

Buying Clothes from Thrift Stores: An Analysis of Young People Consuming Second-hand Clothing in Rio de Janeiro

Comprando “Roupa de Brechó”: Uma Análise Sobre o Consumo de Vestuário de Segunda Mão entre Jovens na Cidade do Rio de Janeiro

Un análisis sobre el consumo de ropa de segunda mano entre los jóvenes de Río de Janeiro

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Abstract *This article presents the results of a research that analyzed the consumption of second-hand clothing among young people in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Theoretically speaking, the research was guided by the anthropological perspective of consumption. The research was conducted based on the ethnographic method with participant observation and in-depth interviews. The results show the relationships between consumers and merchandise and reveal the main motivations for buying second-hand clothing and accessories.*

Keywords: *second-hand clothing; consumption; ethnography.*

Resumo *Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa que analisou o consumo de vestuário de segunda mão entre jovens no Rio de Janeiro. Em termos teóricos, a pesquisa foi orientada pela perspectiva antropológica do consumo. Quanto ao procedimento metodológico, foi realizada uma pesquisa etnográfica, com observação participante e entrevistas em profundidade. Os resultados mostram as relações entre consumidores e mercadorias, e revelam as principais motivações para o consumo de roupas e acessórios de segunda mão.*

Palavras-chave: *vestuário de segunda mão; consumo; etnografia.*

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Resumen *En este artículo se presentan los resultados de una investigación que analiza el universo de consumo de ropa de segunda mano entre los jóvenes de Río de Janeiro. En términos teóricos, la investigación fue guiada por la perspectiva antropológica del consumo. En cuanto a la metodología, se llevó a cabo una investigación etnográfica, con observación participante y entrevistas en profundidad. Los resultados muestran las relaciones entre los consumidores y los bienes, y revelan las principales motivaciones para el consumo de ropa y accesorios de segunda mano.*

Palabras clave: *ropa de segunda mano; consumo; etnografía.*

Submission date: 28/07/2014

Acceptance date: 13/02/2015

Introduction

In recent years some studies have highlighted the importance that the fashion industry has on the Brazilian economy in general and especially in Rio de Janeiro. Confirming this perspective, a survey conducted in 2011 showed that in the city of Rio de Janeiro the fashion productive chain has an annual turnover of more than R\$ 890 million and that the total number of people formally and informally employed in the clothing industry alone is approximately 35,000 (IPP/SEBRAE-RJ/FGV, 2011). However, within this universe of fashion and clothing there is a segment that is beginning to receive media attention and arouse interest among consumers, but it has generated only a few studies and has no official statistics: the second-hand clothing market.

The objective of this paper is to present some of the results of a study that sought to analyze the dynamics of changing and building values, the meanings and reinterpretation of objects, and the forms of sociability present in the universe of second-hand clothing consumption (clothes and accessories) in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The investigation of this universe included uncovering and analyzing the meanings attributed and the motivations of consumers to purchase and use second-hand articles.

The anthropological perspective of the consumption is what guided this work and in this perspective, specifically regarding the consumption of clothing and fashion, some authors highlight the clothing system as a map for the cultural universe (SAHLINS, 1979) and fashion as a system of communication (McCRACKEN, 2003). Hansen (1994, 2004) points out in his work that clothes are things that have history and meaning and, moreover, that objects in general have the power to structure and transform social relationships. In her perspective, clothes go through a process where they are highlighted or valued in the Western World beginning in the 90's when retro or vintage looks began to be valued.

As for the methodological procedure, the research used an ethnographic approach. Therefore, for twelve months, between April 2012 and March 2013, the fieldwork was conducted through direct observation

and in-depth interviews with consumers of second-hand clothes in order to understand aspects related to motivation, practices, meaning, and the building of value of this type of clothing. The group of consumers interviewed was composed of young men and women between 19 and 22 years of age, residents of the northern, southern, and western areas of the city of Rio de Janeiro, predominantly middle class. These respondents buy second-hand clothes and accessories mainly at thrift stores and goodwill bazaars promoted by religious institutions, but some also acquire second-hand articles online (on websites, blogs, or social networking pages).

Methodological Notes

The survey conducted can be classified as exploratory as to its objectives; qualitative as to the type of data that was analyzed; and, in relation to procedures, an ethnographic research was conducted. Ethnography does not seek general rules or universal laws, but rather describes and interprets social phenomena and tries to understand the logic, values, and meanings present in a community from the “native point of view”. Therefore ethnographic studies are guided by a kind of scientific knowledge that is generated from another’s point of view, allowing a research within the reality of a group, escaping the ethnocentric bias through a perspective that is more relative. The centrality of anthropological knowledge and practice is, for Peirano (1991), the creative tension between theory and research—a permanent tension between the accumulated knowledge in the discipline and “native categories” presented by the members of the social groups surveyed. The ethnographic method recommends conducting field work in which two techniques are used, complementing themselves in the construction of a “dense description” of a group, event, or social phenomenon: the participant observation and in-depth interviews. In relation to the participant observation, through direct contact and interaction with the group researched, the objective is to know the group or phenomenon in its various aspects. To do so, it is necessary to follow the everyday and special moments—routine and rituals—that

take place in the environments studied. However, in relation to the interviews, they should be conducted through a script to allow the flow of speech of respondents and preferably be recorded (audio) so that they can be analyzed later and in order to withdraw “native categories” used by the group researched. With this type of interview it is possible to obtain the motivations, definitions, classifications, meanings, and the vision as a way of perceiving the world by the group’s members.

In reference to the ethnographic method, a twelve-month field work was conducted between April 2012, and March 2013, in which the following was carried out:

- a) In-depth interviews with 12 consumers (10 women and 2 men) based on a script that addressed aspects related to the motivation, practices, meaning, and the building of value of second-hand clothing. The interviews were conducted preferably in the consumers’ homes. In addition, so that more detailed information about the second-hand clothing market and customer profiles of these shops were obtained, interviews were conducted with six owners of thrift stores located in the northern and southern areas and downtown Rio de Janeiro. For these interviews, a specific script was written that allows us to understand not only the thrift stores as a business, but especially the universe of changes, relations of sociability, and value building of this specific type of merchandise.
- b) Visits to thrift stores and open markets (Feira de Antiguidades on Praça XV and Feira do Rio Antigo on Rua do Lavradio, both located in downtown Rio de Janeiro) with the intention of observing consumers while shopping in specialized consumption spaces of second-hand clothing located in different neighborhoods of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The Anthropological Context on Second-hand Clothing Consumption

The research that originated this article was conducted with reference to the field of Consumer Anthropology, which is an area of knowledge that has as a prerogative a perspective that is more relative in relation to the consumption phenomenon and a perspective that points to steering away from seeing merchandise as mere utilities with only a value of use and with an exchange value. In this field, we try to emphasize the cultural dimension that goes beyond consumption practices, understanding the consumption as a sociocultural process—which involves, in addition to use, exchange, and creation—and, therefore, intends to establish the relationship between culture and consumption. Culture is understood as a set of ideas and activities through which we manufacture and build our world, while consumption means the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used. For McCracken,

culture and consumption have an unprecedented relationship in the modern world. (...) Consumption is an entirely cultural phenomenon. (...) consumption is shaped, driven, and constrained at every point by cultural considerations. (...) consumer goods are loaded with cultural significance. Consumers use the meaning of goods to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideas, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of oneself, and create (and survive) social changes. (McCRACKEN, 2003, p. 11)

According to the same author, in contemporary Western societies, culture is deeply connected to and dependent on consumption, and goods are key elements for reproducing, representing, and manipulating our cultures. It is therefore necessary to understand the cultural aspects of consumption and the importance of consumption for culture. According to the anthropological view on consumption, the answers to the question “why we consume” are diverse: we consume to mediate our social relations, to check status, to build identities, to establish boundaries between groups and individuals (including processes of social inclusion

and exclusion), to classify, to express our desires, our aspirations, and our affection. Ultimately, it is about analyzing consumption from a perspective that does not reduce this social phenomenon to a merely utilitarian or economic dimension but instead highlights aspects of collective language, communication and social classification present in the modern consumer. (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2004; SAHLINS, 1979).

In the anthropological perspective of consumption, goods have a dual role: on one hand, undoubtedly, they provide sustenance, but on the other hand, they promote social relationships. In this sense it is possible to state that consumption can be understood as a means of communication between people, in which objects act as mediators or indicators in this interactive process: goods are communicators. In a single phrase, “goods are good to think” (DOUGLAS & ISHERWOOD, 2004, p. 108). Therefore, they serve to produce classification systems from which social groups set boundaries and differences amongst themselves.

Another set of authors relevant for their contributions to the anthropological study of consumption are those related to the field of material culture who study fashion and consumption of clothing. Miller (2007), who points out the need for more ethnographic work seeking to understand clothing through the meaning of using specific clothing, states that “material culture studies work through the specificity of material objects to ultimately create a deeper understanding of the specificity of humanity inseparable from its materiality.” (MILLER, 2007, p. 47). The role of objects creating social relationships is essential; therefore, for the author, it is the merchandise that produces the relationship between itself and the various people who come into contact with it, and the relationship of people among themselves. In another study, dealing specifically about clothing, the author states that, “clothes are not superficial; they really are that which makes us be what we think we are.” (MILLER, 2000, p. 13)

For Sahlins (1979), the clothing system is a map to the cultural universe because the categories and cultural principles can be seen and are evident in clothing. In this way, by analyzing clothing it would be

possible to understand the processes, principles, and social categories of a group or society as well as aspects related to social distance, to everyday communication, and to the history of this social group. McCracken (2003), in turn, analyzes fashion as a communication system and clothing as “expressive media”. According to the author, “*It is characteristic for clothing to act as a record and guide to cultural categories*” (McCRACKEN, 2003, p. 85), because clothing highlights different categories (categories of gender and social class, for example) and also communicates properties that are supposed to be inherent in each of these categories, but one cannot ignore the dynamic character of culture and, consequently, the fact that the cultural meaning of goods is something that is constantly changing.

Related specifically to consumption of second-hand clothing, Hansen (1994, 2004) points out in his work that clothes are things that have history and meaning and, moreover, that objects in general have the power to structure and transform social relationships. Contextualizing the historical, economic, and social aspects that led to the development of a bustling market of used clothes in Zambia, Hansen (1994) analyzes how the population of that country uses clothes discarded by the West and what this has to say about the construction of identity and the difference in that country. In addition to the analysis on the issue of second-hand clothes in Zambia, Hansen (1994) attempts to show, based on news and media articles specialized in fashion, how these used clothes have undergone a process of being highlighted or valued in the West after 1990. “Looks”, “retro” or “vintage” clothing have become valued by famous and non-famous people.

In a later text, Hansen (2004) points out to the increasing amount of academic work (books, articles, journals, theses, etc.) about clothes and fashion beginning in the late 80s in several areas. For the author, the anthropology’s contribution lies in the consumption perspective as *locus* and process of meanings; however, clothing and the consumption of clothes would be studied from this perspective of building meanings and identities. The author lists the many possibilities in which the

subject has been studied in Anthropology in the last two decades, points to different perspectives to study the issue of clothing, and highlights the change of studies that were based on the emulation viewpoint to a broader notion of bricolage and hybridity, incorporating into the studies on the subject questions such as *locus* of conflicts of values, interactions between classes, inter-relations between genders and generations, and the economic and cultural exchanges of a global nature. Hansen (2004) highlights the importance of studies that introduced the prospect of material culture in studies on clothes and apparel. In these studies, the materiality of the clothes would be a surface or a platform representing social relations and “states of being”. The author brings up a specific discussion on second-hand clothes and on research carried out in different social contexts. In general, research on second-hand clothes in developed countries focus on the consumption of clothing as a *locus* of consumption for building identity, gender, and looks through clothes, and they work the perspective of incorporating accessories and specific clothing articles in dressers of young people—what might be called a retro style. On the other hand, in third world countries, especially in Africa, second-hand clothes, which are imported from western countries, besides representing a large volume of objects and being a part of major international as well as local/regional trade, will be decontextualized from their original universe and will be incorporated into local garments through specific social processes and different consumption practices, acquiring, through these processes and practices, several uses and meanings (HANSEN, 2004).

Drawing on the ideas of Sahlins (1979), it can be said that these second-hand clothing items are acquired according to specific cultural logic and through multiple purposes. “Original” consumptions are often ignored or subverted as soon as these clothes arrive in other societies, being incorporated into local cultures.

Moreover as the clothes go through the hands of different consumers and social contexts, McCracken describes the rituals of release. One occasion and purpose for the release ritual is when “an individual

purchases a good that previously belonged to another” (McCRACKEN, 2003, p. 118). In these situations the ritual is done to “erase” the meaning associated to the previous owner. The good is then “liberated” from the previous owner and free to be claimed as his by the new owner. In other words, when goods are passed on they need to be “purged” from their previous meaning in order to be incorporated by the new owner, avoiding “contamination” (of meaning). For the author, “what seems to be merely superstition is actually an implicit recognition of the mobility quality of the meaning invested in goods.” (McCRACKEN, 2003, p. 118).

This idea goes along with authors such as Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe (2000) who, in researches of second-hand clothing in the context of goodwill shops and “retro” stores, unveil the need to symbolically “remove” the former owner of the clothes. Miller, when referring to the work of these authors, states: “We usually think in terms of people taking off their clothes, but here we have to get used to the idea of people being taken from their clothes” (Miller, 2000, p. 80). However, at the same time, research work in goodwill and “retro” stores points to the fact that the value of second-hand clothes (especially for middle-class consumers) is still largely derived from the fact that they were previously used. The value of these clothes lies mainly in its past and, therefore, its authenticity.

Palmer and Clark (2005) clarify and illustrate the relationship of clothing worn by their former owners in different social contexts:

Taboos against wearing used clothes are culturally determined and can have positive and negative associations that provoke strong emotional reactions. East Asian cultures have beliefs that clothes carry the presence of deceased that are very “honored” and in this way remain “alive” by means of a tactile “memento mori”³ (...) But by the end of the twentieth century, many cultural taboos had been eradicated, such as the exchange of used clothing, which develops on a global scale driven by fashion, as well as by a genuine need. The tendency to wear ‘vintage’ second-hand clothes that

³ “Memento mori” is a Latin phrase meaning “remember that you are mortal.”

emerged in western urban clothing serves as an illustration. (PALMER; CLARK, 2005, p. 3-4)

These same authors also reveal another contemporary aspect of second-hand clothing consumption phenomenon: the consumption as a means to reveal the “alternative” lifestyle as well as political and ethical manifestation.

Hansen’s work (1994, 2004) and other authors who study second-hand clothing⁴ (CLARKE, 2000; GREGSON, BROOKS & CREWE, 2000; GREGSON & CREWE, 2003; PALMER & CLARK, 2005; FONTAINE, 2008) will therefore show the consumption of this category of clothing—considering the uses, practices, meanings, and exchanges—in different social, cultural and economic contexts, and emphasize the relevance of studying this kind of social phenomenon, which can reveal interesting aspects of consumption in contemporary times.

Second-hand clothing consumption in Rio’s context

The consumers of second-hand clothing interviewed are mostly women, but two men are also part of this group. All, except for one, are studying or have a higher education and ages ranging from 19 to 22 years old. In regard to socioeconomic issues, it was based on self-classification, and the majority of respondents defined themselves as being “middle class”, but sometimes this “middle class” was further explained using terms such as “upper middle class”, “average middle class” or “more towards the lower middle class”. Only one interviewee classified herself as “high class”. The responses show the relativity of self-classifications, but from what was observed during field work, it may be suggested that the group is part of what has been called in anthropology as the “urban middle classes”. It should also be pointed out, as a delimitation of the

⁴ Regarding Brazilian authors, research and academic texts only two studies were found: a monograph presented to the UESC Arts Center (ROSA, 2009) and a dissertation presented for a Master’s in Administration from PUC-RS (KRUGER, 2010).

research group, that the focus of the study fell on people who buy second-hand apparel (clothes and/or accessories), which means that they spend some money, even if the value in Reais is low when acquiring these articles. Therefore, the consumers referred to here as second-hand garment consumer, this is not considering people who receive clothing and/or accessories in the form of a donation.

An important element to be analyzed is related to native categories that are used by the consumers researched. Since the beginning of the field work it became clear that the term “second-hand clothes”, a term widely used by the reference literature and used in research as a category of analysis, was strange to the respondents, not because they did not know what it was, but because this expression is not used, or should we say that it is avoided. “Used clothing”, “old clothes”, and “thrift store clothes” are some of the terms used by the interviewees to describe the clothes that once belonged to other people, that have had other owners. The adoption of one or another expression is not free and reveals the relationship that is had with the clothing in general and specifically with this category of clothes and accessories. Because of this, the people who do not consume this type of clothing will more easily use the term “old clothes” and “used clothing”, while “thrift store clothes” or “goodwill clothes” is the expression most widely adopted by those who consume them. Although the rejection reaction is subtle, you can notice that the term “second-hand clothes” does not bode well with the respondents. For the consumers interviewed, “old clothes” refers to clothing that is worn and threadbare and therefore to use this expression not only has a pejorative character, but it betrays ignorance about the universe of second-hand clothing. The term “used clothing”, although it doesn’t have such a strong reaction as in the case of using “old clothes”, it is also not a very well regarded expression. Some interviewees like to stress that at thrift shops and goodwill stores clothes can be found that are “almost new” and in excellent condition. “Old clothes” can also refer to clothing produced in other decades, which would approach the idea of *vintage* or *retro* clothing. Definitely the term most commonly used by consumers

is “thrift store clothes,” which seems to dispel the negative connotations that exist in some of the other expressions.

Second-hand clothes does interest and attract the consumers surveyed when they meet one or more of the following requirements: *price*, *exclusivity*, and *quality* (the idea of quality can also be referred to by the respondents as “durability”, “finish”, “cut”, and “resistance”). In addition to these three requirements, the aspects of *demand* and *achievement* are also taken into account in this universe.

The low price of these goods in absolute or relative terms, combined with the style they have, is something that these consumers are proud of and boast about because they love to tell you the price they paid for the articles, especially when someone pays them a compliment for the clothing or accessory. The ideas of expensive and cheap can be made relative, but in general “first-hand” clothes serve as a parameter. In addition to publicly saying the price they paid for a piece of clothing, they also like to say next that it was bought in a thrift store.

“The parameter is more or less the price I know it has at a normal store. For example, I know if I walk into any fashion store to get a blouse I am going to pay R\$ 150. OK, so I’m not going to pay R\$ 100 at a thrift store for a blouse. (...) Because usually in these fashion stores it is R\$ 150 for a simple blouse, so at the thrift store I am going to pay 20 or 30, max. But the price really depends on the location of the thrift store. Here in Ipanema it will be much more expensive than in a thrift store in Santa Teresa. So I always take that into consideration along with how well the clothes are conserved—does it have a defect, will I have to take it to the seamstress, does it have a little button missing...”

The same young lady was asked about articles that don’t exist in “normal stores”, such as clothes with a particular cut or clothing that could be considered *vintage*. She explains how this price evaluation would be made since it would involve an article that she no longer would have a parameter from another store.

“I think you have to go with what your gut is saying. There are things I liked so much, and I had the money, so I paid more. There have been

some articles that I paid more for, but the most expensive thing I have spent in a thrift store was R\$ 150. It was a blazer that I just loved. I said to myself ‘it’s mine; I have the money, it doesn’t matter.’”

As for another interviewee that is part of the group that usually buys in stores in the north and west part of the city, the price is an item even more important and she usually gets different articles for less than R\$ 10.00, and it may even get as low as R\$ 1.00, but still the store price is a parameter, a reference to calculate the value that she is willing to pay for the article.

“I try to compare it to the price of a store. If an article has a certain price, it can’t be that price and even close to that price because it is already second-hand, right? So, if it is used, you aren’t going to buy it for the same price as a new one. (...) For example, you decide to buy a pleated skirt just because it is fashionable. It will cost around R\$ 80.00. But if you go to a thrift store you may find one for R\$ 3.00 or R\$ 2.00.”

As for the brand, this does not seem to be a major concern of consumers when looking for clothes at thrift stores or goodwill shops, even though it is common knowledge that certain brands are valued and can make the article more attractive and more expensive:

“Brand is one thing I don’t care much about. But if I like something and it is of a strong brand, that adds more value to it so I may be willing to pay a little more. But only if it catches my eye first.”

There is an exception among the respondents: In the case of Beatriz⁵, she only buys second-hand clothes over the Internet, on blogs, websites, or on social networking pages. For her, price is not something really important because what drives her is to look for and obtain articles that she has seen and has not been able to buy in stores. They usually are from well-known brand stores and are references for young people living in Rio. Beatriz is from an upper middle class and her motivation, which is unlike the other interviewees, causes her to disregard the price of the

⁵ To preserve the anonymity of respondents, all the names used here are fictitious.

article or be willing to pay a price that she admits is high. She has paid up to R\$ 350.00 for a second-hand skirt or paid for an article at a more expensive price than the original store price.

“There was a time when a bikini was shown on the cover of *Veja Rio* that was from Farm. I called all the stores, all the stores in Brazil. I called Bahia, and found it in Bahia, so I asked them to send it. When they sent it, they gave me an OK, I went in the store and you wouldn’t believe it! They sold the bikini. But I decided to not make a big deal of it, right? I wasn’t going to make a scene. So I started to search on the Internet like crazy to try to find it because I knew the name of the pattern, I knew what I wanted, I knew everything. Then I found a girl selling one. The bikini cost R\$ 98.00. I’m pretty sure at the time it was R\$ 98.00, and she charged R\$ 170.00. I don’t remember if it was used. Then we met and I said ‘I’ll pay it, whatever...’. So we met... I bought it.”

But in general, what can make a difference as a motivation for buying second-hand clothing is exclusivity because these consumers are used to going to thrift shops and goodwill stores and many times they are looking for “one thing that no one else will probably have”, something that is different and unique.

“I needed a blazer and some slacks, but I wanted an older cut, not these slacks that have a very new cut. I wanted a blazer that was purple, yellow, blue, so it was very hard to find. So I went to a thrift store that a friend recommended to me and I got there and found a purple, green, and a blue blazer...”

Considering that the articles in thrift stores are, in general, one of a kind, to find something that consumers like and that matches the size they use, does not always happen, and this is exactly why to find an article is viewed as something that generates satisfaction. The very looking for something specific can be assumed as a “mission”, as revealed by an interviewee. The feeling of satisfaction also arises when one can boast of an article, something beautiful and cheap, that make others pay a complement:

“I like to tell people ‘I bought this skirt for twenty reais.’ [referring to a skirt she was wearing at the time of the interview]. Someone says: ‘I love your dress.’ Really? It cost 50 reais. I like this.”

Regarding the biography/history of the clothing and accessories purchased, the first respondents were not very keen to learn about, but, for some, to know why the article was disposed of is something to think about and that generates some curiosity. The following three parts of testimonials show these nuances.

“No, I don’t really care. What I want to know is if it fits me and if it’s what I want. It may have been a convict, a cleaning lady, a socialite, a president, for me it is indifferent.”

“[The clothes] are mine. It is my fabric and now it is going to be me who am going to make my story with it.”

“I like to think that those clothes are there because they didn’t fit someone anymore and now they are going to fit me. So I think it’s cool to shop at a thrift store because, besides buying some clothes that I like at a better price, the clothing also has a story. Someone one day saw those clothes, liked them, and for some reason did not want them any more so decided to get rid of them. (...) I wonder why it did not fit any more on that person. I’m always looking for the motive. Did the person put on weight or simply did not want to wear it anymore, or moved? But the reason I really will never know, right? It’s the same when you go to a used book store and you see a message written in the first page. A book that nobody wanted any more, an outfit that nobody wanted any more—the rejets. “

As the interviews progressed, statements began to emerge in which this issue of the clothing’s history had some or a lot of relevance. For André and Cláudia, the exact biography of a clothing article or of a particular accessory doesn’t really matter much. Who wore it, how, and where it was used does not generate any interest in them, but they would like to know the historical context of the articles. For them, the clothes and accessories found in some thrift store can be easily identified as having been produced and originally consumed in past decades, and for them they want to understand what was that historical moment: what

songs were listen to, what was happening in the country and around the world, what were the social movements that emerged, who were the fashion icons, etc. The clothes and accessories this way would be able to send them back in time, being mediators of a social and historical knowledge.

The topic that invariably comes up when consumers talk about second-hand clothes is the prejudice (in relation to these clothes) that may be associated with the history of the clothing and/or a socio-economic issue. For the younger respondents, this prejudice is repeatedly attributed to “older people”, meaning the generations of their parents and grandparents, and the reason for this, according to them, would be the fact that in the past they were people of lower classes or with financial difficulties who resorted to second-hand clothes that were often donated.

“A lot of people who don’t like it [thrift store clothes] say things like ‘Yuk! Other people used that, people who died.’ But that doesn’t have anything to do with it; it is only a piece of fabric! The mother of my boyfriend is paranoid with me: ‘But you brought this thing into the house... it used to belong to someone’. That has nothing to do with it. Are you going to throw it away? I’ll use it! (...) This [prejudice] is common for older people a bit more. (...) Because I think that with older people, I don’t know... I think people who are older...in there time people used to use second-hand clothes because they didn’t have money to pay, so I think that there is this inheritance, like, ‘but I’ll give you money to go to the store,’ but I don’t want to; I want to go there. I think there’s some of that. It could also be that the clothes aren’t the best possible quality. I think it has to do with these things.”

“Younger people are more open to new possibilities and have less prejudice. The prejudice comes from those who are older. Because it used to be that the thrift clothing store was for those who were poorer because they didn’t have money to buy a new outfit so they went there and bought used clothing. So I think the older folks who were born some time ago still have this in their head and think ‘used clothes, I don’t know; who used it, who passed by there.” Even a friend of mine, her mother will not let her buy thrift store clothes because they don’t know who used them; they carry a negative energy. Some people still think that way. No one I know

of my age has that kind of prejudice. And it seems that they are becoming fashionable because every blogger I see goes to a thrift store or posts something about a thrift store.”

As shown in the statements above, part of the prejudice seems to come not only related to the aforementioned issue of income, but also to the ideas of “contamination” of the clothes—not exactly to the possibility of the articles being dirty, but to be contaminated by the “energy” of the former user of the clothes. As for the cleaning processes, the consumers interviewed have shared that they don’t have any specific rituals of purification and decontamination for the second-hand clothes. Most speak of just a “normal wash” in the washing machine or scrub basin that is done before the articles are stored in their closet. There is even a case of an interviewee who used the clothes without washing them because she wanted to wear the dress on the same day that the purchase was made. However, this consumer acknowledged that this was an exception, and added that she was reprimanded by her father for doing that. While respondents state that, in terms of cleanliness, there is no difference between first and second-hand clothes, the fact that they wash the clothes before putting them away and using them already denotes a difference.

After washing the clothes, they go to the closet and are put away mixed in with the new clothes they bought. There is no separate space for the second-hand clothes that in quantity may even be greater than the number of “new” articles.

Last but not least, a more detailed reflection could be made on the issues of cleanliness, pollution, and contamination. The first observation that can be made is that the second-hand clothing consumers do not seem to be “afraid of” or “disgusted with” these articles or places where they are sold. At first, they don’t show a concern about the possibility of them being contaminated, either by the “energy” of the former owner or by body fluids or diseases present in the clothes. For some respondents this question seems really resolved. For example, for one interviewee, she doesn’t see a problem with using newly arrived clothes from thrift stores even before these are washed. But, dismissing this exception, what

is observed is that these articles must at least be washed before they reach the closets, wardrobes, and dressers, even if it is just a “normal wash”. Once they are cleaned and decontaminated they can be mixed in with the other purchased new clothes. This seems to indicate that the consumers of second-hand merchandise are people for whom this issue is well settled in relation to others who express disgust and fear to wear clothes that once belonged to others and were used by other persons, and usually an unknown person. However, as the topic was explored deeper and more interviews were conducted, it was possible to notice that some respondents had times when the possibility of contamination came to light, even though they tried to demonstrate confidence—and many seemed to really be confident as to the fear of being contaminated. The question of “spiritual pollution” by (bad) “energy” of the former owner was practically nonexistent and is generally considered “nonsense”, but the fear of “bodily contamination” by a disease is more present, but they have decontamination rituals of articles that once done reassure the new owners of these articles.

These issues relating to cleaning and hygiene processes of second-hand clothes made by the respondents reveal a side of what McCracken (2003) calls the release rituals, which means that there is a procedure that “frees” the clothing from their former owners and “prepares” them to be consumed by the new ones. But especially with respect to fear of contamination and the differentiation between “spiritual pollution” and “body pollution”, these questions are dealt with in Douglas’s work (1991) on the notions of pollution and purity. Douglas points out the “relativity of impurity” because, according to the author “what is pure in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another and vice-versa. The language of pollution lends itself to a complex algebra that takes into account the variables of each context.” (DOUGLAS, 1991, p. 21). If the reflections of Mary Douglas are valid, the difference that respondents make between “energy” and “skin disease,” expressions of “spiritual pollution” and of “body pollution”, respectively, come to no avail and their “washing”, whether they are “ordinary washes” or “special

washes”, are purification rituals that reflect the compartmentalization of experiences and of rituals typical of complex societies. Thus, the washing of second-hand clothes on the grounds of hygiene reasons is both a physical action and a symbolic action to “clean” the clothes of their past and insert them into their new condition.

Final Considerations

The bibliography for this research makes clear two types of motivations for the consumption of second-hand clothing. One motivation refers to the objective of saving money when purchasing clothing items, namely, the individual is primarily looking for cheaper articles and these second-hand articles represent in some cases an important part of the total set of clothes he or she has. It should be noted that not always is this objective related to an unfavorable financial situation on the part of the consumer since some second-hand items cannot be considered cheap in absolute terms, but only in relative terms, which is compared to new clothes. The other motivation relates individuals who consume second-hand clothes in search of articles that are unique and that complement their attire. These articles are generally *vintage* or *retro* items that would make a modern, cool look.

The research pointed to the combination of these motivations—price, exclusivity, and quality. The considerations made by consumers about what they value and how much they are willing to pay for “thrift store clothes”, which is how they refer to second-hand clothes, include the relationship between consumers and merchandise, as present in the discussions of Appadurai (2008) about the construction of the value and the concept itself of merchandise. Based on the idea of value, in a clear reference to the work of Georg Simmel, Appadurai (2008, p. 15) affirms that “the value is never an inherent property of objects, but a judgment that people make about it.”

The data presented in this study supports the perspective pointed out by Hansen (1994) concerning the valuation process through which the second-hand clothing underwent beginning in the 1990s. The growing

interest in second-hand clothing was highlighted by consumers surveyed who claim that the *retro* or *vintage* look “is in style,” particularly among young people. This interest is also evident on the business side as we see new thrift stores opening up, especially beginning in the 2000s, in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

It was also found that for most respondents, to know the story of the clothing and have information about their former users was not a relevant issue. What is important for them is the story that they will now build with these clothes; clothes that gain meaning and new significance from the moment that they become part of their personal wardrobe. For the consumers, the clothing does not bring with it nor does it establish a historic relationship with the former owner. The uses that will be made, the combinations with other garments, the occasions when it will be dressed, all this will depend on the appropriations that these new owners will do, which will follow specific cultural logic and serve multiple purposes. The uses made by the former owners are ignored or subverted from the moment that these clothes get into their closets.

The research that originated this article has shed light on the consumption of second-hand clothes and accessories among young people ages 19 to 22 living in Rio de Janeiro. While the focus has been this age group, during the research it was possible to notice that the consumption of this type of clothing is not exclusive to young people. This realization became clear during the field work, particularly with regard to observation work in the different thrift stores visited. There are children’s thrift stores, thrift stores for designer clothes and luxury brands, thrift stores specialized in women’s work clothes (known as “female suits”), *vintage* thrift clothes, and in these thrift stores circulate different consumer profiles. It would be interesting for new research to broaden the scope of the work both with regard to the location, because it is possible to imagine that other cities have different aspects and configurations, as well as about the different economic and social-demographic profiles of the second-hand clothing consumers.

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