from reviewing various media in our culture, including popular television programs, magazines, and books. In addition, my analysis and explanation are based on what could be garnered from several brief questions on the thrift shopper survey. Together, I believe the methods employed in this study provide an interesting and hopefully thought provoking look into the upscaling process taking place in the U.S. thrift industry.

CHAPTER 2

CONTESTED TERRAIN: THEORETICAL DEBATES OVER CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION

Theorizing Beyond Production

In making a case for upscaling in what is virtually an invisible arena of consumption, I begin by arguing for consumption as a feature of social life worthy of theoretical and empirical inquiry. Theoretical arguments for the centrality of production in shaping social, political, and economic life have a long intellectual history, most notably in the works of Karl Marx (1975 [1844]; 1974 [1867]) and scholars working within the Marxist tradition. Until relatively recently, far less was written about how consumption affects our individual and collective lives. Surely this is problematic for social theorizing given the rise of consumption on a mass scale, particularly in advanced capitalist societies during the second half of the twentieth century. Some historians have argued that consumerism is, in fact, the 'ism' that defines the twentieth century (Cross 2000; Glickman 2000), and sociologist Steven Miles (1998) contends that consumerism is now "a way of life." In the introduction to his text, *The Sociology of Consumption*, Peter Corrigan (1997:1) suggests "perhaps it is time to stand Marx on his head and claim that consumption, and not production, is the central motor of contemporary society."

While it is certainly time to theorize the significance of consumption as a central feature of social life, it is equally important to resist a simplistic binary opposition between production and consumption. Theoretically, it may be more useful to analyze the interplay between production and consumption, and to underscore the ways that both are shaped by political-economic forces. Instructive examples of this approach can be found in the substantial body of literature on the political economy of Fordist mass production and its reliance on mass consumption practices (Cohen 2003), and in research that examines specialized consumer markets under post-Fordist strategies of capital accumulation (Raynolds 2002).

Yet there is more to understanding contemporary consumption practices in general, and upscaling in resale consumption in particular, than one can garner solely from an analysis of the political-economic conditions under which consumption takes place. The altered state of capitalism since Marx's day – the fact that the system can now produce so much that consumers must be induced to consume more and more products (Smith 1993) – has led many social theorists to examine the cultural sphere in order to better understand consumption practices. In a noteworthy essay that reviewed developments in the sociology of consumer culture at the end of the 1980s, Mike Featherstone (1990:5), for example, argued that "it is important to focus on the question of the growing prominence of the *culture* of consumption and not merely regard consumption as derived unproblematically from production" (emphasis in original).

Changing Conceptions of Consumption

In his essay, "Perspectives on Consumer Culture," Featherstone (1990) identified three analytical approaches that help situate how social theorists conceptualize consumption activities in Western advanced capitalist societies. The first he calls the "production of consumption" perspective. It focuses on the expansion of capitalist commodity production and sites of consumption, and emphasizes the disproportionate power of capitalist producers. This approach is first associated with the Frankfurt School, and further developed in Jean Baudrillard's early writings, as well as Frederic Jameson's (1984) influential essay *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* The second perspective, which Featherstone argues is "the more strictly sociological view," is the "modes of consumption" approach. Here the emphasis is on the role of consumption in social classification, "the different ways in which people use goods to create social bonds or distinctions" (1990:4). In contemporary social theorizing, this perspective is most closely identified with Pierre Bourdieu (1984), but it is also associated with classical social theorist Thorstein Veblen (1994 [1899]) who, as early as the turn of the twentieth century, was keenly aware of how commodities conferred status. In discussing this second approach, Featherstone rightly notes that the proliferation of commodities in contemporary Western societies has made it much more difficult to read material goods as signs of social status. The last perspective, not yet fully developed, is more heterogeneous than the first two. It examines the pleasures, desires, and dreams generated by consumer culture imagery and sites of consumption. This approach can be found in the works of Walter Benjamin and, more recently, in work on consumption (and reception) in cultural studies (Radway 1984). It is, in many respects, a post-modern perspective on consumer culture, one that erases the line between high and low culture, and concerns itself with the aestheticisation of everyday life (Warde 2002).

In surveying contemporary conceptions of consumption, sociologist Alan Warde (2002) asks what, if anything, has changed since Featherstone articulated his theoretical typology of consumer culture. Warde argues that among more recent theories of consumption there has been a serious decline in the production of consumption perspective, attempts to preserve parts of the modes of consumption approach, and widely expanded interest in the last perspective, which, he maintains, celebrates consumption. He argues the reason for this is that "the celebratory approach...appears to have encouraged a tendency to turn the benevolent aspects of consumption into a legitimation of commercial culture and an apology for liberal capitalist markets" (2002:11). Warde draws out several important implications of the celebratory approach to consumption. He argues that this perspective exaggerates the role of individual choice in consumption behavior, obscures the unreflective nature of much ordinary consumption, and subdues critique of consumer culture in general. Further examination of Warde's interpretation of changing conceptions of consumption is warranted here because it helps to frame several of the theoretical and social issues addressed in this study, and clearly illustrates the implications of adopting a particular theoretical approach to consumption.

Warde draws on several contemporary trends – including developments in social theory, an enhanced appreciation of the symbolic rather than the use-value of goods, and post-Fordist niche marketing – to explain the decline in more "classical" approaches to consumption. The most significant of these trends is the idea found in much contemporary social theorizing that media/consumer audiences do not passively absorb media/advertising messages. Without a passive audience, producers cannot simply manipulate wants through advertising nor market goods that are best for them to produce. Arguments against a docile audience or consumer can be found in the growing number of audience/reception studies in contemporary cultural studies, the earliest and perhaps most influential of which is Janice Radway's (1984) ethnography *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Radway discussed the appeal and pleasures of romance reading, and argued that it is an "oppositional" act for women because it enables them a temporary emotional respite from their proscribed familial roles and responsibilities under patriarchy. The contrast between this view of consumption and, for example, the production of consumption perspective is suggested by Laura Desfor Edles (2002:74) who notes that "Above all audience/reception analysts celebrate *agency* – the freedom of the audience to pick and choose which parts of texts to attend to, and thereby create their own meaning" (emphasis in original). This is a far cry from the view that capitalist producers hold a disproportionate amount of power to manufacture and manipulate meanings.

Warde contends the decline in more classical approaches to consumption also results from an enhanced appreciation of the symbolic rather than the use-value of goods. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's (1979) *The World of Goods* is an illustrative example of Warde's claim. Douglas and Isherwood argued that material goods do more than reflect social position or prestige as Veblen suggested; they serve as a form of communication that enables us to project an image of ourselves to others. Warde argues that increasingly during the 1990s those conceptualizing consumption emphasized its role in the creation of personal identity, rather than viewing consumption as a set of socially embedded practices that reproduce inegalitarian social classifications, which would reflect the more strictly sociological modes of consumption approach in Featherstone's classification. Arguments that consumption enables one to exercise radical personal freedom (Bauman 1988), or that consuming can be a kind of liberation (Twitchell 2000), also represent the more celebratory – and it should be noted *individualistic* – approach to consumption, which Warde rightly argues sociologists should interrogate.

> ... sociologists have become much enamoured with accounts which start from an assumption of individual agency rather than social constraint...that we no longer have any option but to choose who we are to be and that substantive choices are registered most powerfully through consumption behavior. The individual agent exercising self-control over personal destiny – a key figure in the discourse of late modernity – offers a seductive model. People like to think about themselves in this way, or at least the privileged and successful do....The danger is that we accept a model of the individual, who is very like our own ideal versions of ourselves, and where the checks and balances, context and constraints are overlooked.... If the collective and institutional conditions of consumption are ignored, then the structure of unequal distribution of power in various fields of consumption is also overlooked, and all actors are attributed with an equal capacity for control over their own situation (2002:18-19).

Warde does not accept uncritically the so-called classical approaches to consumption. He cites the limitations of Veblen's emphasis on conspicuous consumption, arguing that appropriate weight should be given to "the ordinariness of most consumer behavior," that is, consumption practices where consumers are not making self-conscious decisions and choices (2002:19). Obscuring this "dull compulsion to consume," he argues, is also one of the problems with the celebration of consumption approach. Warde maintains that the important point about acknowledging ordinary, less self-reflective consumer behavior is that one begins to understand the process of "normalization," how certain things become defined as necessities that all people and households should have.

He rightly notes that this is a primary way that demand and material accumulation are accelerated upwards – and that this acceleration is rarely noticed.

Finally, Warde contends that wholeheartedly embracing a positive view of consumer culture, as those who adopt a celebratory approach to consumption often do, suspends or subdues critique of the many problematic aspects of consumption and consumer society. These include waste, privatization, and the labor processes under which commodities are produced. Among the many consequences of what Warde refers to as this "diluted critique" of consumer society is a convergence between social scientific concerns and market research approaches to consumer behavior, which, he argues, "reflects a tendency towards the commercialisation of mental life, and the subordination of intellectual reflection to the instrumental and practical purpose of selling goods and services" (2002:20). Moreover, subdued critique of consumer culture fostered by the celebratory approach contributes to the absence of any discussion regarding the politics of consumption, the fact that some of us can consume through markets, and some vastly more than others, while others are dependent on the state. Warde calls for more discussion and structural analysis of divisions in consumption practices:

> The suppressed politics of consumption hints at a basis for a more general social scientific critique of the consumer society, which would identify more connections among the social institutions implicated in sustaining contemporary consumption patterns (2002:22).

This study of upscaling in the thrift industry along Colorado's Front Range addresses several of Warde's concerns regarding the waning interest in more classical approaches to consumption, as well as problems associated with the celebratory view of consumption and consumer society. My analysis of the destigmatization of resale consumption is grounded in both the production of consumption and modes of consumption perspectives. I argue that the changed meaning of resale goods in U.S. culture has been shaped in significant ways by those with the power to produce cultural products such as popular books, magazines, and television programs. This may be unfashionable given the postmodern turn in social theorizing. Although I would concur with many social theorists who argue that power is more dispersed than a production of consumption approach recognizes (Foucault 1975), the meanings associated with consumer goods are not defined solely by individuals, but rather by individuals living in particular contexts shaped by specific historical social, political, economic, and cultural forces. Individuals may or may not accept prevailing meanings and may reject popularized consumer practices that attempt to create social distinctions. Consumer socialization and the reality of social stratification, however, are powerful forces that affect what we consume. This is well understood by cultural producers and the advertisers that financially support them. The popularity of sport utility vehicles, despite ridiculously low mileage and historically high gasoline prices, attests to the power of messages that attempt to create social distinctions even as they run contrary to social responsibility and economic self-interest.

Thrift shopping also reflects the everyday, ordinary consumer behavior that Warde argues is too often ignored by those who adopt the modes of consumption perspective or the celebratory approach to consumption. In addition, by focusing on upscaling, this study specifically examines the racheting-up of material accumulation, or what Warde refers to as the process of "normalizing" what is considered a necessity in the culture. While he acknowledges the many benefits of consumption to human-well being, Warde is right to be concerned about the detrimental effects of consumer society and much of our ordinary consumption practices. This study examines several of the undesirable consequences of upscaling in a sphere of consumption closely identified with those who often have the most restricted choices about what and where to consume, those whose individual agency is most circumscribed by the confines of their social class position. For this reason, an examination of upscaling in the U.S. thrift industry helps to illuminate the politics of consumption.

Culture, Consumption, and Politics

As many social theorists, cultural analysts, and anthropologists argue, culture is a key factor in understanding why people behave the way they do. Following sociologist Laura Desfor Edles (2002) and anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) before her, I define "culture" as systems of shared meaning. As Edles argues, this definition underscores that culture is collective and shared, and that cultural systems help to pattern behavior just as more visible structures do. Edles, however, astutely notes that this symbolic definition falsely implies that culture is *only* symbolic. She points to contemporary theorists Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault whose concepts "habitus" and "discourse" respectively "demonstrate that culture is continuously embodied, *practiced*, and reproduced, i.e., that it [culture] does not simply "exist" in abstract forms" (Edles 2002:7). Moreover, she argues that whether one adopts the definition of culture as shared meanings, or employs

Bourdieu or Foucault's concepts, "the point is that "culture" and "social structure" are only analytically, and never empirically, distinct" (Edles 2002: 8).

Central to understanding consumption practices is the question: why and how do people internalize cultural prescriptions to consume what they do? How do consumers come to share the meanings they have about certain material goods, and then how do they embody, practice, and reproduce these meanings? In advanced capitalist societies like the United States it would be difficult to answer these questions without discussing the role of mass media as a primary agent of socialization. This is not a novel idea, of course. Frankfurt School theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse argued decades ago that modern mass culture was the key agent of ideological hegemony in the twentieth century. Marcuse (1991 [1964]) argues this point quite forcefully in his classic text *One-Dimensional Man*:

> The irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate: they promote a false consciousness... *it becomes a way of life* (emphasis mine). It is a good way of life much better than before – and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of *one- dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe (1991 [1964]:12).

Whether one argues that the mass culture industry determines a generalized false consciousness and malaise regarding social action, or whether individuals are conscious, active agents, especially with regard to their consumption of cultural products, continues to be a matter of some debate. This is particularly true of theorists who take a more hard-line Marxist political economy approach, such as Nicholas Garnham (1998), and cultural studies theorists like Lawrence Grossberg (1998). While this theoretical debate too is often mired in a simplistic dualism, its relevance lies in sustained thinking about the relationship between ideology, symbolic representation, social action, and social change.

Garnham (1998) argues that contemporary cultural studies proponents like Grossberg have forgotten or forsaken the founding political economic project of cultural studies, which was the reaffirmation of British working class culture against the culture of dominant elites. At its founding, Garnham argues, cultural studies viewed the cultural realm as the ideological link between relations of production and political action. Cultural studies lost its way, according to Garnham (1998:602), because the notion of ideology was complicated by textual analyses that question the concepts of truth and falsity, and because the concepts of domination and subordination were broadened beyond class to also include race and gender, so that "The enemy is now not just capitalism but...white patriarchal capitalism." Moreover, Garnham (1998:603) finds the current emphasis in cultural studies on cultural consumption rather than cultural production, and on leisure rather than work, extremely problematic because it plays ideologically into the political Right who attempt to convince people to "construct themselves as consumers in opposition to producers." It also exaggerates the freedoms of consumption in daily life.

> Political economists recognize with Marx that all commodities must have a use-value; they must satisfy some need or provide some pleasure. There is no simple relationship between the unequal power relations embedded in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural forms as commodities – the overwhelming focus of cultural studies analysis – on the one hand, and the use-value of that commodity to the consumer on the other. But there is some relationship. A delimited social group, pursuing economic or political ends, determines which meanings circulate and which do not, which stories are told and about what, which arguments are given prominence and what cultural resources are made available and to whom. The analysis of this process is vital to an understanding of the power relationships involved in culture and their relationship to wider structures of domination (Garnham 1998:604).

For Garnham what is at stake here is the question of false consciousness, the ability to identify cultural practices that sustain structures of domination and those that do not. While he recognizes that the notion of false consciousness makes people uncomfortable because it implies some privileged access to truth, Garnham (1998:607) argues it is necessary "once one accepts the idea that on the one hand, our relations to social reality are mediated via systems of symbolic representation and, on the other hand, that we live within structures of domination – the mechanism and effects of which are not immediately available to experience...."

Lawrence Grossberg (1998:614) challenges Garnham's critique of cultural studies noting first, however, that he agrees "there are particular positions in cultural studies that have become too celebratory of culture, in part because the commitment to the local and specific have overshadowed any sense of the broader social context of unequal power relations," and that some cultural studies does not pay adequate attention to the economic realm. But Grossberg argues that rather than construct a simple binary between production and consumption, cultural studies addresses and theorizes the articulation between production, consumption, politics, and ideology. He argues for a notion of production that goes beyond the "capitalized manufacture of cultural commodities," to include what he calls "the self-production of culture," which addresses how people represent themselves and their worlds.

> For cultural studies, the fact that people do use the limited resources they are given to find better ways of living, to find ways of increasing the control they have over aspects of their lives, is significant, not only in itself, but also in terms of understanding the structures of power and inequality in the contemporary world and the possibilities for challenging them. Cultural studies does assume that people live their subordination actively; that means, in one sense, that they are often complicit in their own subordination, that they accede to it, although power often works through strategies and apparatuses of which people are totally unaware. Be that as it may, cultural studies believes that if one is to challenge the existing structures of power, then one has to understand how that complicity, that participation in power, is constructed and lived, and that means not only looking at what people gain from such practices, but also at the possibilities for rearticulating such practices to escape, resist, or even oppose particular structures of power. Cultural studies refuses to assume that people are cultural dupes, that they are entirely and passively manipulated, either by the media or by capitalism. But it does not deny that they are sometimes duped, that they are sometimes manipulated, that they are lied to (and believe the lies, sometimes knowing that they are lies) (1998:617).

Both Garnham and Grossberg's positions shape my analysis of the popularity of resale consumption and upscaling in the thrift industry. While I hesitate to surrender the power of the concept of false consciousness to explain how systems of symbolic representation are implicated in structures of domination, Grossberg's idea that "people live their subordination actively" in my view helps to negotiate the structure-agency binary embedded in the debate between some Marxist political economists and cultural studies. It also helps to elucidate, for example, why many middle-income consumers would claim they shop at thrift stores for fun rather than out of necessity, despite growing financial insecurity among the U.S. middle-class as a whole. As Grossberg suggests,

> Perhaps some people in cultural studies exaggerate the possibilities or the freedom to interpret and use popular practices. But the choice is not, as Garnham would have it, between freedom and determination....The fact that certain institutions (and individuals) would like to control how people interpret texts or what they do with them does not mean that such 'intentions' actually determine what people do and think, that is, the effects of practices. Are the real effects determined? Of course, but in very complex ways, across a multiplicity of planes and dimensions, of codes and structures, as the result of particular struggles to articulate particular sorts of practices to particular sorts of effects (1998: 618).

Certainly it is far too simplistic to view human behavior as either free or determined. But the concept of socialization – and, for the purposes of this project, consumer socialization – is extremely relevant here. While we are certainly free to think and act as we wish, as Grossberg cogently argues, the reality is that most of us live out our lives within relatively rigid cultural prescriptions and share systems of meaning. This, in my view, lends support to the production of consumption approach, which emphasizes the power of capitalist producers, including the so-called culture industries, to shape the meanings that we share.

Culture, Consumer Socialization and Over-Consumption

If consumerism is indeed "a way of life" (Miles 1998) it is difficult to deny that, at least to some extent, we are learning this way of life through advertising in newspapers and magazines, television programs and commercials, billboards, product placement ads in films, and other mass media forms that are ubiquitous in contemporary American society. Numerous studies have shown how mediated images shape our values, actions, and view of world events (Jhally, Lewis and Morgan 1991; Kilbourne 1999; Parenti 1993). Communications analysts agree that the central message disseminated by the culture industry is quite simple: consume. Sut Jhally (1987), for example, argues that advertising is one of the most important socialization mechanisms in modern society – and its main purpose is the marketing of goods.

In addition to advertising, cultural products such as television programs are also important socializing agents, bolstering myths about social mobility and shaping ideas about the "normal" American lifestyle. Mark Miller (1992:646) maintains that a materialist message is emphasized even in so-called "liberal" television situation-comedies like *The Cosby Show*:

> Each week, the happy Huxtables nearly vanish amid the porcelain, stainless steel, mahogany, and fabric of their lives. In every scene, each character appears in some fresh designer outfit that positively glows with newness, never to be seen a second time. And, amid all this pricey clutter, the plots and subplots, the dialogue, and even many of the individual shots reflect in some way on *consumption as a way of life*. Cliff's new juicer is the subject of an entire episode; Cliff does a monologue on his son Theo's costly sweatshirt; Cliff kids daughter Rudy for wearing a dozen wooden necklaces. Each Huxtable, in fact, is hardly more than a mobile display case for his/her momentary possessions (emphasis mine).

Economist Juliet Schor (1998; 2000) argues that characters on popular television shows have become our new "reference group," encouraging what she calls "the new consumerism," a national culture of upscale spending. "We watch the way television families live," she argues, "we read about the lifestyles of celebrities and other public figures we admire, and we consciously and unconsciously assimilate this information. It affects us" (Schor 1998:4). One indicator of this upscaling of consumption can be found in the average size American house: in 2000 the average size of a new home was 2,260 square feet, twice the size of the average home in 1970 (Rozhon 2000). While this fact may seem insignificant, its consequences are not. As economist Robert Frank argues, the middle-income family that buys this house will now have a significantly larger mortgage than the family would have had in 1970. And since public schools are funded by property taxes within a school district, these families must buy average-priced homes or send their children to below-average schools (Frank 2000a; 1999).

Schor maintains that upscale spending is problematic because with increased inequality over the past three decades – income and wealth accruing to the richest twenty percent of Americans – fewer of us can actually afford to emulate the lifestyles of the rich and famous. (It is worth mentioning here that *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* was a popular television program in the 1990s.) In order to finance their upscaled lifestyles, Schor argues, many middle-class Americans overspend, that is, they spend more than would like to and more than they have. This has driven down their rate of savings and in many instances led to personal bankruptcy.

While several social scientists who analyze consumption in the United States concur with Schor that consumer overspending is a serious problem for middle-class Americans (de Graaf, Waan and Naylor 2001; Frank 1999), others argue that over-consumption is a myth. Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi (2003) emphasize that those in trouble are *families with children*, and they are not going broke because they overspend on luxuries or unnecessary consumer items. Warren and Tyagi use Consumer Expenditure Survey (CES) data from 1972-1973, 1980, and 2000 to show, for example, that the average family of four today spends 21 percent *less* (adjusted for inflation) on clothing, 22 percent *less* on food (at home and eating out combined) and 44 percent *less* on major home appliances than its counterpart a generation ago. Rather than frivolous spending, they claim, middle-class parents are in trouble because they have assumed high mortgages to provide their children with a basic need: a decent, safe education. They write, "The data expose a harsh reality: Parents who can get their kids into a more *economically* segregated neighborhood really improve the odds that their sons and daughters will make it through school safely" (Warren and Tyagi 2003:26). The increased cost of suburban housing has been burdensome for two-income families, according to Warren and Tyagi, and especially so for single, female-headed households after a divorce. Moreover, many families assume large credit card debt as a result of a job loss, medical problem, family breakup, or combination of the three. Yet the over-consumption myth remains "rock solid" in their view, "not because it is supported by hard evidence, but because it is a comforting way to explain away some very bad news.... if families are to blame for their own failures, then the rest of us bear no responsibility for helping those who are in trouble. Their fault, their problem" (Warren and Tyagi 2003:19).

What is interesting about the debate on over-consumption is that, again, it seems mired in binary thinking: the problems of middle-class families are a result of *either* a culture that encourages them to overspend, *or* an economic environment that makes it extremely difficult for them to finance basic needs such as housing, education, and health care. I maintain that it is *both* culture, which is saturated by media that champion consumerism as a way of life, *and* a political-economic environment that contribute to the financial problems experienced by low and middle-income families in the United States. This study bridges the culture verses political economy gap by showing how both media culture and increased social inequality help to explain the phenomenon of thrift shopping among middle-income consumers.

Consumerism as Ideology

There is little doubt that consumer spending in the United States helped to fuel the incredible economic expansion of the 1990s. But the shopping frenzy that often made headlines masked a darker economic reality. Despite the boom, inequalities in income and wealth increased in the United States, continuing a trend that appeared in the mid-1970s. There is now a considerable body of evidence that shows a dramatic rise in income, earnings, and wealth inequality in the United States over the past three decades (Henwood 2003; Miller 2000; Neckerman 2004; Perrucci and Wysong 2003; Roberts 2004). Between 1977-1999 the top twenty percent of households in the United States saw their real after-tax incomes grow 43 percent, while after-tax income for the poorest twenty percent of households declined 9 percent (Henwood 2003, see Table 2.1). Though they saw some income growth, the relative share of total income declined for all but the top 20 percent of U.S. households.

Table 2.1
Changes in Household Income, 1977-1999

	Real Income Growth 1977-1999	Share of Total Income 1977	1999	Change	Income in 1999
Poorest 20%	-9%	5.7%	4.2%	-1.5%	$ 8,800
Second 20%	+1	11.5	9.7	-1.8	20,000
Middle 20%	+8	16.4	14.7	-1.7	31,400
Fourth 20%	+14	22.8	21.3	-1.5	45,100
Top 20%	+43	44.2	50.4	+6.2	102,300
Top 1%	+115	7.3	12.9	+5.6	515,600

Income is after federal taxes. Source: Shapiro and Greenstein (1999) in Henwood (2003).

Table 2.1 shows that incomes in the United States have been growing more unequal since the late 1970s. By 2000, the top 1 percent of the population received a greater share of after-tax income than the bottom 40% (Inequality.org). In his book, *After The New Economy*, Doug Henwood (2003:79) writes that "the distribution of income in the U.S. in the early 2000s is about the most unequal it's ever been.... Not, of course that many people care, or even notice." Wealth is even more unequally distributed than income. In 2001, the richest 1 percent of the population in the United States controlled 38.1 percent of all wealth (excluding the principal residence) (Henwood 2003). Barbara Ehrenreich (2000) argues that low-wage service work and the appearance of a low-wage servant class is consistent with what some economists call the "Brazilianization" of the U.S. economy – a tiny overclass and a huge underclass, with the latter able to perform services for the former. While evidence of increased inequality finds its way into left-leaning popular magazines (Sklar 2003), and *The New York Times* recently published a series of articles on class in America, it may still be true that many in the United States do not notice the growing disparities between those who have and those who do not.

How can this be? *New York Times* reporters Janny Scott and David Leonhardt (2005) ask, "Why does it appear that class is fading as a force in American life?" Their answer is quite telling, and consistent with Featherstone's claim that the proliferation of commodities has made it more difficult to read material goods as signs of social class.

> For one thing it is harder to read position in possessions. Factories in China and elsewhere churn out picture-taking cellphones and other luxuries that are now affordable to almost everyone. Federal deregulation has done the same for plane tickets and long-distance phone calls. Banks, more confident about measuring risk, now extend credit to low-income families, so that owning a home or driving a new car is no longer evidence that someone is middle class. The economic changes making material goods cheaper have forced businesses to seek out new opportunities so that they now market to groups they once ignored. Cruise ships, years ago a symbol of the high life, have become the ocean-going equivalent of the Jersey Shore. BMW produces a cheaper model with the same insignia. Martha Stewart sells chenille jacquard and scallop-embossed ceramic dinnerware at Kmart (Scott and Leonhardt 2005).

Whether or not low and middle-income families are "over-consuming," buying luxuries such as new cars or cruise vacations, is debated by economists like Juliet Schor and Elizabeth Warren. Nevertheless, increased poverty rates and consumer debt, home foreclosures, and record numbers of personal bankruptcy filings suggest that many of these families can no longer afford to consume as they once did. There are clear indications that poor and middle-class Americans are in serious trouble. Despite a so-called economic recovery in the last few years, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the percentage of the U.S. population living in poverty rose from 12.1 percent in 2002 to 12.5 percent in 2003, with children comprising one-third of those who are poor (Knowlton 2004; Reuters 2004). Credit card debt has increased from less than ten billion dollars in 1968 (adjusted for inflation) to more than six hundred billion dollars in 2000 (Warren and Tyagi (2003). In less than twenty-five years, home foreclosures have more than tripled and, if current trends continue, more than five million families with children in the United States will file for bankruptcy by the end of this decade (Warren and Tyagi 2003). Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi (2003:4) state the situation plainly:

> Over the past generation, the number of American families who have found themselves in serious financial trouble has grown shockingly large. In a world in which our neighbors seem to be doing fine and the families on television never worry about money, its hard to grasp the breadth or depth of financial distress sweeping through ordinary suburbs, small towns, and nice city neighborhoods.

Mounting evidence underscores rather than erases the salience of class as a significant force shaping American life, and makes the failure to notice growing inequalities on the part of many in the United States extremely troubling. But perhaps it is a blurring of the consumer landscape, as *New York Times* reporters Scott and Leonhardt (2005) suggest, that keeps many Americans in the dark about the significance of class. The ability to consume an abundance of cheap commodities – available at Wal-Mart, Kmart, Target, dollar stores, and thrift stores – keeps the millions who are poor and downwardly mobile from comprehending their class location and doing something about social, political, and economic inequalities. Cheap consumer goods therefore, serve an ideological function. An abundance of cheap commodities keeps us "happy in our own domination," in the words of Herbert Marcuse (1991 [1964]), and enables us to "live our subordination actively" in Lawrence Grossberg's (1998) terminology. Consequently, there is much at stake ideologically and politically in defining cheap, even used, consumer goods as fashionable and desirable.

CHAPTER 3

FROM SHABBY TO CHIC: DESTIGMITZING RESALE CONSUMPTION

Thinking About the Margins

Despite varied theoretical approaches to consumption, resale shopping is considerably under theorized or, in the case of thrift store shopping, disregarded entirely. This comes as no surprise to those concerned about social inequality since much of what occurs on the margins in our society is often ignored, especially by the mainstream media, and regrettably, even in some academic discourse. In the case of thrift consumption, mainstream media has taken notice of its increased popularity, as well as reported on the growth and changes occurring in the industry. But characteristically, media discussions go no further than superficial descriptions of the changed appearance of stores and passing declarations regarding the abundance of middle and upper middle-income consumers who now shop at them. Newspaper articles on the industry often include descriptions of the BMWs now found in thrift store parking lots – certainly one possible indicator of the income levels of shoppers – but little else is provided as to what social forces or cultural changes might lead these apparently well off individuals to shop there. Mention is made that thrift shopping is now fashionable, that there is less stigma attached to consuming used goods evidenced, for example, by the huge popularity of ebay's on-line auctions, but that is as deep an explanation of the growing trend as the reader gets.

Though you might think that people involved in the resale and thrift industry would have a clear picture of shifting consumer trends, even they have a hard time accounting for why resale and thrift shopping are now fashionable rather than stigmatized. While the Vice President of Retail Sales at Helping Hand noted that " there was a time when people wouldn't say they got it at a thrift store and then there was a time period where it was fashionable to shop at thrift stores," he could not posit any reason for this difference.

> I wouldn't want to guess the industry. You know, shoppers, I mean, I have been in retail business all my life. If I could tell you those answers, I'd be rich, I wouldn't be working today. Yeah, you can't get a handle on that.

I think one *can* "get a handle" on why the resale industry, including thrift stores, have grown so dramatically over the past decade. But it takes what C. Wright Mills (1959) calls a "sociological imagination" to piece together how and why used commodities have been destigmatized in the culture, permitting middle and higher-income consumers to shop at resale venues without reservation. It requires an understanding of how political-economic changes have threatened the stability of middle and lower-income households in the United States, necessitating that they buy cheaper, even used, goods to maintain excessive levels of consumption encouraged by the culture. These two catalysts, positive cultural expressions of resale consumption and increased economic uncertainty among particular groups, help one "get a handle" on what has contributed to recent changes in the U.S. thrift industry.

Taking a historical perspective elucidates the incredible transformation that the industry has undergone during the twentieth century, from its humble beginnings as a source of material goods for the poor in our society, to a fashionable consumer site for middle and upper-income shoppers.

Class and Trash

A brief glance at history confirms that thrift venues were once the purview of poor, marginalized, and low-income people in our society. In *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (1999), historian Susan Strasser explores the social processes that transformed American culture from one grounded in recycling and reuse at the turn of the twentieth century to a throwaway consumer culture by the century's end. Like Veblen, she is aware of the class implications inherent in "disposability," and notes that the ability to waste is an expression of power.

> But above all, sorting is an issue of class: trashmaking both underscores and creates social differences based on economic status. The poor patronize junk stores and charitable thrift stores, which depend on richer people to cast things off and even subsidize their operations with cash or volunteer work. What is rubbish to some is useful or valuable to others, and the ones who perceive value are nearly always the ones with less money. (Strasser 1999:8)

Strasser underscores that in the early decades of the twentieth century trash became identified with the poor, many of whom were recently arrived immigrants, those marginalized from the emerging consumer culture. This is the class of people who came to be associated with reuse and recycling. Many middle-class Americans, she argues, embraced a more sanitized lifestyle expressed in disposability. Those who wanted to do more with their discards than simply throw them away could donate them to newly organized salvage charities that "would repair and resell them, providing work for the poor and a store where even paupers could go shopping" (Strasser1999:114).

Strasser's account of the social and economic dimensions of trash disposal and reuse in the early twentieth century provides a rare glimpse into the then nascent U.S.

thrift industry. She points out that emerging charitable organizations were all key players in salvage markets, which even today remain a primary means of eliminating unsold merchandise while generating revenue for thrift firms. Most importantly perhaps, Strasser's research documents who worked for and shopped at the stores run by these salvage charities, and who donated the merchandise sold there.

Salvage charities emphasized self-help as a means of assisting the poor. To that end they put poor people to work, and also charged for the goods donated to their organizations. Strasser points out that those who donated items were generally not the truly wealthy, but rather were predominately middle-class and even relatively poor people. Of course, given the pejorative association of waste with the poorer classes, it is not surprising that donations would come primarily from middle-class and aspiring middle-class households.

The numerous historical documents Strasser draws upon to discuss salvage charities confirms many common sense assumptions about who would shop at thrift stores. In their own literature, for example, the Salvation Army claimed that their customers were not the "desperately poor" but rather "for the most part hard-working, industrious wage-earners who patronize our stores because their incomes do not permit them to buy new household and personal necessities at prevailing market prices" (Strasser 1999: 145-146). In 1902 Goodwill Industries founder Reverend Edgar James Helms said much the same thing about his customers when he described his charity's mission:

> "It is not good charity to clothe people in rags....It is bad enough to have to wear your own rags without having to wear other people's rags. We therefore, began to give work to those who could sew or cobble or repair furniture, to put these contributed articles into more serviceable condition. Prices were charged to cover the necessary expense of collecting, cleaning and repairing. No one has been pauperized by the process. The pennies of the poor folks who needed these things and could not afford to buy new articles helped to pay for the food, rent and medicine of the other poor folks employed to repair them" (Strasser 1999:146).

Strasser's historical research shows that early salvage charities existed primarily to assist the poor, perhaps not specifically the "desperately poor" but what we today might call the "working poor." Assistance came in the form of both providing employment as well as creating a venue in which low-income people could purchase used household goods and other necessities. Those in the middle-class, but even some with less financial means, donated the goods sold by these charitable organizations.

In considering contemporary changes taking place within the thrift industry it is important to acknowledge that Strasser's work reveals early measures taken by salvage charities to modernize their stores in order to increase sales. She notes that leadership in one prominent salvage charity encouraged "modern selling techniques," which as early as 1909 included creating departments for the various types of merchandise sold in its stores. In the 1920's emphasis was placed on "hanging clothes on hangers, displaying goods on racks and in bins, and collecting bric-a-brac and furniture, which brought in the most money" (Strasser 1999:157). Other salvage charities also implemented more modern business practices in the operation of their stores, including sales conferences and classes in salesmanship, as well as the application of contemporary business methods in an effort to modernize their sales establishments.

Strasser (1999:280) contends that even as recently as the early 1960s charity shops as well as church bazaars and rummage sales were intended to provide for the needy; middle-class people donated and worked at these sales venues but did not shop there "and the pricing was intended to be charitable. " But a decade later yard sales, garage sales and porch sales were formidable competition to these charitable sales, and middle-class shoppers as well as collectors now rummaged through used merchandise alongside the poor. Many interpreted the influx of the middle-class into these shopping venues as a passing fad, an extension of the 1960s counterculture or a response to the 1973-74 recession, but Strasser (1999:281) provides a different explanation:

> Rather than a sign of a troubled economy, garage sales were a function of affluence, a response to the proliferation of stuff....Buying and selling at garage sales were consumerist pastimes; bargain hunting was a consumerist skill....Garage sales – along with bigger houses and mini-storage facilities – took care of such things and freed up space for more consumption. They created a secondhand market in Crock-Pots and electric yogurt makers, items not worth advertising in newspapers or selling by themselves.

At the end of the twentieth century Americans continued to acquire their possessions at resale venues like weekend rummage sales and charitable thrift stores. In 1999, forty-three percent of Americans bought something at a rummage sale, although far fewer, just nineteen percent, actually sold something at one (Lach 2000).

Cheap But Chic

If affluence, leisure, and a desire to consume more can best explain the trend in middle-class resale consumption in the sluggish economic conditions of the early 1970s, how best to account for the burgeoning thrift industry with its middle-class consumers in the booming 1990s? I would argue that these same factors – relative affluence, the practice of shopping as a form of leisure in the United States, and the desire for greater levels of consumption despite declining incomes – are also compelling explanations for thrift consumption among the middle-class in the 1990s. Indeed, as economist Juliet Schor (1998) has discussed, during the 1980s and 1990s most middle-class Americans were consuming at a greater rate than their middle-class counterparts of previous generations. Moreover, their consumption was much more "upscale," that is, they bought bigger houses, purchased more options on their vehicles, and took more vacations. In short, what now was required for a "middle-class lifestyle"increased fairly dramatically. The consequence was that "Definitions of the 'good life' and even of 'the necessities of life' continued to expand, even as people worried about how they could pay for them" (Schor 1998: 12).

In *The Overspent American*, Schor (1998) emphasizes the increased inequality that has taken place in the United States since the early 1970s. But one of her primary arguments is that many middle-class Americans no longer compare their standard of living to that of their middle-class neighbors, as was the case in the mid-twentieth century, but rather with members of the upper-middle class, the top twenty percent of U.S. households, excluding the very wealthiest few. Retailers, Schor notes, have responded to the growing desire of many Americans to emulate this wealthier class of people. The furniture, clothing, and household accessories of the upper twenty percent are the prototypes for cheaper versions found at lower-end retail venues like Sears, Wal-Mart and Kmart, which helps to explain Kmart's partnership with Martha Stewart.

In their attempt to maintain an increasingly illusory lifestyle and to continue to consume more on less inflation-adjusted income than in the 1970s, many middle-class Americans have begun to frequent dollar stores, low-end retail stores, and resale venues that sell inexpensive merchandise. As *New York Times* reporter Allen Salkin (2004) recently noted,

> Five years ago, when 99-cent and one-dollar stores were considered the province of lower-income Americans, not many people would have admitted to patronizing such low-status outlets. But these days, a lot of drivers of BMW's, Mercedes-Benzes and Rolls-Royces are carrying...under-a-buck merchandise to their cars parked in the lot outside.

In Salkin's article the explanation for this counter-intuitive observation was provided by the director of a design research company who claimed that wealthier shoppers were at the 99-cent store to find a "hidden-treasure," that "The object you buy can be like a trophy you can show your friends....And then you show them the price." While one might argue that indeed there are "hidden treasures" to be found in a dollar store and that BMW-driving consumers are there to find them, ignoring mounting evidence of increased economic uncertainty for entire classes of consumers – including middle-income consumers who drive expensive vehicles – is typical of much reporting on the phenomenon sometimes referred to as "shopping down." This *New York Times* piece does note that Target Corporation has recently added one dollar items to the front of its stores providing the "crowning evidence that the dollar-and-under moment has arrived" (Salkin 2004). Whether Target has added one dollar items to its stores as a response to a growing consumer desire for cheap chic or increased economic inequality and uncertainty is left unanswered. From a sociological perspective, however, the two trends fit together like a hand in a glove.

Transformed Consumer Desires

Before examining changes in the thrift industry that cater to higher-income, middle-class consumers, it is instructive to consider changes that have taken place in another segment of the retail sector where Americans shop: the supermarket. In his study of the transformation of supermarkets in the United States, sociologist John P. Walsh (1993:2) argues that since the mid-twentieth century "supermarkets have changed from small, often family-owned stores, stores specializing in a limited number of grocery and meat items to enormous retail centers that include...an increasing number of specialty shops, such as delis, bakeries, seafood shops, and florists." Walsh attributes this radical transformation to several factors, including changes in supermarket work resulting from automation, task specialization, and the tremendous growth in the size of stores. Cultural changes, most notably the enormous influx of women into the workforce and the subsequent demand for prepared foods, also remade the environment in which supermarkets functioned. Changes in eating habits required that firms provide more services and alter their product selection to adapt to new consumer preferences – all within a much more competitive terrain. Post-war suburbanization and "the upscaling of consumption" during the Reagan years likewise had important affects on the remaking of contemporary American supermarkets. One stop in a Whole Foods Market today confirms Walsh's research. This enormous supermarket consists of speciality areas that include frozen foods, a deli, a floral shop, and a café, all in an upscale environment to better compete against its grocery chain rivals.

Like other expressions of social life, many of us fail to realize the importance of these everyday arenas of consumption. Walsh (1993) argues for the economic and political significance of supermarkets, maintaining that even individual stores are substantial economic entities given what they are making. Furthermore, supermarkets are embedded in retail trade, one of the most critical employment sectors of the economy. But he goes further to assert that,

> ... in addition to their economic and political importance, supermarkets can be seen as central to modern American culture. From the point of view of consumers, the supermarket is the embodiment of the basic American values of consumption and affluence (rivaled perhaps by the shopping mall) (Walsh 1993:5).

This is an important claim. It underscores the ideological function of shopping in our society: the belief that we *should* consume and we should do so in a manner that confirms our affluence. Shopping where poor or lower-income groups must shop such as low-end retail stores, dollar stores and thrift stores, creates a sort of "ideological dissonance" – but only if those venues are socially stigmatized. Once they become fashionable and frequented by wealthier shoppers, the stigma and accompanying degradation about shopping there disappears.

Like supermarkets, thrift stores remain out of the daily scope of many in the United States, but they are also important economic actors in our communities, with some individual stores earning more than a million dollars a year. As a regional enterprise, Helping Hand earns more than ten million dollars in profits annually. But because we often fail to recognize their significance both economically and socially, or maintain myths about who patronizes them, transformations within the thrift industry have transpired largely unnoticed. This is equally true about the changed discourse surrounding used goods in our culture. It is to an examination of how we talk about used goods and the proliferation of that discussion in mass media that we now turn.

The Cultural Commodification of Junk

The socializing force played by mass media in society, especially advertising, has long been a topic of social scientific interest and research (Bagdikian 1997; Goffman 1976; Packard 1957). Robin Leidner's (1993) study of McDonald's, for example, reveals how the fast food giant's numerous advertising campaigns socialize customers into their role at the same time it encourages them to try new products. Social psychologists have also noted the importance of the mass media in the social construction of stigma. As Dovidio, Major and Crocker (2000) have observed, stigma is a collective and cultural phenomenon as well as being an interpersonal one that happens in the process of social interaction. They note that stigmatization is shaped by cultural representations that embody "stereotypes, ideologies, values, and beliefs, that are widely known, often widely shared, and widely communicated in the mass media, whether or not people actually endorse them" (Dovidio et al. 2000: 16).

Jackson Katz (1999) argues that "if you want to understand the meaning of something in society, look at its representation in the media, what stories are being told about it in the popular culture." There has been a proliferation of popular cultural representations that both illustrate, and I would argue, fuel the increased trend in resale consumption. Popular magazines, books, and television programs have contributed to destigmatizing resale consumption and, in many respects, have been successful in commodifying junk. The popular magazine *Country Living*, for example, has cover stories on "Flea Market *Chic*" and a "Flea Market Makeover" for your home, *Good Housekeeping* meanwhile assists readers in unearthing that special find by providing an "Insider's Guide to Flea Markets." Rather than carrying a stigma, buying something used is now fashionable – and sometimes the more wear and tear on an item the better. The August 2000 issue of *Country Home* magazine featured an article "Yard Sale Today," which suggested that "peeling paint and rust won't deter customers from snapping up vintage metal chairs" and therefore sellers should position them strategically the day of their sale (p. 121). *American Homestyle and Gardening* magazine's May 2000 cover read "Tag Sale 101: Finding the Good, the Fabulous, the Affordable." Even upscale retailers like Pottery Barn are capitalizing on the popularity of resale consumption with catalog descriptions that read: "At a Paris flea market, we found an antique quilt pieced from fabrics traditionally used for mattresses. Made of pure yarn-dyed cotton, ours is hand stitched and backed with a classic ticking stripe." The description also notes the item is imported – and I would guess it is not from Paris (Pottery Barn 2000:7).

Perhaps one of the most important popular magazines to destigmatize the consumption of second-hand goods is the extremely successful *Martha Stewart Living*. Prior to her conviction on charges that she lied to federal investigators about a 2001 stock trade, Martha Stewart's name, face, and brand were synonymous with good taste and gentility. Throughout the 1990s Stewart and her corporation Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia were home and garden trendsetters. Her magazine *Martha Stewart Living* went from just 250,000 subscribers when it was launched in 1991 to a circulation of 2.4 million readers in 2001, causing other popular domestic magazines to experience major losses (Tyrnauer 2001; Wajda 2001). Stewart has written or co-authored more than thirty books, had her own daily television show, syndicated advice column, radio program and commercial website (Tyrnauer 2001; Wajda 2001). She still has her own line of products with Kmart and Sherwin-Williams. Like Oprah Winfrey who can recommend a book to her television viewers and make it a bestseller overnight, when Stewart made a garden plant suggestion, nurseries could not keep them in stock (Hyland 2001). Or, in the case of one antiques dealer I spoke with, when *Martha Stewart Living* featured old suitcases as decorative storage she sold the suitcases she had in her store within days.

Martha Stewart Living is filled with all types of projects that transform everyday objects into useful, aesthetically pleasing home decor. Many of these projects employ "vintage" objects and encourage readers to buy old or second-hand goods. From using old teacups as Easter baskets with a byline that reads "mismatched vintage teacups and saucers are whimsical 'baskets' for someone who loves tea," to the magazine's "find of the month," which often includes simple projects made from second-hand purchases, readers are inspired to scour flea markets and yard sales.

Several scholars have noted that a nostalgic longing for the past is a key theme that runs through the magazine, as well as segments of the television show, *Living with Martha Stewart* (Beecher 2001; Bentley 2001; Hyland 2001; Leavitt 2001; Wajda 2001). Shirley Teresa Wajda (2001:79) argues that Stewart "sells a nostalgic sense of comfort and family in an era when a quarter of American households consists of one person, when half of the nation's families are childrenless couples, and when the demands of work daily invade the home." Wajda (2001:80) notes that even the "tag sale" items that are displayed in the magazine and television show "erode the distinction between past and present." Tracing the genealogy of Stewart's work within the last century of domestic advice literature, Sarah Leavitt (2001:126) argues that "Stewart brings the past into the future by talking about antiques and other symbols of the past even as she launches her web site and IPO on the New York Stock Exchange. Hers is a peculiar melding of the ultra-modern and the throwback."

Like the domestic advisors that preceded her, Stewart sees herself as educating her followers on all good things. The monthly magazine often features a lengthy article on collecting, everything from vintage baking pans to old kitchen clocks. Readers learn something about the history of the everyday objects in these articles, but they also learn average prices and where to buy them. Consider this description of clocks from a feature story in the magazine:

> The attachment a family feels to its own particular kitchen clock is not easily understood by people who have never had breakfast under its gaze, which is one reason many vintage kitchen varieties can still be picked up for a few dollars at flea markets. Dealers who carry kitchen clocks, such as the thirties-era Manor clock by Westclox, usually sell them for under $100; a high-style designer piece, though, such as the "steering wheel" clock designed by George Nelson for Howard Miller in the fifties, costs $1,200. If you're looking to collect kitchen clocks, you are starting at a good time, as the market is not yet oversold.

Scholars have highlighted the ways that Martha Stewart, in her role as domestic advisor, performs and promotes a genteel, upper-class notion of the good life whether it be in culinary practices (Bentley 2001), landscape design (Hyland 2001), or home decorating (Leavitt 2001). While her project is to appeal to everyone, and her multimillion-dollar empire suggests that she does, the class identifications associated with many of the practices she encourages – collecting, monogramming, and keeping a well-groomed home lot – are rendered invisible (Hyland 2001;Wajda 2001).

While popular magazines have contributed to destigmatizing the consumption of second-hand goods, there are a plethora of recently published books that provide encouragement for bringing what was someone else's stuff, even "junk," into your home. Several books explain how to differentiate good junk from bad and then use the former in decorating your home and garden. These include junk guru Mary Randolf Carter's books *American Junk* (1994), *Garden Junk* (1997), *Kitchen Junk* (1999) and *Big City Junk* (2001), as well as *Junk Chic* (Elliott 2001), *Junk Style* (Molesworth1998), *Just Junk* (Barker 1997), and *Garden Decoration From Junk* (Mackenzie 2000).

In addition to books on the creative use of junk there are also several books on decorating with flea market finds: *Flea Market Makeovers* (Berti 2000), *Flea Market Style* (Tolley 1998), *Flea Market Decorating* (Ingham 2000), *Tattered Treasures* (Powell 2001), as well as the *U.S. Flea Market Directory* (LaFarge 2000). Rachel Ashwell's books, *Shabby Chic* (1996), *Rachel Ashwell's Shabby Chic: Treasure Hunting and Decorating Guide* (1998) and *The Shabby Chic Home* (2000) have also been extremely popular. She even has a chain of upscale stores of the same name and current line of home products with retailing giant Target Stores, Incorporated.

Although there is far more print media that glamorizes and popularizes the consumption of second-hand goods, television also has its venue for commodifying used goods in The Corporation for Public Broadcasting program *The Antiques Roadshow*. Thousands of people come from great distances to have their items appraised by *Roadshow* experts, although only a few dozen are taped, and even fewer end up having their items appraised when the show is broadcast on public television stations across the country (Shenk 2001). The premise of the traveling show is simple: individuals bring items to be appraised by antiques dealers and experts from auction houses. These experts ask how the individual acquired a specific item – if it was passed down in the family, found, or purchased somewhere – and then proceed to tell both the individual and the viewing audience about it. This might include the historical context and significance of the object, and perhaps its maker or manufacturer. The most important piece of information the expert discloses, however, is the item's current market value, the price it might bring if put on an auction block.

In his textual analysis of *The Antiques Roadshow* Ronald Bishop (1999) argues that there are a few recurring types of narratives that individuals tell of the items they bring for appraisal. These include picking up an item at a garage sale or flea market as well as a much more personal story about how the item came into one's possession. This latter story, a more sentimental story, is quickly followed by the appraiser's estimate of the item's current value so that "the dominant narrative revolves around the monetary value of the item, rather than around sentimentality, or around history" (1999:3). Individuals are disappointed if they learn their item does not have monetary value, even though many respond by saying, "Well it's priceless to me." As journalist Joshua Wolf Shenk (2001:53) experienced when he attended a *Roadshow* in Rhode Island,

> At the *Roadshow*, almost everyone I spoke to insisted that they did not care about price, though they also spoke excitedly about possible sums.... One woman with unusually clear intentions, who had brought the Disney books she read as a child, told me she hoped they would be valuable so that her children would keep them. I did not have the heart to ask the obvious question: "Don't you wish they would keep them just because they are yours?"

The Antiques Roadshow, like *Martha Stewart Living* and the numerous books on the value of junk and flea market finds, commodify used goods and therefore cultivate the trend in shopping for antiques and collectibles in places like second-hand shops, thrift stores, and on ebay. Like *Martha Stewart Living, The Antiques Roadshow* serves the manifest function of educating the consumer about the historical value and significance of a particular item. But as Bishop argues, the show serves a latent, ideological function as well: it promotes the value of collecting and that everyone, rather than simply the upper-classes, can do it.

> The appraiser's narrative power comes from his or her knowledge of value and from their willingness to entertain sentimental narratives....their "success" comes not in finding valuable items; it comes from converting individuals to the religion of collecting.... In this sense, the narratives are purely ideological; they reinforce society's power-class structure. Collecting is almost seen as a condition for entry into society's upper classes.... To encourage individuals to make the effort, collecting is made to seem "natural and universal" (1999:16).

In addition to *The Antiques Roadshow*, The Learning Channel's extremely popular home redecorating show, *Trading Spaces*, also functions to educate viewers about the value of second-hand goods, and more specifically, helps to destigmatize shopping at thrift stores. The premise of the show is that neighbors switch houses and work with designers to redecorate one room in each other's home, usually on a budget of one thousand dollars or less. In order to meet these budgetary constraints, designers very often buy used furniture and other household items at thrift stores – sometimes as the television cameras follow them around the store – and then recondition the items by painting or reupholstering them. When the redesigned rooms are completed, there is often discussion between the show's host and the designer about how the thrift store purchases enabled the designer to achieve his or her aesthetic vision while staying within their limited budget. *Living with Martha Stewart*, *The Antiques Roadshow* and *Trading Spaces* are just a few television programs among hundreds or even thousands available on cable television. But they are part of a plethora of contemporary cultural representations that have destigmatized and shaped the practice of resale consumption.

Second-Hand Consumption as Ideological Reproduction

Despite the reality that incomes for middle-class households rose only slightly between 1977 and 1999, and those of the poorest actually *decreased,* consumer spending increased dramatically during the1990s. Although those at the top of the income and wealth hierarchy could afford larger houses, bigger cars, and other luxury items, consumer spending in general, and upscaling spending in particular, has had especially adverse consequences for those with fewer financial resources. Middle and lower-income families have financed their higher spending by saving very little and going deeply into debt. As Robert Frank argues,

> Middle-income families, whose inflation-adjusted incomes are no higher now than in the 1970s, have been saving at much lower rates for much of last year. They're also carrying record levels of credit-card debt and other loans, going without health insurance and filing for bankruptcy at several times the rate of the early 1980s. In short, middle-income families are experiencing unprecedented levels of economic distress, largely because they are trying to keep up with a living standard they cannot afford. (2000b: 64).

One of the ways that middle and lower-income consumers have maintained high levels of consumption but at a much cheaper cost is by "shopping down," purchasing goods at discount stores like Target, Kmart and Wal-Mart. Even during the economic boom of the 1990s these retailers were gaining market share while department stores watched their share of retail sales fall from 52 percent to 31 percent (Naughton 2001). While shoppers were heading in droves to discount stores they were also feeling less apprehensive about shopping in thrift stores. A willingness to buy used goods could be attributed to the perception that consumers shop second-hand for fun rather than out of need, a view that is certainly promoted in popular culture and confirmed by my research. Eighty-one percent of the shoppers I surveyed mentioned that they shop at thrift stores as a way to have fun (see Table 3.1). The Regional Store Coordinator for Helping Hand suggested that this might be why shopping in thrift stores has become more socially acceptable.

> A lot of people just come in and have a good time shopping here. You know, looking, going up and down the aisles....There again, I think the whole emergence of the garage sales and the yard sales, and its okay to go buy somebody else's stuff because you're not doing it out of necessity so much as for fun and enjoyment and that kinda thing. So it becomes much more acceptable.

Table 3.1
Reasons For Shopping at Thrift Stores

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
As A Way to Have Fun	19%	41%	40%
The Thrill of Finding Cool Stuff	8%	28%	64%
Other Stores Are Too Expensive For Me	25%	35%	40%
Can Get What My Family Needs For Very Little Money	11%	34%	55%

Total = 204

Regardless of the prevailing belief that consumers shop at thrift stores purely for entertainment, Table 3.1 shows that several factors play into their rationale for shopping there. Economic uncertainty and instability, coupled with a relatively high cost of living, are certainly factors that help to explain the increased presence of middle-income consumers in the thrift stores in this study. Table 3.1 demonstrates, for example, that the vast majority of shoppers surveyed indicated other stores are too expensive for them. So while many people might be too embarrassed to admit the economic reasons that lead them into a thrift store, economic factors are clearly part of the rationale for why they are there. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the estimated median household income in Colorado was $40,853 (Hughes 2000). In my survey, conducted in 2001, a significant percentage of my respondents had household incomes higher than this: thirty-eight percent had household incomes above $50,000, twenty-two percent indicated their household income was above $75,000 . A large number of the thrift shoppers surveyed therefore were not poor or lower-income consumers (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2
Thrift Store Shopper's Household Income

Household Income	Percentage of Shoppers
Less than $9,000	7%
$9,000 - $17,000	10%
$17,001 - $32,000	20%
$32,001 - $50,000	25%
$ 50,001 - $75,000	16%
$75,001 - $100,000	18%
More than $100,000	4%
Total = 188	100%

As we can see, 17 percent of shoppers have annual household incomes less than $17,000. Togther this group comprises what I will call low-income shoppers. Of those within this group, 7 percent have extremely limited incomes of less than $9,000. Households earning $17,000 to $50,000, 45 percent of my sample, are what I label as middle-income. Upper-income shoppers are those with household incomes above $50,000. This group comprises 38 percent of my survey sample.

An important point to underscore here is that the presence of more affluent consumers in thrift stores needs to be considered in a broader economic context. As in other parts of the country, the cost of housing skyrocketed in Colorado during the 1990s, particularly along the Front Range where this study was conducted. Between 1989 and

1999 the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment along Colorado's Front Range rose eighty-eight percent, and the median price for a single-family home increased one hundred and one percent, while the average wage increased just fifty-six percent during the same ten-year period (Arellano 2000). So while some who shop at second-hand stores are there for fun and enjoyment, others perhaps are simply trying to stretch their household income as far as it can go.

Forty percent of my survey respondents indicated other stores were too expensive for them as a very important reason for why they shop at thrift stores; even more, 55 percent, said a very important reason they shop at thrift stores is because they can get what their family needs for very little money (see Table 3.1). When shoppers' responses are broken down by annual household income, it becomes clear that thrift stores serve as a place where relatively affluent consumers can stretch their dollars. 43 percent of middle-income shoppers and 28 percent of upper-income shoppers that I surveyed indicated other stores were too expensive as a very important reason for why they shopped at thrift stores (see Table 3.3). Moreover, 65 percent of middle-income consumers and 39 percent of upper-income consumers surveyed cited being able to get what their family needs for very little money as a very important reason for why they shopped at thrift stores (see Table 3.4). Especially in recessionary periods, but also during periods of economic growth when prices of basic necessities such as housing increase, thrift stores provide relatively affluent shoppers with a cheap arena for consumption.

Table 3.3
Reasons For Shopping at Thrift Stores By Household Income: Other Stores Are Too Expensive

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Total
Lower-Income Shoppers $17,000 or less	(1) 3%	(11) 34%	(20) 63%	(32) 100%
Middle-Income Shoppers $17,000-$50,000	(16) 19%	(32) 38%	(37) 43%	(85) 100%
Upper-Income Shoppers $50,000 and above	(29) 41%	(22) 31%	(20) 28%	(71) 100%
Total	(46) 24%	(65) 35%	(77) 41%	(188)100%

Table 3.4
Reasons For Shopping at Thrift Stores By Household Income: Can Meet Family Needs For Very Little Money

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Total
Lower-Income Shoppers $17,000 or less	(2) 6%	(8) 25%	(22) 69%	(32) 100%
Middle-Income Shoppers $17,000-$50,000	(6) 7%	(24) 28%	(55) 65%	(85) 100%
Upper-Income Shoppers $50,000 and above	(11) 16%	(32) 45%	(28) 39%	(71) 100%
Total	(19) 10%	(64) 34%	(105) 56%	(188) 100%

When asked if he thought there had been any change in who was shopping at thrift stores, the Regional Store Coordinator for Helping Hand said he thought that through "word of mouth" thrift shopping had been "legitimized" among middle-class consumers. Then he added:

> And that's not to say 20 years from now it might be a cycle and thrift will be strictly for those who can't afford it. I mean, I don't know. But right now were in a cycle where it's, it's a fun, pro-active shopping thing, almost like a macho going after the elk in the woods, almost like the hunt, ya know? It almost has some kind of a self-fulfillment above and beyond just the clothing itself. Just the search and the, you know, I was in here about two months ago and this college kid came in and he was goin' through some of our pictures, picture frames over there and ran across something, a little 5x7 pencil etching. And he knew enough about it to know that that might be worth something or whatever, it wasn't terribly attractive. And so, I think he paid six bucks for it. And went down the street here to one of these art galleries and it was a signed Dali etching and they evaluated it at $1,900. So you know he went back to his dorm or his fraternity and told everybody. Wow. That perpetuates the myth of finding a Salvador Dali amongst the old frames and prints.

Perhaps it is stories like these, of finding something of significant monetary value, as well as popular media that commodify and glamorize used goods, which help to explain why almost half of my survey respondents shop at thrift stores to find antiques and collectibles (see Table 3.5). Even for the lowest-income shoppers (N=32), those with household incomes of $17,000 or less annually, half said that finding antiques and collectibles was a somewhat or very important reason for thrift store shopping (see Table 3.6). These lower-income consumers have clearly adopted the value of collecting. But as Bishop (1999) notes, this serves the ideological function of erasing social class differences and promotes the belief that everyone, rather than simply the upper-classes, can engage in this practice.

Table 3.5
Importance Shoppers Place on
Finding Antiques and Collectibles at Thrift Stores

Not Important	54%
Somewhat Important	27%
Very Important	19%

Total = 204

Table 3.6
Household Income and Importance Placed on Finding Antiques and Collectibles at Thrift Stores

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Total
Lower-Income Shoppers $17,000 or less	(16) 50%	(13) 41%	(3) 9%	(32) 100%
Middle-Income Shoppers $17,000-$50,000	(43) 51%	(24) 28%	(18) 21%	(85) 100%
Upper-Income Shoppers $50,000 and above	(42) 59%	(15) 21%	(14) 20%	(71) 100%
Total	(101) 54%	(52) 28%	(35) 18%	(188) 100%

The New Thrift Shopper?

Cultural representations that commodify second-hand goods and popularize resale consumption contribute to destigmatizing thrift shopping. So do changes in clientele. If Strasser (1999) is correct that charitable thrift stores historically have been the province of the poor and lower classes, then my research indicates that there has been a significant change in who is now shopping at these stores. As previously mentioned, 38 percent of the thrift store shoppers that I surveyed had household incomes higher than $50,000, well above the median income for the state of Colorado where my study was conducted. In addition to income level, educational attainment also suggests a new kind of shopper. More than half of the thrift shoppers I surveyed, 58 percent, have some college education, and one-quarter have a Bachelor's degree or higher (see Table 3.7).

Table 3.7
Thrift Store Shopper's Educational Attainment

Level of Education	Percentage of Shoppers
Grades 1-8	9%
Grade 9-12, no diploma	10%
High School Graduate or equivalent (ex. GED)	23%
Some College or Associate Degree	33%
Bachelor's Degree	15%
Master's Degree, Professional Degree	10%
Total = 197	100%

My research indicates that thrift shopping has lost its stigma for more affluent, educated consumers. Rather than there being a stigma to buying something used, those who work in the industry talk about the way their customers boast about their purchases. When explaining who was shopping at his firm's stores, Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator discussed the local office workers who shop during their lunch hour.

> It's just a little party. They'll come down and it'll be like who can find the best deal of the day. So rather then it be a stigma attached, there's almost a competition if it's *finely tailored* and you haven't just bought and it's tattered or whatever. I mean you put it on and everybody's complimenting you on it, ya know. To be able to say, "Yeah, you enjoy the way I look. I enjoy the way I look. And guess what? I only paid $8.99 for it." I mean, it shows some kind of superiority of shopping prowess or something. ...I'm sure there would be some stigma attached to a certain group of people that bought it and they would want people to think that they got it at a Donna Karan shop. But that really isn't our customer, quite frankly.

My survey confirms that shoppers at all income levels like to brag about their thrift store purchases, supporting the notion that most people are no longer ashamed to tell others they shop there. Middle and upper-income shoppers, however, report bragging to others slightly more than lower-income ones: lower-income shoppers sometimes, often or always bragged about their thrift store purchases 75 percent of the time, whereas middle and upper- income shoppers did so 84 percent and 79 percent of the time respectively (see Table 3.8).

Table 3.8
How often do you brag about how little you paid for something that you bought at a thrift store?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Total
Lower-Income Shoppers $17,000 or less	(5)16%	(3) 9%	(10) 31%	(5)16%	(9) 28%	(32) 100%
Middle-Income Shoppers $17,000-$50,000	(11)13%	(2) 3%	(28) 33%	(20) 24%	(23)27%	(84) 100%
Upper-Income Shoppers $50,000 and above	(10) 15%	(4) 6%	(25) 36%	(21) 30%	(9) 13%	(69) 100%
Total	(26)14%	(9) 5%	(63) 34%	(46) 25%	(41) 22%	(185)100%

According to my research, however, there is still a group that expresses some embarrassment for shopping at thrift stores, but ironically it is lower income rather than middle or upper- income shoppers who relate such feelings. When asked how often they feel badly about *having* to shop at a thrift store because it is the only place they can afford to shop, one quarter of the lower-income consumers in my sample (N=32) said that they sometimes, often or always felt this way, compared to 13 percent of middle-income shoppers (N=85) and only 6 percent of upper-income consumers (N=69, see Table 3.9). Of course, middle and upper-income consumers presumably have other alternative shopping venues, which would explain their responses, whereas lower-income shoppers supposedly would not. In spite of the fact that some shoppers had negative feelings associated with their thrift store shopping, Table 3.9 reiterates that, at all income levels, the overwhelming majority of shoppers surveyed, 84 percent, did not feel badly about it.

Table 3.9
How often do you feel bad about *having* to shop at a thrift store?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Total
Lower-Income Shoppers $17,000 or less	(24) 75%	0	(5) 16%	0	(3) 9%	(32) 100%
Middle-Income Shoppers $17,000-$50,000	(71) 83%	(3) 4%	(10) 12%	(1) 1%	0	(85) 100%
Upper-Income Shoppers $50,000 and above	(62) 90%	(3) 4%	(3) 4%	(1) 2%	0	(69) 100%
Total	(157) 84%	(6) 3%	(18) 10%	(2) 1%	(3) 2%	(186) 100%

One of the most important factors that contributes to destigmatizing thrift shopping has to do with what many firms in the industry are doing to upscale their image in order to attract and keep higher-income and professional customers. The observations made by one reporter on a visit to a Portland-area thrift store demonstrate the upscaling process occurring in the industry:

> The espresso machine is ssshushing, and the smell of rich coffee drifts around the room. In a corner, someone is reading, deep in a comfy chair. Top 40 radio plays on the sound system. In the landscaped parking lot, a Volvo zips into a space. Well-dressed shoppers are browsing the racks (Puente 2000a).

Although not every store boasts an espresso bar, many thrift store managers and industry administrators recognize that the changed appearance of their stores has helped to pull in new, higher-income customers. While social stigmas can be extremely harmful to those stigmatized, the *process* of destigmatization can also have detrimental consequences. Upscaling the consumer spaces where the poor have traditionally shopped for basic needs has important implications for this society's most economically vulnerable shoppers. Is it significant that only seventeen percent of the thrift shoppers I surveyed were "low-income" consumers with annual household incomes of $17,000 or less? Most were middle to upper-middle income shoppers – and the firms in my study are transforming themselves to appeal to these customers. As thrift stores become more upscale, will the poorer among us have to resort to handouts in order to meet their needs?

To suggest that cultural and economic changes alone are driving the growing market for second-hand goods would be to ignore the many transformations taking place within the thrift industry itself that have attracted new customers into these consumer sites. Several journalists have reported on the increase in resale consumption generally, while a handful have investigated the upscaling taking place in the thrift industry specifically. In a business section feature story *New York Times* reporter Leslie Kaufman (2000) noted that "In recent years, businesses ranging from tiny thrift stores to giant nonprofit charities to pawn shops have upgraded store design, layout and organization of goods." Several thrift stores now sport coffee bars and reading areas, in addition to selling some brand new merchandise. Cleaner, brighter, and well organized stores have reeled in highly coveted middle and upper-income shoppers with the promise of both convenience and low prices. It now seems like only a myth that thrift stores are for poor and low-income consumers.

CHAPTER 4

UPSCALING IN THE THRIFT INDUSTRY: COURTING THE HIGHER-INCOME CONSUMER

No Longer Your Grandmother's Thrift Store

> My grandmother worked in a thrift store in Salt Lake... and I remember being in those stores and them being kind of dark and, you know, not very appealing, I remember that. And I know that the ones that we had...when we got there, my husband wouldn't let me go in the store because it was, my son said, "Oh, mom, you know those junk places where you go get car parts?" and I said, "Yeah." And he goes, "It kind of looks like that, only almost worse."
>
> – Special Services Director, Lifeline Ministries

> Our stores, the way they look now it looks nothing like what a thrift store had looked [like] twenty, thirty years ago. I think they were drab, dull, musty, ya know, kind of like your grandmother's closet or a basement or attic. Whereas now we're using bright colors, opening 'em up, and they have more of a look of a retail store versus, ya know, a second-hand store.
>
> – Marketing Director, Helping Hand

To someone who had never set foot inside a thrift store before the late 1980s their appearance might not catch your attention: the store is clean and brightly lit; there are "departments" for women's, men's, and children's clothing; shirts are on hangers, sized and color coded from light to dark; housewares sit on shelves grouped according to their function; furniture is displayed as it might be in your own living room, with lamps and other accessories fashionably placed; and areas of the store are set aside for new goods still in the manufacturer's original packaging, or antiques and collectibles, which are secured behind glass display cases. To many consumers this is standard department store presentation: the merchandise looks appealing and is easy to find. But to someone who has worked or even shopped in thrift stores for some length of time, the store's appearance represents significant changes within and outside of the thrift industry.

Precisely when these changes began to occur is difficult to pinpoint because the upscaling process is quite varied within the industry. The Executive Director of Lifeline Ministries indicated, "I think it's all within the last ten years when all thrift stores basically started doing a face lift and started to be more like the [retail] store." In part, the recent emergence of many large for-profit thrift operations, as well as a greater number of smaller, non-profit charitable stores, has dramatically altered the resale landscape. Large corporate for-profit thrifts such as Ragtags have put tremendous pressure on traditional salvage charities to literally "keep up appearances" in order to successfully compete in an increasingly aggressive business. Indeed, when asked to identify their competition, Helping Hand administrators and store managers often pointed to Ragtags as their most significant rival. Ragtags employees also perceived that their company was at the forefront of the industry, establishing many of its standards and trends. One Ragtags store manager I spoke with explained his firm's trendsetting position in the industry this way:

> I think, and our company likes to take a lot of responsibility for it, the whole nature of the thrift store in the last ten to twenty years has changed. If you walked into a Helping Hand store twenty years ago, typically dark, cramped, um, maybe things thrown into bins, so on and so forth. One of the core values of our company was to have well lit stores, you know, clean, organized, more like a department store than a thrift store. And this has caused, if you go into a Helping Hand store now, and I did it on the way to work.....They've come a long way. It looks very nice on the surface. They've even got tiled isles and carpet where the racks are. Although, you get down to looking at it, for example, if you go to our men's pants, they are all sized. Within the sizing they are all, the colors are, you know, we start with yellows and oranges and end up with black and white and all the colors in between.

The Ragtags employees with whom I spoke were all very aware of the ways in which their firm was trying to set itself apart from their competition within the industry and the role that store appearance played in achieving this end. When asked if there were any differences between for-profit and non-profit thrift stores another Ragtags store manager replied,

> We care about our sales, so we worry more about our customers to provide the best selection and make sure we provide good customer service.... with this particular company, I will say this is the only one with pride in seeing they have a really good presentation of the store. All the Ragtags. That's the way they set up the Ragtags and the way a department store is set up....Because they want to get the presentation more than a regular Helping Hand or other thrift store. You notice all the thrift stores are all messy and smelly and things like that. Ragtags is more focused on the presentation, making sure of like color and sizes. We can provide better outfits for customers to find what they need...because it's always more organized and easier for them to shop.

These managers' comments are highly instructive for several reasons. The first Ragtags store manager suggests a time frame during which many of the cosmetic changes he describes occurred. Since this is an exploratory rather than a longitudinal study of the thrift industry, I rely on the experience and insights of my subjects to periodize industry changes. In addition, both Ragtags store managers discuss Helping Hand stores, alluding to the increased competition that now exists between thrift firms. Moreover, both managers also claim that Ragtags, a for-profit enterprise, has been at the forefront of the thrift industry makeover. In the course of my research, several Helping Hand employees indicated that Ragtags was their most formidable competitor. This lends further support that Ragtags – and by extension other large for-profit firms – shapes at least some industry standards, especially regarding store appearance. In claiming that Ragtags was his firm's greatest rival, Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator also emphasized the essential role that store appearance now plays in successfully competing in the industry.

> Other thrift, with the exception of Ragtags, aren't that much of a competition because ah, a lot of the stuff that they do is, well there's, the stores look thrift. I mean, if you go into some of our new, you know, if you're down in Golden, go into that store...it won't look like a thrift store....Um, we're going to all tiled floors now, which brighten, brighten up the look. Increase lighting with lower ceilings, again to get by that perception of thrift being dirty and dank and dark and that kinda thing. Um, so it'll just, it'll look more like a regular retail environment, but massive because of colorization and that kinda thing.

The two Ragtags managers quoted above assert that the upscaled look in their firm's stores makes them appear "more like a department store than a thrift store." Several Helping Hand administrators and store managers I spoke to maintained that their firm was also trying to fashion their stores to look more like department stores or, as the Regional Store Coordinator suggests, "more like a regular retail environment." Box 4.1 indicates some of the more recent changes the thrift firms in this study have made to achieve this end. This is significant because it indicates that thrift firms are competing not only against one another, but also increasingly with low-end, discount retail corporations which, as some researchers argue, have greatly homogenized and "McDonaldized" the retail landscape and shopping experience (Miles 2002; Ritzer 2002).

Box 4.1
Changes That Make Thrift Stores Look More Like Retail Department Stores
Cleaner Better Organized Increased lighting and lower ceilings Tiled Floors Color Code and Size Clothing

Competing in the New Resale Landscape

Why firms within the thrift industry would seek to upscale the appearance of their stores is clearer when one looks at the tremendous growth in the resale market over the past decade. In 1997, Americans spent almost twelve billion dollars on used goods, a thirty percent increase from 1992, after adjusting for inflation (Kaufman 2000; Thorpe 2000). Resale is one of the fastest growing segments of the retail industry, with more than fifteen thousand resale shops throughout the country (Curry and Taylor 1999). It seems ironic that the resale market exploded during the largest economic expansion in U.S. history. One would assume that there would be less need to buy used goods. But we must recall historian Susan Strasser's assertion that the growing second-hand market in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a function of affluence and increased consumption, as well as economist Juliet Schor's contention that middle-class consumption grew significantly in the 1980s and 1990s as this group of consumers aspired to emulate the top twenty percent of American households. Furthermore, there is a huge market for used clothing – the majority of merchandise in thrift stores – and it is worth remembering that Americans consume more apparel than any other people in the world (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000).

The thrift industry along Colorado's Front Range benefitted from the strong economy in the 1990s by getting additional donations, since in good economic times people tend to replace their possessions more readily. However, despite the willingness of people to donate their unwanted possessions, a greater number of firms and more stores within those firms has increased competition for the donations upon which operations depend. According to one Helping Hand administrator, "We're at the mercy of our donations. We can only sell what we're donated." Ragtags, which contracts with various charities to collect donations and then purchases them from these groups, claimed that the quality of donations was declining due to the sheer number of thrift firms now in the market. Discussing how his firm acquired the merchandise in its stores, Ragtags' District Manager noted,

> Quality used to be better because there weren't so many, even, you know, five or six years ago, there weren't so many thrift stores. There weren't so many charities trying to do this. The quality has gotten a little less, because there is big competition to get that donation.... But even our stores, there is so much competition now that, you know, to get that same dollar, you've got to work twice as hard.

Intense competition exists for all manner of donations, including high value items such as automobiles. This adversarial environment has necessitated that even well known salvage charities like Lifeline Ministries get their name out to the public by doing what for-profit retailers do as standard practice: advertise. The firm's Executive Director, who also oversees the organization's ten stores, explains the need to advertise.

> And there is a real competitive world out there for that right now. If you listen to your radio, every other day there's somebody saying that they take donated cars and such. So yes, it is harder to get things. You have to pay for advertising. We... are on the back of [grocery store] sales slips. We have coupons that come out there and it says, you know, "15% discount if you bring this to Lifeline Ministries," and so forth. So, there are different ways to advertise. Signs. We have a major twenty-five to thirty foot balloon that we try to set up on buildings, but most of the time they don't let us do it, or you have to have a special licence to do it for so many days. There are a lot of obstacles, but you get over it.

More resale venues has clearly meant greater competition for both donations and customers. In addition to the increased number of thrift and resale venues that have emerged, discount retail corporations such as Wal-Mart, Target and Kmart can sell very inexpensive merchandise, in large measure due to cheap foreign imports. Thrift firms must now also compete with these corporate entities given that they can, and often do, sell new merchandise for the same price as used goods in thrift stores. In discussing the increasingly competitive landscape in which his thrift firm operates, Lifeline Ministries' Executive Director noted that, in addition to other thrift stores, his firm must also compete with these discount retailers:

> And then we are dropping our prices to try to get even more competitive with the outside.... It is a very competitive market. Because you are not only competing with each other, you are competing with new stores, with people who sell new stuff....If we are in a shopping center where there is a Target or a Wal-Mart, we automatically compete. We're trying to get people rather than spending two dollars for that shirt in Wal-Mart to come over to our store and pay a dollar.

While upper-level administrators in all three thrift firms in this study acknowledged that their competitors included low-end retail companies, recognition of the broader competitive field was more varied among store managers. One Lifeline Ministries store manager responded that her firm competed with other thrift operations but said, "We can't really compete with like, you know, Kmart and Target and stuff like that because we're like, well, we're a thrift store." In contrast, the majority of Ragtags store managers were well aware of the scope of their competition. Of her competitors, one Ragtags store manager said matter-of-factly, "The low-end quality, you know, retail stores, which is like Wal-Mart, Kmart, Fred Meyer, all those different ones. They, that is our real competition at this point."

Greater competition, both within the thrift industry and with discount retailers, has meant that thrift firms need to increase their customer base beyond those who have historically shopped at their stores, that is, beyond needy or low-income consumers and "regulars." This latter group includes some middle-income shoppers who have long shopped at thrift stores, and dealers reselling their thrift store purchases in other for-profit resale shops. Although thrift firms do benefit from strong economic conditions by getting more donations, a strong economy means that coveted middle-class consumers can loosen their belts and shop more freely at department stores and low-end discount stores. The Marketing Director at Helping Hand explained the situation this way:

> Well, because of the economy, number one that's one of our biggest threats. That we've been experiencing a very good economy. And you've had this influx suddenly of Wal-Mart, Wal-Mart, Kmart, Target, you know. Kmart and Target have upped their services to compete with Wal-Mart who just came in like bulldozers. But what they have done is they've pulled the middle-class shopper that used to shop thrift, you know, but now they make a little bit more money and when you have these discount stores that have a little lesser quality but at an affordable price, people say well I can get something new verses getting something used....what we have seen is a drop-off of the middle-class customer more low, lower-class customers are now starting to come in. And so, though we want to service that population, we also want to continue to attract the middle-class shopper.

To that end, this administrator mentioned that Helping Hand started to concentrate donation drives in what she called "more upscale areas," "more upper-class neighborhoods" in places like Highlands Ranch, Colorado so that they "make sure that we get high quality goods." In no uncertain terms she claimed that "our goal is to attract a higher-end shopper."

The "higher-end" shopper *is* being lured into Helping Hand stores, if by that one means a higher-income consumer with presumably more money to spend. As mentioned in the previous chapter, my survey of shoppers at three Helping Hand stores in the Denver-metropolitan area found that thirty-eight percent had household incomes over $50,000 a year, and twenty-two percent had annual household incomes topping $75,000.

But while only 10 percent of shoppers with incomes higher than $50,000 purchased all or most of their family needs from thrift stores, it is significant to point out that 37 percent of those with incomes below $17,000 did so (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1
Amount of Family Needs Purchased at Thrift Stores By Household Income

	All	Most	Some	Very Few	Total
Lower-Income Shoppers $17,000 or less	(4) 12%	(8) 25%	(13) 41%	(7) 22%	(32) 100%
Middle-Income Shoppers $17,000-$50,000	(3) 3%	(20) 24%	(46) 54%	(16) 19%	(85) 100%
Upper-Income Shoppers $50,000 and above	0	(7) 10%	(36) 51%	(28) 39%	(71) 100%
Total	(7) 4%	(35)19%	(95) 50%	(51) 27%	(188) 100%

As Table 4.1 shows, only 23 percent of shoppers indicated that they buy all or most of their family needs from thrift stores. Growth in the thrift industry therefore does not appear to be fueled by those who *must* shop at thrift stores, that is, by those who historically have shopped there – the poor and low-income members of our society. Rather, middle and upper-income consumers are finding thrift stores desirable places to shop. In part, this has to do with the increased practice of shopping as a leisure activity in our society. Claire Jameson, a Lifeline Ministries store manager for seventeen years in a Colorado college town, said of her clientele:

> A lot of people tell me, I have university professors that come down here to shop, and you know what they tell me? Well, it's like most of the upper-class people or middle-class people that shop here will tell me, this is their down time, this is their relaxation, their time to just have fun and just hang out, and not be all stressed out. Before they go home, they come here and then they unwind here and then they can face what's at home, that's what they tell me.

Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator discussed the type of shopper who frequents his firm's stores in a similar way:

> I think people are a little, there's a little less stigma attached to thrift shopping now then there was, I'm sure twenty years ago. I think it was looked upon, used clothing was looked upon as being something that you only bought if you couldn't afford to buy new. [Now] it's fun.

He acknowledged that there continue to be shoppers who must shop at thrift stores out of need but added, "the growth of the thrift industry isn't that; the 'need people' haven't grown the industry. It's been the addition of a new demographics. Um, professionals, you know, the middle-class."

Increased competition in the resale and thrift industries, as well as the ubiquitous presence of Wal-Mart and other discount retailers, has meant that lower and middle-income shoppers have more options about where to purchase inexpensive consumer goods – or where to pass time just combing the aisles for pleasure. The three thrift firms under consideration here are keenly aware of the competitive landscape in which they must now operate, whether they are a well-known salvage charity or a large corporate entity. Firm administrators and store managers express the need to distinguish themselves from the competition in order to maintain and expand their customer base. Even Ragtags, clearly one of the leaders in the thrift industry, recognizes the need to set itself apart from its competitors, evident in this comment by their District Manager:

> We've actually been backwards in customer count. Because there is so much choice, a thrift shopper a lot of times will shop all the thrift stores. When I first got here, it was us, WRC, and Helping Hand. WRC has expanded, we've expanded, Helping Hand has expanded. I mean, we had three stores when I got here, WRC had four. Now, WRC has twelve, we have six. So it's the same customers spreading the stuff out. Even as you bring more customers in, there's still more choice. So, you've gotta do better than the competition to get the customer in here.

"Doing better" to attract more customers, especially middle-class professionals, is central to the transformations taking place within the thrift industry. It means keeping up with the competition but also distinguishing yourself from them. While there were some similarities in the process of upscaling or renovating the look of the stores in the three firms I investigated, there were also significant differences largely due to differences in the mission of each firm.

The Lure of Location

Most of the thrift industry employees I spoke to understood the complex, competitive terrain in which they operate and the importance of store appearance in attracting new customers and maintaining existing ones. Attracting new customers poses distinct challenges for non-profit firms Helping Hand and Lifeline Ministries since they must balance the need to increase store revenue with the public's perception of them as charitable organizations. Both had to be especially careful about using such means as advertising to increase sales and customers. The Special Services Director of Lifeline Ministries underscored this point when she said that "We don't want the public to get the idea that their dollars are going into publicity and things." This helps to explain why Helping Hand, although they had a regional advertising department that created coupons, brochures, signs and other promotional items, also concentrated their advertising efforts on clarifying their organizational mission to their customers and prospective donors. The difficulty in trying to promote the stores, which fund mission activities, is well expressed by Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator:

> We've even hired a consultant, an advertising consultant to see about doing ads that really – and there again it was well, do we promote the retail or do we promote the mission? – there's always that, that *thing*, you know? I mean, we *are* the mission, we are our mission. That's what we are. But people only know us, our retail, you know? And we don't really, I mean, we want to let people know that we use the retail to support the mission, but I think there's always a fear that, like, we want people to like, if we advertise, we're trying to *sell* them the mission to have them buy at our retail. I mean, it gets to be a, I think, a philosophical problem trying to sell ourselves, trying to sell our business through our mission.

While advertising is clearly one effective means of increasing customers and sales, certainly one used by mainstream corporate retailers, store appearance and location are others that are increasingly being employed by thrift firms. It is surely no surprise that a considerable number of customers who frequent particular thrift stores live in the neighborhoods that surround the stores. Some long established stores have seen the racial composition of their customers shift dramatically with broader demographic changes taking place in the Denver-metropolitan area. Like other parts of the country, the population of Hispanic immigrants has swelled in Colorado, particularly in the capital, and this has changed the racial make-up of several Denver neighborhoods – and consequently store clientele. According to the Vice President of Retail Sales, this has greatly affected who shops at some of his firm's stores.

> Well, some of the biggest changes, of course, is the change anywhere in the country. Number one is related to this store, the big Hispanic population that shops with us, that has been all over Denver and all over Colorado, all over the country because that population growth has just exploded. If you want to go by demographics, if you go to my Fairfax store, when I came here five years ago, that particular part of town had a large Black population, and so that was a large percent of the customer. That has totally changed now, and it is almost totally Hispanic, and that whole part of town has changed.

The Helping Hand employee who manages the Fairfax store, one of the three Helping Hand stores where my shopper survey was administered, reflected on the needs her store serves its lower and middle-income customers:

> Um, I think needs, I think maybe we're not so expensive, you know, and they come in and they buy, I think, need wise, they can come in and they can buy like clothes for their kids, especially for low, low income....You know, especially now for back to school.... I think we probably help more of the lower class.

This manager was right. The Fairfax store has a relatively low-income customer base compared to the clientele at the two other Helping Hand stores where my survey was conducted (see Table 4.2). Shoppers at the Fairfax store comprised 72 percent of all low-income shoppers surveyed, and only 11 percent of all upper-income shoppers. This is clearly related to the lower-income, depreciating area in which it is located.

Table 4.2
Income Levels of Shoppers in Three Helping Hand Neighborhood Stores

	Broadcliff	Radcliff	Fairfax	Total
Lower-Income Shoppers $17,000 or less	(4) 12%	(5) 16%	(23) 72%	(32) 100%
Middle-Income Shoppers $17,000-$50,000	(30) 35%	(28) 33%	(27) 32%	(85) 100%
Upper-Income Shoppers $50,000 and above	(33) 47%	(30) 42%	(8) 11%	(71) 100%
Total	(67) 36%	(63) 33%	(58) 31%	(188) 100%

The manager at Helping Hand's Fairfax store had worked for the firm in various capacities for twenty-four years when I interviewed her, and witnessed changes in both store clientele and store appearance. In discussing her customers she mentions both lower-income shoppers as well as professional women coming in to find inexpensive brand name clothing. She recognizes that this latter group, and other higher-income consumers that her firm seeks to attract, have found her firm's stores more agreeable places to shop given what she calls the "facelift" they recently have undergone.

> From the time I started, which was back in '77, Helping Hand, the whole, it's like we gave it a total different, uh, a facelift. Because it wasn't, you would walk in and it would just look like a thrift store....everything was thrown in there, and you had the bookcases on the wall, you know, where you tried to display your merchandise, your books, your housewares, whatever you had, you know. Where today, it's just totally, totally different. It just has come so far that it's uh, I mean, walking into a Helping Hand now is more like walking into maybe like a Kmart or a Wal-Mart. You know, because we try to keep everything sized. We try to keep everything clean....a lot of the customers say that they like coming into Helping Hand because the stores are clean. You know, and I think, to me, that has a lot to do with it. And I think the difference in people that you get depends on how your housekeeping is of your store, too. Because I think if your store is more downgrade, I think you are probably going to be getting the lower-income people. Where I think if your store is up and I think if the housekeeping is good and it looks like you are walking into a Kmart or Wal-Mart and it's clean and it smells good, then you know, I don't think your upper-class is going to a lower-class store compared to going to a Helping Hand store.

This manager's comments emphasize, once again, the importance of store appearance in attracting more middle and upper-income shoppers. Stores that attempt to look like a Kmart or Wal-Mart, however, require considerably more space and are often found in places similar to where these giant corporations locate their operations: shopping centers. Increasingly, thrift firms are deciding to locate their stores in high traffic shopping areas where there are also other major businesses. In doing so they are following a trend in the broader resale industry. The successful resale chain formerly known as Grow Biz International recommended that franchisees locate stores near upscale shopping centers and department stores in order draw more middle-class bargain shoppers and bring in high-quality merchandise to resell (Landwehr 2000).

As a company, Ragtags is making a conscious decision to establish their operations in these busy shopping venues, often near so-called "dollar" stores, which enable the firm to rent large twenty-to-thirty thousand square foot retail spaces and still be profitable. The company also has decided that traditional advertising methods such as newspaper ads are not cost effective, and has pursued a much cheaper promotional strategy that includes store window signs and in-store flyers to notify customers of upcoming sales. Locating stores in more dynamic shopping areas has increased the feasibility and success of this advertising approach. The idea, one Ragtags manager asserted, is to make a store "close by, easy to stop into." While rents may be higher in these locales than in other places, they offer the additional advantage of drawing a variety of shoppers into the stores. A Ragtags manager, whose Denver store is in one such shopping complex, summed up the advantages of his store's location:

> You get more, you know, more of a draw. If you are in a stand-alone site somewhere in the middle of nowhere, it's, you know, only going to draw people that know you are there or if you advertise a lot. But if you are sitting right next to a [grocery store] that is high traffic anyway, or a Rite Aid, with a lot of people, then people are going to see you more.

This, of course, is a sensible strategy to increase one's customer base, although it is worth noting that these shopping centers are rarely, if ever, located in poor, low-income neighborhoods. In low-income areas in cities across the country one is hard pressed to find a grocery store or a bank let alone a group of these businesses situated together. But thrift firms are not seeking to attract additional poor or low-income customers. Rather, they want to appeal to those who would frequent these kinds of shopping areas, that is, middle-income and even upper- income consumers.

In the 1990s Helping Hand opened several stores in high-traffic shopping centers and for reasons similar to those given by Ragtags employees: to diversify the kinds of customers who come through your doors. And like their chief competitor, they too are building larger, Wal-Mart-like stores. While this approach to expanding one's customer base has been less true of Lifeline Ministries, they also recently opened a store in a busy suburban shopping center with a flagship grocery store. Although fewer of Lifeline Ministries stores are currently located in areas like these, their Executive Director made it clear that this was the direction in which his organization was moving:

> We try to find stores now that are in shopping centers that are more easy to get to....we find places that are more accessible, easy to get to, where a lot of people are. We try to find brighter stores with higher ceilings, good lighting, good windows. You know, so it draws people to you. You know, you want stores to be friendly, you want it to be exciting to come to and shop in.

One important difference between the firms in this study is that Helping Hand owns their store properties, whereas all of Ragtags' stores and most of Lifeline Ministries' stores are on properties that do not belong to the firms. Renting a substantial amount of retail space can be extremely costly, as Lifeline Ministries discovered after they opened a relatively large store in a "more accessible" shopping center. Their Special Services Director disclosed that "we've been losing our shirt" on that particular store. Nevertheless, one of their stand-alone, poorer performing stores in a lower-income area is being relocated to a shopping center complex. But in addition to – or even in spite of – store location, there are other ways that Lifeline Ministries, Helping Hand, and Ragtags are attempting to increase their revenue and attract middle-class shoppers.

Everything Old and New Again

The fever over antiques and collecting that permeates American culture was discussed briefly in the previous chapter, and it helps to frame one strategy begun in the early 1990s by Lifeline Ministries to generate store sales and lure a higher-income shopper into its stores. In select locations Lifeline Ministries has created a "store-within-a-store," setting up a "boutique" area for antiques and collectibles. In these sections of the store there are glass display cases with expensive pieces of china, silver, or old toys, shelves of old pottery and other household items, as well as large pieces of older furniture, some with price tags as high as several hundred dollars. Of course, this additional section requires greater expertise in pricing this potentially profitable merchandise. Lifeline Ministries has someone in particular who, as the Special Services Director said, can "watch for stuff that looks like it's old or it's collectible or certain things."

Since there is not an abundance of this type of merchandise donated to Lifeline Ministries, not all of its stores are allocated merchandise of this quality or potential for profit generation. According to the firm's Executive Director, "You try to put boutiques in areas where, in a higher-class area where people will come in and buy those type of things. That's not to say that you can't sell it in a poor neighborhood, you can." While it may be possible to sell this kind of merchandise in a lower-income neighborhood, boutiques were not part of Lifeline Ministries stores found in poorer parts of the Denver-metropolitan area. Rather, they were in stores located in college communities, shopping centers, and in the large main store where merchandise processing also takes place. This was not lost on a Lifeline Ministries Assistant Manager who thought her store received lesser quality merchandise from the main office “because of the location, so they send all the nice stuff and the better quality stuff to the nice stores.”

It is worth recalling the intensely competitive environment in which thrift firms are operating, and that, in the case of non-profit firms, store earnings are the foundation of funding the organization’s mission. This helps one to interpret the comment made by Lifeline Ministries’ Executive Director when he discussed the antique and collectible sections in his firm’s stores:

> There’s always been a part of Lifeline Ministries stores where there is an area that was stuff that the poor people didn’t need to survive, but rich people could come in an buy as collectors. And you know, it would have been foolish on the part of the thrift store to, just because we got it donated, to give it away for almost nothing so they can turn around and make a thousand dollars on it. You know, it’s like we had someone donate a fur coat to us, walked into our place and said they’d like to donate it and signed the fur coat and everything for us. Now, should we then turn around and sell that fur coat for ten dollars so a poor person can buy it who is just going to take it and sell it for the ten thousand dollars it’s worth and do something else with it? You know, or should we sell it for the two thousand dollars so that we can do the programs that we do to help a million people?

In many ways this comment is about knowing your clientele. When I queried them about their customers, most administrators and store managers in all three firms told me that “all kinds of people” shop at their stores. While I was interviewing the Manager and Assistant Manager at a soon-to-be relocated Lifeline Ministries store in a poorer part of a Denver suburb, one out-of-town shopper from Minnesota approached us anxiously. She was inquiring about an old couch priced at $189 that was already sold. She offered to pay $500 for it if was not retrieved by the person who bought it so that she could put it in the “old Victorian mansion we redid” back home.

It seems that Lifeline Ministries’ Executive Director is right. There are things in these stores that poor people don’t need but that the wealthier among us can afford to collect. Why not cordon them off in order to make a greater profit off of higher-income customers? Part of the reason these boutiques and other upscaling measures are problematic is that thrift stores, especially the charitable firms, were once for poor people who needed things and could not afford to buy new. There is now less physical sales floor space in these stores for the merchandise that *is* affordable for them. This is a change worth emphasizing, especially given the dismantling of other social safety nets for the poor and vulnerable in the past decade. Moreover, there is a potential spillover effect: higher-priced items in one area may lead to price increases on other merchandise in the store. Indeed, the Assistant Manager of a Lifeline Ministries store with a boutique that is located in a wealthy college community confessed, "Overall, we're pretty expensive....It would be difficult for a single parent with two kids to come in and shop here." When asked if there was a concern about making the merchandise in her store accessible to lower-income people she responded simply, "There's not, there's not...lower income people cannot buy here."

Store managers and administrators with whom I spoke cited weekly sales, seasonal promotions, and regular markdowns – discounts available to all shoppers – as ways their firm makes its merchandise affordable for lower-income consumers. Other than these sales strategies, however, nothing exceptional was done to make store goods more affordable for poor and low-income shoppers. Senior citizen discounts are given at stores within each firm, which is significant for older shoppers living on a fixed income. And all three firms worked with social service agencies that provided things like store vouchers to ensure vulnerable people who sought assistance could get some of what they needed from their stores. Yet despite acknowledging that this was the shopping outlet used by lower-income people in our society, sales strategies that allocated more floor and shelf space to higher-priced merchandise were employed by all three firms.

Rather than create an area in their stores for antiques, collectibles, and vintage items, Ragtags and Helping Hand attempt to boost sales by stocking some of their shelves and floor space with "new" goods. This is more lucrative, according to Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator because "the whole secret to thrift, for anybody really, is how fast you can turn the merchandise." New goods "turn" or sell quickly. His firm is less interested is garnering the highest price for an "antique" item. From their perspective, "So this is an antique and it goes for ten bucks, we sell it for ten bucks. We've got ten bucks out of it. We got what *we* needed to get out of it,. And you got a good deal." Instead of expending resources trying to determine prices for relatively few antique items, this firm buys new merchandise it can "turn" quickly as a way to increase store sales.

Helping Hand purchases year-end close-outs, discontinued and returned items from a national retail chain, and also buys merchandise in large quantities at trade markets twice annually. This merchandise includes things such as small, inexpensive kitchen gadgets, Halloween costumes, and back-to-school items from the trade markets, as well as furniture, lamps, small kitchen appliances, and holiday decor – most still in their original packaging – from the national retailer. The Vice President of Retail Sales who orchestrates these purchases said that this isn't done to compete against the large discount retailers, but rather is meant to "try and set ourselves a little separate, apart from our competitors, the other thrift stores....because it's a cleaner, fresher look, that type of thing." The market purchases began in the early 1990s and have been a "growing business every year" according to this Helping Hand executive.

But Helping Hand's industry competitors are also raising revenue by stocking and selling new goods. Close-out merchandise purchased in bulk has been incorporated into Ragtags' stores to raise average sales. At one Ragtags store I visited there were several tables of inexpensive candles and candle holders. These are low-cost items, "impulse buying items" the Store Manager called them, but they are working to boost average sales because "they're really a bargain price." This Ragtags Store Manager also noted that his firm recently purchased bulk quantities of returned items from a national discount retailer, a different chain from the one working with Helping Hand. Items were purchased per palette and included televisions, VCRs, and baby cribs. The firm lost money on the cribs because they were missing parts or broken and so could not be sold. But the other bulk merchandise was fine and, according to the Store Manager, "was good stuff, I mean, we made a killing so, it was worth it to us."

Like Helping Hand, Ragtags stocks its stores with new Halloween costumes and decorations because this occasion is the busiest time of the year for stores in the industry. Some people who would not consider shopping at a thrift store for their everyday needs do buy items for Halloween costumes there. New merchandise, a cleaner, brighter atmosphere, and other upscaling measures seek to convert these occasional thrift shoppers into regular customers. One Ragtags Manager noted that "We hope that people will come in for Halloween costumes that wouldn't shop at thrift stores, but we hope to generate them as new customers for our regular stuff, too."

The McDonaldization of Thrift

The introduction of "vintage" areas and new goods into thrift stores – as well as store cleanliness, organization, and new shopping center locations – demonstrate some of the ways that thrift firms are striving to increase sales and diversify their clientele in a fiercely competitive market. These are not random approaches to change, but rather well calculated attempts to vie for higher-income customers and more donations within a particular economic climate. Like other businesses that have transformed themselves in order to remain competitive in the new global economy, thrift firms are becoming increasingly "McDonaldized," that is, they are placing greater emphasis on four elements that sociologist George Ritzer (1996) argues are key to the colossal success of the fast-food giant: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control through nonhuman technology. These dimensions of what is increasingly standard business practice are not mutually exclusive, but rather overlap and affect one another. They are an integral part of the late twentieth century shift from a Fordist model of production, characterized by mass assembly line production and standardized products, to a post-Fordist model, which emphasizes efficiency through flexible, decentralized production practices (Sabel 1994). Several social scientists have argued that McDonaldization has permeated all aspects of social life, from the family (Dennis 2002), to the criminal justice system (Robinson 2002), to theme parks (Bryman 2002). Perhaps it should come as no surprise then that one can see the elements of McDonaldization extending into thrift stores, one of the lowest sites of consumption in our society. Although the movement toward McDonaldization can be seen in the three thrift firms under investigation here, the process manifests itself somewhat differently in each firm.

In today's fiercely competitive global economy businesses must exercise efficiency, or the best way to do something, in order to remain viable. Administrators and managers of Ragtags, a thrift industry leader, understand the connection between generating store profits and market share, and operating the business with ever greater levels of efficiency. This is evident in how the firm processes and prices its merchandise. It is important to note here that processing in the thrift industry is analogous to producing, since thrift stores "produce" the merchandise they sell by collecting, sorting, cleaning, and pricing it. As previously mentioned, Ragtags purchases most of what it sells in its stores from charitable organizations that collect donations and sell flats of goods to the firm. Ragtags uses a decentralized method of processing, which means that goods are delivered directly to each store, sorted, and priced right where they are sold. This is now the trend in the industry because it *is* most efficient and, consequently, most cost effective. This decentralized processing model is comparable to the "flexible" production strategies occurring in other industries, especially the apparel industry (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000).

Ragtags' store managers are mindful of the relationship between generating store profits and enhancing efficiency. When asked about his job responsibilities, one Ragtags store manager responded quickly, "Um, bottom line, profit, in a nutshell." But profit was clearly linked to his responsibility supervising those in charge of production and store operations, monitoring what he even called "efficiencies."

> We have ways to monitor how efficient a certain department is working. We have certain standards, certain figures, formulas that we go by that we can tell if the production team is clicking on all cylinders or if there is a problem, um, we are able to break down the production team into different departments. We can actually tell, you know, a strong department from a not-so-strong department.

A strong production department will be one that dispenses the required number of items within certain price points or ranges. The company knows that about half of what it purchases from the charitable organizations it partners with will be substandard quality goods that will neither be processed any further nor go out on the sales floor. But it also has "formulas" for how many items will be in each of its sales categories given the number of items that can be sold. Here, while the emphasis is on maintaining efficiency, there is also clearly a reliance on calculability, being able to quantify how much is processed, priced, and put out on the sales floor. The Ragtags Manager above described his company's processing and pricing procedures as if they were parts of a well oiled machine:

> Yeah, we know that on an average, we should hit twenty items, we should. And we should get so much dollar value out of that twenty, on a average. So, we monitor that and, you know, if we are not getting that, we find out why. You know, we find out why, we do the trouble shooting, and then we're responsible to take care of the problem and get it to where it needs to be.

Increasing efficiency, and therefore cost reduction, is also a concern at Helping Hand. The firm's top administrators recognize that the trend in resale is away from large centralized processing plants, such as the one they currently operate, toward a decentralized model like the one employed by Ragtags, a chief competitor. According to the Vice President of Retail Sales, "The turn nationally has been to do that and get away from the big centralized processing plant. And the reason for that is cost savings.... decentralization is definitely the way to go. And basically, it's because you run the operation much more efficiently, much more efficiently."

The majority of merchandise sold by Helping Hand is acquired from donations that are collected in trailers at donations sites around the Denver metropolitan region.

Sites are often located in shopping centers near busy grocery stores. Helping Hand stores also serve as drop-off locations for donations, which are sometimes priced and put out to sell at that particular store. More commonly, donations are hauled back in the trailers to the central processing plant where they are placed on huge conveyors to be sorted, sanitized, priced, and finally distributed among the various stores in the Denver-metropolitan region. The Vice President of Operations explained the system to me on a tour of the firm's central plant:

> Pretty much everything gets centralized with our operation. We bring them [donations] back here, they get processed here, cleaned up, tested out, priced, and then shipped back out to the stores. The stores do a little bit of their own processing of some of the stuff they get. More of the hard good items or smaller, what do ya call it, um, houseware-type stuff. And that's to help reduce any breakage and, double handling-type stuff. But they do a small, really small amount compared to what we bring in.

This way of distributing merchandise to the firm's stores, however, is becoming increasingly outdated because it is less efficient and more expensive than using a decentralized model of collecting and processing donations. As much as Helping Hand wants to prevent the "doubling handling" of donated goods in order to reduce costs, a centralized processing model makes this extremely difficult to achieve. This is why two of the firm's newly built stores include space for collecting and processing donations on site, and why it is moving to decentralize operations in order to furnish merchandise for several of its other stores. The need to "turn" merchandise, or sell it as quickly as possible, pushes thrift firms to find the most efficient way to acquire, process and distribute goods. This is no different than what occurs in "regular" retail, where quick turnover and cost reductions have been facilitated by improvements in the efficiency of distribution centers and transportation fleets (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000).

Selling merchandise in thrift stores, however, has everything to do with pricing, just as it does in other retail venues: if the price is low enough, it will sell. In discussing how his firm trains employees to price merchandise, Ragtags' District Manager said, "The main thing you want to teach is, if it's not a bargain to you, it won't be a bargain to anybody else." Ragtags, Lifeline Ministries, and other firms in the industry spend time training their workers to differentiate among brand names and the quality of merchandise in order to determine prices. Although Helping Hand has implemented various pricing practices over the years, it currently has settled on a standardized method that is both efficient and cost effective.

Helping Hand sets a standard price for all categories of merchandise that it sells in its stores, with the exception of miscellaneous items, new goods, and furniture. Standardized pricing practices mean that there is little question for workers as to what price they should give an item. Here desire for efficiency relates to another facet of McDonaldized systems: predictability. Helping Hand can expect that workers will quickly and uniformly determine the price of a particular item. The faster goods are priced, distributed, and displayed, the faster they can be sold. Moreover, savvy shoppers knowledgeable about designer and brand names feel an added sense of customer satisfaction when they buy designer labels for the same standard price as lesser quality items. Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator explained his firm's pricing practices this way:

> So the sooner you can get it out into the stores, the sooner you can sell, the sooner you can turn that money. We really, there's a couple ways of looking at pricing merchandise. You know, one is, what is it worth? And that's what you'll find in like the WRCs. They're trying to put an overt price on it. We price it for what we think you could sell it for. And by doing that it enables us to turn. It also gets us shoppers that are looking for that "diamond in the rough." You know, the woman who just shops thrift more as a hobby, or to find those treasures. And she can come in and find a cashmere sweater for $4.99. And that's somethin' to talk about the rest of the week.

Again, it is worth mentioning that the hobby shopper, the treasure seeker, those looking for that "diamond in the rough" are more likely to be higher-income consumers rather than lower-income shoppers looking for an inexpensive sweater out of need or lack of resources to shop elsewhere.

Predictability and standardization also have a great deal to do with the new, cleaner, more organized look of stores in the three firms under examination here. As previously discussed, administrators and store managers identified discount retail stores like Wal-Mart, Target, and Kmart as primary competitors, although Lifeline Ministries store managers primarily saw other thrift stores as their main rivals for customers. Like the discount retail giants, Ragtags and Helping Hand are seeking to "brand" their firms, that is, they want consumers to be able to quickly identify their logo and stores. Moreover, when shoppers enter one of their stores, they want them to feel comfortable by recognizing the layout and the firm's visual signs. This necessitates that all stores in the firm standardize store appearance and operations. It means, in short, that they become more McDonaldized. The desire for firm recognition and what it entails were pointed out to me by Ragtags' District Manager:

> Yeah, we're trying to, we call it, we're working on calling it branding. So when you go into any Ragtags store you are going to know it's a Ragtags. By doing that stuff, we're going to try to put a brand like, you walk into Starbucks, you know, and people try to copy Starbucks formula, I guess you call it. You can go into any Starbucks location, and the way they do it is exactly the same. And that is what we want to get to.... but everybody needs to do everything the same way.... so if a manager transfers from my store to one in Connecticut, that the things are done the same way.

"Branding," according to this administrator, requires that all stores share the same logo and store design, are painted in the same type of colors, and all stores have identical signs. This is what the large retail stores do. This is what makes McDonald's and company's like Starbucks that imitate its model successful. He continued:

> You should be able to go from this store to this store, like a Wal-Mart or Kmart, and it should be the same. It should be the same colors, it should be...So it's like McDonald's. You see that McDonald's sign driving down the road, you know you're going to get a tasteless burger quick. Or you see a Starbucks sign and you know what you're going to get.... And that's what we're looking for, so they'll know that it's a Ragtags, have the same logos, you know the ladies' department is going to be here. You know, it's a comfort thing, so you can go right where you need to go.

Ritzer (2002) argues that this is the way predictability functions in McDonaldized systems: employees behave in routinized ways and consumers know what to expect and therefore feel comfortable in their surroundings. This type of standardization aims to attract the broadest range of customers, as well as limit the skills needed by workers. For thrift firms, McDonaldizing their operations enables them to diversify their clientele by making all types of consumers feel comfortable in their stores. This same Ragtags administrator maintained:

> I think we're trying to get away from the idea that there, that we just want a regular thrift shopper. We want everybody to feel comfortable in the store, whether it's a thrift shopper that enjoys hitting every thrift store, or whether it's somebody that just wants to come in and shop.

As a firm, Helping Hand also recognizes the advantages of predictability by way of standardization. Individual store managers have little say in the way their store looks. The firm determines the stores' appearance, which is now a uniform design. The Vice President of Retail Sales at Helping Hand, a key player in determining store expansion, explained that his firm is following a general trend in the thrift industry.

> Yeah, we try and make all the stores look the same. The store in [one location] will be a carbon copy of [different location], but it will be much smaller. It's easier for us, number one. Number two, it works out. The customer likes it because they can associate where things are, men's is here, women's is here. We try to keep it in the same place unless the layout of the store won't allow it. But, yeah, we try to keep it similar. That's why all McDonald's are the same. We call 'em cookie cutters. That's why all Foley's are the same. It's less expensive to do it that way. You know, so now I do a store and I tell my painter I want white walls with [firm logo]. He knows what it is, he has it laid out already, it's not different every time. They're all doing that. Yeah, every Ragtags store is identical, all WRC stores are basically identical. Lifeline Ministries is on the border, but they are a whole different world. That's a whole different company. If you want to get somebody to talk to you about thrift stores, they have a whole different concept.

Again, the rationale for standardization and uniformity here is, first and foremost, cost savings. This is the most efficient way to establish multiple sales venues. But familiarity and comfort for the customer, as well as predictable employee performance, are also important considerations. This administrator also suggests that Lifeline Ministries has an entirely different way of operating its stores, out of the mainstream of the thrift industry in general. There is some truth to his comment, which I shall discuss in some detail below. But notable changes are also taking place at Lifeline Ministries, not so much in a "cookie cutter" appearance of their stores, but in another facet of the McDonaldization process: worker control through non-human technologies.

Ritzer (2002) and others (Leidner 1993) argue that controlling workers through technology is significant because it results in a "de-skilling" of many jobs. While on the one hand Lifeline Ministries needs a knowledgeable, skilled worker to price the more expensive goods sold in their antique and collectible boutiques, pricing the majority of merchandise found on its sales floors – clothes – requires relatively little competence or judgment. The firm began computerizing how it prices clothing in the early 1990s so that an employee determines the price of an item within a very narrow framework of possibilities. There is no writing involved; rather, the push of a button creates a price tag. Of course, there is a connection between predictable employee behavior and the control of workers by means of nonhuman technology. In this case, Lifeline Ministries workers are in much the same position as fast food employees who push buttons on computer screens marked "double cheeseburger" or "large drink." In their work, however, those that do much of the pricing for Lifeline Ministries' stores need to exercise *some* judgment. The Executive Director of the firm described how clothing is priced as follows:

> Normally, what we do, we have one person in our store that sees the clothes first. And that person will take designer clothes and things of that nature off the rack and she knows well enough what to price them. She prices them separate, they go to our boutique parts of the stores. The rest of the stuff, like we have a shirt and there is a touch screen computer they touch, and it says "shirt," and if whoever looks at it $2, $3, or $4, so they make an assumption, how new it looks, and they push one of those three buttons.... The computer makes the tags. They have like three choices. They'll push on the screen "shirt" and they push that and it comes up and it gives three price ranges, and they decide well, let's see that's pretty new, you know what I mean, it doesn't look like it has been worn much. And they can give that to $3, just push $3 and then they hang it back up and they go to the next one, and when the rack is done, then there is a whole printout they hang on it, and then another person goes and then sticks it individually on it.

Since most of what is sold at thrift stores is clothing, a considerable part of processing donations at Lifeline Ministries has been de-skilled. This, however, makes those that perform this work less expensive to train and easier to replace if necessary. This is the attraction of employing non-human technologies in any business. But there are always thrift store items that need to be priced that do require some knowledge and expertise. For things like furniture or electronics, the Executive Director said the firm has long employed a man who "shops around in furniture stores, sees what things are going for, whether it be in Kmart or Wal-Mart or regular furniture stores" to get an idea of how to price like items in their stores. At Lifeline Ministries, pricing that requires more expertise is still the domain of its human employees.

Yet what Ritzer (2002) calls "the long arm of McDonaldization" has extended less into Lifeline Ministries than it has into the two other firms under consideration here. While it is not entirely true that Lifeline Ministries operates in "a whole different world," this firm is less efficient, less calculating, and a less predictable system than either Helping Hand or Ragtags. This is due in part to its religious affiliation, which places the firm within a larger bureaucratic structure that carries out the organizational mission. If one Lifeline Ministries firm is struggling financially because its store sales are suffering, the divisional headquarters subsidizes it until it becomes self-sufficient again. Divisional support enables all the firms within the division to maintain their level of outreach services in their respective communities. The same Helping Hand administrator who claimed Lifeline Ministries was "a whole different company" with "a whole different concept" of thrift stores also added, "They are probably the best at doing their mission."

But there are additional reasons why, among the three firms investigated in this study, Lifeline Ministries is less McDonaldized and their stores less upscaled. The first has to do with the firm's personnel. Several upper-level administrators and many store managers in both Ragtags and Helping Hand worked in the retail sector for a considerable period of time, some for decades, before working in the thrift industry. While a handful of

Lifeline Ministries store managers had worked for the firm for a number of years at the time I interviewed them, only a few mentioned that they had any retail business experience, which helps to explain why they failed to consider the larger discount retailers among their competitors. Moreover, Lifeline Ministries store managers said things to me that no manager in either of the other two firms came close to revealing. Comments such as the one quoted above, "Overall, we're pretty expensive" and "lower income people cannot buy here," as well as another manager's disclosure that the firm did not provide her or some other managers with certain essential supplies. These included things for store displays, necessities for the store's bathroom, and an open/closed sign for the front door of her store. She paid for these herself saying, "I mean, that should be their responsibility as far as supplying us with the necessities for the bathroom." These responses underscore some employee discontent and a failure on the part of the firm to treat their store managers professionally.

An additional personnel-related problem at Lifeline Ministries was that their stores were often grossly understaffed. This was not the case at either Ragtags or Helping Hand. During one of my interviews at a Lifeline Ministries store the Manager was attempting to talk to me, work the register and assist customers, and help to unload a truck full of donated merchandise. She was the only employee I saw in the store.

Another reason Lifeline Ministries is less McDonaldized is that it continues to operate under a less efficient centralized distribution model to stock its stores. More problematic, however, is that in recent years the distribution of merchandise was highly erratic, that is, unpredictable. Customers stopped coming and store sales plummeted. The Special Services Director disclosed to me that her firm had been a top earner in their division up until just the past few years when things started "falling apart." She acknowledged that "if they were delivering merchandise to a store once a month they were lucky." She and the Executive Director were appointed to this region in order to remedy this situation and merchandise is now delivered on a regular basis. But problems remain. The same store manager who paid for bathroom supplies told me that sometimes merchandise she sent back to the main distribution center because it would not sell was sent back to her again, and that she received poor quality merchandise that was often, in her view, overpriced. This suggests a continued lack of efficiency and predictability on the part of the firm. In our interview, however, the Special Services Director emphasized the steps that her firm was taking to turn their stores around and make them profitable again: adding boutiques sections, changing the look of the stores, establishing stores in busier locations, and trying to get better quality control. In short, upscaling the stores in her firm.

Some of the consequences for lower-income consumers of upscaling in the thrift industry already have been discussed. But the ramifications of these changes are especially vivid, particularly at Lifeline Ministries, when one explores the functions of thrift stores in our society. Here, evidence of upscaling suggests that we may be losing – or at least significantly altering – one of the few places that the poor and marginalized among us can go and seek help, find community, and still feel part of the consumer society in which we live.

CHAPTER 5

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THRIFT STORES IN OUR CONSUMER SOCIETY

The changes in the thrift industry, like those occurring in other commercial enterprises, are shaped by economic, political, social, and cultural forces that affect the availability and cost of goods as well as consumers' desires. I have argued that growing inequality among classes in the United States, increasingly competitive retail and resale environments, and media forms that foster the fashionability of used goods all contribute to the transformations taking place in the thrift industry.

The significance of these changes cannot be fully appreciated, however, without also considering the vital material and ideological functions that thrift stores play in our consumer society. Materially, thrift stores historically and presently help to provide the poor with the goods they need to survive. In addition to highly bureaucratized social service agencies, religious groups, and the kindness of strangers, thrift stores give real, tangible material assistance to people in need. They also serve as both a shopping outlet and gathering place for seniors with fixed incomes and an unwavering desire to feel a part of their communities. Furthermore, the genuine environmental benefits that ensue due to thrift industry recycling of goods back into the hands of consumers cannot be undervalued.

Ironically, thrift stores also serve to ideologically support a highly capitalistic, consumer society. Despite limited incomes and downward mobility, the working poor can feel that they, too, are able to participate in our consumer culture by shopping at thrift stores, even if choices regarding where they can shop are few. And like their counterparts who first began furnishing the merchandise sold by traditional salvage charities a century ago, middle-class Americans can donate unwanted items to thrift firms and feel justified in their accelerated consumption practices. Corporations can also maintain a positive image as they sell their returned and out-of-season merchandise to thrift firms thereby casting a benevolent face on corporate America. In the absence of alternative markets for this unsold merchandise, and since many items sold by these corporations are inexpensive imports, one is left to wonder exactly how much benevolence is involved in these transactions.

A Place for the Poor

In the 1990s in cities across America, urban gentrification, a booming economy, and historically low interest rates sent the price of housing skyrocketing. Between 1990 and 2000, the median price for a single-family home in the United States rose 18 percent (Roberts 2004). As mentioned previously, Denver and the Front Range of Colorado were no exception. At the time of this study in early 2001, housing costs in one area in metropolitan Denver rose so high that professionals earning less than $20 an hour were priced out of the housing market (Rouse 2001). From late 1999 to October 2000 the cost of renting an apartment in the Denver metropolitan area also went up an average of 5.1 percent, slightly higher than the 4.4 percent average wage increase in the area during the same period (Arellano 2000).

As the price of housing increased, in 1996 the welfare reform act, "The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act," was signed into law. The welfare reform act dramatically reduced material and financial assistance to the neediest American families, while it simultaneously pushed those of working-age in these households into low-wage jobs (Bermanzohn 2001). After the economic downturn in 2000 the situation for many poor Americans worsened, since the federally funded safety net previously there to cushion their fall had been severely curtailed. Even for people who qualified for the limited federal aid currently available, bureaucratic hurdles continued to be a huge barrier to actually receiving assistance (Ehrenreich and Piven 2002).

Upscaling in the thrift industry must be assessed in this political-economic context. Perhaps what is most problematic about the upscaling process is that vulnerable people may lose one of the few places they can go for non-bureaucratized assistance in a society that often renders them invisible. The homeless and the poor frequently make their way to thrift stores to ask for coats, blankets, children's clothing, and other basic necessities for which they cannot pay. They venture there because, despite both upscaling and the growth in for-profit businesses in the industry, thrift stores are still identified with charity in our society. This helps to explain the reactions of some who are distressed and confused by the prices of some thrift store merchandise. "Why," one man making a donation asked me, "are the prices so high when this is supposed to be a place where poor people shop?" Ragtags' District Manager offered a simple, economically rational response: "If you try to price it just for the low-end, you're not going to make a profit. You're not going to be here."

Economic realities notwithstanding, there are far too many among us who cannot even afford to pay the "low-end" prices at thrift stores. In need of something to keep them warm on the streets where they live, the homeless and poor find their way to a Ragtags, Helping Hand, or Lifeline Ministries store and ask for what they need. They assume they will not have to pay for it, fill out any forms, or answer any social service provider's questions. And despite changes in the industry, they are largely right. Store managers at all three firms related experiences when they provided assistance to someone in need. While institutionalized channels for providing this type of material assistance exist, such as store vouchers obtained though a human service agency, several store managers like this one at Lifeline Ministries readily acknowledged that they gave away merchandise when asked by someone who needed it.

> Because there's like, well, we're not supposed to actually just, you know, give stuff away to people and stuff like that, and there's, I mean, there's just been a lot of times that I've seen people that need help.... Like in the winter time, we have people come in here that didn't have coats. They're pretty much homeless, so we give 'em a, you know, a coat so they wouldn't freeze out there. I had a lady come in here that said she didn't have clothes. She said she had slept in the street all night. We tried to help with finding shelter, gave her a couple places to go to so she wouldn't be in the cold, and then gave her a couple of, you know, something to put on to stay warm.

Even within the same firm, while one store manager might feel they can exercise their own discretion in giving merchandise away, another will actually pay for the merchandise they provide to someone. Another Lifeline Ministries store manager who worked for the firm for seventeen years at the time I interviewed her said,

> I work for my boss, my boss expects me, I'm the caretaker, they're [store merchandise] not mine to give away, and I don't give them away. I have boughten things for people if they've come in and need like a pair of socks because they're walking from here to who knows where, and I've boughten a pair of socks or given to 'em or something like that, or a hat, or even a coat here or there, but they're not mine to give away. And even after all these years, I don't give stuff from here, because it isn't mine to give.

At Helping Hand, the other non-profit firm in my study, the practice of giving merchandise away to someone in need was authorized by the highest level administrators. When asked if there is a concern about making merchandise accessible to lower-income shoppers, a Helping Hand store manager who had only been with the firm four months at the time of our interview replied,

> Yep, in fact, in the middle of December, I had a lady come in, and she said to me, "Listen, I cannot afford to buy Christmas gifts, my kids need clothes." I called downtown and talked to my supervisor, who is store coordinator for six stores, and he said, "have her pick out what she wants." So, I told her, "You go pick out what you want, call me, and I'll take care of it." So, when she was finished, she was in here an hour, and I went up there, and she was very frugal. She said, "They don't need more than three or four things each." I said, "Hey, it's Christmas, pick out what you want." So, she went out with ten or twelve things, you know, sweaters, pants, shirts, and this kind of thing for the kids. I put it in the bag, and that was it.

Despite being authorized by upper management to give merchandise away in appropriate circumstances, another Helping Hand store manager echoed the sentiments of many Americans when she said that "to cover [my] own backside" she often paid half price for merchandise that she gave away so that "they know that nothing in life is free, somebody has got to pay for it eventually." Still, in her managerial position at a non-profit thrift store, she saw incredible need in her community, an area with a swelling low-wage immigrant and migrant agricultural workforce. When queried, she was less concerned with keeping the prices of merchandise in her store accessible to low-income consumers than she was with the need to develop more programs to help them. Her own experience with vulnerable people led her to advocate for more institutional, long-term modes of assistance. When people in need made their way to her store she sent them on to the appropriate social service agency – only to find them back on her doorstep again.

> I mean, here we've had, I mean, a couple of winters ago when it was so cold, I sent people to Catholic Community Services, and they offered them a hard candy and a cup of coffee. And it's like, I mean, you know, they are freezing to death, that's really not going to be long-term for them. And they came back and told me, so that's when I started buying coats and stuff.

Although a handful of store managers actually purchased what they gave away, many believed that they could exercise their own judgement in giving away merchandise to someone who really needed it, and that their firm would not penalize them for doing so. One Ragtags manager, however, felt that her firm's policy was shifting, and that she may no longer have that prerogative. When she mentioned that she was asked to donate some dishes to a community service organization she did so because, not being able to sell or recycle them, she inevitably would throw them away. For her the ability to assist people was an important aspect of her managerial role. She wondered whether her benevolent actions would be a problem for the corporate firm.

> I won't know until I talk to Corporate. So, it may be one of those things I'll be in trouble for. I don't know....You know, what's it costing Corporate? So, I'm giving away fifty dollars worth of merchandise, you know, once a month or so they'll call me. I don't see that that's going to hurt a billion dollar business....I don't know how the corporation, we'll see how that works. If they still like what I do, you know, as far as giving things away, then yes, we'll get along okay. Other than that, I don't know if I can continue this job, because I have to be able to do those things.

Store managers who had experience in "regular" retail spoke of the satisfaction in working for a firm where they were able to provide such material assistance and to interact with their customers in diverse and meaningful ways. A Helping Hand manager who had forty-two years of retail experience spoke candidly about the difference between thrift stores and other retail environments:

> They come because they don't have the money to go to a Nieman Marcus, or whatever, and do their shopping. They have to come and try to put things together and live, you know, warmly even. But, see the thing about it is, is what I like about this, is in a regular retail setting, if somebody comes in and says, just comes up to you and says, "I can't afford that at the price it's marked." I say, "What can you afford?"... If a person walked into a Rite Aid store and said, "I don't have the money for that." Well, I'm sorry, I can't sell it to you for any less. Because there again, you're working with a cost of goods. Here, you're saying, "What can you afford? I can reduce the price for you."

This Helping Hand manager puts simply what is at stake in the upscaling and McDonaldization of thrift stores: genuine human interaction that directly attends to the material needs of our society's most vulnerable members. This is perhaps the most socially detrimental consequence of trying to remake firms within the industry so that they mirror their corporate retail competitors. In addition to what Hal Kane (2001) has called "a rise in inequality of space" between the ten million Americans with two or more homes and the hundreds of thousands of homeless people in the United States, there also is the diminishing of spaces where vulnerable people can go to satisfy their most basic needs.

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Many social researchers argue that one of the most notable demographic changes in the United States over the past century is the dramatic increase in the number of elderly Americans as a percentage of the total population. In 1900 only about one in twenty-five U.S. residents was age 65 and older (Eitzen and Baca Zinn 2004). Today, Americans who are 65 and older now comprise about 13 percent of the total population, and they are expected to constitute approximately 20 percent by the year 2030 (Roberts 2004). While the wealth and incomes of these older Americans differ depending on their marital status, race and sex, post-retirement years often entail reduced personal income, fixed pension benefits, and a reliance on Social Security income, especially for the poorest seniors. Diminished economic prospects for many seniors helps to explain why, when asked, most thrift store managers included the elderly among their "typical" customer. My research found that 7 percent of customers were 65 and older, below their actual proportion in the population, but apparently visible enough to be noticed by thrift industry workers. (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1
Thrift Store Shoppers By Age

Age	
14- 44	51%
45- 64	42%
65 and older	7%
Total = 202	

A Lifeline Ministries Assistant Manager, herself a senior citizen who lives and works in a relatively expensive Colorado city, spoke frankly about the economic circumstances of many of the seniors who regularly shop in her store:

> I think there are many senior citizens that come in here, and yes, we do have our homes, our homes are more valuable than they were when we bought them and so forth. But their taxes are higher. And so, I see people who are struggling, senior citizens who are struggling....They are very careful. They are, most of them are on social security, and I notice that they don't, five dollars is a lot, and they want that senior citizen discount.... And they want that, and they, I don't know, I just get the feeling that they just may be struggling an awful lot.

It is significant that stores in the least McDonaldized firm in this study served as a place where seniors would not only come to buy things on their fixed incomes, but would linger to talk to managers and sales personnel, in some cases for several hours. In speaking with store managers at Lifeline Ministries, I was struck by how many of them related interactions with their customers, particularly the elderly ones, that were more social as opposed to strictly commercial in nature. While store managers and administrators at Ragtags and Helping Hand discussed discounts provided to seniors, what elderly shoppers liked to purchase, and even mentioned unconventional and creative sales strategies with their customers, Lifeline Ministries managers spoke of knowing many of their customers by name, and inquiring about the health and families of their senior shoppers. One Lifeline Ministries manager mentioned the predominance of elderly customers in her store, and attributed her clientele to a senior residence that was recently built nearby. But she tapped into something that is perhaps more influential than mere location when she related why these seniors visit her store with such regularity.

> We know the majority of the people that are our regular customers. [Those] that we know, and know us, and come in and speak to us by name, are seniors.... [They come] mostly to have something to do. Conversation, 'cause a lot of 'em don't have children. A lot of 'em lost their, maybe their husbands, wives, or whatever....We have a lot of, well, a couple of women that come in and bring us things. You know, bring us cookies, or something that they baked all day. You know, just bring us food. I guess they want to come here and do something. And a lot of times they won't even buy anything. They'll just walk around and look and talk. Oh, I've got about three or four old men that love to come in and flirt and talk and hold conversations!

It should not be surprising that older Americans seek a place to socialize and be with people who know their names and something about their lives. In addition to the sheer increase in the proportion of seniors in the population is the trend in the number of elderly who live alone. Currently, about forty percent of Americans over age 65 live by themselves, and of those, eight out of ten are women (Kane 2001). With so many seniors living alone and, more importantly, since being old is a devalued status in our society, Lifeline Ministries thrift stores seem to fill a niche similar to the one filled by the corner coffee shop or Woolworth's lunch counter decades ago, before the advent of Starbucks and pricier chain restaurants. They are an inexpensive place to go on a regular basis, a place where genuine human interaction can be found, and where one can share the triumphs and trials of one's life. Given the preponderance of senior citizens in her store and her relationship to them, it is no wonder that when asked if there is a concern about making the merchandise accessible to lower-income shoppers this Lifeline Ministries manager replied, "Mostly for the seniors, because a lot of times, you know, they already are on a fixed income."

In my conversations with several Lifeline Ministries store managers I heard a sincere concern for the customers who walked through their doors. This is yet another reason why changes taking place in the industry are problematic. As the thrift industry tries to remake itself to look more like their corporate retail competitors, important differences between the unique shopping experience one can have at a thrift store and the more routinized interactions that result from the McDonalization process will begin to disappear (Leidner 1993). When asked to describe her customers, one Lifeline Ministries manager, whose store is located in a college and agribusiness community, detailed not only the variety of customers, but also explained that people go there for more than basic commodities:

> They come here for the friendly "Hello." They come here, "How are you, oh, I see that your leg is healing up." And I had one man, he's a little Hispanic man, my gosh, I talked to him for, must of been two years before his leg finally healed up. He had, he wore slippers, you know, just continually. And just the thought that you care and that you notice, and a kind word....Some people that you know own their own business and stuff that come in here that you know by name that, you know, and that is the nice part of getting to work here is that you get to meet a lot of people, whether they are on welfare, or whether they are professors. There are doctors, we have therapists that come in here just to unwind....Yeah, it makes you feel good because they feel comfortable.... every now and then we'll have tea and cookies upstairs, just, you know what I mean, just something for the customers and that. They enjoy coming here....they know us by name. They'll come in, they'll talk to us a few minutes every time they're in, or if they have trouble in their life, you can almost guarantee that they'll wait for you and catch up with you somewhere in the store if they are really troubled. I have people that will just stand there and wait for me to walk through so they can share something with me. Sometimes it's a tragedy, sometimes it's a birth of a grand baby, you know, something. And they don't find that in the malls, or Target, or where am I trying to say?

Despite the fact that they are commercial spaces, one of the functions that thrift stores can and sometimes do serve in our consumer society, unlike most of their corporate retail competitors, is that they are also *community* spaces. This juncture of commerce and community is what many corporate entities attempt to create when they donate to organizations within the locales where they operate. This is similar to the relationships that are established between Ragtags, a huge for-profit company in the thrift industry, and the local non-profit organizations they affiliate with in order to collect donations. I suspect that the kind of community spaces that Lifeline Ministries stores engender – although we may be witnessing the last of it – occur precisely because their business practices are less McDonaldized, that is, less rationalized and less routinized. When asked if he thought there had been a change in the type of customer who shops at his firm's stores, the Executive Director of Lifeline Ministries noted that there are always a certain percentage of shoppers who are new. But he went on to talk about his "regular" customers, and in doing so described the communal function of his firm's stores:

> And like I say, it's not just poor people who are down on their luck that are shopping at thrift stores. I think we are one of the great retirement discoveries. We have a lot of retired people, especially little ladies that are bored, sitting at home, they don't want to sit at home. So, they come and shop at the thrift stores. You know, they know they can get something for a buck. They may spend four hours there and spend a buck, but they know they can find something for a dollar. And they just love the shopping. They love the idea of being there and having people in the store being friendly with them and someone's paying attention, and they like that....We have had people that donate to us, that every other week or so, you have to go to her house and pick up a bag of clothes. I think they go to a thrift store to buy it so they can call you up to come and get it so they have somebody come to their house. They are lonely people and they want to have someone to talk to for a few minutes. You know, we live in a society where people are doing this, they're walking by each other so darn fast they don't stop to say "hi" anymore, and these people are looking for a little attention.... I think maybe my store people don't even realize it sometimes. I think they are actually doing something that is helpful, that gives people an outlet, a place to go. You know, they know that if they go there somebody will talk to them. It is very important. In our society we are becoming too isolated from each other.

Contact with those who work and shop at his firm's stores enables Lifeline Ministries' Executive Director to recognize what some social researchers argue is a growing problem in the United States: social isolation. From the nearly ten percent of Americans living alone (Kane 2001) and the sixteen million people residing in gated communities (Low 2003), to cities segregated by race and class, we are increasingly becoming a more socially isolated society. While in the United States the decision to live alone or isolated from others is oftentimes a choice, there are, as Hal Kane (2001:97) notes, "major implications not only for individuals, but for public affairs, the environment, and the future." Lifeline Ministries thrift stores, and perhaps other consumer venues like them that have not yet fully McDonaldized or upscaled their operations, are a place where people from different races and social classes circulate in the same space. They are also commercial spaces that still offer those seeking authentic, unscripted interaction with others a place to go and be recognized. This is extremely important. In his extensive work on civic culture and engagement in the United States, Robert Putnam (2000:332) cogently argues that "the single most common finding from a half century's research on the correlates of life satisfaction...is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections."

But Lifeline Ministries' thrift stores, and the entire thrift industry, provide yet another service to society" they are a preliminary dumping site for the plethora of unwanted material goods Americans, living alone or with others, no longer desire to possess.

Where Retailing Meets Recycling

It is certainly no exaggeration to state that Americans are the world's most rapacious consumers. As five percent of the world's population, the United States consumes twenty-two percent of its fossil fuels (Taylor and Tilford 2000). Gas inefficient sport utility vehicles and light trucks comprise nearly half of all vehicles Americans now buy (Sawin 2004). As previously noted, the average American consumes about fifty-three times more goods and services than someone from China (Taylor and Tilford, 2000). The Chinese, regrettably, are rapidly embracing our consumption practices. In 2002 there were 10 million private cars in China; automobile industry analysts expect that 150 million cars will be on Chinese streets by 2015 (Gardner, Assadourian and Sarin 2004).

What is perhaps as remarkable as the sheer volume of consumption in the United States is how our propensity to consume affects the lives we lead and the social choices we make. "Americans spend an average of six hours per week shopping, but less than 40 minutes a week playing with children," according to environmental analyst Hal Kane (2001:134), and there are now "more shopping centers in the United States than high schools." One would think that with all that Americans consume, we would be an extremely happy lot. But as many social researchers have observed, although the average person's income more than doubled during the second half of the twentieth century, enabling us to purchase more and higher priced consumer goods, our level of happiness over that same period of time remained static (Gardner et al. 2004; Schor 1998). As economist Robert Frank recently noted, "If we use an increase in our incomes, as many of us do, simply to buy bigger houses and more expensive cars, then we do not end up any happier than before" (Svensson 2004).

With an abundance of shopping areas at our disposal, and the amount of time we spend at them, it is no wonder that more Americans have more things – and oftentimes greater levels of debt – than they know what to do with. One way to deal with the former is to donate them to a charitiable or for-profit thrift firm. A number of firms in the industry are capitalizing on Americans high levels of consumption by directly soliciting households via telephone for "unwanted reusable items." These firms will send out a truck to pick things up, so the donor does nothing but put items out in front of their house. Ragtags gets much of its merchandise this way, contracting with local charities in the communities where they are located and training them to solicit for and collect donations. One Ragtags store manager revealed that his firm would even "grow a charity" in a particular market that they want enter:

> Florida, we went into that market a few years ago, and there wasn't any charities set up there. But we told, I think it was [charity], "Hey, go down, we'll set you up, get you some buildings, get you trucks. You guys go out and solicit, and we'll buy the stuff from you." We'll do that. We will actually grow a charity in a particular market that we want to go into.

Although Ragtags garners its store merchandise in this manner, like other thrift firms, it actually deals with the refuse of our consumption practices. Lifeline Ministries' Executive Director explained where his firm's merchandise comes from this way:

> The merchandise comes from donors like yourself, like myself. We give something we're tired of or something that doesn't fit us any longer or, you know, we don't have no purpose or need for it, rather than throwing it in the garbage can, if it's something someone can use, Lifeline Ministries picks it up, we clean it up, fix it up where we need to when we can, and then it goes into our stores to make money.

Dealing with the discards of our disposable consumer society is obviously profitable, or the number of for-profit firms within the thrift industry would not be growing. But there are huge costs to dealing with what people "donate" to thrift firms because a great deal of it is truly trash. Administrators and store managers at all three firms in this study discussed the garbage that people "donate." In states like Colorado where individual households must pay for trash removal, some of the cost of household consumption is being assumed by thrift firms who cannot sell many of the items passed on to them. This is especially problematic, of course, for non-profit firms. Lifeline Ministries' Special Services Director declared, "Our trash costs are exorbitant because people dump all their trash off on us, too. They know we couldn't sell it, but they just don't want to deal with it, so we have to pay the dump fee and all of that."

Several Helping Hand administrators discussed the huge expenditures their firm paid for trash removal, largely a result of "donations" of non-sellable items. The

Marketing Director at Helping Hand noted this when asked if there had been any changes in the type of merchandise sold in their stores:

> Another thing that we struggle with, and all thrift operations do, is that we get a lot of trash. We get things that we just cannot use and there has been an increase of that. It's always been a problem, but it seems that, you know, there's an increase in that. So we need to do more educating of the public as to what they should donate. And one of our lines is, "Give to Helping Hand what you would give to a friend."

No one at Helping Help knew more about the problem of trash disposal and its associated costs, however, than the Vice President of Operations. He and his staff are responsible for processing all donations, which includes: collecting donations at thirty-eight pick-up sites in the Denver-metropolitan area and in two other Front Range cities; sorting and cleaning donations in an "assembly-line" type operation; and distributing this fully "processed" merchandise to all Helping Hand stores. They are also responsible for picking up merchandise that has not sold from all the stores and dispensing of it. Like several of his colleagues, when asked about changes in the type of merchandise now donated to his firm, he immediately responded:

> I'll tell you what has been on, on the not positive side for Helping Hand, that's changed probably in the last ten years. It's, it's always been there, but it, for some reason the community has really been dumping a lot of trash on Helping Hand. We, with our type of collection service, we have the trailers, so what we also get with that, unfortunately, is people dumping things after hours at our sites. And we'll get a lot of torn-up mattresses. You'll get old appliances that we don't accept. And you'll get couches that are just trashed-out. So we become more of ah, a dumping ground for some people, unfortunately. We have to deal with that. Ah, we have to run a crew at night that picks up a lot of that stuff. And... we're spending probably close to $250 thousand dollars a year to, to pick up and just to deal with (pause) trash. You know, some of it comes certainly from the donations we go through. But, a lot of it also comes from that type of stuff where people are getting rid of stuff that really isn't sellable. It's just, it's just trashed-out.

Lifeline Ministries' Executive Director also mentioned that his firm has a problem with people "donating" trash, noting that it cost his firm approximately 100 thousand dollars to deal with trash removal in 2000. But Helping Hand, Lifeline Ministries, and Ragtags all go to extraordinary lengths to recycle, as well as profit from, the incredible amount of merchandise – or what might more aptly be called "consumer waste"– donated to their firms. In 2000, thirty million pounds of clothing, just clothing, was donated to Helping Hand alone.

While much of what is donated to the firms is sold by them, there is always merchandise that must be disposed of because it fails to sell in the stores. At Helping Hand, some unsold merchandise such as televisions and small household appliances might be sold in bulk at a bi-weekly auction, in many cases to Mexican entrepreneurs who sell these goods in Mexican markets. Unsold books might also be sold in bulk, most often to local used booksellers. Items such as clothing, shoes, and belts that failed to sell through its stores are compacted into huge bales and sold to local rag dealers. Ultimately – and quite ironically – it is often sold back to markets in poor countries where a considerable amount of the apparel Americans buy is first manufactured. Finally, some unsold merchandise ends up in an enormous trash compactor, where its life as a commodity ends in a Denver-area landfill.

Many of the people I spoke to in the industry saw part of their firm's mission as an environmental one: to keep as much as possible from ending up in the local landfill. When asked to reflect on whether her store serves any community needs, one Helping Hand manager replied:

> There's a lot of things that people get rid of that aren't junk, they're, you know, somebody could use. I think, because we're here, it doesn't end up in a landfill, it comes here....the thrift store, I used to think was really low income type shopping, but not at all. I mean, if you want to get good bargains, so what if it's, you know, been in somebody else's house, as far as furniture and that type stuff goes. Even the clothing is worn so little, I think that the recycling is a great thing that we're doing.

This manager also mentioned that of Helping Hand's twelve Denver-area stores, four or five earn over a million dollars a year selling "recycled stuff." For non-profit firms like Helping Hand and Lifeline Ministries, most of the revenue from store sales is directed back into mission-related programs. Maximizing the number of markets in which they can sell the goods donated to them means greater revenues for organizational projects. It also means that as little as possible ends up in a landfill. Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator said "we try to squish out every little bit [of money] out of it that we can...but after a while it gets to the point where handling it become more expensive then, then getting rid of it." For these non-profit firms, recycling more of what is donated to them requires efficient retailing.

Ragtags' District Manager also claimed that recycling was one of the greatest benefits his firm's stores provide to their communities. Like Helping Hand, Ragtags finds buyers for merchandise that fails to sell in its stores in order to increase profits, but also to keep as much as possible from ending up in a landfill. As one Ragtags Store Manager explained:

> Well, firstly, the stuff that we sell doesn't go into landfills. But another 90% of it is, we find recyclers or buyers for it, so it is used again. So it is being reused. Like I said, if we don't make, we're lucky to break even in that area, but it's a commitment we make that, you know, we just don't want to send it to the landfills. Because even candles, we'll give a lot of candles, you know, basically it just pays for the shipping to these guys that make those logs, those fire logs. All those are, are sawdust and wax.... Not just the clothing, the shoes, belts, purses, all that type stuff. What, a lot of it ...will go over to a third world country where they'll take it and it is again resold at, you know, pennies on the dollar. But it is stuff that they are not able to get. I would say 90% of our [unsold] clothing and that goes over there.

What happens to thrift store merchandise that does not sell is as interesting as why these used goods now appeal to higher-income shoppers. Few thrift store shoppers probably know what happens to the shirts, pants, shoes and other items that they do not purchase in these stores. Although I will not go into detail about the "rag trade," I mention it here because it is a primary way that thrift firms deal with unsold, excess merchandise. Moreover, when explicitly asked what happens to the merchandise in the store that does not sell, administrators and store managers in all three firms mentioned the process of "ragging out" clothing or their relationship to this global rag market. Many, including this Ragtags Store Manager, discussed the international rag trade as integral to her firm's recycling efforts:

> And then when we are ragging off the merchandise, that is baled and sold to a rag company that then sells it to third world countries. So, you'll see our merchandise, if the tag is still on it, in Africa or Mexico, or one of those countries, not just thrown away. It is recycled again. And for, you know, like some Third World countries, they don't maybe want wool sweaters, but they want the yarn from that wool sweater. So, they will unravel that, remake a wool sweater, and resell it to us here in America. And we pay for it again. ... It is, it's fascinating, you know, it just keeps being recycled and recycled....And uh, which is great, it's a good feeling, you know, to be involved in total recycling.

This Ragtags manager was especially concerned about the potential for her firm, as a second-hand retailer, to positively shape the attitudes of people in the affluent community in which she worked. She reflected on her own experience with used goods and on what she believed was people's desire to do more than simply consume:

> My dad loved going to the dump and digging through trash. You know, I was so embarrassed, but he loved to do that, and he always brought home some really good things. So, I guess there have always been those people that just like getting a good deal. They just didn't want to spend their money on that. They would rather go out to dinner or something else, you know. But I think it has become more, as we started talking about recycling, and realizing that we needed to do something different rather than fill the earth with garbage. I think it's become a community effort, you know.... I think if you can get [this community] to commit to charities and recycling, you can get them to do anything. Anyway, that's my goal.

Thrift firms, and the people like this woman who work for them, play an important role in recycling the possessions that American consumers no longer want. Moreover, thrift shoppers appear to be the type of consumers for whom recycling is an important practice. Over eighty percent of thrift shoppers surveyed in this study said that re-using and recycling things was a somewhat or very important reason for why they shop at thrift stores. (see Table 5.2)

Table 5.2
The Importance of Recycling to Thrift Shoppers

Not important	16.5%
Somewhat Important	42.0%
Very Important	41.5%

Total = 200

Although recycling appears to be an important reason for why many people shop at thrift stores, others find thrift stores are one of the few places where they can purchase what they need for their families. As previously discussed, my research shows that lower-income shoppers in particular found thrift stores to be a place where they could meet the needs of their families. Even middle and upper-income shoppers reported that they purchased some of their family needs at thrift stores. But that lower-income households *can* participate in our consumer society by shopping at thrift stores obscures tremendous inequities in income, wealth, and consumption options in the United States.

The Ideological Salience of Thrift Consumption in a Consumer Society

Although people with low-incomes have far fewer affordable shopping venues than those with greater economic means, thrift stores, dollar stores and discount retailers remain a way for them to participate in our consumer culture. In addition to increased economic polarization among classes in the United States, there is a growing segmentation in who consumes where in America. Research on low-wage service sector employment shows that a deterioration in retail industry wages has been driven by a split in the consumer market over the past two decades (Bernhardt 2000). Annette Bernhardt (2000:23) argues that, on one hand, "there are now specialized department stores, upscale grocers, and home improvement and auto repair centers offering personalized, in-depth service," and on the other "are the mass discounters, outlet stores, and uncountable fast-food franchises offering no-frills service and cheap products." The act of consuming itself, even it entails consuming cheap products or other people's cast offs, may be powerful enough ideologically to mask – or justify – qualitative differences between Gucci and garbage.

Because of the history of salvage thrift firms, there is a perception that goods in thrift stores are within the economic reach of those with lower incomes. This was affirmed by a Ragtags Store Manager who stated, "I know that a family that perhaps isn't as well off as other families can come here and get a good deal. They can afford to... clothe their kids and themselves for a reasonable cost." When asked if and how their firms tried to make store merchandise accessible to lower-income consumers, store managers and administrators in all three firms mentioned store vouchers, regular sales, and lower-priced merchandise as the primary ways this occurred.

Many industry store managers and administrators cited voucher programs as a means to make their merchandise available to people with low incomes. Those in need are sent by a local charitable organization to select a certain amount of merchandise from a firm's store, which is paid for with a voucher. A Ragtags Store Manager claimed that poorer people can use a voucher "to purchase merchandise for nothing," which was particularly important for those with fewer resources in the affluent community where her store was located. It may appear that vouchers level the consumer playing field in some ways since, according to the Executive Director of Lifeline Ministries, using a voucher poorer people "can shop just like anybody else":

> And then we also have the other part of Lifeline Ministries that gives vouchers to people who can't afford a lot and they bring those vouchers into the store and shop just like anybody else, and then they just pay with the voucher.

The need to go through a social service provider in order shop does not seem to be an issue for this administrator, but it seems reasonable to believe that having to do so significantly shapes a shopper's experience.

Weekly sales were also viewed as a primary means to keep merchandise priced within the reach of lower-income shoppers. One Ragtags Store Manager discussed her firm's weekly "dollar day" sale, which was started "to help assist the public, you know, those people who really can't afford a lot." Anything with a particular colored tag priced less than $9 sells for just $1. At this price, someone with just a few extra dollars would be able to buy several items. But even within a thrift store, very low priced merchandise obscures the economic inequities that exist between those who must buy a dollar priced item and those who can afford everything else. The comments of one Ragtags Store Manager make this quite clear.

> We try to price on a price spread. We try to have something out there for everybody, you know, from that bum off the street who just wants to pick up a pair of socks because he doesn't have, you know, he's worn a hole in his, to you know, that customer that is willing to spend $129 on a 1946 silverware set. You know, I just had one recently sell for that. But, something for everyone is really what we are trying to do, and certainly we're going to have some things out there for people that don't have a lot of money that can buy things.... And so what that does is it really opens up for people, you know, that don't have a lot of money, but still want to get some good quality to come in and get something for a dollar that they normally wouldn't be able to buy.

Many thrift industry administrators and store managers argued that a selection of lower priced merchandise enabled low-income people to shop at their stores. This could be interpreted as a *democratization of consumption* by thrift firms since, as one Ragtags Store Manager affirmed, "we treat everybody the same, whether they got money or not."

But he went on to say, "And it comes down to, if the person is lower income and is in here buying stuff, they need to buy the cheaper stuff, and there is plenty of that there."

Most importantly, perhaps, is that low income people – and the number of Americans who can be defined this way has increased with de-industrialization, downsizing, outsourcing, and contingent employment – *can* continue to shop and participate in our consumer society. Arguably, this has positive consequences in our society since the working poor and lower-income families can get what they need, stretch their hard earned paychecks, and feel part of a culture that places excessive value on material accumulation. This is especially true for poor children who must strive to fit in with peers in a highly competitive material landscape. One Lifeline Ministries Store Manager included this as part of the needs her store served the agriculturally-based community in which it was located:

> The majority of needs that I see met here are that we offer low cost furniture for the people that really are in desperate need of furniture, or they come in here and their kids don't have clothes, or they can't afford to dress 'em like some of the other children may be dressed that are going to school. They can come in here and they can find beautiful clothes, wonderful clothes for children and adults. They can buy dishes, they can buy knick knacks for the house, they can buy bedding. I can't hardly think of anything that we don't offer. We offer appliances. For less than $100, almost always, you can buy an appliance. And they are guaranteed for 30 days, too.... So, I think we meet a great need that is in the community.

While the stigma of thrift shopping may have diminished for middle and upper-income shoppers, as discussed in the previous chapter, some people with lower incomes still feel embarrassed about shopping there. Living in a media saturated consumer culture many people, especially media savvy children, are knowledgeable about the status that comes with designer labels, name brands, and store recognition. When he pointed out the typical shoppers who frequent his firm's stores, Ragtags' District Manager said that his "low-end" customers want something that say's "nice," but at a price that they can still afford.

> That would be one of our low end [customers], but they will still come in and shop because they want to find something nice, even though they are on a limited income.... Not a lot of people want to buy a pair of Rustlers, because it's K-mart and everybody knows its K-mart....If they are looking for something nice, they want something that says "nice" and that is the hardest thing to learn. It doesn't matter what economy level, they still want nice stuff....That's why a lot of people who come in to [get a] donation, you'd think they were ignorant, "Oh, I don't want this,"... they won't take just Kmart Rustlers, and we think, "God, that's terrible, this is free!" But, in their mind, that's, I'm not a psychologist, but it lowers their self-esteem. Even though they're at this income level.

This is a keen observation about how we often view the poor in our society. If poor people are getting something cheap or free, then they should be grateful for what they get, including our cast-offs or garbage. Of course, this minimizes the importance of fashionable goods in our consumer culture, and ignores how difficult it is to escape internalizing the ideology of materialism pervasive in American society. But it could be argued that thrift stores provide ideological justification for inequities in consumption precisely because poorer people can buy or get *something* there. While lower-income groups may have to shop at thrift stores, or get merchandise free by using vouchers, they also are attempting to "live warmly." Their disdain at consuming unfashionable, discarded material goods is, perhaps, an indicator of their complete ideological integration into our consumer society.

The Benevolent Corporation?

In the previous chapter the purchase of merchandise from corporate retailers was discussed as part of the upscaling process occurring in the thrift industry. Here I want to examine the implications of the corporate-thrift connection, and the differences between non-profit and for-profit thrift firms.

Donations to all manner of charitable, non-profit causes are part of much corporate culture. Contributions to local charities and organizations where corporations operate shape public perceptions about the social benefits of corporate entities. As a nationally recognized non-profit organization, Lifeline Ministries benefits from corporate giving. While Helping Hand and Ragtags have established business links with major retailers, buying returned or discontinued items and selling them as "new merchandise," thus far Lifeline Ministries has accepted merchandise from other businesses as donations only. Some donations, like discarded flatware and dishes from United Airlines, are used at the facility where direct services are provided. Others are sold as merchandise in their thrift stores. This would include such things as the goods they received when a hardware store went out of business, or discarded items donated by some corporate retailers.

The merchandise acquired by Helping Hand from a major corporate retailer that I will call Budget is quite different. These are not corporate donations but rather are business transactions that enable a major retail corporation to broaden its market by selling its returned, close-out, or discontinued merchandise to a thrift firm. According to Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator, "We still pay a pretty good price for it [Budget's merchandise], but it makes it advantageous for us to resell." Although this can be interpreted as a win-win situation for both the non-profit and Budget, it is important to note that the origin of this merchandise is neither publicized nor disclosed to Helping Hand customers. Helping Hand's Marketing Director explained the relationship this way:

> We also have what we call "new goods," and where we purchase them at a fraction of the cost from Budget Corporation. We have a relationship with Budget Corporation where goods that are not sold in their stores are then purchased by us for a percentage on the dollar. So we sell those goods as new goods.... So, there's some of those larger retail stores, retail chains that have goods that are not sold in their stores that they in turn sell to us as a non-profit.... they don't lose it, and then we in turn sell those goods as new goods.... of course we don't *say* that it's from Budget Corporation. You know, but it's just, they're just um, labeled as new goods. But, you know, we're not allowed to say, that's part of the deal, that you know, you don't say this comes from this store or that store.

Budget is not the only major retail corporation to establish ties to a thrift firm in order to expand the market for its merchandise. As previously mentioned, Ragtags also purchased merchandise from a major corporate retailer to sell in its thrift stores. Of course, savvy discount shoppers easily recognize these "new goods" as merchandise that was in Budget stores only a few months earlier, even if Helping Hand goes to some lengths to conceal their origin. These goods are clearly important to Helping Hand given the accommodations it makes to process this merchandise through its system. The Vice President of Operations at Helping Hand explained these processing adjustments, which appear to be made in the interest of the corporation rather than the non-profit.

> We get some stuff from Budget that we will work into the system. It'll be return-type stuff that they might get. We purchase that at a very reduced rate. And we work it in, in a separate area totally. It's ah, a secured area so that um, 'cause their theory is, of course, that people will get a hold of this merchandise and maybe try to *return it* again and get refunds for it. So we have to go, kinda go through a deidentification-type system with those items. We have to put a little code on there, on the inside of a label, or on the bottom of an item um, so that if it ever did wind up back in one of their stores they could look at it and know that this was a Helping Hand item, we already gave a refund on it once.

Since new goods are integral to upscaling at Helping Hand, it is easy to understand why the firm would modify its processing procedures to accommodate the merchandise it buys from Budget. But depending on the corporate retailer for merchandise could be detrimental in a highly competitive industry where consumers expect a plethora of low-priced goods. A Helping Hand Store Manager argued that the best merchandise in the firm's stores was indeed from Budget, but that there were limits to how much they could pay for it given competition in the thrift industry.

> Well, as I said, the nicest merchandise is bought from Budget. And the way I understand it, Helping Hand is having a hard time with Budget because Budget now wants to charge us more for it because they are looking at their bottom line. What used to be, we got pretty good merchandise at a very, very low price. Now they are upping the price on it, and Helping Hand doesn't want to get into that purchasing from vendors at higher prices and then having to compete with other thrift stores, I mean, that's ridiculous. What it ends up doing is defeating the purpose of what the whole thing's about.

What the whole thing's about for a non-profit enterprise like Helping Hand – and this is equally true for Lifeline Ministries – is using its thrift stores as a means to raise revenue for mission-related activities. Buying "new goods" from Budget enhances the look and quality of merchandise in Helping Hand's stores. But if the cost of this merchandise is too high, acquiring it comes at the expense of the organization's larger purpose. While many of Helping Hand's administrators and store managers were interested in discussing the improved look of their stores, there was clearly a sense among them that the stores' purpose was to generate money for the mission. As the Regional Store Coordinator said plainly, "We exist on a retail level *solely* to fund our mission projects, our training, that kinda thing. We're not there for, ya know, for stockholder benefits. We're not there for anything else but growth so that we can generate more revenue, so that we can subsidize more plans and more programs."

Such zeal for the organizational mission helps to explain strong reactions to questions about differences between non-profit and for-profit thrift firms. Many in the industry admitted that both types of firms strive to make the most money possible from the merchandise sold in their stores. Considerable differences were acknowledged, however, in how merchandise is acquired and what is done with the revenue made from its sale. Several Helping Hand administrators maintained that the public is misled by for-profit thrift firms because they conceal that they are for-profit enterprises through their affiliation with charitable organizations. The Vice President of Retail Sales, like several of his Helping Hand colleagues, took special aim at Ragtags, their primary competitor.

> Well, the basic thing is, the businesses are run primarily the same and similar. But what you run into I think is a misconception of the public. You're for-profit thrifts, basically, they team up with, they go to a charity and they buy the charity's name. And basically, they're saying we're going to use your name to get people to donate goods to us. At the end of the year, we're going to give you a percent of our profits. Which is usually very small. So they go out all year long and say, "Donate for [Charitable Organization]." So people think they are donating to [Charitable Organization] and essentially they're not. You know, a very small percent of that is going to [Charitable Organization]. It is going to the owner of the thrift store, the for-profit thrift store's pocket. And the biggest company in the country is [the family that previously owned Ragtags] who just sold their business, which are the Ragtags stores....Those are for-profit, and they make a fortune, a fortune.

Helping Hand's Marketing Director pointed out the ways that signs in Ragtags' stores contribute to this public misconception of where shoppers' money is going after it leaves the cash registers.

> I think that they're in a sense it, it almost seems as though it could be somewhat unethical. For example, Ragtags, a portion of their monies go to [Charitable Organization]. So when you go to a Ragtags store, they have the big placard out saying, you know, "This supports [Charitable Organization]," but it doesn't say "a portion of." And so I think the donor as well as the consumer is lead to believe that they're supporting [Charitable Organization]. And they don't understand that just a small portion of that dollar that's going to that particular non-profit. And the rest of it is going so somebody can live on a hill.

Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator argued that, while charities that team up with for-profit thrifts do benefit monetarily from the relationship, he added that "the guise of it being that that's where the money is going is deceptive." Given the fierce competition in the thrift industry for both donations and higher-income shoppers, it is no wonder administrators at Helping Hand are concerned that the public understand differences between their firm and for-profit thrift enterprises like Ragtags. Although most thrift industry workers I interviewed mentioned that people shop at thrift stores primarily to get a bargain, some, like Helping Hand's Marketing Director, argued that if shoppers understood the mission her firm would garner even greater support and sales.

> One of the things that *I* believe is that if people understand our mission and they understand who we are, then they don't just support us because they're getting a good deal, but they support us because their dollars are doing good for humankind.... we do have a large portion of customers that shop because they know what Helping Hand stands for....we did a donation drive...that we do at the end of every year to give people that have waited until the last minute a last opportunity to get that tax receipt for a write-off. And in doing that um, one of the customers actually said – I mean I, I couldn't have paid her for what she said – she said, "Ya know just ah, everything it goes for, job training, and to help people that are less fortunate, and I get a bargain, ya know, in the process." And so, I think that we have a, a percentage of our customers that are shopping because they know that it, uh, it supports something that's good.

It is interesting that when reflecting on why people shop at his firm's thrift stores, Lifeline Ministries' Executive Director claimed that most people shop there out of self-interest, “they just want a good deal.” He claimed that a fundamental difference between his non-profit firm and for-profit thrifts is, in fact, in intention: they work out of self-interest and Lifeline Ministries’ business motives are “pure.” Because of this crucial difference he argues that Lifeline Ministries will endure – regardless of what the competition does or why people shop at his stores.

> You know, I used to be naive and used to think that they shopped at Lifeline Ministries because they knew all the good we do, you know. But like I say, I think people shop there because we have something that somebody else doesn’t. And we just have to keep showing people what we have. I think we live in a society today where most people don’t really care, they just want a good deal. You know, the icing on the cake is they can walk out of there knowing that they helped somebody, that makes it feel a little better. The major difference between us and those for-profit, it’s not because we’re not all for-profit, because we are, but with different intents. Our profit is so we have money to be able to help more people. Theirs is to put more in their pocket. And, they’ll get to a point where they’ll die out. We were one of the first organizations in the world to start the thrift stores, and so, we’ve been around a long, long time and we’ll be here when they’re gone because our motives are pure. We do it for a very, very good reason and that is to help mankind. They do it to help themselves.... We just got to make sure we do a good job to the best of our ability and do it every bit as good as they are doing it because that is smart business.

Many thrift shoppers indeed do not recognize whether the store where they shop is actually a non-profit or a for-profit thrift firm. But rather than not caring about this distinction, contributing to a “good cause” is considered a somewhat or very important reason for why many people shop at thrift stores (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3

**Reasons for Shopping At Thrift Stores:
Supporting a Good Cause versus Buying Brand Name Merchandise**

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
The money I spend goes to a good cause	17%	52%	31%
I can buy brand names for very little money	16%	42%	43%

While Table 5.3 shows that a greater share of shoppers see finding quality, brand name merchandise at an inexpensive price as a very important reason for shopping thrift, it also verifies that thrift shoppers *are* concerned about where their money is directed. This is an important finding not to be taken lightly since it has implications that go far beyond the thrift industry. A growing number of U.S. consumers are concerned about how their money is used by the firms where they shop. Witness the emergence of the "fair trade" movement where consumers spend more on products to ensure that producers are fairly compensated for their work (Raynolds 2002). In a highly competitive industry where the number of for-profit firms is increasing, it is a wise business strategy on the part of non-profit thrift firms to educate their customers about how store revenue is used. According to Helping Hand's Regional Store Coordinator, however, educating customers about his firm's mission is a changing priority.

> And that's a constant thing that we discuss all the time, you know?...but right now we're so involved in like expansion that every, all of the philosophical discussions are kinda put on the back burner, you know? But when we were going through a plateau period that was probably the number one discussion, ya know, how do we let people know we're different from Ragtags, from how we, what we do with our money?...And it was basically decided we, unless we want to actually set-up a marketing or public relations part of the business to *do* that, and make them responsible, they probably never really will know. And it was to the point where it almost got like, well then, that's okay, because I mean, we know what we are doing. And those people that we are helping know that we're helping them. And we're fulfilling our mission. If it ever got to the point where we weren't getting donations, I think then you'd probably hear us going, saying, you know, more purposively.

Like Lifeline Ministries, Helping Hand has been around for many decades and its identity as a non-profit organization is widely recognized. Still, several Helping Hand store managers said that their customers do not know enough about their firm's mission activities and mentioned that they wanted to do more to educate them. New signs highlighting the mission now have appeared at some Helping Hand stores. But until the firm feels it absolutely necessary to allocate funds to better educate the public, either to increase sales or donations, it seems unlikely that this critical difference between it and its for-profit competitors will be exploited.

Ragtags is no newcomer to the thrift industry either. Although it has been in existence only about half as long as either Lifeline Ministries or Helping Hand, it fully understands, perhaps better than its non-profit competitors, the importance of educating the public about its charitable connections. Signs at store entrances let shoppers know how much money Ragtags has allocated to local charities. As Helping Hand's Marketing Director noted, these signs do not say "a portion of our sales" go these charities. Whether this is deceptive or just stating the facts depends on one's perspective. When asked if

Ragtags stores serve any community needs, the District Manager's response sounded much like those given by Helping Hand and Lifeline Ministries employees, with emphasis placed on its charitable relationships.

> Well, firstly, the community needs are with the charities. You know, we do a lot of work with the charities. And a lot, especially with [Charitable Organization], is I have even set up a, we have a voucher program. So, you know, [Charitable Organization] and I, if somebody comes in and they have certain needs, they can come in and get between $50 to $150 worth of stuff. And we kind of split the cost on that. So they come in with a voucher, and you know, there are a lot of times during the first part of school, families that are struggling a little bit. They can come in, and for $150 can, you know, four kids, they can get 'em ready for school.

A Ragtags Store Manager responded similarly to the question of whether the operation of his store is related to a charitable mission, although he mentioned serving his customers first. Like other Ragtags store managers with whom I spoke, this one discussed the firm's "core values," which were sometimes displayed in poster form in their offices. This manager placed special emphasis on how Ragtags' relationships with charitable organizations were integral to these values.

> Well our vision is to provide our customers with the best selection and shopping experience of any thrift store in the world. That is what we at Ragtags try to do. We have some core values, and uh, where are those? They are not posted here. Actually, they are over there. The first one is recognizing the source of our success. To answer your question, one of our core values is to provide a win-win relationship with our charities that we work with. We purchase everything outright from the charity as opposed to Helping Hand or maybe even WRC, which a lot of times, they are simply, um, proceeds from their store go to charity. What happens is we buy up front. We pay for the merchandise, then we process, then we try to turn a profit on it, which is good for the charity because they don't have to run a store, they don't have to wait for their money, it all comes up front. And I can tell you that, as a company, we paid over a billion dollars to charity last year.... You know, people think, charities, they need clothes, they need this...No, they need money just like everybody else. To make the charities go. So, it's a win-win situation all the way around

Like Helping Hand employees, this Ragtags Store Manager maintained that his customers do not know enough about how his store serves the community, but he mentioned ways that the firm was trying to get the message across to its shoppers.

> I don't think they know as much as we would like for them to know. Yeah, we have done some things in the past, we have some charity awareness days, and we have had [Charitable Organization] come out and set up some tables and things like that at the store. Also, anytime [Charitable Organization] goes to a home to pick up merchandise, they give a Ragtags flyer out as well so that they know there is a relationship. There are a lot of things that we have done to try to further that, to let people know what we are about as far as charities go.

Whether the way that Ragtags acquires its merchandise by partnering with local charitable organizations or how much it actually donates to these groups is deceptive or simply a good business model depends on one's perspective. Of course as their primary industry competitor, Helping Hand and Lifeline Ministries find Ragtags affiliation with local charities dishonest since it gives the appearance that they are a non-profit firm when in reality only "a portion of" what they earn from their merchandise goes to charity. But the relationship between Ragtags and its charitable organizations does seem to be a win-win situation for both of them. With over a billion dollars donated to charities around the world, it certainly can be argued that this multinational corporation has made a difference to the organizations with whom it affiliates. On the other hand, if a billion dollars is only "a portion of" what the firm earns, what more could be done with the additional revenue by non-profit organizations like Helping Hand and Lifeline Ministries, who funnel the vast majority of their stores proceeds back into mission related activities?

Non-profits thrift firms like Helping Hand and Lifeline Ministries could learn from their for-profit rival and do more to educate the public about how the money they earn through their stores is used for social benefit. The perception that thrift shoppers are primarily interested in getting a good deal or a bargain while true, does not negate their desire to support a good cause and recycling efforts through their shopping practices. A greater emphasis on the social benefits of thrift consumption on the part of both for-profit and non-profit firms would go a long way to eliminating what remains of the stigma of thrift shopping, and link resale consumption practices to social betterment.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

> On television and in the movies now, and even in the pages of novels, people tend to dwell in a classless, homogenized American Never-Never Land. This place is an upgrade, but not a drastic one, from the old neighborhood where Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet, and Donna Reed used to live; it's those yuppified city blocks where the friends on "Friends" and the "Seinfeld" gang had their apartments, or in the now more fashionable version, it's part of the same exurb as One Tree Hill and Wisteria Lane – those airbrushed suburbs where all the cool young people hang out and where the pecking order of sex and looks has replaced the old hierarchy of jobs and money. This is progress of a sort, but it's also a regression, since it means that pop culture has succeeded to a considerable extent in burying something that used to be right out in the open. In the old days, when we were more consumed by social class, we were also more honest about it."
>
> – Charles McGrath

Charles McGrath's (2005) observations underscore the ways that class differences are obscured, blurred even, in much contemporary American culture, particularly television shows, movies, and fiction. Not long ago, blue-collar life was flashed across our TV screens in shows such as "The Honeymooners," "All in the Family," "Sanford and Son," and "Roseanne." Storylines like Theodore Dreiser's 1925 *American Tragedy* centered around differences between the rich and poor. Much of what takes place in most contemporary American novels, McGrath argues, occurs "in a kind of all-purpose middle-class America, in neighborhoods that could be almost anyplace, and where the burdens are more psychic than economic...." Of course, the propensity of cultural producers to construct social landscapes that reinforce a classless society – or the belief that social mobility is solely dependent on the will of individuals – comes at a time when structured inequalities in income and wealth are widening rather than abating.

All this points to the politics of culture and the role that culture plays in shaping our understanding of the world and how we act in it. This study demonstrates that both political-economic and cultural forces play a key role in shaping thrift consumption and changes occurring in the thrift industry. My research reaffirms how media as a socializing agent shapes consumer attitudes and behaviors. I have argued that in the United States a media-saturated culture affects how we think about used goods and why we should acquire them. Over the past decade the media-culture's message to consumers has been that buying and collecting used things is fashionable and oftentimes lucrative. I maintain that this serves an ideological and consequently a political purpose in that financially insecure middle and upper middle-income people can purchase what they need at resale stores without the stigma historically attached to buying used goods. Moreover, those with relatively low-incomes can continue to actively engage in our consumer society by purchasing used commodities in resale venues like thrift stores. All downwardly mobile consumers, of course, can buy inexpensive knock-offs at Kmart of the tattered treasures beautifully displayed on the pages of Martha Stewart's home decorating magazine. And thus many of the markers of social class differences conveniently disappear.

While the thrust of my argument has been that those who produce culture hold a tremendous amount of power to shape the meanings we have about used goods, I have also tried to demonstrate that meanings are malleable and open to interpretation. In this sense my study of upscaling in the thrift industry bridges the theoretical impasse between the more political-economic production of culture approach to consumer culture and the far less deterministic view advanced through cultural studies. My interviews with those who work in the thrift industry indicate that they recognize there is no longer a cultural stigma attached to thrift shopping, and that they often attribute this to the reorganization and remodeling of their stores. But I also demonstrate that changes in cultural discourse about used consumer goods matters. A changed political-economic environment for middle-income consumers also makes it more likely that they will need to shop thrift.

Several thrift store managers expressed deep concern about how the commodification of used goods affects their lower-income and poorest customers. Many in the industry also discussed how thrift shopping challenges a culture of hyper-consumption by emphasizing recycling. My survey of thrift store shoppers confirms that they, too, have embraced an ethic of reuse even as they actively participate in their consumer society. But further research needs to be conducted with resale and thrift shoppers to more fully understand their motivations for purchasing used commodities. How exactly are consumers' ideas about used goods affected by the television programs they watch and the popular magazines they read? What is the role that used goods play in how consumers construct their identities? Are people really resisting a culture of consumption as they stroll the aisles of thrift stores, or simply reproducing it?

My research indicates that upscaling in the thrift industry capitalizes on the cultural commodification of junk and is related to the desire of thrift firms to increase their middle-income consumer base. This study shows that the industry aspires to lose its historical association with the poor and become more like "real" retail stores, that is, more like the places where a majority of the middle-class shops – Wal-Mart, Target, and Kmart. My research reveals the steps that several firms in the thrift industry have taken to become more like their discount retail competitors. George Ritzer (2002) is right to use the phrase "the long arm of McDonaldization," since it has reached all the way to one of the lowest strata of consumption. McDonaldization in the thrift industry, predictably, looks very much like it does in the rest of society: more rationalized business practices, more routinized work, more homogenization of the social landscape.

But perhaps we also should begin using the phrase "the Wal-Martization of society," and more deeply consider the economic and political implications of this retail behemoth. Wal-Mart's tremendous size has enabled it to undersell its retail competitors in communities across the United States – and around the globe. This study indicates, however, that Wal-Mart's influence extends even to the *resale* industry, since its new goods are so cheap the company often competes with firms that sell used merchandise. This does not bode well for resale venues like thrift stores, or for relatively small retail operations in this country and elsewhere. In addition, we should be concerned about a politics of consumption that makes it necessary for so many of us to shop at Wal-Mart and thrift stores while others have far more options.

I hope this study contributes to the growing body of literature in the sociology of consumption, and encourages more scholarly research on what consumption looks like for those at the bottom or near bottom of social hierarchies in advanced capitalist societies. Moreover, I hope that readers gained a deeper appreciation of how culture, ideology, and political-economic conditions coalesce to sustain these hierarchies in everyday practices like thrift shopping. For it is only by understanding how our ordinary activities reproduce social inequities that we can begin to create more just societies.

APPENDIX 1

METHODS

Research methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, a survey of thrift store shoppers, and content analysis of media representations of secondhand goods. Interviews were conducted with twenty-eight administrators and managers of three firms in the thrift industry in the greater Denver-metropolitan area. In order to get better representation of the industry as a whole and changes taking place within it, two of the firms were non-profit and one was a for-profit company. An interview schedule was developed that enabled respondents to broadly discuss any changes they perceived during their employment in the industry (see Appendix 2). I collected field notes and conducted all the interviews myself in the Denver-metropolitan area and in stores along the Front Range of Colorado from August 2000 to July 2001. Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes to two hours, depending on whether or not the interviewee provided a tour of the premises, as was the case with several managers and upper-level administrators. These tours were used to clarify any remaining questions about the acquisition, distribution, or pricing practices of merchandise in the stores. A total of two hundred and four consumer surveys were administered to thrift shoppers at three different stores within one of the non-profit firms. I had a Spanish-speaking research assistant who conducted thirty-eight surveys at one store located in an ethnically Hispanic neighborhood in the Denver-metropolitan area. I conducted all the remaining consumer surveys in English.

Gaining entry to speak with store managers and firm administrators was relatively easy. I conducted one interview with a store manager in one of the non-profit firms and she provided me with the name of an upper-level administrator who I then also interviewed. He gave me additional names of key administrators who I interviewed over the course of several months. This was not, however, a snowball sample of interviewees, since there were a limited number of stores within each firm and I wanted to interview the manager at key sites as well as key administrative personnel within each firm. On several occasions I simply introduced myself and my research project to store managers and asked if they would agree to an interview at a mutually convenient time. Some already had heard about my study from other store managers in their firm and consented to talk with me. In most cases, there was at least one face-to-face introductory meeting to establish rapport before the actual interview took place. Because I wanted to speak to as many managers as possible, on a few occasions I needed to make several attempts to conduct an interview. I was fortunate that the turnover rate for managers at the firms I studied was very limited; however, I did have to contend with the movement of managers between stores within one of the non-profit firms.

Participant Observation

This method of inquiry consisted primarily of examining the merchandise and layout of stores within the three different firms, and observing the types of consumers in each of the stores in the study. Multiple visits to each site at varied times during the day enhanced my understanding of each store's clientele. I was also able to observe the ways that used goods were processed and priced at each of the three firms, and therefore to inquire about any changes in these practices. Moreover, touring the main regional headquarters of both non-profit firms broadened my awareness of their respective missions, which were funded in large part by proceeds earned through their network of stores. Since this study took place over the course of thirteen months, I was able to ascertain the ways that the thrift industry, like their giant retail competitors, altered their merchandise and store appearance to mark changing seasons and cultural holidays. In tandem with my interviews, particularly those with firm administrators, this proved significant in analyzing the thrift industry's desire to compete with other discount retailers.

In-Depth Interviews

Twenty-eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted on store premises or in the firm's administrative offices. All interviews took place from August 2000 to July 2001. In two cases when I interviewed a store manager the assistant manager was also present and actively participated. Fifteen of the interviewees were women and thirteen were men. Although the majority of interviewees were white, there was some cultural diversity represented in both administrators and store managers. One administrator was an African-American women, as was one store manager, another store manager was an African-American man, and one other manager was a Hispanic woman.

Since age was irrelevant to the questions under consideration, I did not ask for my interviewees to disclose this information. Still, age can provide insight into one's perspective and, when querying about change, can be instructive. The age span between interviewees was quite significant, ranging from those in their mid- twenties to those in their mid-sixties. Perhaps even more significant is the time interviewees spent working in the thrift industry, which ranged from several months to twenty-four years. For each of the three firms under investigation, I attempted to interview managers at as many stores as possible. Time constraints, as well as the shifting of managers between stores, prevented me from interviewing one manager at each store in all three firms. The interviews with managers analyzed and considered here, however, represent the vast majority of stores within each of the firms under investigation.

Interviews were coded by concepts and themes derived from social theories, and by those that evolved during the research process. Perhaps the most significant concepts to emerge from theoretical considerations include social class, social inequality, stigma, socialization, and ideology. The themes of upscaling and competition between discount retailers emerged from the research process.

Consumer Survey

A survey of thrift shoppers at three different stores representing one of the non-profit firms was conducted from early June through September 2001. Surveys were administered at stores within this firm because, to the extent to which it had upscaled and rationalized its stores, it had gone further than one firm but not as far as the other. A total of two hundred and four surveys were administered. Since one of the stores where the survey was conducted was in a primarily Spanish speaking community, nearly one-fifth of the surveys were done exclusively in Spanish. This provides an added dimension of diversity in the survey data and renders a more complex understanding of what upscaling in the industry means for different consumers.

Consent was granted by both administrative staff and respective store managers to conduct the survey with shoppers after they exited the store. Although the survey was intended to be brief, taking under five minutes to administer, its purpose was to provide both demographic and attitudinal data. Information collected from the survey included demographic data – most notably sex, age, race, educational attainment, and household income – that assisted in understanding the varied social locations of thrift store shoppers. Several survey questions were constructed that probed consumers' rationales for why they shopped at thrift stores; many of these questions emerged from the interviews conducted with thrift industry administrators and store managers. Questions that explored the potential stigma in shopping at a thrift store were also asked of survey respondents. In addition, the survey queried consumers' responses to changes in store appearance and merchandise, changes which exemplified the upscaling process.

Content Analysis

Content analysis of media representations of used goods focused on identifying empirical evidence of the contemporary de-stigmatization of resale consumption. This was done in two ways: first, by drawing on scholarly studies that analyzed specific media texts; and second, by analyzing additional representations in popular media. Analysis of the latter was guided by theoretical concepts including class, ideology, and consumer socialization.

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The first few questions have to do with you and your employment at ___________.

1. What is your official job title? ____________________.

2. When did you start working here?

3. Can you tell me about your job responsibilities?

4. Is the operation of the store related to a charitable mission and if so, what is the mission?

5. Do you think that this store serves any community needs?
   If yes, what are these needs?

The next set of questions has to do with the merchandise in the store and some of your thought about who shops here and why.

<u>Merchandise</u>

6. Where does the merchandise in the store come from?

7. In the time that you have worked here, have there been any changes in the type of merchandise that is sold in the store?

8. Is there more demand now for certain things than there used to be?
   Why do you think that is?

9. How do you or others decide how to price particular items?

10. Have there been changes in how the merchandise is priced or sold?

11. What happens to the merchandise in the store that does not sell?

Customers

12. Can you tell me a little about your customers?
    What kinds of things do they want?

13. Has there been any change in who is shopping here or the type of shopper who comes into your store?

14. Is there any concern about making the merchandise in the store accessible to lower-income customers?

Thrift Industry

15. Who do you feel you compete with for customers?

16. Do you think there has been an increase in demand for resale or second-hand goods?
    Why do you think that is?

17. Do you think non-profit thrift stores differ from for-profit thrift stores?
    If so, how?

18. And the final question: Why do you think that people shop at this store or other thrift stores?

Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX 3

CONSUMER SURVEY

DAY ________ DATE ______ ID #________

Hi. My name is Julie Raulli. I'm doing a brief survey of thrift store shoppers in the Denver area that takes a few minutes. Would you mind answering a few questions? All answers are anonymous. Provide cover letter.

1. Store _______ **1.** ___

2. Respondents' Sex 0 ❑ Female
1 ❑ Male **2.** ___

3. What is your age? ________ **3.** ___

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4. Today you're shopping at this Helping Hand. Do you shop at other thrift stores, too, like Ragtags, Lifeline Ministries, WRC, or other Helping Hand stores? **4.** ___

0 ❑ No
1 ❑ Yes

If Yes, **Do you have a favorite store?**	a. ❑ Ragtags	**4a.**__
Check all answers given by respondent.	b. ❑ Lifeline Ministries	**4b.**__
	c. ❑ WRC	**4c.** __
	d. ❑ Helping Hand	**4d.** __
	e. ❑ Other	**4e.** __

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5. When did you start shopping at thrift stores? **5.** ___

1 ❑ Began during the past five years
2 ❑ Began during the past 6-10 years
3 ❑ Began more than 10 years ago

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6. About how often do you shop at thrift stores? **6.** ___

1 ❑ Less than once a year

2 ❑ More than once a year, but less than once a month

3 ❑ Once a month

4 ❑ More than once a month, but less than once a week

5 ❑ Once a week

6 ❑ More than once a week

---

7. Is this a store you go out of your way to get to, do you shop here because it is convenient for you, or somewhere in between? **7.** ___

1 ❑ Go out of my way to shop here

2 ❑ Somewhere in between

3 ❑ A convenience choice

---

8. a. About how much of your needs or your family's needs – clothing, household items, furniture, etc. – do you buy at THRIFT STORES? **8a.** ___

1 □ **ALL**

2 ❑ **MOST**

3 ❑ **SOME**

4 ❑ **VERY FEW**

8. b. Now think about DISCOUNT STORES like Wal-Mart, Kmart and Target.

About how much of your needs do you buy at these types of stores? **8b.**___

1 □ **ALL**

2 ❑ **MOST**

3 ❑ **SOME**

4 ❑ **VERY FEW**

8. c. How about NAME BRAND DEPARTMENTS STORES like Foley's? How much of your needs do you buy at these kinds of stores? **8c.** ___

1 ☐ ALL

2 ☐ MOST

3 ☐ SOME

4 ☐ VERY FEW

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9. I'm a thrift shopper myself. So is my sister. When I find a great deal or bargain on something, I can't wait to tell my friends what I bought. But my sister would never tell anyone that she gets some of her clothes, or dishes and things from a thrift store. Which one of us sounds more like you? Are you: **9.** ____

SHOW CARD A.

1 ☐ Exactly like my sister, don't talk about it
2 ☐ Somewhat like my sister
3 ☐ Somewhere in between
4 ☐ Somewhat like me
5 ☐ Exactly like me, tell everyone

---

10. Sometimes when a friend or co-worker compliments me on something that I bought at a thrift store I like to brag a bit about how little I paid for it -- especially compared to how much it would cost in a "regular" retail store. Do you ever find yourself doing this? **SHOW CARD B.**

1 ☐ Never 2 ☐ Rarely 3 ☐ Sometimes 4 ☐ Often 5 ☐ Always **10.** ___

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11. There are also days though when I really need something – like a new pair of shoes or pants – and the only place I can afford to shop is at a thrift store. Then I start to feel a little bad about *having* to shop at a thrift store. Have you ever had this feeling while thrift shopping? **SHOW CARD B.**

1 ☐ Never 2 ☐ Rarely 3 ☐ Sometimes 4 ☐ Often 5 ☐ Always **11.** ___

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12. People give a lot of different reasons for why they shop at thrift stores. I have a list of several of the reasons I've heard from various shoppers. Can you tell me HOW IMPORTANT each of these reasons for shopping at thrift stores is to you? SHOW CARD C.

a. "I shop here because the money I spend goes to a GOOD CAUSE."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12a.__**

b. "I like to shop at thrift stores because I can find things that I REMEMBER FROM THE PAST."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12b.__**

c. "I can buy HIGH QUALITY, BRAND NAMES here for very little money."

1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12c.__**

d. "I like to re-use and RECYCLE things."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12d.__**

e. "I shop at thrift stores because OTHER STORES ARE TOO EXPENSIVE for me."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12e.__**

f. "I like the thrill of finding really COOL STUFF, of finding that "diamond in the rough."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12f.__**

g. "At thrift stores I can get what my FAMILY NEEDS FOR VERY LITTLE MONEY."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12 g.__**

h. "I buy things here to RESELL."

1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12 h. _**

i. "I shop at thrift stores to find antiques and COLLECTIBLES at reasonable prices."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12 i.__**

j. "I think of shopping at thrift stores as a way to have FUN."
1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **12 j. _**

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13. Are there other reasons why you shop at thrift stores? (open-ended) **13. __**

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14. Now I want you to think about thrift stores in relation to other kinds of retail stores like Target or K-Mart. When you are shopping at a thrift store, how important are the following: SHOW CARD C.

a. It is as CLEAN as those other stores.

1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **14a.** __

b. The merchandise is as well ORGANIZED as it is in other stores.

1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **14b.**__

c. It has at least some NEW MERCHANDISE like those other stores.

1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **14c.**__

d. It has SEASONAL MERCHANDISE like other stores (school supplies, holiday decorations).

1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **14d.**__

e. It has the same SHOPPING ATMOSPHERE as those other retail stores.

1 ❑ Not 2 ❑ Somewhat 3 ❑ Very **14e.**__

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15. If a thrift store seems to be more like other retail stores, are you more likely to shop there, less likely to shop there, or it wouldn't make a difference to you?

15. __

1 ❑ More likely to shop there
2 ❑ it wouldn't make a difference
3 ❑ less likely to shop there

The next few questions are about you and your household, which will help me get a better idea of who is shopping at thrift stores in the Denver area.

16. How do you identify yourself by race or ethnicity? SHOW CARD D. 16. ___

1 ❑ Black, African Am.

2 ❑ Latin/Hispanic (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American)

3 ❑ White

4 ❑ Asian decent (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese)

5 ❑ Another race **What is this race?** __________

17. If you were asked to use one of five names for your social class, which would you say you belong in? **17.___**

SHOW CARD E.

1 ❑ Lower-class
2 ❑ Working-class
3 ❑ Middle-class
4 ❑ Upper Middle-class
5 ❑ Upper-class
6 ❑ Don't know/Not sure
9 ❑ No answer

---

18. What is the highest level of school or the highest degree you have completed? **18. ___**

SHOW CARD F.

1 ❑ Grades 1 - 8
2 ❑ Grades 9 - 12, no diploma
3 ❑ High school graduate or equivalent (ex. GED)
4 ❑ Some college or Associate degree
5 ❑ Bachelor's degree
6 ❑ Master's degree, Professional degree
(ex. MD, DDS, JD) and/or Doctoral degree

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19. How many people are living in your household, including yourself? **19.___**

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20. In which of these groups did your total *family* income, from *all* sources, fall last year before taxes? You can just tell me the number. I just need a rough estimate. We want to use this question to help us group responses to other questions in the survey.

20. ___

SHOW CARD G.

1 ❑ Less than 9,000
2 ❑ 9,000 - 17,000
3 ❑ 17, 001 - 32,000
4 ❑ 32, 001 - 50,000
5 ❑ 50,001 - 75,000
6 ❑ 75,001 - 100,000
7 ❑ More than 100,000

Thank you for your participation.

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