



From the Mexican *tianguis* to Instagram: Second-Hand Markets in Puebla-Tlaxcala

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ABSTRACT

The following paper aims to discuss the current dynamics of the second-hand market in the Mexican region of Puebla-Tlaxcala. Through this anthropological research, we have followed garments from the *tianguis* (open-air markets) to consumer-to-consumer eCommerce on social media. We propose an accidental ethnography to analyse the market in which we have interacted as consumers and retailers in recent years. The set market is sometimes perceived as controversial due to its illegality and informality. The importation of *ropa de paca* (bales of second-hand clothes) from the United States, or elsewhere, is currently banned by Mexican authorities. This ban has not stopped the smuggling of clothing into the country, and once the garments arrive, they are distributed into the local markets to be sold. Our paper will describe and analyse the complexities of the second-hand clothing market in order to expose the different ways in which Mexican families interact with and depend on it. Rather than looking at the cross-border relations of this market, we propose to understand the circulation and consumption of used clothes once they have reached the *tianguis* and the consumers. Finally, our research will also outline problems arising within the market such as stigma and de-stigmatisation, overconsumption and gentrification.

KEYWORDS

second-hand markets, Mexico, gentrification, eCommerce, accidental ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing trend towards finding more sustainable alternatives within fashion

in recent years, as consumers have become increasingly concerned about the adverse effects our clothes have on the environment (Hoskins, 2014 and Šajn, 2019). There has also been growing criticism of how the garment industry produces garments, such as the speed of production and use of unsustainable materials, the violation of textile workers' rights, and the poor quality and durability of the clothes (Hoskins, 2014). For these reasons, consumers worldwide have become increasingly interested in buying second-hand clothes; according to ThredUp's report (2021), the market is expected to double in five years. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has positively impacted the market and consumers' perceptions of 'pre-loved clothes' (Reference needed). As well as in other parts of the world, consumers' perception of second-hand clothes in Mexico has also changed, thanks significantly to two main factors, social media and the COVID-19 pandemic, yet these changes remain poorly understood. This research focuses on Mexican consumers in the central area of Puebla-Tlaxcala, in order to explore. The consumers we have focused on are on young women, mainly in their twenties, who have found in '*la paca*' a place to find different types of clothing and entertainment. In this region, there has been a clearly observable increase in the number of Instagram profiles selling second-hand clothes, which could be those of the account owners, other people's preloved garments, or items bought in the flea markets.

Second-hand clothes markets in Mexico are fascinating as they reveal the complex interconnections of local and global markets. The political and economic situation in Mexico highlights several problems and inequalities experienced in the Global South, such as border security, stigma, and American overconsumption (Hansen 1999; Sandoval-Hernández 2012; 2019; Nast 2022). Looking into the processes of commercialisation, from the *tianguis*¹ to e-commerce through social media, this article will demonstrate the complexities and realities of merchants, entrepreneurs, and consumers who see an economic opportunity in the *paca*, as well as a sustainable alternative to the current means of production within the capitalist system.

This study aims to understand the complex circulation process in which second-hand clothes are disposed of, sold, resold, and finally consumed in the Mexican region of Puebla-Tlaxcala. Through this ethnographic research, it has been possible to observe many more factors involved in the aforementioned market beyond sustainable consumption. While the current market seems to be a sustainable alternative, nevertheless, it has also been shown that new problems have arisen, such as overconsumption and the gentrification of second-hand. In

1 For the purpose of this essay, we will use the local words to describe the markets and the products. Therefore, it is important to familiarise the reader with the local vocabulary: first, *tianguis* is the word used to describe large, open-air markets in Mexico which not only sell second-hand clothes but many other products; second, *ropa de paca/la paca* is the term for second-hand clothes sold in the *tianguis*, which usually come from the United States in large, compressed packages, or bales.

recent years, consumers with greater purchasing power have had a growing interest in the *tianguis*, and the merchants are aware of this. Therefore, there has been a considerable increase in prices. Initially, the *pacas* were an accessible means of dress for low-income families (Hill 2009; Sandoval-Hernández 2015), but now, many of the garments found in the markets have now doubled in price for a group of consumers with higher purchasing power. As our research will go on to show, when resold online, some products even tripled in price, sometimes becoming more expensive than new clothes.

Trade and circulation of second-hand clothes across the Mexican-American Border

The buying and selling of second-hand clothes in Mexico has been prevalent since the 1960s and 1970s (Sandoval-Hernández 2015), especially among the working classes. Nevertheless, this commerce has increased in recent years, both through traditional means and social media (Coolhuntermx, 2022; El Financiero, 2022). This section will briefly outline how the second-hand market has established itself among Mexican families in the last six decades. Understanding how this market has been established will help to identify how these garments' popularisation and eventual gentrification are modifying second-hand consumption practices. Traditionally, low-income families have relied on the second-hand market for affordable clothing. However, in recent years, prices have increased considerably, and now, the most accessible items for lower-income families are the ones with lowest quality. The overconsumption of hyper-fast fashion and online retail has also affected the market, resulting in more poor-quality clothes discarded into American thrift stores, and affecting the *paca* quality in Mexico. Users on social media have complained about finding low-quality clothes from ultra fast-fashion companies.

According to the social anthropologist Sandoval-Hernández (2015), second-hand clothes markets in Mexico began to emerge in the 1960s. This phenomenon has been relevant to the study of the Mexican-American border, as Mexico has been the principal recipient of American overconsumption, with American used clothes being smuggled into the country (Hill 2009, Sandoval-Hernández, 2018). As Sara Hill (2009) argues, the Mexican-American border has a significant role in the American way of consuming. Such business has been an essential aspect of Mexico's informal economy. Cross-border second-hand markets began with small merchants who crossed the border to buy *fayuca*, or smuggled goods, to resell in different cities across Mexico (although mainly in the border cities).

The prevailing existing literature on second-hand clothes in Mexico analyses the cross-border relations between Mexico and the United States at two prominent border crossings, Reynosa-Laredo (Sandoval-Hernández, 2015) and Ciudad Juárez-El Paso (Gauthier 2007, Hill 2009). Between the 1970s and 1990s, there were small changes in how these markets

operated. However, this was an important period for creating unions among *fayuqueros*, or smuggled goods dealers, and the involvement of such unions in Mexican politics (eg Sandoval-Hernández 2012, 2015; Hernández & Loureiro, 2017). The most relevant literature (Guathier, 2007; Hill, 2009; Sandoval-Hernández, 2015) on cross-border relations between Mexico and the United States agrees that these interactions were highly modified due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 (Sandoval-Hernández, 2015). The signing of NAFTA in 1994 did not prevent the smuggling of these products. Nevertheless, it did mean that merchants now had to pay bribes to more and different actors on both sides of the border, in order to continue smuggling such products. The 1990s signalled a significant turning point for policies around the clothing trade, including the second-hand market, with a new ban on imports of second-hand clothes in Mexico from the United States and elsewhere. Hansen (1999, p. 347) remarks how this was a decade of change for the industry around the world:

Although the trade in second-hand clothing has a long history (Ginsburg, 1980), its economic power and global scope were never as vast as they have been since the early 1990s in the wake of the liberalisation of many Third World economies and following the sudden rise in demand from former Eastern bloc countries.

As Gauthier (2007) explains, the 'ant trade' of second-hand clothes into Mexico was never regulated until the 1990s. Such regulation was brought in due to the Mexican textile industry lobbying to end the unregulated importing of second-hand clothes into the country. Examining the historical context in which the Mexican government and local industry regulated the use of second-hand clothes helps us understand when second-hand clothes became a 'problem' from a Foucauldian point of view. Bacchi's post-structural approach aims to understand how a social issue—the 'ant trade' of second-hand clothes—was understood, portrayed and approached through governing via policies. Further, this 'problematization' is not only relevant for how we are governed, but also, how such discourses—in the form of policies—have a direct impact in our lived experiences: "'objects' [...] are central to how we are governed because they have all sorts of effects on the way we live our lives—both directly and indirectly, through the norms they install" (Bacchi 2012, p. 2).

Since the 1990s, there have been two main justifications proffered for the regulation of the second-hand garment trade: firstly, the need to shield the local textile industry, which had already been affected by the importation of cheaper fabrics and garments produced in China, using protectionist policies; and secondly, phytosanitary concerns about the possible transmission of various diseases (COFEPRIS, 2011; Novedades Yucatán, 2021). Regarding the latter, in 2011, the Federal Commission for the Protection against Sanitary Risks (COFEPRIS) warned about the possible risk of transmission of fungus and bacteria through second-hand clothes. However, it noted that no scientific studies had proven the existence of such risks

with second-hand clothes in Mexico. The epidemiologist Pérez Santiago (Comisión de Salud y Asistencia Social, 2011) noted that the problem is not a problem with the clothes themselves, but with the habit of failing to wash recently acquired clothes before wearing them. According to our autoethnographic experience, second-hand clothes users recommend that both new and used clothes should always be washed before being worn. Yet concerns about contamination from second-hand clothing persist, contributing to regulation and continued stigma around this market (Brooks, 2019; Klepp 2007; Silva et al. 2021).

Another significant aspect of the commercialisation of these products in Latin America is related to security issues and border control. Minor changes occurred throughout the 1970s, but the 1994 NAFTA treaty reshaped how goods were sold, transported, and resold in Mexico (Hillberry and McDaniel, 2002). What is more, in 2006, the former Mexican president Felipe Calderón Hinojosa began the Mexican Drug war. This conflict has significantly impacted safety and security issues with the second-hand market in Mexico (Weinberg 2008). According to Sandoval-Hernández's research (2012), since the beginning of this war, the drug cartels have taken control of illegal commerce at the border, including the trade in second-hand clothes. As a result, there has been an increase in violence at the border and merchants are forced to pay "taxes"² to the cartels. Sandoval-Hernández (2015, p. 12) points out this very clearly about his informant Carmelo, a 'fayuquero';

Carmelo saw how his *compadre* was being extorsionated by the drugdealers, it was clear for him, that, in order to continue as a merchant, he had to agree with them, and moreover, he witnessed the violence practiced against those who resist the submission to the new order. There were murders, disappearances. All this made Carmelo to stop selling second-hand clothes in 2008 and went back to construction. Carmelo affirms that, at least until last year, if someone wanted to pass merchandise, there was no other alternative than to work with "the bad ones".

Like Carmelo, many have decided to abandon the business and look for alternative means of subsistence (Sandoval-Hernández 2015, p. 12). Sandoval-Hernández's research (2015) has also pointed out that the compressed packages of clothes are being used by the drug cartels to smuggle weapons into Mexico.

As can be seen, there are significant complexities to the second-hand clothes market in Mexico. Such issues also denote a change in the understanding of the political implications

² Through our experience in fieldwork, it has been very common to hear cases of shooting across different markets due to fights among members of organised crime. Such was the case in July 2019 where two men were executed at the Chiautempan *tianguis* (Infobae 2019).

of US-Mexican trade across the border, both legal and illegal. Our research examines the dynamics that occur once the merchandise has crossed the border and how users in central Mexico consume and interact with garments. To do this, we have undertaken an ethnographic approach to a particular area in Mexico: Puebla-Tlaxcala. The presence of new consumers of second-hand clothes in local markets in Puebla-Tlaxcala, and the digital dynamics of e-commerce on social media, suggests consumption of second-hand clothes has become a sustainable alternative for consumers of higher purchasing power. Such popularity has increased the demand for products at the border. This demand has both positive effects, like the de-stigmatisation of thrift shopping, and negative effects, such as price increases for lower-income families. In addition, our methodology has allowed us to reach out to sellers, resellers, and consumers directly, to hear their experiences and views. These methods enable us to explore the social meanings and connections between local and global markets across the *tianguis*, bazaars, and the use of social media such as Instagram and TikTok.

ACCIDENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY AS CONSUMERS OF SECOND-HAND CLOTHES

The proposed research began from our interest as consumers of second-hand clothes and our empirical observations of the growing phenomenon of second-hand shopping in Mexico. Our research is based on autoethnographic research carried out in different markets across Puebla-Tlaxcala and digital ethnography on social media platforms. Through participant observation, we can access the second-hand markets' social meanings for merchants, resellers, and consumers. As consumers, we have visited and shopped in the markets, selected different garments, talked to other users, and been digitally active on social media. After several years of shopping for second-hand clothes, the co-writer of this article, Diana, has used Instagram to sell her old garments and resell items from the *paca*. In the following section, we will explain the rationale for this research and the steps that have allowed us to analyse changes in the current thrifting trade in Puebla-Tlaxcala.

As consumers of second-hand clothes, we have noticed the drastic de-stigmatisation of the market over recent years, which has driven us to analyse the thrifting trade from an anthropological perspective. When we started to attend the *tianguis* in 2018, we realised that the markets were an excellent alternative for finding cheap and good quality garments, and an exciting alternative to fast fashion and its production system. Later, Diana became increasingly involved in the market, and realised she could make extra money as a college student if she started her own business on Instagram. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we realised we were doing what Fujii (2014) calls an accidental ethnography, where researchers find revelations in the quotidian and the mundane of their everyday lives. We started reflecting on our personal experiences, conversations with merchants,

consumers, our own families and friends, as well as looking into our notes and photographs from fieldwork. From our conversations, which began as brief, informal interviews with each other, we began to analyse our experiences in order to gather data, after which we returned to the field to gather more information in a more structured way, following Levitan's approach (2020).

Levitan (2020, p. 340) talks about finding data when not searching for it. Therefore, accidental ethnography is based on:

[...] the principle that important research is often "accidental"—but not anecdotal or journalistic. Simply because a research project did not begin with the usual prerequisites, the findings and lessons from deep, reflective, and systematic analysis of data can still be a legitimate, vital contribution to knowledge for the organisation, for other practitioners, and theory.

Following this type of research, we followed the following proposed steps, in order to reorganise the data collected through our personal experience as consumers, and in the case of Diana, resellers, of second-hand clothes. The said steps are 1) initiation, 2) reflection, 3) re-examination, 4) collecting data, 5) coding, and 6) recursive consultation. These steps will be outlined in the following section.

The initial step involves what Trigger (2012) and Fujii (2014) call a revelatory moment. This moment was first experienced at the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic when we decided to co-write an interview about our experiences as consumers of second-hand clothes. We realised that we had something to contribute to the conversation about thrifting. The second step proposed by Levitan (2020) is reflection. During this step, we read more about the topic and sought to understand the complexities of the market, where we identified three key aspects we wanted to pursue: motives, stigma and overconsumption. At this stage, we realised the contradictory nature of the market and its surrounding ideas of sustainability. Thereafter, we began to re-examine our empirical data through a literature review on the topic, which showed that the popularity of second-hand clothes was growing worldwide, and the problems we noted were similar across the Global South. We collected data from our notes, conversations, interviews, previous fieldwork, Instagram accounts, and photos with our phones and cameras. The data analysis allowed us to reorganise previous conversations, but we also went back to the field with more structured, focused ideas and questions. In conversation with informants, we asked them about how they approached second-hand clothes, who inspired them to find alternative sources of garments, and what their first thoughts were about moving into the second-hand market. Based on our most recent fieldwork experiences, we carried out more interviews and gathered more visual

records, which allowed us to reflect carefully on the experiences of thrifting. We coded our experience, following the fifth step, by identifying vital information in our interviews, conversations, and interactions.

The final stage was to gather and organise that information, in order to present it at a conference. At the conference, we also learned about the global context of second-hand markets, and in particular, how the Global South is being negatively affected by overconsumption in the Global North (Hill 2004, Hansen, 2004). Finally, this paper is a deeper reflection on what we first presented at the virtual symposium 'Second-hand Cultures in Unsettled Times' in June 2021, organised by Cardiff University (Mondragón-Toledo and Morales 2021).

Self-exploration and hedonistic adventure

In 2016, Diana was an undergraduate student, and her college friend invited her to the San Bartolo *tianguis* in Puebla City, which was her first encounter with second-hand clothes. Being a college student usually means being very short on money and unable to afford goods, including clothes. On this first trip to the *tianguis*, Diana did not know what to expect, but her friend guided her through the market, which was filled with hundreds of stalls of clothes observable in Figures 1 and 2. They explored the market and found fascinating pieces, such as a green hoodie from Abercrombie and an old blazer. She realised that the market had more accessible clothes than the malls and that the search was enjoyable. She would find 'treasures' once in a while, after she transitioned from buying new and expensive clothes in the malls to buying second-hand and cheaper clothes.

When you first arrive at the market, you can see different stalls with all sorts of items in outdoor areas. The merchants set up their stalls and place them according to the quality of the garments. The stalls are long tables or pieces of wood that contain huge piles of disorganised clothes. The clothes are usually organised early in the morning, but the buyers disorganise them in the search for items. These clothes are organised according to their prices, which are set by the quality of the product. The *tianguis* are organised so that some sellers might only sell hoodies, others only blouses, or another might only sell jeans. Regardless of their type of garment, most of the sellers belong to the same group of people, as family businesses. Nevertheless, it is also possible to find new people starting a business, selling cheaper but good quality items starting from 5 MXN. More established businesses sell garments from 20 MXN (1 USD).



FIGURE 1 Shoppers at the *tianguis*. Photograph by authors.

People who visit these markets have identified techniques to find 'treasures'. Among the piles of clothing, you can find all sorts of clothes: from old and recent American presidential campaign items, to damaged clothes that cannot be worn again, vintage clothes from the 80s, renowned and desired American brands like GAP, Nike, Abercrombie and Aeropostale, or fast-fashion clothes from Inditex and H&M. Once in a while, you can also find designer clothes. For example, one Twitter user shared that she found a pink nightgown from Dior. Finding extraordinary and unique pieces drives many people into second-hand clothes, referred to as 'treasure hunting' for hedonistic reasons (Roux and Guiot 2008). Visiting the market and exploring the stalls becomes a recreational activity that requires specific techniques and strategies.

Most consumers arrive at the markets with tote bags or backpacks to carry their purchases, although most stalls offer plastic bags. People who attend these markets wander around the market trying to identify the best prices. They look for as many clothes as they can and finally choose the ones they will buy. As some studies have noted, one of the principal reasons to buy second-hand clothes is the economic value of the items (Laitala and Klepp 2018; Roux and Guiot 2008). In order to find the best deals, those of us who visit these markets have developed different strategies to buy better quality items for the best price. To begin with, we try to identify the stalls with lower prices, and then we try to find clothes of the best quality. Following that, we visit other stalls with higher prices and decide which ones are worth buying and which are not. Sometimes, it is possible to negotiate with the seller, and

get clothes at a lower price if you buy more than three items at one stall.



FIGURE 2 More shoppers examining shoes in the *tianguis*. Photograph by authors.

Xu (2014) has referred to thrift buying as a creative alternative, which allows people to create their own unique styles. Second-hand clothes allow people to find unique pieces and play with their style. In the case of Diana, approaching the *tianguis* has allowed her to identify what fits her, what kind of clothes she likes, and what style suits her best. Buying clothing from various periods and of various styles allows consumers to find a style outside the mainstream dictates of fashion that is available at the mall. However, finding one's style necessitates fighting the stigma associated with second-hand clothes.

Questioning stigma and the rationale against second-hand clothes

Mary Douglas (2015) is the central referent when discussing dirt, and how dirt must be understood according to the context in which the object is being discussed. She argues that

our perceptions of pollution are built upon dichotomies around purity-impurity and order-disorder. Therefore, new clothes are usually considered 'pure', since no one has worn them (except for the dozen customers that try them on in the shop before someone finally buys them). They are, therefore, considered safe. On the other hand, there is an idea of 'impurity' associated with second-hand clothes, which are seen as polluted and dangerous. Ditlevsen and Anderson (2021, p. 182) expand on Douglas's understanding of dirt by looking at food consumption in contemporary societies, where 'our idea of dirt is dominated by the shared knowledge of pathogenic organisms and bacterial transmissions'. In the context of our research, public perceptions of dirt are directly connected to the current legislation in Mexico around hygiene and phytosanitary risks from used clothes. Such concerns over dirt and disease also appear in the wider literature regarding consumers' concerns over used items (Edbring 2016; Bardhi and Eckhard 2012).

Yet when we became interested in second-hand clothing, we realised hygiene was not consumers' only concern regarding *la paca*. There was also a concern around class and how the market is divided by purchasing power (Klepp 2007). Rather than a concern about dirt, this is an issue of social embarrassment. Claudio Lomnitz-Adler (2001, p. 118) argues that this form of distribution and recycling of second-hand clothes makes Mexican society feel invaded by a sense of 'second classness'. Laitala and Klepp (2018) note the social and reputation factor involved in the purchase of second-hand clothes. A concern for reputation also stops people from buying used garments, as consumers see them as symbols of lower socioeconomic status.

Nevertheless, the concern around social matters such as status runs both ways, as Laitala and Klepp (2018) discuss. Purchasing second-hand clothes also allows consumers to identify as socially and environmentally responsible, and to have a sense of uniqueness. The growing popularity of second-hand clothes and items has also become popular among online luxury retailers (Turunen & Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2015). Nevertheless, a second-hand Hermès or Chanel bag buyer rarely confesses the item was bought in a second-hand retailer (unless it is vintage).

The fear of not knowing where second-hand clothes come from is also a driver of moral panic. 'Obroni Wawu' is how second-hand clothes are known in Ghana, which translates to 'dead white man's clothes' (Nast, 2021). These clothes arrive in African nations from European countries in the same manner as second-hand clothes from the United States arrive into Mexico and Central America. In Mexico, there is a similar 'urban legend', which holds that clothes from the *paca* once belonged to now-dead Americans. Across fieldwork, we have encountered this myth among both purchasers of second-hand clothes, and those

who would never wear them. While according to some research, the main reasons people do not buy second-hand clothes are the fear of dirt (Silva, 2021), and social embarrassment (Laitala and Kepp, 2018), the fieldwork in Mexico adds to this the superstitious aspect. Many people who refuse to wear second-hand clothes in Mexico have mentioned their concerns that the clothes might come with 'bad vibes' or 'bad luck' from the previous user. Such is the case of informants who said they would not wear a second-hand or rented wedding dress, for fear of bad luck in their marriage.

Ecommerce of second-hand clothes: an extra source of income for young women

The second-hand clothes market is a very dynamic and complex one. The current illegal state in which this market operates does not allow us to fully quantitatively measure the reach it has into everyday Mexican life, or the outcomes it produces. Nevertheless, through ethnographic research, we are able to approach its users and sellers to understand the complexities underpinning these forms of trade and consumption. As previously mentioned, our first interaction with second-hand clothes was when we were college students, which is the case with many of the other people we have met in the *tianguis* and selling clothes online. Mexican college students often have very limited access to goods and services; therefore, there is a need to find cheaper and more accessible alternatives. That was how we became consumers, but Diana also saw an opportunity to set up a business that could give her some extra income. Her journey began when she started selling clothes from her old wardrobe, which was filled with things she had not used for a long time but that were in excellent condition. Later, she noticed that others were reselling items bought at the *tianguis*, and this was what kept their Instagram profiles updated.

Diana was not the only one; thousands of young women in Mexico between the ages of 20 and 26 have used selling products online as an alternative way to make extra income (Chilango, 2021). This form of trading allows customers to buy articles directly from other users instead of from a retailer. As Saarijärvi (2018) mentions, consumer-to-consumer eCommerce is reshaping the understanding and dynamics of retail and shopping. These interactions occur on social media and have been categorised in two categories: auction-based or fixed prices (Saarijärvi 2018). However, in the case of Puebla-Tlaxcala, we have also found bartering to be a strategy by which second-hand clothes are exchanged. Getting involved in this form of retail brings joy to young women. However, it is not easy, as many have to juggle running their eCommerce business, having an official job, attending college, and doing care work.

What Susan Strasser (1999) recalls as 'object stewardship' is one of the main aspects differentiating the labour of Instagram resellers and sellers at the *tianguis*. Selling on social

media is all about repairing the object to be nicely presented. Running an Instagram account of second-hand clothes is not an easy job, as it requires about 8-10 hours of labour per week. The items from these accounts might come from the seller's wardrobe or the *tianguis*; whatever the origin of the clothes, different levels of stewardship are required depending on the garment. As Hill (2009) notes, waste from the US is sent to Mexico, and becomes an object of consumption, which needs to be carefully preserved, recovered, renewed and repaired. This process is what Lomnitz-Adler (2001) calls 'Mexican recycling'; "as a treasured index of *mexicanidad*: Mexicans are resourceful, and Mexico's organic aesthetic makes creative use of items whose original use has expired" (Hill 2016, p. 316). This ethos of 'Mexican recycling' applies to the online resellers we researched.



FIGURE 3 Clothes in the *tianguis*. Photograph by authors.

The labour of reselling involves attending the market on the days they are set up (Mondays or Sundays), spending some hours searching among the piles of clothes, choosing the right

pieces that match with the seller's Instagram style, bringing them home to be washed, mended, repaired and ironed. There are a small but growing number cases of people who curate the pieces with artistic embroidery or hand-painted designs. Then, there is the process of styling and photographing the object, posting it on social media and waiting for people to buy it.

Whether the exchange is by way of fixed-price or auction-based, this happens mainly through Instagram, whereas the bartering mainly occurs through Facebook groups. Regardless of the platform, most of these exchanges are conducted through cash or the exchange of objects. Bank transfers are unusual. Therefore, most of this form of eCommerce remains part of the Mexican informal market. In order to finish the transaction, the interested parties meet in a specific area of the city, established by the seller. This shows us that these forms of exchange remain local, and the items are rarely shipped outside the cities of Puebla and Tlaxcala. Due to the high rates of insecurity in Mexico, there is a mistrust in consumer-to-consumer trade; there is fear of scams, theft, or kidnapping, and both parties usually attend accompanied, or meet inside established local venues like coffee shops, restaurants or malls. From Diana's point of view, problems like gentrification, overconsumption, and excessive price have pushed her away from this type of business, as these issues take away the joy that 'treasure hunting' brings her.

Findings: problematics and debates

It is important to note that the prices of second-hand clothes have increased now that more people have begun to resell them in other forms of bazaars beyond the *tianguis*, whether physical or online. Notably, there has been an increase in buyers and prices due to the recent trend of recycling clothes, which has arisen from different environmental movements around the globe and the increasing resistance to fast fashion and its production systems. In recent years, consumers have become more conscious of the harmful effects of the fashion industry on the environment, which has resulted in a change in people's mindset, with many now looking into alternatives such as second-hand clothes (Styvén & Mariani, 2020). Moreover, Mexican consumers are now interested in these garments due to the uniqueness of each item in these markets, from vintage items to exclusive designs by renowned brands (GQ Mexico, 2021).

The surging trend of second-hand clothes in Mexico has increased prices and modified the market. Through social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, more people have decided to explore the second-hand clothes market. Such a phenomenon has meant that the upper classes have begun to buy clothes at these markets, which is noticeable by how they dress and behave. Merchants have recognised these new customers and will set their

price based on how people are dressed. Consequently, the prices in the second-hand market have increased significantly in the last few years. This change has been more significant since 2021, thanks to the use of TikTok, where users share outfits put together for less than 100 MXN (5 USD). Such hauls were bought in the market, and even some videos tell the location of their favourite market. These videos are titled; "*haul de lo que compré en la paca*" (haul of what I bought in the flea market), showing every item and its price.

Through this research, it has been possible to observe the circulation process of the garments inside a specific geographic area, independently from its previous history at the US-Mexican border. A critical analysis of these dynamics allows us to understand how second-hand clothes are consumed and how important they are as a form of subsistence for thousands of families. These may be either merchants at the markets, family-run businesses, or young women selling the clothes online as trendy items. Regardless of how second-hand clothes are sold, they have significant economic and social relevance. *La paca* has historically also been an important source of affordable dress for low-income families across the country, and what grabs our attention is the gentrification of such a market. Recent scholarship points out a broader trend of the gentrification of informal markets in the Global South (Ortega, 2016 and Gómez-Mendez, 2018).

The case of Puebla-Tlaxcala is illustrative of how the de-stigmatisation of the market feeds gentrification. The stigma regarding second-hand clothes has decreased in recent years, which has increased their popularity as they have been rebranded as more sustainable than the traditional means of production in the fashion industry. As consumers, we have experienced criticism from our friends and families, who reproduce the myths of dirtiness, the idea of getting 'bad luck' from previous users, or the complaint that these clothes belonged to dead people.

The pandemic has been a turning point for the second-hand market worldwide, but particularly in Mexico. Since the start of the pandemic, there has been an increase in informal stalls, which occupy streets that were not originally designated for the *tianguis*. The increase of informal stalls in the market matches with the significant increase in unemployment and informal markets in Mexico since the pandemic began. According to official numbers, Mexico has 2.5 million unemployed people (INEGI 2021). This has had a negative impact on the national economy and the labour market, where 53% of national employment is in the informal economy (INEGI, 2021). Regardless of the current economic situation that millions of Mexicans face, there is also a growing stigmatisation of young women trying to find alternative income sources through online bazaars that offer second-hand clothes. Stigmatisation is noticeable through jokes and memes on social media that have given them

the nickname '*las nenis*', with images that make fun of their physical appearance, the vocabulary they use, and the products they offer, as well as jokes related to the lack of tax payment.

On the other hand, consumers have faced less stigmatisation as the trend becomes more and more popular. Gentrification can be observed in the type of consumers who now buy and wear second-hand clothes. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in finding alternative and sustainable dress sources. Second-hand clothes offer that possibility and are much cheaper than brand-new clothes. Nevertheless, the prices of these clothes have also translated into hyper-consumption in two ways. Firstly, consumers now feel more confident about buying brand new clothes because they know they can wear them several times and then resell them to different bazaars or specialised apps. Secondly, hyper-consumption is driven by second-hand consumers who now buy many more clothes thanks to the low prices of these garments. The use of social platforms such as TikTok demonstrates the increasing popularity of this hyper-consumption, where users show off their hauls and advise where to buy them for less than 5 USD. Such behaviours are far from the original purposes of sustainability and reproduce that which was initially criticised: capitalist overconsumption.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, second-hand clothes are a sustainable alternative, provided the market and consumers are managed responsibly. From this research, we can identify interwoven issues that should be understood as part of a very complex market. The problems presented by this paper are not isolated; they outline inequalities in the local context of Mexico but also the uneven relations between the Global North and the Global South. With this paper, we aim to reach out to our readers and question ourselves on how to make this type of market more sustainable and equitable for all users. How can we push for a more sustainable market through sellers and consumers? Concerning border security, we wonder if a local exchange of clothing (from closet to closet) will reduce our dependence on American hyper-consumerism and avoid continuing to give money, indirectly, to organised crime. Finally, as consumers, we constantly try to comprehend the environmental impact of our clothes on the environment. Such impact has drawn us to conclude that reducing is a more valuable goal than recycling, given that the latter has only modified our consuming methods, but not the quantities and quality of what we consume. This research shines a light on how what was once seen as a sustainable alternative has become reliant on the quantity of clothes that can be purchased for low prices, regardless of their quality or durability.

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