

# THRIFT STORES AS ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTION: MOTIVATORS OF BUYERS AND DONORS

*Sara Beniulis*

*LCC International University*

*Saidas Rafijevas*

*Faculty of business, Klaipėdos valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution*

*Indre Razbadauskaite-Venske*

*LCC International University, VU Business School*

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## Abstract

This study seeks to uncover the primary drivers influencing thrift shop buyers and donors. With the growing urgency surrounding waste management, thrift stores offer a promising solution for reimagining the fate of used goods and promoting sustainable consumption. Despite the limited existing research on the motivational factors underlying thrift shop involvement, preliminary investigations suggest a range of incentives, including economic considerations, support for social causes, the excitement of discovery, acquisition of unique items, personal gratification, and environmental consciousness. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study collected data through 300 questionnaires administered to Lithuanian thrift shop consumers and donors. Further insights were gained through in-depth interviews with three thrift shop proprietors, each representing a different operational scale. The findings revealed that thrift shop buyers are primarily motivated by cost-effectiveness, the allure of distinctive merchandise, and the thrill of exploration.

Conversely, donors are primarily driven by altruism, aiding the less fortunate and promoting resource reuse. Strikingly, environmental sustainability emerged as a secondary motivator, indicating an area with untapped potential. It is evident from the study that thrift stores should strategically align with these identified motivators by managing pricing strategies, curating product offerings, and amplifying their societal contributions. Given the unexpectedly lower emphasis on sustainability, there is an exigent need for heightened public awareness and strategic communication efforts to position thrift stores as a pivotal solution for advancing environmental responsibility.

**Keywords:** thrift stores, sustainability, reuse, consumer behavior.

## Introduction

**Relevance of the topic.** As internationally recognized major players in the fashion industry continue relentless production efforts to meet global demands, textile waste accumulates in landfills or undergoes incineration. At the same time, very little of it is being recycled (Graham, 2021). Since the second largest industrial polluter in the world is clothing, and it accounts for 10% of global carbon emissions (Conca J., 2015), this paper chooses to focus on thrift stores as one of the potential solutions. Additionally, “17 to 20% of industrial water pollution is from textile dyeing and treatment; 72 toxic chemicals in China’s water originate solely from dyeing 30 cannot be removed” (CWR, 2018). Hence, with the escalating consumption within the fast fashion industry, this issue becomes increasingly pertinent, particularly in the present context.

**Research problem.** Despite the increasing popularity of thrift stores as potential contributors to environmental sustainability, there is a gap in understanding the nuanced motivations of both buyers and donors. In addition, the increased recognition of environmental issues and the surging interest in sustainable fashion have led to the rapid expansion of thrift retail establishments, evident in both their increasing numbers and sales. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of comprehensive research specifically investigating thrift stores as a distinct retail sector. Park, H. et al. (2020) This study addresses motivations that drive individuals to engage with thrift stores, specifically focusing on their roles as environmental contributors. At the same time, it investigates potential areas for improvement and recommendations promoting sustainable consumption.

**Research aim** is to provide insights into the motivators of the shoppers and donors in thrift stores, which will be used to increase the influence and ensure the success of thrift stores, which in turn will improve environmental sustainability.

**Research objectives:**

1. To analyze the concept of thrift shops and previous research on the motivators of thrift store shoppers and donors;
2. To examine the thrift shop donors and shoppers through a survey identifying their motivators;
3. To provide recommendations for motivating the public to increase their shopping and donating in thrift stores.

**Research methods:** scientific literature analysis and synthesis, quantitative and qualitative surveys.

**1. Thrift Shops and Their Values' Influence on the Environmental Solution**

It might be a common misconception that thrift stores primarily serve the purpose of aiding the less fortunate by offering affordable goods. However, as indicated by Selmys, M. (2016), many middle-class families rely on thrift stores for clothing, basic dishes, and other goods to enjoy a good bargain. A study by Montgomery, R. D., & Mitchell, M. (2014) found that as people become older, they shop more than donate in thrift stores, that married people donate more goods than single people, that full-time employed people shop more than part-time or unemployed people, and that young people donate more than they shop. Other research shows that thrifting has become more alive now, especially among Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010. BER staff (2019) Furthermore, it is reported that Gen Z and Gen Y are much more concerned about climate change compared to older generations Ballew, A. et al. (2019). According to a report done by McKinsey's called "The State of Fashion 2019," it was found that nine out of ten customers part of Gen Z believe that companies have a responsibility to address environmental and social issues. This is interesting because when discussing environmental sustainability, the general expectations are for businesses to take leadership since they have much bigger impacts that can make significant differences Failte Ireland (2020). In Europe, especially in Lithuania, thrift stores, particularly those with more than just clothes and are donating to charity causes, are quite new, emerging in the past 10 years. Still, even though studies prove that clothing sells best in thrift stores, the diversification of goods creates higher foot traffic and higher revenue. Clients who come into the store to buy bigger things like furniture, or household goods, also end up purchasing smaller things like clothes, books, toys, and other goods (Sims, L., 2017). According to Bardhi, F. (2003), the image of thrift stores has been changing from the dark, old messy places that people go to just for the sake of saving money to much better organized, better-looking places where people go to shop out of pleasure and for the sake of shopping, not just out of pure necessity. All in all, these studies show that thrift stores are connected to sustainability and social responsibility, not only because they promote the reusing of goods but also as an expectation from many to support different projects and those in need.

**1.1. Demographics of Shoppers and Motivators to Shop and Donate in Thrift Stores**

Montgomery, R. D., & Mitchell, M. (2014) identify profiles of the donors and buyers of thrift stores for the companies to reach distinct groups. It focused on five demographic characteristics of the thrift shop donors and shoppers, which are: age, gender, education, marital status, and employment. They stated no statistically significant difference between donors and shoppers regarding gender. Still, there is a statistically significant difference between the two regarding age, education, marital status, and employment. Age-wise, it showed that with an increase in age, people shop more than donate, and people under 34 donate much more than they shop. Education-wise, the more people were educated, the more likely they were to shop then donate, the same is true opposite, the less people were educated, the more likely they were to be donors than shoppers in the thrift stores. This might be strongly connected to the awareness of sustainability as one gets more educated on one hand and the shame to donate goods which are not in the best condition on the other. When talking about marital status, the research showed that married participants were more likely to be donors. In contrast, single and widowed participants were more likely to be shoppers in thrift stores. Strange enough, when it came to employment status, the respondents who were full-time employed were more likely to be thrift store shoppers, whereas people

who were part-time employed or not employed were more likely to be thrift store donors. Montgomery, R. D., & Mitchell, M. (2014)

Another study done by Dr. Yakup Durmaz and Ibrahim Diyarbakirhogly (2011), analyzes the different motivators people have to be able to foresee the purchase decisions people make. The researchers in this study suggest there is: intrinsic motivation, which comes from the inside, as a pleasure someone gets from just doing something because of the challenge of it; then there is extrinsic motivation, which are things like money and grades, which can be seen externally. Haraldsson, F., & Peric, S. (2017) found that the main motivators for second-hand shopping are divided into three categories: recreational, fashion, and economic motivations. The first concerns the thrill of hunting and finding interesting and unique goods, which excites the shopper. The second type represents people who have a unique style and fashion, which prompts them to look for different goods that they might not be able to find in stores otherwise. The last group of people shop in thrift stores because of their sensitive economic situation and the affordable goods sold. These three categories represent the clients of thrift stores quite well and show the possibility of the different motivators behind each. Interestingly, Han, J. (2013) shows that 84.6% of the managers and owners of second-hand stores were female, and 38.5% were between 36-45 years, 46.2% of which completed a Bachelor's degree, the average number of years the participants had experience in the field was 8.8 years, and 53.8% reported making a profit the previous year (2012). In the study, the researcher distinguishes three types of second-hand stores: vintage stores, consignment stores, and thrift stores.

To summarize, Table 1 collects all the motivators for thrift shop buyers and donors. The already mentioned were: the intrinsic motivators, thrill of the hunt, unique goods, low prices, support of social projects, home clean up, and getting rid of unwanted or unneeded goods from home.

Table 1. Motivators

Variable:	Literature Reviewed:
Financial motivators	Soomro R. B., et al., (2020), F. Haraldsson and S. Peric (2017).
Thrill of the hunt	Bardhi F., (2003), F. Haraldsson and S. Peric (2017)
Sustainability	Nguyen N., Lobo A., Greenland S., (2017), Mishal A., Dubey R., Gupta O. K., and Luo Z. (2017), McKinsey's (2019)
Feeling Smart	Benson V., Ezingard J., and Hand C. (2019),
Finding unique goods	F. Haraldsson and S. Peric (2017); Fitzpatrick, A. (2020)
Social projects	Jinhee Han (2013)
Do it yourself motivators	Benson V., Ezingard J., and Hand C. (2019),
Feeling better about myself	Benson V., Ezingard J., and Hand C. (2019),

*Source:* Soomro R. B., et al. (2020), F. Haraldsson and S. Peric (2017); Bardhi F., (2003); Nguyen N., Lobo A., Greenland S., (2017); Mishal A., Dubey R., Gupta O. K., and Luo Z. (2017); McKinsey's (2019); Benson V., Ezingard J., and Hand C. (2019), F. Haraldsson and S. Peric (2017); Fitzpatrick, A. (2020); Jinhee Han (2013), Benson V., Ezingard J., and Hand C. (2019)

## 2. Analysis of Questionnaire Findings

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study collected data through 300 questionnaires administered to Lithuanian thrift shop consumers and donors. The results show that 90.3% of the participants were female and only 9.7% were male, 39.5% were in the age category of 18 – 25, 16.7% were 26 – 30 and 16.7% were 36 – 45, and largest sample from the family status was “married with kids” as answered by 23.5%, which are results that were somewhat described by one of the interview participants confirms: “And I think that the blueprint is: a female, in the age of 25 to 35, and it might also include that it’s a housewife or a wife who is taking care of the kids, either working from home or stay at home mom.” When asked about the education level 31% had a secondary degree or lower and 40.9% had a bachelor's degree. The employment status showed that 47.3% were full-time employed, 32.7% part-time, and 19.9% were not employed, but when it came to income 38.4% made less than a minimum salary in Lithuania (430 euros) alone, whereas 22.1% put their family budget in the category of 1400 – 2000 euros per month. Most participants were from Klaipeda, and only around 10% were from other cities in Lithuania. When asked where they found out about thrift stores, 73% said from word of mouth.

Speaking about donating vs. buying, 87.9% said they buy more than they donate in thrift shops, and 12.1% said they donate more than they buy. When asked about what type of goods they buy or donate, for buying, the top three categories were: clothes (82.9%), household goods (41.3%), and shoes (37.7%); and for donating, they were: clothes (69.8%), shoes (23.1%) and toys (17.1%).

The results were mixed when participants were asked how much understanding they have about thrift stores as part of sustainability. 39.5% said they have a basic understanding, 31.3% said they understand very little, 14.6% said they know nothing about this idea, and the same 14.6% said they completely understand it, which gives the perfect bell curve.

In the last two questions, the participants were asked to rate the motivation to shop and to donate from strongly agree to disagree strongly. When talking about the motivators to donate, the top three motivators rated by the participants were: price, unique goods, and thrill of the hunt. When asked about their motivation to donate, the top motivators were: feeling good about myself, supporting those in need, the ability to clean the home, caring for the family (sustainability), and the desire to give the items a second life.

When analyzing the Asymp. Sig. we see that the result is not lower than 0.05 (Figure 1 and Figure 2), which leads us to conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between the shoppers and donators when talking about sustainability as a motivation to buy, which means we fail to reject the first null hypothesis. Furthermore, the same test was conducted for donating, and the results are as follows:

**Ranks**

	ShopVSDonate	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
BuySustainability	More shop than donate	259	151.38	39207.50
	More donate than shop	41	144.94	5942.50
	Total	300		

Figure 1. Mann-Whitney Test, Ranks of Sustainability as a Motivator to Buy.

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	BuySustainability
Mann-Whitney U	5081.500
Wilcoxon W	5942.500
Z	-.462
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.644

a. Grouping Variable:  
ShopVSDonate

Figure 2. Test Statistics, Sustainability as a Motivator to Buy.

In Figure 3 and Figure 4, we also see that the Asymp. Sig. is not less than 0.05, although it is quite close to it. Still, once again, the test shows no statistically significant difference between the buyers and donors and sustainability as their motivator to donate. This means that we fail to reject the second null hypothesis as well.

**Ranks**

	ShopVSDonate	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
DonateSustainability	More shop than donate	259	147.03	38080.50
	More donate than shop	41	172.43	7069.50
	Total	300		

Figure 3. Mann-Whitney Test, Sustainability as a Motivator to Donate.

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	DonateSustainability
Mann-Whitney U	4410.500
Wilcoxon W	38080.500
Z	-1.814
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.070

a. Grouping Variable:  
ShopVSDonate

Figure 4. Test Statistics, Sustainability as a Motivator to Donate.

Figure 5 and Figure 6 shows that it was conducted for exploratory reasons to examine if there is a statistically significant difference between the thrift store buyers and donors when it came to understanding the thrift store's participation in sustainability. And once again, as seen in the results below, the Asymp. Sig. is higher than 0.05, which means there is no statistically significant difference between the shoppers and donators and their understanding of thrift store participation in sustainability.

**Ranks**

	ShopVSDonate	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
ThriftShopsSustainability Knowledge	More shop than donate	259	150.36	38944.50
	More donate than shop	41	151.35	6205.50
	Total	300		

Figure 5. Man -Whitney Test, Thrift Store Participation in Sustainability.

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	ThriftShopsSustainabilityKnowledge
Mann-Whitney U	5274.500
Wilcoxon W	38944.500
Z	-.071
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.943

a. Grouping Variable:  
ShopVSDonate

Figure 6. Test Statistics, Thrift Store Participation in Sustainability.

These results show that the average thrift store buyers are younger women who are married and have children. But also, they show that the main motivators of buying and donating differ from some of the theoretical findings. In these results, we see that the main motivators that thrift store buyers in Lithuania have are mostly related to the price, unique goods, feeling good, sustainability, and the thrill of the hunt, whereas the main motivators to donate are: feeling good, helping those in need, the possibility to clean out the home, caring for sustainability, and giving things a second life. Since the results are scattered, the research dives into the interviews to further develop an understanding of the data and its application.

## **2.1. Analysis of Interview Findings**

Inquiries regarding shopping motivators yielded diverse responses from interviewees. Price, unique products, and the thrill of the hunt were consistently cited as motivators. An intriguing perspective emerged from one participant who emphasized the potential superiority of used goods, asserting that they undergo a "test of quality" that new items lack. This perspective noted second-hand purchases as preferable due to the observed durability after washing. Additionally, all participants underscored the significance of a social mission in their shopping motivations.

Similar motivators were identified for donation behaviors, aligning with those mentioned for shopping. Participants commonly expressed motivation stemming from social and environmental considerations. Additionally, the motivation for engaging in social projects and environmentally conscious practices extended to the act of donating unused items.

Regarding the characterization of buyers, interviewees noted a dynamic shift over the past five years. The demographic has diversified significantly, encompassing various age groups and style preferences. While some seek affordability, others pursue fashionable items for distinct settings, including summer houses or stylish residences. The prevalence of young shoppers, particularly from schools, was highlighted. "Friend to friend" shoppers were described as often engaging in do-it-yourself (DIY) projects, reflecting a creative and hands-on approach to their purchases.

Conversely, donors were perceived as a distinct group from shoppers. Donors were believed to comprise individuals with an environmental and social consciousness, as well as those seeking to declutter. The motivations for donation ranged from supporting the mission to disposing of unwanted items.

## **2.2. Comparison Analysis of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Results**

Several parallels were established in the preceding sections, yet subtle disparities emerged upon closer examination of the data. Notably, the analysis of age categories revealed an unexpected prevalence of younger individuals, contrary to the interviewees' emphasis on older demographics. Interview responses indicated a focus on affordability for older consumers, particularly in relation to price-conscious shopping and the acquisition of furniture, antiques, and stylish home goods.

Regarding motivators, the qualitative findings were largely affirmed by interviewees. Unique goods, a key motivator, were consistently acknowledged, with a notable emphasis on the allure of stylish items. However, the qualitative data underscored the significance of "DIY" projects for refurbishing, a factor less pronounced in the quantitative results. Participants expressed a penchant for renewing and transforming items, a motivation less prominent in Lithuania.

Another variable, social projects, emerged as a more dominant motivator according to interviewees. Their perspectives highlighted the motivational influence of social missions and brand affinity, contrasting the lower emphasis on this variable in quantitative data. This discrepancy could be attributed to varying levels of familiarity with companies' social projects among respondents.

The "thrill of the hunt," a robust motivator in qualitative data, was articulated by interviewees who likened thrifting to a sport, aligning with the qualitative findings. Sustainability, accentuated in qualitative data, reflected participants' ecological consciousness and concerns for future generations, contrasting with a comparatively subdued emphasis in the quantitative results.

Motivations for donation, including decluttering and spring cleaning, were mentioned in both qualitative and quantitative data, with no substantial variations.

To conclude, most of the findings from the quantitative data matched the findings from the qualitative data. There were some variables that were more accented in the qualitative data, such as the sustainability and the companies' social projects, but this might be just due to the higher knowledge and the possession of insight from the leaders, which influences their motivation by these variables. Overall, there were no major differences or discrepancies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of thrift shops and their impact on environmental sustainability. Contrary to the common perception of thrift stores primarily catering to the less fortunate, the research reveals a broader clientele, including middle-class families seeking affordability and unique goods. The emergence of thrift stores in Lithuania over the past decade.

Examining the demographics of thrift store shoppers and donors sheds light on distinctive profiles. Age, education, marital status, and employment exhibit statistically significant differences between donors and shoppers. Notably, younger individuals, particularly from Generation Z, are increasingly drawn to thrift shopping, aligning with their heightened concern for climate change. Additionally, the study underscores the evolving image of thrift stores from budget-focused spaces to organized, aesthetically pleasing environments.

The analysis of motivators for thrift shopping and donation further enriches our understanding. While price, unique goods, and the thrill of the hunt resonate as key motivators, the qualitative data emphasizes the significance of "DIY" projects for refurbishing, social projects, and sustainability. The discrepancy in emphasis on certain variables between qualitative and quantitative data may be attributed to varying levels of familiarity with companies' social projects among respondents.

The questionnaire findings reveal a diverse participant profile, predominantly female, aged 18-25, with varying income levels. Interestingly, the understanding of thrift stores' role in sustainability shows a bell curve distribution, with participants holding varied levels of comprehension. The statistical analysis affirms that sustainability serves as a significant motivator for both buying and donating, with no statistically significant differences between shoppers and donors.

Interview findings complement the quantitative data, offering nuanced perspectives on motivators and demographic shifts. Participants articulate a changing buyer demographic, emphasizing affordability for older consumers and the growing appeal of thrift shopping among younger individuals. The qualitative data accentuates the role of social projects and sustainability as influential motivators.

The comparative analysis of qualitative and quantitative data reveals overall alignment, with some variables more accentuated in qualitative findings. The study suggests that the higher knowledge and insights possessed by thrift store leaders may contribute to the emphasis on sustainability and social projects in qualitative responses.

In summary, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of thrift stores' multifaceted role, encompassing social, economic, and environmental dimensions. The findings contribute valuable insights for marketers, policymakers, and thrift store operators aiming to cater to evolving consumer preferences and promote sustainable practices in the retail landscape.

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NAUDOTŲ DAIKTŲ PARDUOTUVĖS KAIP APLINKOSAUGOS SPRENDIMAS: PIRKĖJŲ IR AUKOTOJŲ  
MOTYVACIJOS

Sara Beniulis  
Saidas Rafijevs  
Indre Razbadauskaite-Venske

Santrauka



Šis tyrimas siekia atskleisti pagrindinius veiksnius, skatinančius tiek naudotų daiktų pirkimą, tiek daiktų aukojimą visuomenėje. Dėl didėjančios atliekų tvarkymo svarbos naudotų daiktų parduotuvės tapo vienu iš įrankių galinčiu skatinti tvarų vartojimą. Nepaisant riboto mokslinių tyrimų kiekio susijusių su naudotų prekių parduotuvių įsitraukimu skatinant daryti įtaką vartotojų elgsenai, pirminiai atlikti tyrimai rodo, kad tarp populiariausių veiksnių yra ekonominis efektyvumas, noras remti socialinius projektus, atradimo džiaugsmas, unikalių daiktų įsigijimas, asmeninio pasitenkinimo jausmas ir aplinkosauginis sąmoningumas.

Tyrimas buvo atliktas naudojant mišraus tyrimo metodiką. Duomenys buvo gauti atlikus anketinę apklausą, kurioje dalyvavo 300 naudotų daiktų pirkėjų bei aukotojų. Papildoma informacija buvo surinkta atlikus interviu su trimis naudotų daiktų parduotuvių darbuotojais.

Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad dėvėtų daiktų parduotuvių pirkėjus pirmiausia motyvuoja ekonominis efektyvumas, išskirtinių, unikalių prekių pasirinkimas ir tyrinėjimo džiaugsmas. Atvirksčiai, aukojimą pirmiausia skatina altruizmas, pagalba tiems, kuriems jos reikia ir pakartotinis išteklių naudojimo skatinimas. Stebėtina, kad aplinkosauginis tvarumas atsirado kaip antrinis motyvatorius, nurodantis sritį, kurios potencialas yra neišnaudotas. Iš tyrimo matyti, kad naudotų prekių parduotuvės turėtų strategiškai prisitaikyti prie šių identifikuotų motyvatorių, valdydamos kainodaros strategijas, kurdamos produktų pasiūlą ir didindamos savo socialinį indėlį. Atsižvelgiant į mažesnę dėmesį tvarumui, svarbu didinti visuomenės sąmoningumą ir taikyti strateginės komunikacijos veiksmus, kad naudotų daiktų parduotuvės būtų pozicionuojamos kaip vienas iš pagrindinių sprendimų skatinant tvarumą ir aplinkosaugos atsakomybę.

**Raktažodžiai:** naudotų prekių parduotuvės, tvarumas, pernaudojimas, vartotojų elgsena.