

From Riches to Rags: The Sociology of Thrift Shopping Among  
College Students

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Sophia Parker Larsen has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Sociology.

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## Introduction

Allegedly, my mother's first complete sentence was "That's no bargain!" After my initial pre-teen resistance to wearing anything not branded "American Eagle" or "Roxy," she has successfully imparted this frugal attitude to me and we now revel in trips to Goodwill, flea markets, yard sales, and any other opportunities to get the best "Score!" Fleura Bardhi (2003) explains the driving force behind thrift excursions as not merely economic incentive, but a pleasure-seeking experience in which the means are an end to themselves. The hedonistic aspect of bargain hunting resonated with me, but left me wondering, Why? Why am I more than happy to tell someone I found a cashmere sweater at Goodwill for \$0.99, but would be embarrassed to admit that the pants I'm wearing with it were bought at Urban Outfitters for full price? Why am I now interested in re-trending used clothes when I used to shudder at the idea of being seen by my peers in a thrift store? And, how are my views being shaped by my experiences as a student at a small liberal arts college?

Whitman College boasts a campus full of bright, socially-engaged, and "unpretentious" students who are eager to learn about and discuss important social issues. Students are encouraged to understand and reflect on their relative positions of privilege as the majority of the students are white and/or comes from economically advantaged households. This demographic homogeneity also ignites many debates in and outside the classroom surrounding Whitman's lack of diversity, especially racial, and how dominant ideology is perpetuated at the institutional and interpersonal level.

However, the spotlight dramatically turned its focus to class privilege at the beginning of the academic year when a *New York Times* analysis of economic diversity

among America's top private colleges placed Whitman last in the rankings<sup>1</sup>. Many students noted the level of wealth on campus, and critiqued the culture of downplaying such advantage. This paradox of discussing class inequality, but obfuscating one's own class position was never fully questioned. By the time the Power & Privilege Symposium took place in February, conversations about class inequality and economic diversity had fizzled and the focus of the workshops predominantly concerned issues of race and sexuality. This instance of such abrupt, yet transient, vexation among students about institutionalized economic privilege without their widespread acknowledgement of how they benefit from and contribute to it— as what *is* happening with white and heterosexual privilege— inspired me to investigate why class, especially one's own, is a taboo subject at Whitman and maybe other college campuses as well.

These ponderings led me to a study of the intersection of social class and thrift shopping among college students. Before conducting my research, I informally talked with friends to glean a preliminary array of answers to my question, “Why do you thrift shop?” Responses ranged from financial limitations and waste-reducing efforts to the thrill of finding great bargains and novel items to spruce up an outfit. Nearly everyone professed their love of thrift shopping with reflexive excitement, alluding to Colin Campbell's (1987) theory that the imagination of a desired yet unattainable emotional reaction to purchasing a good drives consumer behavior. While this passionate sociology (Game and Metcalfe 1996) approach may account for the recursive nature of thrift shopping, it fails to explain why these college students also expressed profound

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<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times* calculated a College Access Index based on the share of freshmen in recent years who came from low-income families and on the net price of attendance for low- and middle-income. This index can be viewed on their website: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/09/09/upshot/09up-college-access-index.html?abt=0002&abg=0>

discomfort and embarrassment when confiding that buying second-hand is ultimately a choice on their part, as they are not required—financially—to shop second hand. Clearly thrift shopping is not a value-neutral economic practice and needed to be situated within notions of class, status and social difference.

Existing literature on second-hand consumption that does consider class applies Erving Goffman's (1959) theories of impression management and downward impersonation to explain why a person may consume outside of his or her social class location. Karen Halnon (2003) argues that by infiltrating (i.e. shopping at thrift stores) and appropriating (i.e. wearing thrift clothes) the material realities of those who are less fortunate, people on the upper end of the social stratification ladder seek to solidify, rather than blur, class boundaries. The collective effects of these upper class consumptive practices are demonstrated by the presence of "homeless chic" (Mathieu 2011) in high fashion that validates and perpetuates the aestheticization of traditional markers of poor status (i.e. second-hand clothing).

While grounded in empirical data, the subjects of these studies tend to be from the upper class and their experiences are inaccurately generalized to describe everyone in the privileged class, an ill-suited umbrella term for anyone not poor. As such, a critical limitation to current studies on thrift shopping is their inability to account for thrift shopping as an increasingly distinctive and popular college student consumptive practice. Although college students may come from upper or upper-middle class backgrounds, they also seek to establish economic independence and often must work to afford many life expenses—from buying books and paying rent to affording clothes and food. While college students do not face the same material realities of individuals in the lower or

working classes, they also do not necessarily reap the benefits of their parents' social class standing in terms of everyday life and individual expenses. College students, then, occupy an interesting transitional class status, and their consumption of second-hand clothing provides insight into how individuals balance economic necessity and appropriation of lower class culture.

In this study, I draw primarily from Bourdieu's (1984) work on distinction and cultural taste, Ridgeway's (2014) articulation of status as culturally based, and Rust's (2003) theory of identity as contextual and relational to investigate how downward consumption patterns play out among college students. The research question my thesis investigates is the following: How do college students' transitional class status and perceptions of class affect their experiences with and attitudes towards thrift shopping? These perceptions are not objective measures of one's own socioeconomic class position, but rather subjective understandings of class relations that are produced and reproduced through social interactions. This distinction invites the additional questions of: How do aspirations of personal and group status formation on college campuses inform these privileged students' decision to participate in an economic practice historically not associated with people who share their class background? And, How does a campus culture embedded with middle class values influence such aspirations? Through an analysis of fourteen in-depth interviews with college students from the Walla Walla area, my findings suggest that a campus culture embedded with middle class values heavily influences students to thrift shop as a means to express a social class identity based on hard work and an ethos of frugality.



## Conceptions of Class in Sociology

“Class is rank, it is tribe, it is culture and taste. It is attitude and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some, it is just money... Some Americans barely notice it; others feel its weight in powerful ways” (Leonhardt and Scott 2005: 8)

Class is a ubiquitous force in American society, yet a slippery concept to define.

The ambiguity surrounding the term is perpetuated by its near absence from public discursive forums in which class identity has been stripped from popular culture (Mantsios 1995). The subject of class remains one of the last institutionalized social taboos in America, as evidenced by people’s profound reluctance to discuss and examine how the class system and the inequalities it produces operate on a day-to-day basis (Perrucci and Wysong 2003). The nature of this taboo is a product of privileged-class interests and biases that discourage, deflect, and distract media and public discussions away from class issues and toward other forms of structural inequality (i.e. gender, sexual, and racial conflicts). This leaves ideas about class “mired in prejudice and mythology” (Ehrenreich 1989: 7). Additionally, America’s educational system has done little to combat this taboo as we still see class analysis neglected from primary and secondary school curriculum, and is seldom included in university-level courses (Zweig 2004). The result is an American society that generally lacks a consistent or clear focus on the mechanisms and processes that legitimize unequal distribution of rewards and resources within the class hierarchy. This isn’t to say Americans are unaware of class inequality or indifferent to class inequity; there just isn’t a normalized vocabulary of class categorization, measurement, or definition from which people can draw upon in discussions of such important issues.

The topic of class is also highly controversial and contested in the academic sphere. Sociological models of class structure and definitions of social class have sought to achieve greater precision and clarity than public views and images. Although far from uniform in their application, these conceptualizations of social stratification can be organized around two distinct approaches based in the foundational works of Karl Marx and Max Weber. The production model of class is grounded in Marx's view of class as a relationship to the means of production. Marx believed modern society has only two classes of people—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—and that these classes are fundamentally opposed because of their conflicting interests (Marx 1858). Whereas the bourgeoisie seeks to maintain its ownership and control over the production process by instilling a false consciousness among its workers, Marx predicted that these same property-less workers (proletariats) would inevitably revolt out of their socialist interests to redistribute wealth and capital more equally in society.

Despite the fact that this social revolution was never realized, contemporary sociologists who prescribe to the production model still highly regard Marx's two-class model, but have refined and extended it to accommodate for the complexities that mark our society today. These Neo-Marxians conceptualize America's class structure as sharply divided by "wealth inequalities that reflect people's positions in the production process" (Perrucci and Wysong 2003: 7). These positions of wealth are closely related to people's occupational characteristics and thus class is typically categorized into jobs with control over resources (owners, the upper class), control over other people (managers, the middle class), those who take orders (workers, the working class), and those excluded from any relation to the means or modes of production (the poor). These occupation-

based social classes are “both a master identity and a focus of shared culture and community among those with the same relation to the means of production” (Fiske and Markus 2012: 17). While robust, this model is limited within some populations and communities, especially those where occupation is yet to be a defining factor in class status. College students are especially difficult to classify within this schema as they often have class backgrounds that give them access to higher education and jobs with higher occupational prestige, but they themselves have yet to hold a full-time occupation related to the means of production. This leaves them to a transitional class status.

While Marx’s definitions of class provide important insights into how hierarchies of political and economic power shape social relations and class inequality (Dahrendorf 1959), additional models of social class have attempted to move beyond such narrow and rigid definitions. One such model is inspired by Max Weber’s view that social stratification is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon (1946). Instead of conceiving class differences as sharp and discontinuous categories, this approach provides a layered image of class structure as groups of people “organized into layers and stacked in a ranking system that ranges from low to high across gradual and shaded degrees of class difference” (Perrucci and Wysong 2003: 6). A person’s class position reflects their level of social prestige as determined by a combination of interrelated factors: educational attainment, occupational prestige, residential status, style of life (group affiliation), and generated income. These indicators of social prestige coalesce into a socioeconomic status that can be used to assign people and their families to a position in the class strata defined by this status (Coleman and Neugarten 1971). Accordingly, the four commonly

used criterion for measuring and gauging this SES status are education, income, occupation, and wealth.

Although this model better envisions class structure as determined by more than positions related to production and economic wealth, the trouble with this approach is that most of these indicators are only moderately correlated with one another (Fiske and Markus 2012) and inaccurately equate socioeconomic status distinctions with class divisions (Cannon and Vanneman 1987). As theorist Ralf Dahrendorf explains, “Class is always a category for the purposes of the analysis of the dynamics of social conflict... Status, ranking by others, self-ranking, style of life, similar social conditions, and income level are all factors which define social strata but not social classes” (1959: 76). College students further complicate this model because their families’ SES status may not accurately reflect the reality of their financial situation while at college. That is, many college students may often come from a background of privilege, but need to conserve money, take up part-time work, and consciously manage their finances while at college. Regardless of efforts to achieve economic self-sustainability, most college students have simply not had enough time living apart from their families to cultivate their own autonomous social class standing. In this manner, they occupy a transitional class status.

Stemming from the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding definition and measurement of social class in public discourse and within the academic sphere, people have seemingly inconsistent or inaccurate articulations of their own class placement within America’s complex class system. As such, desires to belong to or be seen as part of a certain class may influence self-reports of class status, as suggested by recent studies

showing that roughly half of American adults describe themselves as middle class<sup>2</sup>. With specific attention to college students, a 2002 survey investigated how students enrolled at a private university identify their class position. Although the student body had above-average family incomes (connoting upper middle or upper class identification), 70.5% of respondents said they were middle class (Zweig 2004). Further complicating our understanding of college student social class identity, 93.7% of participants were employed in working class jobs and expressed work-related grievances that favor working class agendas. Clearly, social class is not a simply conceptualized, accepted, or evenly applied social status for people, particularly those in a transitional stage of life.

Elizabeth Bott's (1957) work on the family and social relations helps dispel confusion around these ostensibly contradictory social class identities. Through an intensive interview process, she discovered that people's criteria of class position would shift from money to power and then to occupational prestige. The scope of class categories would also adjust from one context to another, so that at one point the respondent would talk of what seemed like a quite homogenous class, but would later break that class down into well-defined sub-classes. These findings led to her to the conclusion that people hold a multiplicity of class images and that "usages vary according to the immediate social situation and the specific purpose of the comparisons and evaluations. It follows that there is no one valid way of finding out what people really think about class, for each method will reveal slightly different reference groups, although there is a strain of consistency and continuity running through each couple's usage at different times" (Bott 1957: 171). This notion holds true for college students

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<sup>2</sup> Based off of findings from a nationally representative Pew Research Center survey of 2,508 adults. In this survey, 49% of the respondents described themselves as middle class (Zweig 2004)

who may still define themselves by family class background in some contexts, but seek to establish class distinction in others.

The inability of previous models of social class to accurately categorize college students suggests the need for a new conception of social class that captures such transitional experiences as college student status. The previously mentioned descriptions of social class underscore the critical presumption that material resources and material environment (e.g. money and occupation) fundamentally distinguish the lives of lower, middle, and upper class individuals. Furthermore, these theories maintain that material realities also shape individuals' perceptions of social-class rank in society. Some social psychologists argue that "material indicators of elevated rank in society saturate social life, are visible when one is engaging in even the most mundane activities, and can influence daily perceptions of social-class rank" (Keltner, Kraus, and Piff 2009: 154). They go on to argue that individuals from higher social class backgrounds share a sense that they have the freedom and wherewithal to obtain valued goods and services, such as fashionable clothing, expensive housing, prestigious academic degrees, that serve to distinguish their belonging to an elevated social class identity. For individuals from lower social-class backgrounds, the perception that one does not possess valued material resources, but that others do, shapes a lower social class identity grounded in the sense that one's outcomes and desires are constrained by external social forces and other individuals (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009).

While accepting their definition of social class rank as the "sense of where one stands in the social class hierarchy" (Kraus Piff and Kelter 2009: 992), I challenge this psychological perspective of social class identities as shaped by internal subjective

perceptions of social class rank. Instead, concepts from Paul Rust's foundational text on bisexual identity work better describe social class identity as a real and observable phenomenon that is both contextual and relational. Rust defines identity as "a description of the location of the self in relation to other individuals, groups, and institutions" (Rust 2003: 66). Identity is contextual in that it is self-defined and performed on a socially constructed landscape, but subject to change in response to relocation to a new, or at least modified, landscape (Rust 2003). Social class identity is also relational in that it is experienced and expressed differently in interactions with different people, especially when considering interclass face-to-face social encounters. As Erving Goffman points out, positive social relationships are contingent on a mutual acceptance of each actor's face— a self-image constructed in terms of approved social attributes for a particular situation (1955). People thus work to maintain and communicate an identity that is both accurate to their perceptions of self, but acceptable to their particular audience.

This model of social class allows for a more nuanced definition of class that effectively describes and explains college students' class status as interim rather than a static placement based on concrete measures. That is, regardless of their class of origin or parents' SES status, college students often need to pinch pennies to get by and/or establish independence. Thus, their class status is contextually based on location as both a physical site (i.e. college campus) and a relative physical distance from other class affiliations (i.e. family and hometown). Their class identity is also relational in the sense that in some interactions they present themselves as middle or upper middle class, and in others they present as ambiguous (i.e. detachment from upper class status). In either case, their class status is *actual*— they often take jobs, manage finances, and budget their

expenses— but is preformed and presented differently according to context and social relation to others. With this transitional class status, college students hold multiple class images that shape their understanding and interpretations of their own and others' motivations to shop at second-hand stores.



## The Rise of Affluence and Changing Consumerism Patterns in America

The spread of affluence in America has further blurred the class landscape, leading to misinterpretations of this trend as indicative of America's transition to a classless society (Kingston 2000). This confusion is prominent in discussions of modern consumerism as consumptive patterns are no longer clearly delineated along class lines. Rising incomes, flattening prices, and easily available credit have given Americans access to such a wide array of high-end goods such that traditional markers of class status have lost much of their meaning and it is no longer easy to gauge a person's place in the social hierarchy based on their possessions alone (Steinhauer 2005). Sociologist Barbara Ehrenreich argues that this wide-spread affluence has instilled a sense of uneasiness among members of the more privileged classes (i.e. middle and upper) who fear their established class status is being undermined vis-a-vis lower class attainment of goods and services traditionally exclusive to them (Ehrenreich 1989). This "Fear of Falling" has led people with middle and upper class identities to seek new ways to establish and assert their elevated class status.

One way to maintain social class status is to publically display discretionary economic power through conspicuous consumption of luxurious goods and services (Veblen 1899). Members of the upper class have succeeded in reestablishing their elite class status by shifting the focus of their consumption patterns away from acquisition of newly obsolete luxurious goods to spending exorbitant amounts of money on opulent leisure activities (Steinhaur 2005). Expensive services and experiences have replaced possessions as the new symbols of high status that are only accessible to those with enough economic capital to afford them. In light of their anxieties of falling to a lower

class status, some sociologists have argued that members of the middle class have sought to reestablish their own class distinction by emulating the consumptive patterns of these upper class people. Prominent in this stance is Juliet Schor who describes this sociological phenomenon as “vertical emulation” in which dominant norms of consumer aspiration are towards “luxury” and achieving lifestyles enjoyed by those above them in the social class strata (2002). Consumption comparisons are conceptualized as interclass and fueled by the new-found desire to “Keep Up with the Gates”— a revision of the colloquial term “Keeping Up with the Jones” used to describe the dated norm of horizontal, or intra-class, competition. However, these efforts to achieve an affluent lifestyle may prove futile in light of the increasing wealth gap between America’s upper and middle income families.<sup>3</sup>

Some consumer researchers have argued that this frustration has led members of the middle class to create their own specialized and exclusive styles of life by claiming certain monopolies on forms of consumption historically reserved for those economically disadvantaged. Employing Max Weber’s definition of status groups as “stratified according the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life” (1947: 127), the cultural consumption of these specific goods functions to increase status group solidarity and distinctive identity. With regard to thrift shopping as a form of cultural consumption executed to indicate class status group identity, Weber’s ideas can be applied to delineate the crucial difference between using a specific good and having a monopoly over it. He states, “Honorific preferences may consist of the privilege of

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<sup>3</sup> A Pew Research Center analysis of wealth in America found that in 2013 the median wealth of the nation’s upper-income families (\$639,400) was nearly seven times the median wealth of middle-income families (\$96,500), the widest wealth gap recorded in the last 30 years. (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/17/wealth-gap-upper-middle-income/>)

wearing special costumes.... However, material monopolies provide the most effective motives for the exclusiveness of a status group” (Weber 1947: 126). Weber’s distinction is instrumental in understanding how although thrift stores are physically open to everyone and provide extremely affordable and accessible clothing choices, the people who shop at and wear thrift clothing don’t necessarily belong to the same status group. In this sense, “shared lifestyle” must be defined to include considerations of economic privilege and use of monopolized items, not just the possession of them. Thus thrift shopping provides an interesting window into how status is achieved through the ownership of goods available to all.

Understanding consumption as “as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (Warde 2005: 137), then consumer culture is the “meanings and practices that shape consumption” (Crewe and Gregson 2003: 11). The recent popularization of thrift shopping is indicative of a new form of consumer culture that sociologists Greg and Crewe label as “Second-Hand Culture.” Their findings debunk the assumption that consuming through the second-hand market is a critical act of defiance against many of the labels that mark the consumer society— consumerism, materialism, and the ceaseless desire for, and destruction of, the new (2003). In fact, they found that second-hand culture is actually characterized by very many of the same motivations that shape consumer culture generally. Value (as constituted by capturing the bargain), distinction (seeking objects that mark taste, difference and individuality), and brand (symbolic remnant of high status) are still core

consumptive imperatives that transcend the first/second-hand distinction (Crewe and Gregson 2003).

The difference, then, lies in the enactment of consumer culture through the physical sites of second-hand exchange and the biographies of second-hand goods. Thus, for many people – particularly those in the middle class— consumption in the second-hand arena is clever consumption, defined by Crewe and Gregson as “a set of practices which reveal and display heightened consumption knowledge/s and skills, and which encode the extent of investment in consumption” (2003:11). These skills are distributed unequally among the classes, explaining shopping theorist Daniel Miller’s observation that “in one case the image of thrift is saturated with middle-class notions of respectability and research, and in the other case thrift becomes part of a romance of working-class resistance to the establishment” (1998:57). Miller argues that these different approaches and sets of clever consumption demonstrate the clear symbolic opposition between classes, a problematic proposition when considering those who have a connection to both of these class cultures.

Despite the important contributions of these consumerist theories on new consumerism and second-hand culture, they prove insufficient in describing consumptive patterns among those with ambiguous class statuses. Although students on college campuses are increasingly from heterogeneous privileged social class backgrounds,<sup>4</sup> their consumptive patterns exhibit both vertical and horizontal emulation that is contextual, and their discussion of such economic practices is highly relational. Furthermore, the notion of clever consumption along strict class lines is an oversimplification and falls

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<sup>4</sup> Recent studies show at the 250 of most selective colleges, the proportion of students from upper income families has grown sustainably (Tittenbrun 2011)

short in describing college students whose family class status enjoys the economic power for conspicuous consumption and cultural capital for clever consumption, but they themselves have not yet had enough time or distance to personally achieved the level of affluence required to enact such consumption. It is therefore necessary to understand second-hand consumption on a more personal level that accounts for narratives that seemingly don't align with expected class-based consumptive behavior.

## Motivations for Second-Hand Consumption

The body of literature that addresses personal motivations behind people's consumptive choice to shop at thrift stores tends to focus on psycho-social aspects (Bardhi 2003; Boden and Williams 2002) or downward impersonation and objectification of lower class members (Halnon 2003). The work of Sharon Boden and Simon Williams (2002) highlight the need for passionate sociology that considers emotion as a legitimate motive for consumer behavior. Contrary to "Rational Choice Theory" (Scott 2000) that assumes humans to be rational beings who always act with calculated reason, Boden and Williams see consumptive practices as a negotiation between reason and emotion (2002). This explanation resonates with Colin Campbell's work on the nature of consumer desire and its elusive satisfaction (1987). Campbell's modern hedonic perspective explicates the inevitable failure of material goods to live up to the imaginative capacities of the individual. Paradoxically, the more proficient one becomes at imagining a heightened emotional response to the purchase of an item, the more likely it is that "real" consumption fails to deliver a comparable intensity of pleasure (Campbell 1987).

Consumers' desires become insatiable as they search for that illusive, completely satisfying experience amongst the seemingly endless supply of new products— or in the case of thrift shopping, second-hand goods. Fleura Bardhi explains the driving force behind thrifting as not merely an economic incentive, but a pleasure-seeking experience in which the means are an end to themselves (2003). She writes, "Thrift shopping allows consumers to indulge their fantasies for mass produced and premium brands, antiques and collectables, special clothing materials, designs, and luxury items" (Bardhi 2003:376). There exists an "expert shopper with the cultural capital to identify high-

quality brands and the leisure time to frequent thrift stores not with a practical need for a specific item, but a want for that ‘hidden gem.’” Under the hedonic perspective, emotional desire for novelty items and the thrill they produce motivate consumers to thrift shop.

It is important to acknowledge the cognitive component to thrift shopping and modern consumerism in general, but absent from these perspectives is the consideration of consumption as a factor in the social construction of categories. Economic anthropologists Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood saw commodities as a “system for communication which makes visible and stable the categories of culture, with an emphasis upon social difference exclusions and inclusion” (1996:150). In this way, shopping may be viewed as a process by which goods are communicated as social relationships (Miller 1998). These social relationships are strengthened by participation in similar forms of consumption (i.e. thrift shopping) where the physical space of shopping and exchange becomes a medium for group identification.

Erving Goffman’s concepts of downward impersonation and impression management set the theoretical foundation for many modern analyses of appearance in social interaction. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Goffman introduces the notion of impression management to describe how people perform and interpret the theatrical performances that occur in face-to-face interactions (1959). He maintains that when an individual meets another, he attempts to control or guide the impression that the other person will form of him by adjusting his own setting, appearance and manner (Goffman 1959). During this social exchange his audience—the other person— assesses whether the fostered impression is true or, more importantly,

whether or not the performer is authorized to give that particular performance. However, there are different social costs of “upward” and “downward” impersonation that are associated with the pre-existing status of the performer. For example, while it is socially unacceptable to impersonate a doctor or a priest, people are significantly less perturbed when someone impersonates a homeless person or unskilled worker (Goffman 1959).

Karen Halnon uses this theory of downward impersonation to explain how members of privileged classes rely on their higher status to sanction the act of shopping at thrift stores. Halnon coins the term “poor chic” to describe the “array of fads and fashions in popular culture that make recreational or stylish- and often expensive- fun of poverty or of traditional symbols of working class and underclass statuses” (2002: 501). Impersonation down the socially stratified ladder is no new phenomenon, but its most recent manifestation occurs in the context of an increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor, a culture of mass consumerism, and McDonaldization (Ritzer 1996). Halnon argues that people with high class status engage in and perpetuate poor fashion as a means to protect against sliding in to poverty. By “vacationing in poverty—in this instance shopping at and wearing thrift store clothes— privileged people seek to solidify class distinction by infiltrating, exploiting, and appropriating the material realities of the lower class (Halnon 2003). Thus, those with the class-based economic privilege to seek second-hand clothes for the purpose of costumes, jokes, or gag gifts harden social class boundaries not by distancing themselves from sites of lower-class consumption, but by exercising their relative position to control and objectify such consumptive practices.



## Social Class Status and Identity as Cultural Consumption

It is important to contextualize the individual within society where the possibilities for personal expression may derive their meaning and potential. Previous studies of personal motivations to partake in second-hand cultures have taken a narrow focus on how members higher up on the social ladder, most commonly upper class adults, reify class inequality and extract pleasure from engaging in an economic practice clearly not intended for them. Few studies have focused on the perspective of privileged college student thrift shoppers—individuals who may originate from class backgrounds where thrift shopping is unnecessary, but who participate in this consumptive practice while at college as they transition into a new class status.

Additionally, studies that take a hedonistic perspective (Campbell 1987; Bardhi 2003) on downward impersonation (Halnon 2003) do not specifically address how class identity is communicated on an interpersonal level. To understand how identity functions on multiple levels, Robert Dunn provides a useful definition of identity as “secured by the internal mental and emotional states of individuals but produced in multiple structures of social interaction” (1998: 113). With respect to face-to-face social encounters, class identities exist prior to interaction, but are also actively negotiated and jointly constructed by those involved, making them also situationally emergent (Goffman 1955; Fiske and Markus 2012). Building off of this conceptualization of class-based identity at the micro-level, Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Dimaggio provide conceptual frameworks that serve to help explain patterns of consumer taste and choice that reflect socio-economic differences among college students and related cultural class identities—people’s sense of membership in a group based on shared class-based cultural practices (Bourdieu

1984). Celia Ridgeway's work on status and status inequality elucidates these cultural class identities as powerful status characteristics that shape people's expectations for one another's competence and performance of such activities as cultural consumption (Correll and Ridgeway 2003).

In *Distinction: The Social Critique of Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu examined the relationship between class and various types of consumption. Here class is defined in terms of the disproportionate levels of economic, social and cultural capital afforded to and experienced by members in each class (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu (1974), via the habitus as a network of socialized norms that guide behavior and thinking, provides a socially embedded account of the differences in cultural consumption and the struggle for social distinction. He maintains that those with more economic and cultural capital legitimate the forms of consumption to which they have more access (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu emphasized that people with high economic and cultural capital engage in "practices designated by their rarity as distinguished" while those with low economic and cultural capital have "practices socially identified as vulgar because they are both easy and common" (1984: 878). Out of this observation comes Bourdieu's assertion that distinction is socially awarded to those who engage in the correct taste (1984). The advent of thrift shopping invites a new interpretation of cultural taste that challenges Bourdieu's assertion of rare vs. common consumption as indicative of high vs. low social distinction.

Many sociologists who study patterns of artistic taste and consumption believe that prestige now accrues to the individual who is familiar with many cultural forms from many parts of (what once was) the cultural hierarchy (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004).

According to Richard Peterson, these new cultural capitalists are “omnivores,” people who are comfortable speaking about and participating in high and popular culture and everything in between (1996). DiMaggio and Mukhtar’s study on the decline of arts participation in the United States points to the possibility that this decrease is in response to societal trends towards multiculturalism and globalization that have prompted people to expand their cultural taste repertoire to include highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow taste (1996). This account of cultural change can be used to explain why people from classes associated with distinguished taste and cultural consumption are now shopping at thrift stores that historically have had little distinction value attached to it.

Celia Ridgeway incorporates concepts of status, status groups, and status characteristics in her understanding of the mechanisms behind social inequality. In “Why Status Matters in Inequality,” Ridgeway modifies Weber’s original definition of status to become “inequality based on differences in esteem and respect” (2014:1). She points to the need for a multi-dimensional analysis of status that spans from the individual and interpersonal level (status as money and power) to macro-structural and cultural processes (status as cultural beliefs about group differences) that interact to co-produce and sustain systematic inequalities (Ridgeway 2014). This linking of micro and macro levels of status is useful in conceptualizing how the effects of status (e.g. thrift shopping and its related status structure) act as an independent force, as Ridgeway argues, in the making of inequality. I will combine Ridgeway’s multi-faceted concept of status and Goffman’s (1955) theory on face work in my discussion of class-based social status and performance of such status in terms of how college students navigate participation in and discussion of second-hand culture.

# Methodology

## Research Design and Setting

My research explores how college students' transitional class status and perceptions of class affect their experiences with and attitudes towards thrift shopping. I chose to examine college students because of their unique position in our society. College campuses are places where class is blurred, both intentionally and unintentionally, as students are in a transitional stage of life; most are still attached to their family's financial support<sup>5</sup> and class background, but live apart from parental supervision and therefore have the opportunity to communicate a personal class identity that may deviate from their inherited class status. Many seek to establish independence through economic means (i.e. assuming more financial responsibility for their costs of living and leisure activities) and performing and presenting a new face (i.e. shopping at and wearing thrift store clothing). Furthermore, as students create a web of affiliations in dormitories, sporting events, classrooms, and other settings within their schools, they develop a class solidarity with their peers that is based in common beliefs and lived experiences shared over a period of time (Kendal 2006). Thus students' perceptions of class— their own, others and interactions between the two— are influenced by the dominant class culture on campus.

With these considerations in mind, I chose to collect data from college students who attend the three most proximate colleges in my area: Whitman College, Walla Walla University, and Walla Walla Community College. These three colleges encompass students from a variety of class backgrounds and family upbringings that students may or

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<sup>5</sup> According to the 2014 *Sallie Mae's National Study of College Students and Parents*, 69% of families with college-attending children reported that the parent(s) contributed some amount of income or savings and/or borrowed money to pay for the costs not covered by financial aid.

may not wish to deviate from in their college careers. Because I am not concerned with the extent to which students are “expert” thrift shoppers, the requirements of participation were simply adult college students who reported having thrift shopped at least once in the last year, allowing for a broad range of experiences with thrift shopping. This gave me a large population from which to draw my sample, so I decided on a recruitment methodology that reached a wide range of people: emailing listservs. I sent out an email to Whitman’s student listserv that is not biased toward any class grade, club involvement, or any other group that may have skewed the demographic composition of my respondents. Because my connections to WWU and WWCC were considerably less extensive, I enlisted the help of my Sociology advisor, Michelle Janning, to get me in to contact with professors she knew at these colleges. These professors kindly forwarded the same email I sent to the Whitman listserv to their class listservs and I obtained my participants from those who responded with interest in volunteering for my study.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of class that complicates traditional quantitative measures of socioeconomic status, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. These in-depth interviews lasted between 25 and 40 minutes and provided rich, nuanced data about participants’ attitudes, perceptions, and experiences with thrift shopping that could not have been adequately captured by a survey alone. I asked questions that probed into people’s deeper motivations for thrift shopping and allow for their opinions on thrift shopping culture. Interview questions are available in Appendix A. These questions served as a rough guide for topics I wanted to cover in each interview, but I frequently asked follow-up questions to answers I felt deserved further inquiry. All interviews were conducted in private spaces (i.e. Whitman’s Sociology Workroom, study

rooms in Penrose Library and study rooms in the WWCC library) and documented with an audio tape recorder.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, participants completed a short online Qualtrics survey immediately following their interview. This survey served the purpose of collecting demographic information as well as adding a quantitative dimension to my measurement of participants' level of perceived economic independence and perceived class position. I chose to include a survey portion to my data collection because openly discussing the economic component of class causes discomfort for many people (for incredibly sociologically-interesting reasons I will discuss later). To help ensure accuracy of responses, as well as maintain good rapport with my participants, I administered this survey after the interview and left the room to give them privacy to disclose their personal information.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Operationalizing Class Position*

Because my thesis concerns relational and contextual understandings of class status and class identities, attempting to measure social class through an objective scale is not productive. Additionally, there is no agreed-upon model of class structure in America, let alone a uniform measurement of it. Indeed, as noted above, a student's family's SES status, particularly the economic aspect of it, may not be representative of their financial position on college campuses.

To collect information about students' economic independence, I asked questions on the survey regarding if they had a job, how many hours they work weekly, and to what

degree are they financially responsible for the various costs of living (i.e. housing expenses, clothes, groceries, transportation, etc.). Most decisive in determining whether a participant could still be defined— at least in economic terms— by their family’s class background, I asked if they could be claimed as dependents by their parents. To address the more nuanced perception of economic independence, I asked participants, “To what degree to you feel you can enjoy the following leisure expenditures or activities?” and then listed various items such as entertainment, going out to eat, and non-essential clothing. In the interview portion I also asked participants to describe their thrift budget as a way to gauge how they prioritized their personal budget and how conservative they were with the money they did possess.

I also asked participants to position themselves in a class (poor, working, lower middle, upper middle, or upper) and their answers were taken into consideration as part of my larger conceptualization of class background. This class background (not necessarily family SES status, but the class identification with which they came to college and have cultivated since) amassed in to a comprehensive “Participant Profile” sheet that I printed out for each participant (See Appendix B). This sheet included basic demographic information (age, college, gender, hometown, etc.) as well as a combination of information reported in the survey (self-identified class position, personal financial responsibility, etc.) and implications of class background and/or level of economic independence disclosed in the interviews. An example which hints to class background is, “We’re not rich, but we’re not poor. We just have what we need.” An example of implying level of economic independence is, “I don’t have a job personally. I have an allowance and I like to do things.” In this sense, I combined information both disclosed in

the survey and discussed in the interview to create an intricate description of each participant's mutable perception of their own class position.

### *Coding*

I transcribed and printed out all of my interviews. I then employed the strategy of open coding (Berg 2009) to analyze and organize my qualitative data. Through the use of open coding, categories are developed after a researcher's engagement with the data rather than beforehand. This method helps mitigate bias and pre-conceived assumptions or expectations of trends in the data. To start, I read through each transcription and highlighted quotes and made notes in the margins. After repeating this process several times, I identified trends in my data, resulting in a multi-layered coding category system. I found three thematic motivations for thrift shopping: practicality, fun, and uniqueness. I also discerned two distinct realms in which each participant spoke of thrift shopping: personal experience and attitudes of peers and campus culture. The three broad categories of motivation were expressed with varying, and sometimes contradictory, testimonies across the two discourse arenas, allowing for rich data analysis that incorporated auxiliary coding categories of: different as cool, frugal sensibility, disguising wealth, and many more.

### **Participant Demographics**

The following is a brief description my participants as a whole. Because my sample size is relatively small and demographically homogenous, I cannot adequately address my topic strictly along gender, race, and/or regional lines due to the lack of



representation of each. I will also not attempt to draw broad conclusions about inter-class divisions because no participants identified outside of the middle class. What I do intend to do is elucidate the nuanced diversity and complex background each individual contributes to this seemingly homogenous group of white, self-identified middle class college students in Eastern Washington.

### *College, Age, and Marital Status*

In my study I interviewed and surveyed nine students from Whitman College, two students from Walla Walla University (WWU), and three students from the Walla Walla Community College (CC) for a total of 14 participants. One of the students from the CC is technically a senior at Walla Walla High School, but takes all her classes at the CC through the Running Start program. The majority of my sample was 18 to 22 years old with the exception of two women from the Walla Walla Community College who were between the ages of 23 and 34. These same two women were also the only participants who could not be claimed as dependents by their parents. All reported to be single, full-time students.

### *Gender*

While participants were gathered from a gender-neutral sample population (student and class listservs), 12 of the 14 participants who volunteered for my study were female. The other two were male, with no participants reporting alternative gender identities. Although the actual proportion of female-to-male students is indeed higher at these schools, the gender distribution of my sample is not representative of the student

body. I acknowledge that gender expression is related to shopping practices— including thrift shopping— but because gender identities transcend class boundaries, I will not consider it an independent variable in shaping class status identities.

### *Race*

I perceived all participants to be Caucasian, which is not entirely representative of the racial make-up of each school, but does reflect the predominant race on campus. As with gender, I do not intend to ignore the importance of race in individual and social group identity, nor do I mean to mitigate its connection to class-based inequality. Instead, I will approach race, or rather Whiteness, as an aspect of privilege afforded to all my participants.

### *Hometown*

Ten of the 14 participants grew up in the Pacific Northwest. Of these ten, six are from cities within the greater Seattle urban area, one from a suburb of Portland, and four from small, rural towns in Eastern Oregon and Washington. The other four participants have more geographically diverse backgrounds, coming from rural Vermont, the Bay Area in California, and Alaska. Given that Walla Walla is in the Pacific Northwest, the disproportionate amount of college students also from this region is not surprising; in fact, it is representative of the hometown regional distribution of the Walla Walla college student population, especially at Whitman. Those few participants with geographic backgrounds outside Oregon and Washington are equally important to my study as they

provide potential alternative attitudes towards thrift shopping that have been cultivated by their regional culture.

Among the six participants who reported coming from small and/or rural towns, three self-identified as lower middle class. All other participants, including those from urban areas, identified as upper middle class. In a similar vein, those from rural areas frequently described their hometowns as having considerable poor or working class populations— one participant repeatedly referred to her rural hometown as “ghetto”— whereas respondents from more urban areas overwhelmingly described their neighbors as characterized by middle class white families. Consistent with past research on rural versus urban differences of political and religious ideology, participants from rural areas spoke of conservative, religious tight-knit communities cemented in traditional beliefs and slow to adopt national trends. Conversely, participants who grew up within city limits describe their city as an eclectic mixture of people from all walks of life who were accepted by the open-minded, liberal atmosphere. Those from suburbs of big cities described more homogenous hometowns that were also liberal, but did not share the same level of cultural diversity as those from the city proper.

## **Limitations**

I did not specifically recruit students from particular class backgrounds because I conceptualized college students’ social class status as transitional, relational and contextual. I did not want participants to volunteer to my study with any preconceived notions of what my research questions may entail, nor did I want them to feel obligated to represent a particular perspective they may have attributed to their family’s class

position. Therefore, I did not specify class background as a requirement in the emails I sent out. The categories of choice on the Qualtrics survey were poor, working, lower middle, upper middle, and upper class. Without intention, all participants self-identified as being part of the middle class. On first glance, it may seem that the study is lacking; that it is not representative of all class backgrounds. The latter is true. However, it is also true that college students, particularly those at private universities and liberal arts schools, are overwhelmingly from middle class backgrounds (Zweig 2004), thereby making my study representative of the dominant class experiences and attitudes. I will align my analytical approach to match my sample by examining potential differences and similarities within a seemingly homogenous class-based status group, rather than making inter-class comparisons.

Interviews with participants revealed common motivations for thrift shopping that were by no means expressed, experienced, or emphasized to the same degree across the sample, nor were they discussed consistently on an intrapersonal level as participants reflected on their thrifting history. Instead, specific social contexts (e.g. going alone vs. with friends), time in their life (e.g. high school vs. college), assessment of current need (e.g. need specific item vs. satisfied with wardrobe), and other situational factors affected participants' choice to undergo each thrift excursion. However, three aspects of thrift shopping—practicality, fun, and difference— motivated participants to repeatedly patronize thrift stores. Therefore, the conclusions I draw from the data reflect trends and patterns, rather than outline every reason participants mentioned in the interview process. This means that there were other motivations beyond the aforementioned ones that

participants articulated, such as charitable giving and waste-reducing efforts, but including them in my data analysis would have distracted from the larger discussion.

With respect to generalizability, my sample is too small in size and too homogenous in racial, gender, economic, and regional composition to accurately representative thrift shopping experiences and opinions among all college students in America. Instead, I elucidate patterns of contextual and relational social class images—of their own and of their peers— characteristic of college students with transitional class statuses. As I talk about such strains of consistency in my “Results and Discussion,” I will use the term “college students” frequently when referencing participants and their peers on campus. This usage of the term in this context should not be confused with generalization of the social standing of my economically privileged white PNW participants to all college students; instead, it is used to encapsulate the majority of college students who come from middle class backgrounds and/or how students fare on campuses that typically promote a middle class ideology.

## **Ethical Considerations**

As with any research, ethics are an important consideration before, during, and after the research process. Prior to each interview, I had each of my participants read and sign an informed consent form. I asked verbal confirmation that it was acceptable for me to record the interview and all participants consented. Participants were also notified that none of the personal information they wished to disclose could be used to identify them by anyone besides me. During the interview, I was aware of any discomfort participants might have felt surrounding the sensitive topic of class— especially interclass relations—

and worded questions to minimize distress and avoid the appearance of sounding judgmental or accusatory. Furthermore, I didn't disclose my own social class location in the interview process because of the influence it might have had on participants' responses, especially concerning social desirability bias (Callegaro 2008). After the interview, I made sure to upload recordings into a folder on a password protected computer to which only I had access. I kept all participant information confidential and presented quotes in my written thesis anonymously, using only the title "participant" to identify the speaker.

Regarding my own set of biases, I recognize that I was raised and socialized in a middle class family with an avid thrift shopping mother who encouraged me to make economically prudent consumptive decisions. To prevent this bias from interfering with the ethics of my research, I remained cognizant of my biases throughout the research process—from structuring interview questions to analyzing data— and did my best to not let my sympathies be known in case it influenced what information participants chose to emphasize or downplay.

## Results and Discussion

Interviews with participants revealed three categorical motivations for thrift shopping—that is, what brought them to a thrift shop instead of a first-hand department store. The three thematic appeals of thrift shopping – practicality, fun, and uniqueness—underlay the overall collective motivations for thrift shopping among my college-age participants. Extending beyond personal experiences with thrift shopping, these three types of motivations also dominated the discourse surrounding participants’ attitudes of their thrift shopping peers in their immediate social environments (i.e. hometown, college, Walla Walla). Accordingly, I examine these three aspects—as they are expressed through personal experience and perception of others— through a class lens that considers related notions of status, distinction, taste and identity.

Before this analysis, it’s important to first address my more quantitative findings on the level of economic independence, class self-placement, and perception of student body class status that ground the interpretation of my qualitative findings.

### **Level of Economic Independence**

Eleven participants reported having a paying job. Of these 11 people, the number of hours worked per week ranged from 1 to 16, with no one qualifying as working full time.<sup>6</sup> 12 of the 14 participants reported on the survey that they can be claimed as dependents by their parents. When asked “To what degree are you financially responsible for the various costs of living? (i.e. housing expenses, essential clothes, groceries, transportation, etc.),” participants reported in the category of essential clothing: fully (7),

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, working part-time is defined as working between 1 and 34 hours per week (<http://www.bls.gov/cps/lfcharacteristics.htm#fullpart>)

mostly (3), about half (2), somewhat (2) and not at all (0). From these results, the actual level of economic independence enjoyed by participants cannot be pin-pointed, but what can be ascertained is that all participants assumed some amount of financial responsibility over the expenditure most central to my research question: clothing.

### **Class Self-Placement**

All participants identified as either lower middle (3) or upper middle (11) class. No one considered themselves to be part of the poor, working or upper class. In addition to identifying with the middle class, all participants consented to the fact that thrift shopping is a consumptive choice for them, not an economic necessity. The following testimony exemplifies how participants conveyed their relatively secure financial situation in their interviews:

I mean, I still come from a privileged upbringing where everything was fine for me and I didn't have to thrift store shop ... I've never really experienced that being your only real resource, so I can't really say much about that. I will say I'm more privileged than most, but less privileged than others.

Because they all acknowledged their relative economic privilege with regard to thrift shopping, I grouped them under a broad category of class-associated economic privilege. This approach creates a sort of control variable of economic privilege that distinguishes all participants from those who shop at thrift stores by necessity. Supported by results that all participants reported a middle class identity, I analyze intragroup, rather than intergroup, attitudes and experiences with thrift shopping.

### **Student Body Class Status**



In addition to asking participants of what class they consider themselves to be a part, I also asked, “How do you see your class position in relation to the student body at your college?” Options to this question were: below, the same, or above. The two WWCC students who self-reported their class as lower middle believed others at the CC shared this class position. The third student reported being upper middle class and perceived her class standing as above the student body. These findings suggest that these three participants believe the student body at WWCC to be predominantly lower middle class. Both of the WWU students self-reported their class as upper middle and believed others at their school also belonged to this class. Results were the same for seven of the nine Whitman students. The other two (one identifying as lower middle and the other as upper middle) reported their class position to be below that of their peers.

From these results, I’ve concluded that WWU and Whitman participants tend to see the student body at these two schools as predominantly upper middle class whereas WWCC participants view the class status of their college peers as lower middle. With this distinction in mind, it’s also important to remember that college, as an institution, heavily promotes campus cultures that assume middle class values and experiences for its student body (Zweig 2004). This isn’t to say that there are no salient differences between subdivisions within the middle class, and I will address these differences when relevant to my discussion. But for all intents and purposes, I will discuss class and thrift shopping on each college campus operating under the assumption that participants largely feel they belong to the same class as their peers, and that class is the over-arching middle class.

## **Practicality**

All participants mentioned the economic incentive to shopping at thrift stores in their interviews. For some it was the driving factor, for others it was an added bonus to a fun experience and permitted an affordable leisure activity. Regardless of how central affordable clothing was to each participant, all affirmed the practicality of this consumptive practice. Participants also frequently mentioned an ethos of frugality that was expressed as a learned sensibility from their parents or as an individual inherent trait. This moral standing on moderation was presented as starkly opposed to upper-class excessiveness. Both frugality and practicality point to a class-based appeal to the Protestant work ethic embedded within American middle class values that shape college students' various and nuanced stances on thrift shopping.

### *Establishing Economic Independence*

Those who viewed class in more economic terms applauded thrift shopping college peers for their money-saving sensibility. They perceived college students as one group bound by an economic practice to save and the personal financial means, albeit limited, to afford cheap clothing. This stance was summarized by a participant:

We all, like the majority of us, like to kind of take up opportunities that are cheaper financially that makes it easier for students who may not feel comfortable, like upper middle class family, connect with other students because like they all, you know, have the same value likeness. You know, cheaper is better.

This image of college students' collective economic agency and pragmatism was drastically different from participants' memories of high school peers. As one participant recalled:

They[college students] got it [the economical aspect of thrift shopping] a little bit more; when you're in high school, especially when those kids weren't spending

their money, they were spending their parents' money, so it was like they didn't even- they didn't care.

The dependency and indifference that characterized descriptions of high school students contrasted participants' views of college students and their common understanding and appreciation for cheapness. This explains the lack of stigma surrounding thrift shopping and, in fact, how it is seen as a distinguishing behavior of college students that functions to publically establish their economic separation from their parents and high school days.

It's not surprising then that when asked what are some of their motivations for choosing to visit a thrift store over a department store, participants frequently mentioned cheap prices favorable to a college student budget. Thrift store prices were described as appealing because their perceived affordability enabled participants to achieve economic independence, at least when it came to clothes shopping. For example, a participant explained:

I like the idea of being independent, which is a very stereotypical thing for people my age group. But, I mean, everyone wants to be independent and so I try to do things on my own if I can afford it. That's why thrift shopping is appealing to me 'cuz obviously it's something I can very easily afford.

Other interviewees prioritized this identity of the "penny-pinching college student" over identification with their family class status. As one person responded:

Prices. Even though I could afford like a nice sweater, I guess I'm still a college student and I want to be able to save as much as I can... So it's more of like I can get three or four things for \$10 compared to buying one thing for like \$40. It's a better deal.

Here it is interesting to note that these quotes came from participants who identified as upper middle class on the survey, yet all describe consumptive choices that define the material realities for members of the poor or working classes. This demonstrates the importance of viewing class among college students as a contextual phenomenon. They

simultaneous identify with their family class background, but emphasize being thrifty and saving money now that they are in college.

Others went on to explain why price matters, stating their personal budget as hard-earned and not frivolously spent. A participant rationalized, “Obviously price because I work and I like my money.” Another spoke to her own de-stigmatization of thrift shopping that coincided with her increasing sense of economic independence. She recalled:

So I think that I grew up embarrassed to think that, “Why would I want to go to Goodwill? That’s so embarrassing.” I have enough money to buy new stuff, but I think once I bought clothes from Goodwill for the mission trip and I started to make my own money and started to slowly buy my own stuff, then I became okay with it.

Her previous stance on second-hand shopping as an undesirable low-class activity shifted as she transitioned into a college student status group which not only tolerates thrift shopping, but promotes it as a practical, smart activity. By cultural consumption of thrift store clothes as a status-distinguishing activity, she can solidify her place among her peers as belonging to a campus class culture that values economic prudence.

Another participant addressed a different kind of embarrassment she wished to discard by claiming ownership of her personal finances. She spoke of gaining economic agency as a means of detaching from the internalized guilt surrounding purchases made by her parents. When asked about how comfortable she is in discussing clothing purchases, she responded:

I think that part of the reason why I’m more comfortable [in discussing costs of clothes] is because I buy most of my clothes at this point so I think if my parents were buying all this stuff I’d be like, “Oh I don’t know.” But because it’s my own money I feel less guilty because it’s like if I wanted to pay whatever I paid for this, then that’s on my own because I worked and I decided to spend that much.

She makes the distinction that she wants to be- and be *seen* as- an autonomous person capable of making her own economic decisions that are not reliant on her family's wealth. This position alludes to the middle class ideology rooted in the Protestant work ethic that emphasizes the need for vigilance, preparation, saving, and sobriety (Wagner 1997).

These testimonies reflect participants' aspirations to be and be viewed as free agents active in the making of their economic decisions and consumptive choices. This ethos is particular to the middle class because, as Margaret Mead once noted:

The member of the upper class rests upon his birth; born a gentleman, only his act can take from him something that birth and breeding have given him. The member of the lower class rests in a sense on his birth also... But the true member of the middle denies this fixity to which both upper and lower are committed. Life depends, not upon birth and status, not upon breeding or beauty, but upon effort (Ehrenreich 1989: 75)

This Protestant work ethic is promoted on college campuses where a middle class background is assumed (Zweig 2004). From this class-based cultural status quo, a habitus exists that, as Barbara Jensen argues, "tends to put a premium on individual accomplishments, on the achievement of planned (and publically recognized) goals in general, and on earning self-definition by way of those achievements" (Zweig 2004:174). Students have adopted and perpetuated the valuation of achieved over ascribed status to the extent that hard-earned money and disciplined spending practices are a source of class-based status pride among college students. Furthermore, second-hand consumption is avenue for status to be fostered at both the individual level (status as spending power and discretion) and at the macro-structural and cultural processes (status as cultural beliefs about proper consumptive practices), making it a highly appealing consumptive practice among college students (Ridgeway 2014).

I have shown how this class-related status identity of the penny-pinching college is related to their perceptions of economic agency, but perceptions of class also influenced *how* participants chose to spend their limited income. Because participants view thrift shopping as not economically imperative, just incentivized, they understand it as a something that needs to be considered in terms of prioritizing their larger personal budget. As one participant articulated:

Even for me who could buy- I could go to a store and buy a regularly priced item, but I don't want to do that because I don't want to spend all my money on clothing. I want to spend it on traveling, on doing outdoor things, and saving it for the future, for grad school.

She sees buying thrift clothes as a way to save money for future indulgence in non-essential expenditures. This deferred gratification is characteristic of middle class people (Lysgaard and Schneider 1953). However, because many college students really do have less financial assets than those in the middle class, it is more apt to consider their class status as transitional and contextual.

Shopping at thrift stores is also an influential factor in shaping students' perceptions of affordability and access to economic resources. This demonstrates that not only does availability of resources (i.e. money) affect and constrain consumptive habits, but that consumptive practices can also influence how people think about the utility of those resources that are available to them. For a few participants, thrift shopping redefined cheapness. One participant stated, "When you start thrift shopping it kind of changes your perception of what is expensive, what is not." Another participant conveyed a similar sense of change; however, she distinguishes her thrift store budget from other shopping budgets, saying:

And shirts- if it's ever more than \$6 for a shirt I'm like, "Uck no. That is too expensive. That is too much for a shirt." But when I'm shopping at a "real" store there are no shirts for \$6. But when I'm in the Goodwill world, everything is like skewed [laughs].

The distinction between real stores and thrift stores was articulated in another interview:

Participant: If I absolutely couldn't find it at a thrift store and needed it to be good quality, maybe then I would go to a real store. But that's [thrift stores] always been my first go-to.

Sophie: Why go to a thrift store first?

Participant: It's cheaper [laughs].

The affordability of thrift store clothes allows participants to assume more economic responsibility over their expenses, thereby transitioning away from identification with their family's SES status. However, affordability is also relative. With respect to thrift stores, students believe cheap prices are due to their tight budgets. Yet when participants believe they need good quality clothes— Patagonia down jackets were used as an example in multiple interviews— they'd prefer to buy second-hand, but are willing and able, many times with the assistance of their parents, to pay full price. This description of a conditional college budget is much different from the economic position of those who do not have a financial safety net to catch them when they fall.

Those who stressed family class background as marking a college student's class were more hesitant to say their experiences with thrift shopping parallel common views held in this class-based social group of college students. They tended to come from rural areas distinguished by poverty that shaped their conceptions of class, regardless of their own SES standing, and believed they had a firmer grasp on the concept of class inequality. They believed many of their privileged college peers were not as conscientious of the effect they have on lower-class people when they partake in second-

hand culture. The following excerpt from an interview with a participant who grew up in a rural area with many working-class high school peers reveals such a moral stance:

I think that part of me finds fault with people who haven't grown up the way that I have and like, you know, don't have a sense of responsibility to like work hard and do their part. And I kind of find fault, I guess, inherently with like the wealthier areas. Like access, I'm kind of afraid of, like I don't really understand it.

She is like many others who felt they had exposure to lower class realities (typically second-hand from hearing about parents' experiences with poverty or going to high school with working class students) and sought to differ themselves as being more aware of class inequity than the rest of the student body. Although survey results show that these participants share the same class self-positioning as their peers, they made the distinction that they as individuals have a higher awareness of class inequality. Ironically, valuing individualism over class consciousness is highly characteristic of middle-class interests and values (Kloppenber 2001).

How these opinions of college peers' class awareness manifested when talking about thrift shopping was articulated as crossing a line of appropriateness. On the one hand, they saw it as okay to thrift shop because "everyone likes to save money," but they were wary of abusing their entitlement when their consumptive choice starts to affect those who are thrift shopping as a consumptive necessity. Crossing this line was concerning for these participants and they criticized their wealthy peers for being selfish and inconsiderate of the people who actually need it. As one participant put it:

Uh, it kind of was a little frustrating 'cuz people were taking all the good stuff when they didn't need it, for one thing. And then I just kind of got annoyed because they were doing it for all the wrong reasons. .. And so I think it's kind of stealing in a way.



Participants who expressed their considerations of lower-class feelings when deciding how much and what to buy at thrift stores were genuinely concerned about the effect of their acknowledged economic privilege on those less fortunate. Morality here is two-fold; it is morally good to practice prudence and frugality by thrift shopping, but it is also important to understand how this practice may affect others; therefore, one should be moderate in their frugality.

Participants were also concerned about how their transitional class status fit in to this complicated balance of respectful and appropriate class-base behavior. One student described his tenuous position of having inside connections, but outside circumspect. He said:

So like being myself going to these thrift stores... I ask myself do other people because they know I'm a Whitman student and Whitman students have the reputation of being mostly wealthy students and upper middle class- and these people are like "Why are you buying things from here when you have the ability to afford clothes from somewhere else?" So it's kind of a question I ask myself if, "Am I also just partaking in that whole media glamorization of thrift shopping?"

This class-based self-reflectiveness demonstrates his questioning of his ascribed class status as being accurate to his own class image. He is frustrated by his lack of control over defining his expression of thrift shopping as an individual choice, rather than conformity to popular culture. He acknowledges the existence of class differences and others' perceptions of his class status, but proposes that his actual class status may be more fluid and relational. His narrative demonstrates the intricate cross-over of individuality, actual class status, perception of others, and perpetuation of class status quo.

Participants who grew up thrift shopping with their parents, particularly their mothers, developed an attitude towards thrift shopping as something that was natural,

practical, and just made sense. As one participant put it succinctly, “I think my mother shares the same sensibility with me, which is that you should try to find things for cheaper just because that makes more sense.” Like this respondent, many participants were socialized to see thrift shopping as a reasonable and prudent economic practice. Importantly, there is a difference between being middle class with a frugal sensibility (a cultivated economic choice) and being frugal by necessity (a condition for working class and poor individuals). To maintain allegiance with the former, people—especially college students with ambiguous class statuses—practice self-disciplinary spending associated with respectability and the middle class (Wagner 1997). To maintain distance from the latter, people also feel the need to consume conspicuously to display their economic capital as superior to those from the lower classes. This dilemma of being middle class (Wagner 1997) is highly taxing and puts people continuously on the defensive, thereby engendering a middle class consciousness with the common cause to balance a Protestant work ethic with conspicuous consumption.

A few participants believed their awareness of money and saving was a personality trait. One person said, “I’m frugal by nature so I’ll always try to make myself not buy something.” Practicing restraint and moderation was also a theme in another interview. She said:

Like I’m rarely like, “Oh this is fun. I’ll wear it for a month.” That just doesn’t bode well with me. I have to picture myself holding on to it for a while... I don’t feel the need to just pick up a huge wardrobe [laughs].

Participants saw this frugal mindset as something built in them, which is ironic because they consciously did not equate their class position or notions of class as influencing their consumptive attitudes, but actually they fit in perfectly with the ideology of the American

middle class. The reason they may attribute frugality to their nature rather than the nature of their environment resides in the ubiquity of the middle class culture as a normative social standard such that “even those of us who come from very different social settings often find it hard to distinguish middle class views from what we think we *ought* to think” (Ehrenreich 1989). For consumerism, the view is self-restraint.

Extending beyond the belief that their economic conservatism was independently established, a few participants believed they were the influential members in their family, imparting a thrift sensibility to older family members. One participant expressed pride in dispelling her sister’s blanket prejudice against the undesirability of a certain type of second-hand item. When asked if there were any types of clothes she wouldn’t feel comfortable buying at a thrift store, she recalled:

I do buy shoes there- my sister thinks it’s gross because other people’s feet have been in them, but I do buy shoes there. When she said that is the time I found my rad red cowboys boots and then I think she was like, ‘Oh crap, you were right.’

She was right because she was able to find the status symbol of “rad” that she and her sister commonly attached to the red cowboy boots. Her source of pride resides not in destigmatizing all thrift stores shoes from their “gross” label, but in her ability to identify and find commonly valued status symbols at cheap prices, a form of clever consumption (Crewe and Gregson 2003). She is a cultural omnivore (DiMaggio 2004) who has the class-based privilege to structure her consumption habits around personal taste, not economic pressure.

### *Rejecting Affluence and Downplaying Wealth*

Beyond establishing themselves as economically autonomous adults capable of making their own consumptive choices, there was also anxiety expressed by multiple participants over how others perceived their class standing. They viewed the exercise of thrift shopping as a way to distance themselves not just from their parents and their family class background, but from the excessiveness and frivolity negatively associated with upper-class lifestyles (Wagner 1997). To explore these anxieties surrounding acceptance of class self-image in face-to-face interactions, I asked two interrelated questions: Comfort level discussing the price of an item bought at a thrift store versus discussing the cost of something they bought full-price. These questions exposed the discrepancy in which people discuss costs of clothing purchases and how desires to shed associations with stigmas of upper class privileges explain these discomforts.

All respondents, some emphatically, reported that they enjoy telling people about their thrift store purchases. They created hypothetical situations in which someone complimented an item of clothes they bought at a thrift store, and they would respond with exclamations such as “Thanks. It was like \$4 from Goodwill!” and “Oh, I bought this shirt from Goodwill and it was only \$2 or \$3!” This comfort, and even excitement, in disclosing price and site of second-hand consumption was evident in every interview and demonstrated their pride in finding bargains as a status-distinguishing achievement worthy of honor, esteem, and respect (Weber 1968).

However, when it came to discussing clothing items they or their parents paid full-price for or were deemed “expensive,” participants expressed various levels of discomfort and reluctance to disclose such information. This hesitancy was rooted in fear of looking snooty, bratty, or entitled, but how it manifested was contingent on the

perceived class position of the others in the conversation, indicating class identity as relational (Rust 2003). When asked if she feels comfortable talking about an expensive purchase, a participant responded:

Probably not because people don't really talk about that [laughs]. I think it's okay to say I got this at Goodwill for this, but it's not good to say I got this coat for \$300. That wouldn't make you look very good [laughs]

Participants overwhelmingly agreed with this description of talking about expensive purchases as “not looking good,” but many had difficulty in articulating the reasons behind this concern, as illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview:

Participant: I don't know if I'd necessarily want to share that cuz I know for me, I don't feel the need to spend money on clothes like that. Cuz it is kind of looked down upon in a way- the extreme materialism and like buying expensive things. And people are like- I don't know- even when you think about just buying- I don't know what I'm saying. Never mind.

Sophie: No, no continue!

Participant: As far as- [pause] I think when things start to deal with money and expenses is when people don't really want to talk about it. Cuz there is a whole, like, way of thinking around that, whether it be judgmentally or you know, you've got maybe people who can afford those things, but they don't want to tell people because they don't want people to think that, you know, they just spend money all the time.

Although she started to use the first-person narrative, she quickly switched to the third person to describe people's fear of being judged for opulence, lending to ambiguity over her position on the matter. What is clear is her intent to present a cultural class identity rooted in moderation that marks her as different from those who spend carelessly.

Many other participants shared such anxieties of being seen as consumed by materialism or excessiveness because of their privileged class background, and worked to prove that they are like everyone else—that they despise luxury consumption and elite indulgence as much as the next person. By engaging in this form of defensive othering (Ezzell 2009) from those with similarly high SES family statuses, participants actively

sought to communicate a class identity that was achieved on their own, as opposed to inherited and undeserved. These efforts serve to reinforce the legitimacy of a devalued identity (e.g. upper class) rather than resisting and rejecting the power of the stigma surrounding it (Ezzell 2009).

Those who admitted to owning expensive clothes were quick to explain that they did it sparingly and consciously, or that it was a splurge and did not reflect their overall economic standing. When asked, “How comfortable are you talking about cost of thrift store clothes?” A participant responded:

Participant: I would respond with pride. Like, “I got it for 15 bucks!” I would be way more uncomfortable to be like [whispers], “I got this for \$60” [laughs]

Sophie: Why would that make you uncomfortable?

Participant: I think it has to do with- I don’t know, I love beautiful things and I don’t mind spending money on them if I see them as the value being equal to that, but I definitely have thought of occasions where I’ve been embarrassed to tell my boyfriend how much my boots costs... There’s nothing wrong with spending money on a quality, beautiful item, it just shouldn’t be excessive.

Because it is not in her individual character to be frivolous— an undesirable trait—she justified expensive purchases as being carefully calculated and occurring in moderation. This speaks to a middle class ideology of moderation and temperance (Waggoner 1997).

Within these testimonies there is a pattern of individual aspiration to craft a personal identity based on middle class values of prudence that distinguishes participants’ behavior from those— assumedly upper class spoiled kids— who carelessly blow unearned money. It is not that they don’t have the spending power to splurge, what matters is how they chose to wield it. Thus students recognize the position of economic privilege from which they come—that being having the capacity to afford new clothing— but purposefully don’t depend upon it so as to create an opportunity to transition in to a

new and earned class status. This explains why participants were proud of cheap expenditures, but felt uncomfortable to admit expensive purchases in their interviews.

When discussing their peers' consumptive patterns, participants also interpreted thrift shopping as a way for wealthy college students to downplay their family's SES status on campus, but these interpretations were rooted in skepticism. Because such attitudes were stressed much more by Whitman students, I first discuss perceptions of wealth and thrift shopping at Whitman, then address how it manifests on the other two college campuses. One participant provided a succinct description of this social phenomenon on Whitman's campus:

I feel like the wealth here is present and all the discussion about economic diversity makes that more apparent, but it's not shown off. Like I feel like the wealthiest kids are just as likely to be wearing thrift store clothes here.

Not only is it not shown off, it is purposely down-played and disguised. And one way to act or appear like you are not wealthy is to shop at and wear thrift store clothes. Another participant described this phenomenon as "hidden bourgeoisness," and went on to say:

I feel like people are like- I don't know if it's embarrassed- but they want to act like they didn't come from an amazing culture or a really privileged lifestyle. So Whitman is kind of like to act like you don't have it all, but you might [laughs].

Opinions expressed in interviews indicate that wealth itself is not the source of stigma at Whitman; it's the abuse and exploitation of wealth that engenders these negative connotations. To combat the stigma attached to opulence and careless spending, participants encouraged conscious and conservative consumption for themselves and their college peers. Therefore thrift shopping appeals to many college students as a way to disguise their wealthy background, but also— and arguably more importantly— an opportunity to demonstrate that they have the cognition not to misuse it.

Participants from WWU and the CC also saw wealth downplayed, but not nearly to the same extent as expressed by Whitman students. The three participants from the CC did not feel they were socially connected to the school and said they couldn't speak to discussions surrounding wealth on campus. The two students from WWU didn't see a huge thrift shopping culture on campus, nor did they see wealth intentionally concealed. Instead, they described fashion on campus as a mix of outdoorsy and done-up. When asked if brands were important in outdoorsy wear, a WWU participant said:

Yeah I'd say so. I'd say Patagonia and North Face are like the main things- here I've heard that you're not a true Northwestern until you have your Patagonia down or your North Face down and I'm like okay [laughs] I got one of those for Christmas so can I join the club?

At WWU wealth wasn't bragged about, but rather standardized and it was assumed that everyone could afford such expensive outdoor brands. This assumption of a certain level of wealth for students is promoted by many private universities (Kendall 2006).

Although there were noticeable differences between campus cultures with respect to the downplaying of wealth—quite possibly related to difference in actual SES status between the student bodies—all participants disclosed information about spending practices that resonated with the ideology of the middle class. Whether driven by desire to establish economic independence, moral belief in moderation, or wealth guilt, everyone in my study indicated that the perceived practicality and frugality of second-hand consumption was a motivating factor for them and their college peers to patronize thrift stores.



## **Fun**

When participants spoke of thrift shopping as fun, there were two thematic versions of fun that they were referring to. One was the social aspect of it: a leisure activity enjoyed with friends, siblings, parents, or dorm mates. Another element to the fun was the actual hunting process of it: sifting through all the junk to find that “hidden gem.” Desirable items varied from participant to participant— some were looking for joke gifts and costumes, while others found pleasure in finding wearable, beautiful clothes. While certainly possessing pleasurable and hedonistic interpretations, thrift shopping also functions to distinguish oneself as middle class.

### *Vacationing in Poverty: Costumes and Joke Gifts*

The cheapness of thrift store prices allowed clothes shopping to transcend in to a leisure activity for participants, one that they could both enjoy and justify as compatible with their transitional class status. A participant explained, “It wasn’t that I didn’t like shopping, it was just like I never wanted to spend that money. So thrift shopping was fun and it was not as expensive.” Another echoed this appreciation of thrift stores for permitting her to indulge in a leisure activity to the extent she desires. She stated, “I don’t know if I could afford to go to Macy’s for the amount that I do shop at Goodwill. But because I shop at Goodwill, I get to shop a lot.”

These testimonies echo the survey responses to the question “To what extent do you feel you can afford the leisure activity of clothes shopping (beyond the essentials)?” Only one participant said fully, five said mostly, eight said somewhat, and none said not

at all. It is clear that thrift shopping is a means to access and partake in a fun activity that the majority feel they can only somewhat afford in full price stores.

Fittingly, many participants described thrift stores, particularly Goodwill, as great places to find costumes and joke gifts at cheap prices. As one participant explained, “Whenever I do skits in classes that we need costumes for, I always go to Goodwill. ‘Cuz I’d never go anywhere else to do that because they have the goofy stuff.” Items at thrift stores were commonly referred to as “goofy,” “weird,” and “funny”—all adjectives that point to the abnormality of the participant’s presence in sites of second-hand exchange. Karen Halnon’s (2003) concept of “vacationing in poverty” interprets their appropriation of such traditional symbols of lower class status as a form of objectification, not a serious consumptive practice. However, this interpretation may be ill-suited to describe college students who shop at thrift stores for both fun and practical reasons.

Fun thrift excursions were frequently done with others as a social experience that strengthens social ties based upon similar taste (Bourdieu 1984) and mutual enjoyment of finding gag gifts—wildly undesirable items that are deemed so outrageous that they are funny and attractive. The following excerpt illustrates a typical thrift store outing with friends:

Participant: It’s a lot more fun with other people... I think the last time I went it was for a Secret Snowflake event. It had to be under \$10 so I was like, “Oh thrift store sounds like a great idea.” And I decided to go all-out creepy [laughs]

Sophie: What did you get?

Participant: Well I got a dog made out of golf balls, which was really weird. I also got two dolls that were sewn together and they were holding a heart that said “Forever Friends.” And apparently there was a dead beetle in their hair... It was just a lot of fun seeing what weird stuff Goodwill had.

Other participants reminisced fondly about how they enjoy searching for joke gifts with their friends, a status-distinguishing social practice where honorific prestige is afforded

not through the possession of certain goods, but the monopolization of their meaning as lower-class objects readily available to be laughed at in locations designed for those less economically fortunate (i.e. thrift stores). This situational control over resources and power produces beliefs of status difference that develop quickly when categorical difference is at least partially correlated with class-based material inequality (Ridgeway 2012). In this way, economically privileged college students who view second-hand spaces as spaces to play, joke and lark about with similarly privileged peers create discursive communities related to the skills of shopping inaccessible to those with less social, cultural and economic capital than them (Crewe and Gregson 2003).

Many participants alluded to the idea of “poor chic” (Halnon 2003) when describing thrift shopping among college students. They perceived the class position of their college peers as exceptional and distinctive from other thrift shoppers, as expressed by a participant when he described the demographics of thrift store customers, “I think it’s mostly people that are looking for a way to save money. Um, but there is like a significant portion of college kids that are like joke shoppers.” He placed college students in a separate social group with a separate set of motivations to thrift shop that transcend pure economic necessity and enter into the gray area of appropriation, privilege, and ownership of space.

The following conversational excerpt from an interview with another participant illustrates common opinions on the matter:

Participant: I feel like that’s the way thrift shopping is here. It’s kind of this thing that a lot of people would be a little be a little more embarrassed about or like seen as a lower class activity and then making it into this kind of upper class or middle class hobby [laughs].

Sophie: What is your view of this upper class hobby?

Participant: I mean, anyone who wants to be a little more thrifty and frugal... I'm not gonna to be down on people for wanting to do that. I think that, I don't know, there's just like a level that it reaches where it gets a little bit uncomfortable. I feel that people— it's like they go to extremes to only thrift shop per say, to create these outfits or these personas of the thrift shopper

There are three important ideas presented in this quote. The first is that she perceives three distinct social classes and placed her college peers as belonging to the middle and upper classes. Secondly, she observes class-based tensions as two of classes made a hobby of (appropriate) the living constraints of the class at the bottom of the ladder, thereby creating a hierarchical power dynamic based in socioeconomic inequalities. Finally, she has a moral standing on the issue surrounding the intentionality of the consumer. She supports those who thrift shop, regardless of class position, if the motivation is to be frugal, but questions the ethics of thrift shopping for the purpose of creating an image of “cool” without consideration of the impact it may have on others who don't have the luxury to take such a privileged approach.

Individuals with lower middle class identities shared this heightened awareness of class inequality in consumption practices. However, these individuals still sought to establish their own class distinction from lower class individuals by agreeing with upper middle class participants that they go thrift shopping for fun. The clearest example of this comes from a student at the WWCC who vividly remembered growing up on welfare with a single working mom of four. She recalled:

It was not easy... Like that's when we thrift shopped and I didn't want to thrift shop and I just wanted to look like Mary Kate and Ashley [laughs].

Later she went on to explain that as her family became economically more stable, she began to enjoy thrift shopping. She explained:

Participant: My older sister is really the one that got me in to it. She is like the thrift queen goddess and so she was a really big influence.

Sophie: How do you approach going to thrift stores now?

Participant: Now it's just to go shopping. Oh and social because we do all kinds of stuff together, but that was one of our big things. Sometimes we would buy weird things like old prom dresses.

As a child, wearing thrift store clothing was a source of embarrassment for her, but as she grew older, more independent, and financially secure—she spoke of going to thrift stores to buy more clothes when she doesn't want to do laundry— thrift shopping lost its stigma and became a fun and practical way to shop for clothing. Furthermore, this participant enjoyed buying costumes, a consumptive behavior characteristic of people with privileged class positions. This act holds true to sociological theories of aspiration to the middle class (Ehrenreich 1989; Wagner 1997).

### *Hunting for Deals and the Middle Class Steal*

Many participants enjoyed the “thrill of the hunt” aspect of thrift shopping: searching for that score, deal, or hidden gem within the sea of used, discarded goods. These desirable items tended to be high-quality brands, materials, or anything that originally would have been expensive and associated with upper or upper middle class consumptive capacities. Thrift shopping was described as an exciting experience because, as one participant put it, “You never know what’s going to be in a thrift store.” The potential for discovery was considered a very attractive component to thrift shopping, something that couldn’t be experienced when shopping at department stores. A participant explained why:

I feel like there’s a certain amount of freedom in thrift stores. At department stores everything is carefully calculated in terms of, like, these are the things they

are selling this season and that's it. And you just have so many more options at a thrift store. And there's also that wonderful element of serendipity [laughs].

This appreciation of the freedom to choose according to preference, rather than constricted to what's in season, is rooted in American middle class culture that believes individual choice to be a "fundamental right, an indicator of freedom, and the route to individual self-expression and agency" (Fiske and Markus 2012: 94). The middle class standard assumes that all behavior is a product of individual choice, which ignores the fact that the ability to freely choose according to personal preference is not equally available to all people. This erroneous assumption celebrates those (i.e. college students) who already have the resources (i.e. economic and cultural capital) to make individual choices, such as shopping at thrift stores, but blames those who consume second-hand goods out of necessity for not conducting proper economic agency.

On a similar vein, participants also described going to thrift stores with the intention to find something desirable, thereby still enjoying the unexpected aspect of thrift stores, but also actively using their skills to detect valuable. A participant illustrates this point:

The hunt I think is really fun. You know, it's a fun thing. It's like an activity, like it's different from regular shopping because there's an element of like trying to hunt down the best thing for whatever reasons [laughs].

This "hunting down" exemplifies the American middle class value of the Protestant work ethic of working hard and being deserving of your possessions (Wagner 1997). The hunt is also incessant, driven by the elusive satisfaction of those hard-earned serendipitous moments (Campbell 1987).

An additional motivating factor to frequenting thrift stores is due to the lack of guarantee that you will find anything "good." Another participant attested to this saying,

“Sometimes it’s a complete bust and you don’t find anything, but sometimes you find great finds.” Emotion—in this instance, excitement— may be a legitimate motive for second-hand consumerist behavior (Bardhi 2003; Boden and Williams 2002), but does not account for how class-based status beliefs influence the definition of a “great find.” Therefore it is not simply luck that participants come to acquire valued items for cheap prices; they have to have the cultural capital to understand and identify appropriate taste that distinguishes an item as holding more value than others found in the same location of second-hand exchange.

In this way, there is a consumptive motive specific to the middle class in which middle class thrift shoppers appropriate poverty symbols (i.e. second-hand clothes) not exclusively to mock lower class lifestyles, but to undermine highbrow cultural tastes by acquiring high-quality brands and materials historically attainable only by members in the upper class. Indeed, all participants— regardless of actual SES background— aspired to be and be perceived as middle class by engaging in this activity. This desire, then, helps to explain why when someone finds a great bargain they feel like they have “cheated” our classist system: finding and attaining a high-status item in a low-status space. Cheating the system also means you are exceptional to it and therefore unique; another multi-faceted motivation discussed in the next section.

Many quotes from interviews illustrate participants’ common agreement of what constitutes a great bargain: a high-value item for a low-value cost (Bardhi 2003). One participant summarized these views:

I think like finding the hidden treasure, like if you can find something by a designer- maybe not necessarily a designer but like a good name, someone who makes good stuff- and get it for cheap, that’s the way to go. So if you can get good stuff for cheap, that is what you want.

These bargains are value-laden objects which indicate that participants have the cultural capital to recognize such brands and the leisure time to spend going through thrift stores to find them. However, they also derive pleasure in “scoring” these items because they were able to afford such high-brow symbols without fulfilling the economic requirements to access such symbols.

Although ostensibly similar in that these students are infiltrating and appropriating the consumptive spaces and conditions of working class and poor individuals, this behavior is distinctly different from downward impersonation because of the type of items sought after— they seek upward impersonation by finding high-status markers in low-status spaces. These perceptions pertain specifically to the middle class because of its figurative social standing with a foot in both working and upper class realities: they commiserate with lower class people about inequalities inherent in our capitalist system, but have some access to and partake in cultural activities enjoyed by the upper class. Despite identification with both tiers of the class pyramid, middle class thrifters— and those who desire to be seen as belonging to the middle class— work to establish and solidify their own class-based status group through what I have dubbed the “Middle Class Steal” principle.

The “Middle Class Steal” is not limited to thrift stores; it can be enacted by finding discounted high quality brands on clearance at department stores or boutiques. But because thrift stores have such an eclectic selection of brands, materials, sizes, and the like, it is the convergence of fun and serendipity that intersect to produce a unique experience enjoyed by all of my participants regardless of their self-reported class position or family class background.



Not only is finding great bargains a motivator in choosing to shop at thrift stores, it is also a source of pride to be shared with others. Participants repeatedly expressed their contentment and exaltation and how they loved to tell others, particularly those of similar social standings, about their great finds. When talking about costs of clothes, a participant stated:

Participant: I don't think it matters how much things cost. Only if you get a hell of a good deal!

Sophie: Why is it so fun to share your deals?

Participant: Cuz it's sweet! You got- I don't know, I love getting good deals. I do. And if you get something that someone really likes and you really like it too and you just got it for like 90% off, you're always going to be happy about it. You're always going to be like, "This is the shirt I paid \$9 for."

This feeling of pride resonated with many participants who felt comfortable bragging about their thrift store steals to peers with similarly large amounts of cultural capital. The reason why participants spoke of intra-class bragging, rather than discussion, is driven by their desire to establish distinction *within* their class-based social group, wherein "the relation of this set of practices to the spaces is not one of distance and othering but of distancing through out-doing" (Crewe and Gregson 2003: 103).

## **Uniqueness**

Thrift shopping also plays into personal identity formation and presentation of self that relate to participants' class perceptions and class-based social indicators. Two themes emerged from interviews: 1) thrift shopping as a way to express one's self and class identity, and 2) thrift shopping as way to express individuality and difference—an aspirational trait valued by the middle class. These aspects were also recognized by participants as being glamorized by the recent popularization of thrift shopping and the implications this shift has had on the relationship between “different” and “cool.”

### *Class Identity through Self-Expression*

Many participants reported thrift shopping and wearing second-hand clothing as a way to affordably cultivate and personalize an identity of maturity and self-confidence that garners respect. To understand how thrift clothing and fashion contribute to participants' sense of self and face, I asked them the questions “How important is fashion to you?” and “How does thrift shopping contribute to your fashion/style?” Many answered that fashion has become less important to them now that they are in college. However, upon deeper investigation, it became clear that while participants equated “fashion” to adherence to wide-spread fashion industry trends, they emphasized that they care about their image more now than when they were in high school. The next two responses to my first question illustrate the distinction many participants made between fashion and presentation of self:

I'd say it's less about fashion for me and more about visual- the way you chose to represent yourself.

And:

Well, [laughs] I want to look clean, I want to look put together, but like specifically I'm not too in to fashion trends, I just kind of like what I like to wear.

The desire to look clean and put together described in the latter quote was shared by many other respondents. One participant explained why looking nice is important to her:

It is important for me to look nice and I always try to dress in a way that if I saw someone who could be a potential employer or someone I might date, I want to at least look nice.

Here she described a heightened awareness and concern for self-presentation that commanded either an air of professionalism and/ or "date-ability." Participants recognized that they are on the verge of entering the adult world— full of jobs and serious romantic partnerships— and believed in self-agency to shape their own life chances and outcomes (Fiske and Markus 2012). Thrift shopping one means to achieve a look of adult-status respectability for college students at budget prices.

But college students don't just want to be regarded as adults, they want to elevate and secure their social status as belonging to a class of people that can afford to look nice and put together, in turn distancing themselves from low class indicators. This implies an unequal dichotomy between middle and upper class status attachments to "nice," "clean" and "put together" wardrobes and their antonyms of "ugly," "dirty," and "slob-like" that are negatively connoted with lower-class dress options. A self-identified lower middle class participant demonstrated this argument, "Because I don't have to shop at a thrift store... I definitely want to pick something that is of high-quality and not just some piece of shit thing." This testimony, and many more like it, demonstrates how economically advantaged college students consciously pick out items at thrift stores that have higher-status attachments (e.g. quality brands and materials) as a way to further solidify, rather than blur, class lines. They then wear such clothes in everyday settings to secure the

impression others have of them as belonging to a status of middle class adult respectability (Goffman 1959; Wagner 1989).

A way to help ensure that the audience in face-to-face interactions accepts one's presentation of self through clothing as thought-out, appropriate and well-earned is to show that one's clothes were not just found second-hand, but haven't been altered, customized, and transformed into one's own. This Do It Yourself trend (DIY) came up in multiple interviews with the common theme of enjoyment in expressing individualistic enterprise, creativity and confidence. The following excerpt illustrates how the DIY approach to second-hand clothes was a source of pride among many participants:

Cuz like I said before, it's a little bit of a pride factor [laughs]. Especially if I've altered something- that's when I'll definitely say like, 'Oh yeah, I actually altered this 'cuz it used to be like a giant moo-moo floral dress, but I made it cute!' Because that's kind of a pride in my little arts and crafts hobby world.

Although these moo-moo dresses can be usually be found by anyone who visits a thrift store, what is important here is that this participant has both the cultural capital and the ingenuity to recognize the potential of an item that might not be apparent in its current form. Whereas a moo-moo floral dress on its own is not a marker of middle class status, this participant has the class-based capacity to purchase and modify the dress to re-signify it as a now-desirable status symbol of "cute." She shares the middle class belief in the Protestant work ethic to possess and personalize (Wagner 1989), and then publicizes her creations in effort to manage positive impressions others have of her. Thus a critical element to establishing independence in consumptive behavior is more than choosing to shop at thrift stores, but altering second-hand purchases to distinguish oneself as not just an individual, but a creative and cleverly consuming independent social actor.

*Resisting Conformity and the Desire to Be Different*

Another attractive aspect of thrift stopping was its utilization in cultivating a unique clothing style. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

I like just kind of continuing to go to Goodwill without really any expectations... But, yeah every once in a while I just find something and usually it's something that I think is going to be really ugly or awesome. And then I kind of like accept it in to my, I don't know, pool of clothing identity.

Fortuitous finds in which the owner suddenly sees the value of an object and its eccentric aesthetic valuations was motivation for another participant:

Finding clothes that are unique and people wouldn't have, but you know you like a lot- it's just exciting 'cuz you get to look good and feel good about you're buying.

These aesthetic identities do not exist in a class-less vacuum. Although college students may have tight budgets that restrict the scope of their consumption, the more important indicator of their social location is their attitude towards independence and uniqueness. According to studies on the relationship between class and uniqueness, working-class people are more likely to express fondness of an item when others share such preference. Conversely, middle class people prefer items not chosen by others out of their desire to appear unique and different (Markus et. al 2007). Therefore, what participants may refer to as their own unique fashion style is based on a middle class value of individuality (Ehrenreich 1989). They believe they are entitled to individual choice and perceive their ability to express themselves according to personal clothing preference as an act of independence (Fiske and Markus 2012).

I followed up on these declarations of uniqueness by asking participants if they thought they could achieve these personalized styles by shopping at thrift stores and all responded with a resounding “Yes.” One participant expanded upon this:

I think thrift stores fit in with and this idea that your identity is based on the shows that you watch, the directors you’re into, what kind of music you do, what your clothes are... So like you have to find a way to kind of create your own little museum of self.

This perfectly describes cultural taste and distinction (Bourdieu 1984). By consuming particular forms of taste—using her examples of shows, music and clothes—college students communicate a cultural class identity that reflects the norms and values of their social environment. Because college campuses tend to promote a middle class ideology (Zweig 2004), students are more likely to adopt and perpetuate preference and valuation of middle class status indicators, which includes cleverly-consumed thrift store clothes. In this sense, college students contribute their own personalized work of art made of middle class materials and displayed in the “museum” of society.

To establish intra-class differences—differences between student who share similar levels of economic privilege—participants sought to distinguish their affinity for thrift shopping as a personal preference, not conformity to what popular culture has now dubbed “cool.” One participant mentioned that she sometimes gets called “hipster,” a label she vehemently rejects. When asked why she thinks people call her that, she reasoned:

I think that there’s this perception that like [pause], I don’t know, like anything outside of the- I don’t know, anyone putting like distinctive individual effort into their look is what we call a hipster. And I really hate that because for me it’s like self-expression and for other people it’s like trying to be different rather than trying to be me.

Having her personal style criticized for being unauthentic frustrated this participant because she did not believe her approach to thrift shopping was due to mindless acceptance of fashion fads (i.e. the hipster movement), but rather self-expression and adherence only to her own aesthetic values.

Many other participants expressed frustration with the dilemma posed by the recent mainstreaming of second-hand culture. While participants still viewed thrift shopping as favorable to achieve a different style, they simultaneously criticized its assimilation into popular culture as discrediting and undermining the symbolism of uniqueness it once possessed. Macklemore's 2013 hit song *Thrift Shop* and the "Ugly Sweater" trend are two recent examples of how thrift shopping has been glamorized in the media and subsumed by many young people into their consumptive decisions. Now it is trendy and cool to be different, therein changing the meaning of different to not actually indicate rarity, but a newly created thrift store aesthetic that is, ironically, common.

To distance themselves from this recent craze, participants articulated two strategies that enables them to simultaneously maintain their use of thrift shopping as unique, but also argues that others' use of it as not. First, they expressed confusion and bafflement about the trend, indicating they are exceptional to its influence in their approach to thrift shopping. For one participant, the "Ugly Sweater" fad was particularly disturbing:

I like sweaters- I don't like ugly sweaters... I feel like so many people are going to look back and be like, 'What was I thinking?'... And so I don't get it.

This estrangement from and skepticism of fashion fads serves to validate the participant's desire to be accepted as an independent, critical, and thoughtful consumer. By expressing

their bewilderment to the ridiculousness of trend, participants framed participation in it as mindless acceptance of socially constructed “cool,” and their pragmatic approach as the antidote.

To prove this assertion of exceptionalism, participants claimed that their consumptive choice to shop at thrift stores preceded the trend, the second strategy to establish distinction. An interview with a participant who is from the area of Seattle where the *Thrift Shop* music video was filmed revealed such an opinion:

They filmed that song in the Value Village by my house. I feel like it's this national fad and I feel like it started right in my neighborhood.... I guess it's the same with thrift shopping, like I thrift shopped a long time ago- I still thrift shop... I wouldn't be like, 'I love to thrift shop because of Macklemore,' I feel like that's kind of silly sounding.

By exhibiting autonomy and individual initiative rather than lemming-like adherence to socially prescribed consumptive patterns, this participant, and many others in my study, believes in her right to individual choice and agency in how she wishes to express herself through such activities as thrift shopping. In this way, these participants seek to elevate themselves as above their college peers with regard to individual thought, behavior and circumspect consumption, but still aspire to normative values embedded within a middle class culture to which their peers also belong.



## Conclusion

My study suggests that social class is a powerful force in how college students approach, experience and discuss second-hand consumption. Social class is also as elusive as it is powerful, making it difficult to observe and discern based on consumptive practices alone. The advent of thrift shopping further conflates the ambiguity of social class positioning as now traditional markers of class-based status can be acquired in historically low-class spaces. Determining the social class of college students is even more complicated because of their transitional class status that can no longer be solely defined by family class background, but has yet to be fully constructed and applied in the “real world.” Therefore, it is more useful to conceptualize perceptions and performances of social class among college students as relational to the class status of their peers and contextual to their campus culture.

Because college campuses tend to promote a middle class ideology centered in beliefs in the Protestant work ethic and independence, students frequently adopt and incorporate such values into how they approach day-to-day activities. My findings that all participants identify with the middle class supports this claim and elucidates how second-hand consumption is conducive to the formation of such a cultural class identity. By emphasizing the practical, fun and unique appeal of thrift shopping, participants demonstrated their beliefs as consistent with middle class values in frugality, agency, and individualism. This indicates that economically privileged college students may very well aspire to the middle and understand thrifting shopping as a means to achieve a middle class status.

### *Implications for Middle Class Participation in Second-Hand Culture*

Out of my research on social class and thrift shopping among college students, I have developed a concept called the “Middle Class Steal” to describe how people in the middle derive class distinction through clever second-hand consumption. By boasting about high-status markers found in low-status spaces, members of the middle class act to solidify their social standing; they commiserate with lower class concerns about structural class-based inequalities, but capitalize on their larger amounts of cultural capital to impersonate upper class taste. This small theoretical contribution I make to the sociological community works to highlight the need for consideration of the middle class as having a particular set of consumptive objectives, not just participating in mass consumerism.

Further research on the intersection of second-hand and middle class culture could investigate the paradoxical relationship between being different and being popular. Now that the hipster subculture of thrift shopping has been subsumed into mainstream pop culture, what will be the next movement against conformity? One participant made a conjecture to this query:

I feel like hipsters might not even like thrift shopping anymore [laughs] because now it's too mainstream to go thrift shopping, like it's too cliché... I don't know where they go now— maybe they go to H&M, like totally throw it all out!

Could shopping at department stores be the new way to establish difference? I encourage someone to find out.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Questions for College Students

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?  
Probes: What kind of activities do you do on campus?  
When you go off-campus, where do you like to go?  
Why did you decide to attend (name of college)?  
Any plans for after graduation?
2. Can you tell me a bit about your life at home?  
Probes: Where is your hometown?  
Do you live with both parents?  
Are you still close/ in touch with friends from home?
3. What did you think about high school?  
Probes: What kind of activities did you do (through and outside of school)?  
How would you describe your friend group?  
What “scene” did you run in?  
Did you feel like you fit in?
4. What were your shopping habits in high school?  
Probes: Did you get an allowance? If so, how much a month/week? Did you work?  
How would you describe your level of economic independence in high school?  
What did you spend most of your money on?
5. How did you feel about clothes shopping?  
Probes: When shopping for clothes, who did you go with?  
How much money did your parents contribute to your wardrobe?  
Were there certain types of “non-essential” clothes that you were economically responsible for?  
Where did you do most of your personal clothes shopping? What about your parents? Friends?
6. How would you describe your fashion sense in high school?  
Probes: What were some popular trends, brands, styles? Did you adhere to them?  
How important were brands to you?  
How did purchases from thrift stores impact your fashion, if at all?
7. Did you second hand shop in high school?  
Probes: If so, where?  
How often?  
Did you look for anything specifically?  
Did you shop with anyone else (friends, family, etc)?  
Why? Did you enjoy it?



What type of items did you typically purchase?  
How much did brand names affect your purchases?  
What were your friends' and peers' attitudes towards thrift shopping?  
Your parents?

8. What was your motivation for thirft shopping in high school? What factors do you consider when clothes shopping (at thrift stores or elsewhere)?
9. How willing were you to share or tell people about your thrift shopping habits?  
Probes: Did this differ from telling people about purchases made at first-hand stores?
10. How have your shopping patterns changed since high school?  
Probes: same questions as for high school
11. What is your motivation for thirft shopping now?  
Probes: same as questions for high school
12. How has your budget changed since high school?  
Probes: Where does clothes shopping fall in to this?
13. Describe your fashion now.  
Probes: How important is fashion to you?  
How has it changed since high school?
14. Describe a typical thrift shopping experience.  
Probes: What do you think about thrift stores?  
What do you think about the people that work and shop at thrift stores?
15. How does your experience with thrift shopping compare to other Whitties?  
Community members? Other college students? Your family? Friends?
16. How would you describe the culture around thrift shopping at Whitman?  
Probes: How well do you feel you relate to this culture?
17. What do you think about the larger (i.e. national) recent trend of thrift shopping?  
Probes: How does the "hipster" aesthetic fit in to this?  
Do you feel pressure to wear certain clothes (from thrift stores or otherwise)? What about certain brands?
18. Why do you think people thrift shop? How does it differ across varying social classes?
19. Is there anything else relevant or important you would like me to know?

## Appendix B

## Participant Profile Sheet

Age:                      Gender:                      College:                      Marital Status:

### **SES Background**

Hometown:

Culture of neighborhood/ hometown:

High school culture:

Costs of Living w/ help:

Clothes:

Leisure w/ help:

Clothes:

Class (self-reported):

### **Family**

Description of parents' class (growing up and/or now):

Family attitudes towards thrifting:

### **Economic Independence**

Job:

Hours/ week:

Cost of living w/o help:

Clothes:

Leisure w/o help:

Clothes:

Descriptions of thrift budget: