

# Vintage, the First 40 Years: The Emergence and Persistence of Vintage Style in the United States

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## Abstract

This paper historicizes when wearing vintage clothing first became fashionable in the United States. I trace when the trend emerges in the U.S. and explore various ways the press framed secondhand/vintage clothes and anachronistic dressing. I contend that the emergence of vintage occurs as a form of alternative consumption alongside changes that occurred in the U.S. garment industry such as outsourcing and product licensing. These changes led many consumers to seek more authentic consumption experiences. Consumers with cultural capital found in vintage an alternative market for sourcing fashionable street style. Consumers attribute characteristics to vintage clothing that are typically part of authenticity discourse such as it being of exceptional quality, original, handcrafted, made from natural fibers, and providing continuity with the past. The authenticity of vintage is symbolically deployed in opposition to contemporary mass-produced clothing and standardized retail shopping experiences.

**Keywords:** Vintage, vintage clothing, retro, secondhand clothing, authenticity, fashion trends, garment industry

I'm gonna take your grandpa style  
I'm gonna take your grandpa style.  
No, for real, ask your grandpa,  
Can I have his hand-me-downs?

- Lyrics, "Thrift Shop" by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, 2013

## Introduction

In early 2014, rap duo Macklemore and Ryan Lewis won two Grammys for best rap song and best rap performance for "Thrift Shop," an exuberant celebration of thrift store culture. The music video of "Thrift Shop" features the rapper Macklemore walking through a thrift store, trying different outfits, and receiving accolades for grandpa's style in clubs. This is not the first time thrift stores have been highlighted as a place to get retro clothes at bargain prices. Nor is the song "Thrift Shop" the only cultural expression celebrating secondhand clothing. Contemporary fashion magazines often feature celebrity photos whose dress is captioned "vintage." For example, in the December 2011 *Elle* magazine, actress Jessica Biel models as many garments described as vintage as from a current designer. *Lucky* magazine has a monthly "City Guide" featuring local boutiques – including vintage – from cities around the world. Many cities have vintage-themed events such as *Mad Men* parties, Roaring 20s parties or 80s nights at clubs. Moreover, the ubiquity of street style blogs like "The Sartorialist" have made wearing vintage *de rigeur* for demonstrating sartorial savvy whether one is in London, Manhattan or Tokyo (Woodward 2009).

Fashion usually connotes fast change and up-to-the minute trendiness, yet sporting "retro" by wearing decades-old clothing is "in." In fact, vintage dressing has been fashionable for over 40 years. The aim of this paper is to provide a history of when and how vintage style emerged as a trend in the United States. Previous historical studies on retro/vintage have focused on its emergence in the United Kingdom; there is an absence of a similar history in the United States. Providing a U.S. history of vintage is important given that the country represents an enormous consumer market for both new and secondhand clothing. Moreover, New York and Los Angeles are global centers of fashion and media production – films, television shows and fashion sites create depictions of retro/vintage style that circulate globally. Due to the considerable volume of its media exports, the U.S. has had more opportunities than many other nations to influence global vintage style.

As I trace the rising popularity of vintage style in the U.S., the various ways the popular press framed vintage dressing are described. The emergence of vintage occurs as a form of alternative consumption alongside changes in the garment industry that led many American consumers to seek more "authentic" consumption experiences. Rebranding used clothing as scarce and desirable through the moniker "vintage" is wrapped up in cultural constructions of authenticity and is

symbolically deployed in opposition to mass production and standardized shopping experiences.

## **Anachronistic Dressing, Retro and Vintage**

Scholars employ different terms to describe old clothing with a look that is anachronistic compared to current styles. Angela McRobbie (1988) refers to wearing recognizable decades-old looks as “anachronistic dressing.” This is a useful phrase that I also occasionally employ to highlight when press references to vintage mean wearing used-clothing that noticeably displays iconic styles of the past.

Anachronistic dressing can be achieved with actual antique clothing or with new clothing made to look old. While press references to “retro” could encompass genuinely old garments and new reproductions of old looks, retro usually refers to the latter. Heike Jenss (2005: 179) characterizes retro as, “an all-encompassing catchword” that involves:

...the construction of past images and historical looks which can be achieved with original objects as well as with new ones that look historic. It uses the potential of dress as a cultural signal of time and an important component of cultural memory, historic consciousness and imagery.

The ability of “retro” to encompass both old and new has led some to characterize “retrochic” as inauthentic and messy, blurring clear distinctions between past and present (Samuel 1994).

In a sense, the term “vintage” represents a semantic attempt to claim authenticity for genuinely old clothing and objects, distinguishing them from “retro” reproductions, as well as serving as a marker of distinction from contemporary secondhand clothes. When specifically referring to genuine decades-old clothing, the term “vintage” tends to be preferred in the United States. “Vintage” is a concept that has undergone a shift in meaning when it was applied to clothing. In origin, the term refers to “wine age,” the specific year and place of origin, such as with “Bordeaux wine of a 1965 vintage.” When “vintage” was first applied as a descriptor of clothing in the 1960s, it was employed in a way that suggested new clothing was akin to a particularly good year for grapes, something that must be purchased now as an investment (see analysis below). However, “vintage” quickly morphed into an abstract category describing old clothing generally, and no longer necessarily referred to purchasing new clothes as an investment in the future. DeLong, Heinemann and Reiley (2005: 23) describe the abstract category vintage as follows:

When used to refer to clothing, vintage is differentiated from historical, antique, second-hand, consignment, reused or resale clothing. In clothing, vintage usually involves the recognition of a special type or model, and knowing and appreciating such specifics as year or period when produced or worn. Wearing vintage is primarily about being involved in a change of status and a revaluing of clothing beyond the

original time period or setting, and only secondarily about markets for resale of clothing.

In this study, the American press seemed to use a simpler definition of vintage: clothing that is 20 years old or more, with a recognizable decades-old look.

## Researching Vintage and Retro Style

Previous studies on the emergence of retro style in clothing and household objects have focused on the United Kingdom, and usually, 1960s London (e.g. McRobbie 1988; Samuel 1994; Gregson & Crewe 2003; Baker 2013). According to Raphael Samuel (1994), “retrochic” in fashion appears not long after Britain undergoes retrospective taste shifts for the home. Architectural historic preservation and appreciation of period styles arose in reaction to the stark clean lines of 1950s-1960s modernist home design. Samuel connects British popular taste for eclectic home interiors, vintage clothing and retro aesthetics with the development of “alternative consumerism” that emphasized “natural” products such as organic food and “green” consumer goods. Alternative consumerism arose in the 1960s but gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s. Notes Samuel (1995: 100):

Retrochic in the 1970s and 1980s was one of those fields where enterprise culture came into its own, ministering not only to the tourist trade but also to the ‘alternative’ consumerism of the counter-culture; to teenage ‘outlaw’ fashions (notably punk); and to the new narcissism of health, epitomized by the Body Shop.

Samuel’s reference to retrochic as “outlaw fashion” relates to post-war youth sub-cultures employing anachronistic dress as anti-fashion. Sociologist Fred Davis (1994) and cultural studies scholar Elizabeth Wilson (1985) describe anti-fashion as styles of dress that are explicitly contrary to fashions of the day, worn to symbolize rebellion and signal belonging. Beatniks in secondhand 30s skirts, hippies in Edwardian long coats, punks in ripped and dyed 50s tulle petticoats all sartorially expressed opposition to capitalist materialist values (Polhemus 1994). However, these groups’ subcultural styles operated as spectacle from the perspective of mainstream culture rather than a mode to be emulated.

While part of the allure of vintage dressing is its association as a form of alternative consumption (Gregson, Brooks & Crewe 2001), wearing vintage has lost its explicit anti-fashion meaning. According to Sophie Woodward (2009: 92), “The possession, or the wearing, or [sic] second-hand items along with high street ones, has become a key marker of fashionability, with the emphasis falling upon how the items are sourced, and not just on the look.”

The original association of “retrochic” with anti-fashion and subcultural street style raises questions. When did anachronistic dressing become fashionable, not anti-fashion? Why did it become part of the fashion mainstream known as vintage style? (I employ the term “mainstream” similar to Woodward’s use of “fashiona-

bility” to describe how wearing decades-old clothing has become an accepted street style.) And finally, why has vintage remained popular over many decades?

Angela McRobbie dates the mainstreaming of anachronistic dressing to 1967 London, when “...it was Peter Blake’s sleeve for the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper* album which marked the entrance of anachronistic dressing into the mainstream of the pop and fashion business” (1988:24-25). McRobbie makes the case that young people of the 1970s and 1980s engaged the fashion scene (and ran small businesses in the form of used-clothing stalls) during a recession economy by adopting vintage style. The popularity of “rag markets” like London’s Camden Market or Portobello Road ultimately blurred the boundaries between high fashion and street style (McRobbie 1988).

There are a number of reasons why vintage dressing became accepted street style. Some point to the impact of popular culture in the form of retro-themed films, television and books. German 1960s enthusiasts interviewed by Jenss (2004, 2005) and Australians interviewed by Sarah Baker (2013) describe being influenced by movies from the 1970s and 1980s. Elizaebth Guffey (2006: 14) notes that in France, early 1970s literature and films set in World War Two such as Louis Malle’s *Lacombe Lucien* were described as “la mode retro” and influenced Paris fashion design and street style. In the United States, 1970s films like *American Graffiti*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Annie Hall* and *The China Syndrome* contributed to the popularity of vintage style.

Simon Reynolds (2011) contends that through television, film and the Internet, yesteryear’s images and music have come to dominate popular culture. In the 1970s old television shows returned as re-runs, and films from the 1930s-1950s also became available. Teens and adults listened to music of past decades, sorting through album covers, taking note of the fashion. The Internet greatly multiplied the amount of imagery from the recent past. In fact, past imagery is now more available than ever in human history. In this cultural context, the past – represented by retro – is a key component of *present* popular culture (Reynolds 2011).

Other authors explain the popularity of vintage as relating to the experience of vintage shopping itself. Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe (2003) describe how secondhand shopping – whether at car boot (rummage) sales, charity shops or retro stores – carries an air of spontaneity and discovery. Secondhand shoppers utilize cultural capital to engage in “clever consumerism” as they seek the “diamond in the rough” and to “capture a bargain.” Interviewees shared stories of finds at charity shops or car boot sales deemed valuable for a low price – the bragging rights associated with stories are a powerful incentive to continue secondhand shopping. Fleura Bardhi (2003) also found that thrift shopping is characterized by a “thrill of the hunt.”

Finally, the persistence of vintage style can be attributed to particular meanings vintage consumers have of old clothing in terms of qualities they bring to the wearer. Marilyn DeLong, Barbara Heinemann and Kathryn Reiley (2006) found

that vintage consumers want originality as a way to express individuality or some degree of standing out from the crowd. Moreover, vintage buyers claim that antique garments have superior quality and provide better fit. Marie-Cecile Cervellon, Linsey Carey and Trine Harms (2011: 968) concluded that desire for originality, nostalgic expression, and having an interest in fashion best predicted purchasing vintage clothing in comparison to consumers who purchase contemporary secondhand clothing. Additionally, Tracy Cassidy and Hannah Bennett (2012: 252) found that vintage consumers preferred old clothing because of lifestyle preferences and ethical concerns such as recycling.

Expressing ethical concerns about shopping, having leisure time to hunt for bargains, and knowing how to create unique looks are indicators that vintage consumption requires cultural capital (Franklin 2002; Gregson & Crewe 2003; DeLong, Heinemann & Reiley 2006; Baker 2013). Vintage shopping and dressing necessitates knowing how to mix and match old items with new for a fashionable look (Woodward 2009). It also may require the ability to correctly match garment to time period and distinguish between retro reproductions and “authentic” vintage (Jenss 2005). According to Nicky Gregson, Kate Brooks and Louise Crewe (2001: 5), “[R]etro consumers mobilize ‘the authentic’: as a means of demonstrating individuality, knowingness, knowledgeability and discernment, as an expression of their cultural capital, and as a way of constructing difference from others...”

Vintage enthusiasts – whether retailers or consumers – designate when clothing becomes vintage and desirable rather than dated and out of style. Using Thompson’s rubbish theory, Marcia Morgado (2003) describes how Hawaiian rayon shirts faded from style after the 1950s and were regarded as tacky. As original Hawaiian shirts were discarded, they became rare. Clothing collectors rediscovered Hawaiian shirts as scarce and worth preserving; books were published featuring colorful examples, and the market in Hawaiian shirts took off. The generally accepted standard that vintage clothing is 20 years old or more may be related to the time it takes for a style to pass through the cycle of being characterized as “rubbish” and subsequently being rediscovered by taste-makers with the necessary cultural capital to revalorize it (Gregson & Crewe 2003; Morgado 2003; Baker 2013).

What follows is a description of when and how anachronistic secondhand clothing transforms from rubbish into a new fashionable look known as “vintage style” in American press accounts written between 1950 and 1990.

## Method

A qualitative analysis of American newspaper and magazine articles published between 1950 and 1990 was conducted, tracing the emergence of the vintage trend and how vintage clothing was framed for the American public. The aim of

this study is to specifically account for how the vintage clothing trend emerges as a subset of the secondhand clothing market and how the American press made sense of this sartorial practice.

The analysis begins in 1950 (before anachronistic secondhand clothing is acceptable street wear) and ends in 1989 when vintage style is well established. Newspaper and magazine articles were sought from a combination of on-line research databases and *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. Before 1980 (the year Proquest Newspapers database has consistent full-text holdings), I searched *The New York Times* Archive (on the *New York Times* website), the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* using Proquest Historical Newspapers database. New York City was chosen because it is a global fashion center where many clothing manufacturers were located and corporate fashion headquarters remain. *The Chicago Tribune* represents the Midwest, and *The Los Angeles Times* represented the west coast. *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, an annual index of periodicals, was used to research magazine articles published between 1950 and 1982 (when hard copies of the *Guide* ceased to be published). For articles published from January 1, 1980 to December 31, 1989, the Proquest Newspaper database was also utilized. Both Proquest Newspapers and *The Readers' Guide* included articles from the entire United States. Canadian newspapers from Proquest Newspapers were eliminated from the final results since comparable Canadian data before 1980 was not available.

The following search phrases were used for all databases: “second hand clothing” (389 articles); “second hand clothes” (310 articles); “vintage clothing” (888 articles); and “vintage clothes” (254 articles). There was some degree of overlap between categories within articles; in other words, those that mention “vintage clothing” likely also refer to “vintage clothes.” For example, from 1950 – 1980, I read every article from the *New York Times* archive that specifically referred to “vintage clothing” (10 articles) and “vintage clothes” (16 articles), which totaled 24 articles since two articles appeared in both searches. For the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, I searched under the heading “clothing” for articles with “used” “secondhand” “antique” or “vintage” as a descriptor. By looking at the “clothing” category writ large, I also noted changes occurring within the U.S. clothing industry. Thirty-seven articles published between 1950 and 1989 that pertained to secondhand or vintage clothing were included from the *Readers' Guide*. In total across all databases and the *Readers' Guide*, I evaluated over 1,000 news and magazine items about vintage and secondhand clothing.

The articles specifically referenced below represent longer articles where journalists sought to explain the meaning of secondhand and vintage clothing and/or describe its consumers. News articles not included are those merely quoting individuals who coincidentally were vintage shop owners (such as when a vintage shop owner witnessed a crime), or those reporting vintage clothing sold at flea

markets, antique shows or worn at vintage-themed events where the mention of vintage is quite brief.

In the section that follows, I describe how the meaning of decades-old secondhand clothing shifts from being associated with charity to gaining middle-class acceptability as vintage style.

## **The Emergence of Vintage: An Analysis of Popular Press 1950 – 1989**

### **1950s: Secondhand as Charity**

When factory-made clothing became widely available, wearing used clothing became associated with poverty; those who wore it were regarded with pity as charity recipients (Crane 2000). Apparel that looked dated in comparison to current fashions marked one as being of low social status. This association of used clothing with poverty and charity is how secondhand clothes are generally regarded from the 1890s through the 1950s.

The 1950s United States was relishing its post-war abundance; there was a celebration of all things new in clothing, architecture, interior design and product design (Franklin 2002). Although economic prosperity creates the conditions for used goods to become available in alternative economic markets (such as flea markets, charity shops, etc.), during 1950s America, few wanted the barely-used cast-offs of the growing middle-class.

Correspondingly, 1950s references in newspapers and periodicals to “secondhand” or “used” clothing concerned charity. News items included poor people’s need for used clothing and drives for donated clothes. There were three exceptions to this charity rule. In 1951, the *Times* reported on Paris’s Marché des Puces as a tourist destination where antique furniture, housewares, period garments (described as being purchased for display in designers’ shop windows) and army surplus clothing were sold (Barry 1951). In a *Los Angeles Times* column called “The Lighter Side,” Henry McLemore (1951) playfully describes wearing a favorite antique suit “having been bought from a secondhand store that buys from other secondhand stores,” whose seams threaten to split if he sits down; here wearing old secondhand clothing serves as a joke. The third article from the 1958 *New York Times* reports on a consignment store called “Henri” in Washington, DC that sold secondhand upscale dresses. Notes the reporter, Gloria Emerson, “It is a consignment shop called Henri that bears as much resemblance to an ordinary second-hand store as a Wedgewood cup does to a beer bottle.” The reporter’s characterization draws a sharp distinction between ordinary secondhand shops and the consignment shop, which reveals how secondhand clothing was normally regarded in the 1950s – as on the same cultural level as a “beer bottle.”

Interestingly, in 1957, the use of the phrase “vintage clothes” first appeared in *The Chicago Tribune*. In a fashion feature with sketches and a one-paragraph description, Mary Lou Luther (1957) describes how the latest styles display a 1930s influence based on the Broadway play “Auntie Mame.” The phrase, “The 1930 vintage clothes sketched are at Saks Fifth Avenue” reveals that vintage does not yet mean authentically old clothes. Instead, vintage is used similarly to describing wine from a particular time where the time period – the 1930s – is central. Vintage is not yet a way of abstractly categorizing clothing or style.

### **1960s: From Resale Shops to New Youth Style**

In the 1960s, newspapers and periodicals continued associating used clothing with charity, although some reveal the meaning of secondhand clothing is changing. A 1963 article, “Resale shops are a source of good buys” in the *New York Times*’s “Shop Talk” section associates resale shops with luxury bargain hunting:

A Givenchy suit for \$89, a Dior coat for \$100 and even a vintage but still attractive Norell dress for \$10. Bargains like these can be found on Madison Avenue. Tucked above store level...there flourish a number of emporiums known as resale shops. They eagerly buy the wardrobes of fashionable women who cannot afford to be seen in the same dress too often.

Like the consignment shop Henri, resale shops are presented here as a place where it is acceptable to purchase secondhand clothing. Clear distinctions are made between resale shops and thrift shops through invoking fashion designers’ names. The use of the word “vintage” (to describe the Norell dress) contributes to this distinction. Vintage does not yet connote anachronistic dressing since the article reports how shops refuse dresses more than two years old. “Vintage” denotes something of high quality, indicating that the secondhand clothing of the resale shop is more valuable than ordinary used clothing.

In 1965, Harriet Love opened her well-known vintage clothing shop in New York. In her 1982 guidebook, Love (1982: 1) characterized the mid-1960s vintage fashion scene:

When I began this business in 1965, the only thing that could be said about vintage clothing was that it was old and used and that you had to be a little weird or theatrical to buy it, let alone wear it on days other than Halloween. Today every fashion-conscious woman and man has probably bought at least one old piece and worn it as evening or everyday clothing.

In 1966, the *Times* publishes “Thrift Shops: a Small Boom in Big Bargains.” Here, it is *thrift* stores (rather than resale or consignment shops) portrayed as places to find designer clothes; the article mentions a thrift store where actress Barbra Streisand shops. In comparison to the 1958 article that likened a thrift shop to a beer bottle, the association with designer clothing and celebrity suggests the distinction between thrift shops and consignment/resale shops is blurring. While secondhand clothing is being framed more positively as slightly-dated luxury

clothing for bargain prices, anachronistic dressing is not yet mentioned. But this is about to change.

In January 1967, the meaning of vintage (and secondhand fashion generally) shifts to encompass dressing in decades-old clothing. *New York Times* fashion writer Angela Taylor reported in “Searching the Ragman’s Pack and Finding Fashion”:

It’s not so much beggars who are in rags and tags these days as the most fashion-conscious youths of an affluent generation. They are searching for the oldest garments in the ragman’s pack and coming up with moth-eaten furs, doormens’ uniforms and German Luftwaffe braided jackets....The fancy-dress craze, begun in London last year, branches off in several directions locally. Uniforms—worn like old clothes, with a minimum of alteration – are still in demand, and the more esoteric the better.

Taylor’s article is accompanied by two photos – one of a group photo of five young people, dressed in double-breasted trench coats and hats of various sorts, and one woman decked out in a high-necked Edwardian coat. The second photo is of a couple dressed in 1920s and 30s woolen suits. The clothing is described as “old,” “vintage” and even “laughable.” Taylor’s tone is one of amusement towards this fashion trend and the youth who wear it.

*The New York Times Magazine’s* May 1967 photo shoot “The Style that Was Is,” took a less patronizing tone. Penned by *Times* fashion editor Patricia Peterson, the shoot featured models dressed in floor-length vintage skirts and white cotton dresses (most likely 19<sup>th</sup> century petticoats) purchased from Harriet Love’s stall at the New York flea market. Peterson also refers to London as where such anachronistic dressing began: “When England’s young began swooping down on Portobello Road to buy antique military jackets and delicately handmade Edwardian dresses, and, what’s more, wearing them in public, it marked the beginning of a new fashion era.” Peterson featured retro reproductions and vintage fashion in 1968 with sketches of a collection of blouses dating from the 1880s-1940s, with one Victorian blouse explicitly labeled as “vintage.” Later, in 1969, the *Chicago Tribune* reports on a church flea market with a photo of ladies dressed in “vintage clothing” from the early 1900s on sale at the event. This suggests that the meaning of “vintage clothing” has shifted to now connote a separate category of clothing that is decades old rather than a specific time period such as when the *Chicago Tribune* first used the phrase in 1957.

## **1970s: The Mainstreaming of Vintage Dressing**

### *Early 1970s – Rising Popularity*

*New York Times* fashion editor Patricia Peterson’s 1967 characterization of the popularity of old-clothing styles as “the beginning of a new fashion era” was highly prescient. In the 1970s, anachronistic dressing becomes a clear mainstream fashion trend in press coverage. Angela Taylor reports in 1970 “There’s Some-

thing New at Altman's: Shop that Has Authentic Old Clothes" that the New York department store opened a vintage boutique on its sixth floor. Taylor quips, "One thing that's been missing in department stores is the thrift shop. That breach has been filled by Altman's with a cozy lamp-lighted room on the sixth floor called 'Yesterday's News.'" Two photos accompany the text showing young women dressed in 1930s – 1940s clothing. The article characterizes the garments as "vintage" and "authentically old." The vintage trend seems to have spread across coasts by 1971. Sandra Haggarty (1970) in a *Los Angeles Times*'s column "On Being Black" noted, "Recently I observed some young people shopping in a local second-hand clothing store. As is chic today, they were junkin' to dress themselves as *unlike* the Establishment as possible." While Haggarty refers to junking as anti-Establishment, at the end of the column she observes that the new middle-class popularity of secondhand is leading to higher prices in Los Angeles used-clothing stores.

After 1970, the *New York Times* regularly reported on vintage shop locations around the metropolitan region. Some articles were in the Real Estate section describing particular neighborhoods and their shopping attractions. Other *Times* articles on vintage were part of a regular feature called "Shop Talk" that discussed new stores of interest. For example, a 1973 article by Barbara Delatiner is about Rag Garden, a shop in East Hampton. The owner, Mrs. Frank, describes why vintage is becoming popular.

Mrs. Frank believes that the popularity of her merchandise stems from two factors. "The fabrics are soft and flowing. Sensuous and marvelous to feel," she said. "Maybe the women's lib girls will yell at me, but these old things are so much more feminine. So many of the things, too, are handmade as opposed to the machine-made mass-produced clothes today. And the colors are so vibrant, so alive. I love them." Her customers, most of whom are in the 20s and 30s (the teen-agers buy denim because they can't afford the antiques) are also interested in being different, in dressing uniquely. "It's not nostalgia," she said. "They haven't spent their youth in the thirties and forties and I don't have many fifties pieces here."

In July 1973, *Time Magazine*'s "Rags to riches (really)," described how secondhand Levi's denim jeans, adorned with embroidery, are being sold at "designer prices" by department stores Lord & Taylor and Saks Fifth Avenue. "The highest prices are tagged to genuine used denim tempered by years of wear and spruced up with colorful embroidery. Many of the old jeans are acquired by scrap-clothes dealers and sold to boutiques" (*Time* 1973: 52).

#### *1970s: Peak Vintage?*

As the vintage trend builds, in 1975, Catherine Milinaire and Carol Troy publish *Cheap Chic*, perhaps the first consumer guidebook to thrift store shopping and vintage style. It featured individuals with unique sartorial sense who incorporate thrifted garments into their looks. Milinaire and Troy (1975: 79-80) devoted a chapter to "Antiques: Shopping the Thrift Stores," which they began by saying:

Up until a few years ago, wearing some stranger's old clothes was something only the poorest people did when forced to. Can you imagine your mother buying used clothes, except in an almost-new shop with prices to match? But as everyone is discovering, it feels good to wear expensive clothes, especially when someone else paid for them the first time out....Old clothes give you a sense of continuity with the past – an elegant way of life lived in luxurious fabrics of strict tailoring, a life of fluttering afternoon rituals and evening formalities. Solid old clothes give you a feeling that in this throwaway world there are still some things around that can last ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, or more, and remain beautiful.

By 1977 vintage clothing was so popular in New York that it raises alarms amongst sellers of used clothing. Harriet Shapiro (1977) for the *New York Times* reports, "The capes and camisoles hippies paid dimes and quarters for at Salvation Army sales back in the 60s are now getting gold bullion prices at the best little shops in town." She continues, "Dealers, who tend to be sphinxlike about their sources, also worry about the dwindling supply." In 1978, *Times* business reporter Anne Colamosca reports that the demand for vintage clothing is beginning to outstrip supply. Department stores such as Macy's, Abraham & Straus and Bamberg-er's are getting into the used clothing market to attract the middle-class shoppers who have "fueled the boom." They opened vintage shops that sold 1940s dresses, 1950s clothing, and men's tuxedo shirts. Alberta Wright, owner of a well-known New York vintage shop, Jezebel, is quoted, "There are fewer places to get good [vintage] merchandise all the time...If the department stores begin mass-merchandising secondhand clothes, buying it up in huge lots rather than selecting it individually the way we do now, prices will go sky-high." Concludes Colamosca, "The spiraling prices of used garments have disconcerted those traditional buyers of secondhand clothing, the poor," as charity shops like the Salvation Army hike prices to meet growing demand. Rag dealers in the New York are also quoted, saying their business is at a peak, though some grumble that the vintage shops are their least favorite customers because of their choosiness.

#### *Late 1970s: The Vintage Trend Reaches the Fashion Press*

1970s fears over peak demand and dwindling supply occur *ten years* after the *New York Times* first announced in 1967 that vintage dressing is a year-old trend emanating from London. Remarkably, it is at this point that *fashion magazines* introduced vintage to their audiences. The February 1978 issue of *Seventeen* was first, featuring a photo spread titled "California Girl: Her Fashion Style: Dressing in Antique Clothes" (Aldridge 1978). The article features a modeling contest winner dressed in various antique petticoats-worn-as-dresses, and menswear inspired by the Woody Allen film *Annie Hall* (released in 1977, featuring Diane Keaton costumed in vintage menswear). *Seventeen* included tips for buying, caring for and altering antique garments.

*Vogue* magazine – headquartered in New York City where the vintage trend was first publicized to American audiences in 1967 – finally announces a "Boom in Vintage Clothes" in April 1979. Anne Hollander (1979: 273) somewhat dis-

missively speculates on why “la mode retro” has become popular, citing that perhaps it was the influence of:

...The Great Sixties Costume Party. Included then among possible getups...were clothes that looked as if they had long been imprisoned in the attic, or maybe in the grave....Today what remains from the frantic sixties is a youthful vogue for tired old lace and muslin underwear, which are now worn on the outside for romantically sordid effects – suggesting Bellocq and Brooke Shields.

*Essence*, a monthly magazine for African-American women, followed in November (1979: 89) with an article titled “Retro Dressing:”

For the woman with style and budget in mind, Retro is a natural. The quality fabrics, lines and details of decades past are only to be had today if you can afford couture fashions. But these old treasures are affordable and available everywhere – perhaps in mama’s trunk, grandma’s attic or your local thrift shop. In many cities, boutiques (for all price ranges) are springing up that only carry old and antique clothing.

*Essence*’s “Retro Dressing” shows there was not yet a consensus on how to describe the new style of dressing old. Vintage is referred to within the same piece as “retro dressing,” “antique dressing,” “vintage dressing” and “past perfect dressing.” The *Essence* article has tips for readers on how to wear the new style by mixing and matching vintage and contemporary garments. The women of *Essence* provide personal reasons for wearing vintage, including: affordability; clothing made of natural fibers; being reminded of family members; having a personal signature style; femininity; quality fabrics; and a better cut for one’s figure.

As the tone of Hollander’s *Vogue* introduction to vintage suggests, the elite fashion world did not exactly embrace the vintage trend. Kennedy Fraser, a well-known fashion writer for both *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*, viewed retro as disingenuous in her essay “Retro: A Reprise:”

Clothes came to be worn and seen as an assemblage of thought-out paradoxes, as irony, whimsy or deliberate disguise. Thrift shop dressing carried it all to its ultimate. We took to clothes for which we had spent little money, which didn’t necessarily fit us, and which had belonged in the past in some dead stranger’s life. Behind the bravado of what came to be known as “style,” there may have lurked a fear of being part of our time, of being locked into our own personalities, and of revealing too much about our own lives. (Fraser 1981: 238).

### **1980s: The Establishment and Diffusion of Vintage Style**

Critics like Fraser and Hollander aside, the popularity of vintage grew in the 1980s. In December 1980, *Money Magazine* reports U.S. sales of secondhand clothing were up 100 percent. The *New York Times* shifted to mundane reporting on vintage which suggested that readers already knew what vintage was and merely needed to know where to find it and which decades’ styles were currently fashionable. Mundane reporting consisted of numerous mentions of vintage clothing being sold at flea markets, antique shows and shops, publicizing events where it was worn, and celebrities wearing vintage.

Simultaneously, other publications first introduce vintage to 1980s readers. In 1981 *Mademoiselle* publishes “How to Buy and Care for Antique Whites,” “How to Shop the Secondhand Shops,” and in 1985, “The Zing of Things Past.” Other periodicals publish secondhand shopping guides including the *Boston Globe*, *Ebony*, *People Magazine*, and *50-Plus Magazine*.

A 1982 *Boston Globe* article, “Fashions for the Classes of ’82; What’s Happening in College? A Look That’s Vintage-Chic,” illustrates how popular vintage had become. Julie Hatfield reports that Saks Fifth Avenue’s University Shop in Harvard Square – a store that traditionally sells preppy new clothes to college coeds – is in trouble due to “worn clothes” becoming “de rigeur for college students.” Hatfield notes that the local Salvation Army is doing brisk business with college students, who “buy their old tuxedos, oxford shoes, suspenders, and big old winter coats there.”

That same year *Harriet Love’s Guide to Vintage Chic* is published, and in 1983 Trina Irick-Nauer publishes *First Price Guide to Vintage and Antique Clothes*. According to Morgado (2003) the publishing of guidebooks is a key way that outmoded styles are newly marketed as collectable and no longer are “rubbish.”

#### *Journalists Ask: Why Wear Vintage?*

As newspapers and periodicals introduced vintage style to readers across the United States, reporters sought to explain why the trend was occurring. What is the basis of people’s attraction to this new trend of wearing old clothes? Journalists uncover a variety of answers, implicitly juxtaposing characteristics of old clothing with the new clothing one could purchase in a shopping mall.

Interviewees – both vintage shop owners and their customers – often mention the quality of garments from decades past compared to new clothing. Vintage clothes are characterized as hand-made, with special details like embroidery or lace. They are better constructed, made from “luxurious fabrics of strict tailoring” or of natural fibers as opposed to synthetics, and as having the potential for longer wear than new clothing. For example, *Boston Globe* reporter Julie Hatfield (1985) concludes in “Clothes that Get Better with Age,”

Customers like these are obviously not looking for the savings they make by shopping for used clothes. They want what, in many cases, mass production has denied them at any price: fabrics and workmanship that are the best, and the certainty that you will not meet the very same outfit on scores of other people.

As the above quotation suggests, vintage offers originality and individuality to its wearers. Those interviewed said vintage helps them to stand out rather than blend in, so they can be confident that no one at an event will be wearing the same dress. Notes one 1987 Minneapolis vintage wearer, “I don’t want to blend into the woodwork...I don’t consider myself dressing different [*sic*]. It’s really more an attitude, a way for me to say who I am. I like being recognized for what I wear” (Younger 1987). Comments about vintage clothing as a marker of individuality

anticipate what vintage consumers of the 2000s reported in studies of vintage shoppers (e.g. DeLong, Heinemann & Reiley 2005; Cervellon, Carey & Harms 2011; Cassidy & Bennett 2012). The belief that clothing should reflect one's individuality rather than a style trend is part of a larger cultural discourse of expressing one's "authentic self" through consumption (Gilmore & Pine 2007).

Another common theme for why 1980s vintage consumers buy vintage is value in comparison to the price paid. If one cannot afford contemporary designers, then vintage offers high quality at more affordable prices. One store proprietor points out that vintage garments are an investment because the wearer can sell them again.

Some interviewees in the 1980s still see wearing vintage as a type of anti-fashion statement critiquing conspicuous consumption and the materialism. Notes a student in a 1987 *New York Times* article, "In Schools, Fashion is Whatever is Fresh," "Vintage clothing is hot, but it's just reverse materialism. If you're wearing a \$50 sweater, it wouldn't be as proper as if you're wearing a \$2 sweater."

Similarly, the *Christian Science Monitor*, when introducing the trend to its readers in 1980 sees vintage as a move towards more eco-consciousness. Betty Taylor (1980) observes:

There's something sentimental as well as ecological about the awakened interest here in garments made of vintage fabric....The recycling aspect is a satisfaction to most buyers. Furthermore, buyers realize they couldn't duplicate the handiwork they are getting at anywhere near the price they are paying...

Finally, journalists note that some consumers are attracted to the history materially represented in vintage apparel. For example, Milinaire and Troy (1975: 79) refer to old clothes providing "a sense of continuity with the past." Scholars have characterized nostalgia as a key factor driving vintage purchases, that vintage consumers look fondly on the past (e.g. Lyon & Colquhoun 1999; DeLong, Heinemann & Reiley 2005 Cervellon, Carey & Harms 2011; Cassidy & Bennett 2012). In the press accounts, some vintage clothing aficionados imagined who once wore their clothes. Marc Silver's (1987) praise of old overcoats for *The Washington Post* is exemplary of the nostalgia associated with vintage attire:

There is something reassuring about putting on a coat of a past era. The coat has wooed women and witnessed history. It has a mysterious past that can be imagined but never be known. Did the lapel once boast an "I like Ike" button, or was this an Adlai Stevenson supporter?

In summary, the vintage clothing trend emerged in 1960s London and migrated to New York City, where, over the next two decades it spread across the U.S. In its wake, vintage boutiques opened in many cities, and anachronistic dressing became an acceptable street style. Vintage style remained popular for over forty years as a form of "alternative" consumption, with consumers reportedly appreciating its economic value, quality, originality, ecological ethics and historicity.

What is striking about 1980s explanations for why vintage was becoming a popular alternative to new clothing is that compared to contemporary research on what vintage consumers seek from old clothing, there has been little change. The qualities mentioned by 1980s consumers such as high quality at a low price, originality, eco-consciousness and nostalgia are the same qualities mentioned by those interviewed and/or surveyed by scholars in the 2000s (e.g. DeLong, Heineman & Reiley 2005; Cervellon, Carey & Harms 2011; Cassidy & Bennett 2012). The implications of this parallel are discussed below.

### **Vintage as Authentic Alternative Market to Mass-Produced First-Cycle Market**

According to Gregson and Crewe (2003) new (or first-cycle) and secondhand clothing must be understood relationally rather than as separate markets. This holds true for vintage as a subset of secondhand. The secondhand market is socially constructed as “alternative” to the first-cycle market in a number of ways. Secondhand is seen as removed from contemporary production (Gregson & Crewe 2003: 5). The urban commercial districts where vintage shops and antique stores thrive are symbolically coded as alternative spaces to the mall. Vintage and first-cycle clothing mutually reinforce one another’s appeal. Young people create street styles by mixing vintage and contemporary garments, with their vintage items symbolically defining their style as unique and alternative (Woodward 2009). Reciprocally, current fashionable silhouettes that are “in” influence which decades are also popular in vintage boutiques. The consumer landscape of vintage thus depends on what is occurring in the first-cycle clothing market. Therefore, in order to understand the emergence of the vintage trend and its longevity, it is useful to view it in relation to the consumer landscape of the first-cycle clothing market during the same time period when the vintage trend emerged. The relational dynamic between first-cycle and secondhand market provides a more plausible explanation for the persistence of vintage style than economic changes during the same time period. For example, while the 1970s economic recession witnessed a boom in vintage clothing’s popularity (secondhand sales typically rise in recessions), vintage style also remained trendy during the economic prosperity of the 1980s and 1990s.

I contend that changes in the garment industry produced more homogenized, monotonous shopping experiences, leading some American consumers to explore alternatives that could provide more “authentic” options for dressing fashionably. In the following section, I explain how vintage style becomes part of authenticity discourse because vintage clothing is perceived as distanced from mass production, possessing qualities typically associated with handcrafted material goods and experiences deemed “authentic.”

## Garment Industry Changes 1960s – 1990s

During the 1960s-1990s, the U.S. garment industry became increasingly corporatized, dominated by big industry players. The industry contracted from once having a large number of small companies making ready-to-wear clothing, all staffed by designers who hoped to get good sales from this year's "hot little number" (Vecchio & Riley 1968). The first-cycle clothing market that consumers encountered in the 1950s and early 1960s was more diverse than today in terms of the number of producers and potential styles; starting in the late 1960s, consumers gradually found fewer style choices due a number of changes.

In the late 1960s, garment-industry companies took their stock public and designers began to license their names to products not produced in-house. Clothing corporations sought cheaper labor overseas in order to cut costs and gain wider profit margins for shareholders (Agins 2000; Vecchio & Riley 1968). From the late 1960s onward, the U.S. clothing industry globalized. By the 1980s, the first-cycle clothing market was characterized by a relatively small number of large producers. Moreover, with licensing and outsourcing, quality control became a problem and diminished consumer confidence about whether it is worth paying more for a designer label (Agins 2000). During the 1970s recession economy, an American obsession with bargain hunting arose as consumers learned they could find clothing of similar quality for lower prices at discount retailers (Zukin 2004). Simultaneously, during the 1970s, the market for secondhand and particularly vintage clothing in the U.S. expands to the degree that the *New York Times* reports vintage clothing demand is outstripping supply.

According to Sharon Zukin (2004) standardization and dull shopping experiences become the norm. In the 1980s, corporations develop "lifestyle marketing" where the brand image is emphasized over the product's intrinsic qualities (Klein 2000). This homogenizes every department store's floors into a collection of the same brand boutiques – Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Donna Karen, Nautica, Eileen Fisher. Formerly, consumers could easily see a diversity of styles and comparison-shop in departments like Coats, Dresses and Formalwear (Zukin 2004). This change drains a sense of spontaneity and discovery from the department store experience.

The trend in vintage clothing becomes established during the 1960s – 1980s as U.S. clothing industry changes led to relative standardization of clothing styles, garment quality, and shopping itself. While Cassidy and Bennett (2012) proposed that consumers sought vintage clothing as a reaction to fast fashion of the 1990s, garment industry conditions that homogenized clothing and consumption experiences were present well before. Fast fashion merely accelerated these tendencies, giving consumers with an interest in vintage and secondhand clothing little reason to solely purchase new clothing.

## Vintage Clothing's Authenticity versus Mass Production

In journalists' 1980s quotations of what vintage consumers want, their answers included natural fibers, quality, craftsmanship, uniqueness and the historicity embedded in vintage garments. These qualities are typically invoked in authenticity discourse. Macdonald (2013: 119) characterizes "authenticity" as a "stretchy" term that encompasses many meanings. Objects and experiences deemed authentic are often associated with nature, tradition, heritage, the past, craft, originality, and/or reflecting one's core identity (Jenss 2004; Peterson 2005; Gilmore & Pine 2007; MacDonald 2013). Consumer desire for authenticity is a central feature of what Gilmore and Pine (2007) describe as the "experience economy," where consumers are no longer satisfied with goods and services in and of themselves, but are interested in cultivating compelling experiences and particular symbolic associations through their consumption practices.

Walter Benjamin (1969) describes how during the industrial age, authenticity – in the form of originality – becomes a quality to be prized (Peterson 2005). The ease of endlessly reproducing art through photography leads to loss of aura. Authenticity is thus symbolically constructed in opposition to mass consumption and the market (Peterson 2005; Macdonald 2013). Consumers who seek authentic goods and experiences picture themselves engaging a market separate from standardization and its associated social and labor relations (Macdonald 2013). In fact, this symbolic opposition is so strong that authenticity claims are often used to obscure the industrial processes involved in manufacturing material goods such as when wine-makers emphasize family tradition or grapes from old vines (Peterson 2005: 1084).

Moreover, it is often the qualities of production methods "that make them especially amendable to becoming part of authenticity discourse. What is at work here is a contrasting of different kinds of *things* carrying different kinds of histories and social relations – and an attendant relativity of authenticity" (MacDonald 2013: 124). By attributing authentic qualities to vintage clothing, consumers implicitly draw boundaries between old clothing and mass-manufactured apparel. These boundaries may be based on a false distinction. It is highly likely that when 1970s and 80s consumers celebrated the qualities of vintage clothing that had first been sold between 1940 and 1960, they were actually appreciating design and garment construction from earlier forms of mass production. As Elizabeth Cline (2013) notes, almost all clothing, whether home-sewn or factory-made, is produced by the hands of individuals (usually women) sitting at sewing machines. However, older techniques were more labor intense and geared towards pleasing customers, such as constructing garments that were lined or fitted with darts.

Adrian Franklin (2002) makes the case that when an object is re-cycled as retro (or in this case, "vintage"), it takes on different meanings than what probably led to its initial purchase. Those who first acquire a garment purchase it because its

qualities mark it as novel or “in style.” When an object is revalorized as retro in the secondhand market, Franklin argues it is likely because of its original aesthetic qualities. Attention to design was part of the post-war production process, part of an “aestheticization of everyday life” and a “democratization of art” that characterized the post-war period (Franklin 2002). This echoes anthropologist Lionel Tiger’s (1987: A1) observation that

Industrial societies have exaggerated the pompous and finally fruitless difference between high and low art. We have failed to see that industrial designers are really the folk artists of our civilization. The work they do, which we may possess innocently in our homes, is as vital and reflective of our life and times as the ceremonial treasures we line up on museum walls.

Both Franklin and Tiger are making the case that there are intrinsic qualities about older consumer goods that lead to revalorization. Contemporary retro consumers observe these qualities, and have the cultural capital to recognize the cultural accumulation of meaning in older goods. Notes Franklin (2002: 100), “Retro consumers are experienced in their total immersion in the world of goods and are reflexively interested in them and the contexts of their production. In this sense, retro consumers are tourists consuming a form of cultural heritage.” Moreover, it is vintage consumers who ultimately determine which past looks are revalorized. Jess (2004: 395) observes that the authenticity of vintage clothing is socially constructed by vintage clothing wearers who determine which styles of the past constitute “genuine” looks that sartorially signify a particular decade. This selectivity in regard to which styles represent the fashion of a decade parallels Macdonald’s (2013: 119-120) observation that, “[D]isputes [about authenticity] variously mobilise ideas about origins....which past – and whose – will endure?”

The meanings consumers associate with vintage clothing resemble those of handcrafted or artisanal products. The consumers quoted above often assumed vintage clothing is “handmade,” with a high degree of “integrity” and “craftsmanship” in its construction. Likewise, Susan Terrio (1996: 71) argues that craft products:

...make visible both a particular form of production (linking the conception of a product to its execution) and its attendant social relations...Produced in limited quantities, using traditional methods and/or materials, they evoke uninterrupted continuity with the past.

Vintage appears to be “craft,” displayed in today’s boutiques in small quantities and thus implying they were limited in production. Today’s vintage dress seems unique rather than standardized because the garment’s copies that once hung next to it on a store rack are long gone.

Moreover, vintage clothing carries an “aura of pastness” (Samuel 1994) that evokes a sense of historical continuity. This is most clear in consumers’ quotations that imagine the previous lives of their vintage garments. It is also present in accounts by those who describe vintage clothing as higher quality because current

apparel is not made in the same way or from the same type of fabric. This “nostalgia” associated with vintage clothing includes different meanings that can encompass both idealizations of the past as well as justifiable appreciation of qualities from yesterday’s production methods (Pickering & Keightley 2006). Material objects such as vintage clothing symbolically become part of a “timescape of authenticity” (Grasseni 2005), embedded with history, which allows consumers to imbue them with aura and value and wear them with a sense of distinction.

Since the late 1960s, the first-cycle clothing market in the U.S. has offered less to consumers in terms of style diversity, garment quality and an engaging shopping experience. Thus consumers with cultural capital found in vintage an alternative market and source of fashionable street style. Authentic characteristics are attributed to vintage such as it being of exceptional quality, handcrafted, made from natural fibers, providing continuity with the past and being unique. Thus, categorizing clothing as “vintage” symbolically marks it with authenticity, distinguishing it from both the larger secondhand market and the first-cycle market that features new clothes with retro looks. Revalorizing secondhand clothing as rare, authentic and desirable through the category “vintage” is symbolically deployed to mark boundaries between vintage and today’s mass-produced goods.

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