



## Second-hand cultures in unsettled times: a commentary on charity shops, the pandemic, cost of living and environmental crises

**Avril Maddrell**

University of Reading, UK | [avril.maddrell@reading.ac.uk](mailto:avril.maddrell@reading.ac.uk)

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Second-hand cultures reflect wider socio-economic and cultural norms in both stable and unsettled times; but while changes tend to evolve in settled times, at both personal and societal levels, they can be unanticipated and sudden in times of rapid and unpredictable change, such as personal bereavement, national and international crises. Here, I offer some reflections on second-hand cultures in the UK, and three unsettling phenomena: the Covid-19 pandemic, recession and austerity, and the climate crisis.

Firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused an unprecedented global threat to health and life in modern times, and equally unprecedented governmental restrictions on movement, businesses and services, including the closure of all non-essential retail in the UK. This was a huge blow to the retail sector, including for profit and not-for-profit second-hand outlets, as well as a blow to consumers used to having ready access to goods via shops and online platforms.

When travel restrictions were put in place by the UK government in March 2020 in response to the spread of Covid-19, one of many personal conundrums to deal with in our household

was the minor matter of what do about the two armchairs I had recently bought online and had planned to collect as part of a long distance round trip. The seller was anxious to have the chairs collected, but travelling hundreds of miles to pick up an E-Bay purchase didn't fit the government criteria of essential travel. I booked a courier service but expected them to be equally constrained when the government issued a 'stay at home' order. However, to my surprise, I was informed by the company that deliveries were classified as an 'essential service', so they were able to deliver the chairs. This anecdote of a minor personal matter is relevant here because it highlights the mediating and mitigating role that delivery services played during a period of crisis-induced restrictions on consumption, creating a boom in online sales.

Ultimately, while in-person retail experienced huge losses and some high street names were bankrupted, where supply chains allowed, already thriving online retailing boomed during the pandemic, including second-hand sales. Charity retailers, for whom second-hand goods typically make up two thirds of their offering, were faced with multiple intersecting challenges including loss of income streams to support the parent organization's charitable work; loss of donated goods; fear of virus transmission via goods; repeated mothballing and re-opening shop operations; and supporting and retaining a largely voluntary workforce. Charity retailers also responded by developing their online sales capacity, including the British Heart Foundation's (BHF) innovation of a 'click and collect' operation, which contributed to a significant 12% growth in online sales in 2020 (Hargrave 2021a) (a growth echoed in thrift and other resale stores in the US during 2020 [Schiffer 2020]). Smaller charities developed and adopted a new shared online retail platform, [BuyCharity.com](https://www.buycharity.com). With both retailers and public being better prepared and informed during subsequent government-mandated shop closures, the UK Charity Retail Association (CRA) reported an increase in online sales of 34.8% in first three months of 2021 (CRA 2021a).

Nonetheless, a quarter of charities experienced 40% loss of income due to the pandemic, including through shop closures (Charity Times 2022), with the four largest charity retailers (BHF, Cancer Research UK, Oxfam and Barnado's) reporting combined losses of approximately £70 million and approaching 90 shops (Hargrave 2021b). In the meantime, furloughed workers decluttered their homes, often resorting to revitalized informal peer-to-peer exchange mechanisms such as driveways filled with 'free to take' and doorstep boxes of 'help yourself' items (see Figure 1), as well as private online sales. Nonetheless, many charity shops also struggled to cope with the influx of donations when re-opening in summer 2021, due to reduced availability of volunteers due to pre-vaccination health vulnerabilities, and the need to quarantine donations before sorting and displaying for sale.



**FIGURE 1** Examples of roadside free peer-to-peer circulation of second-hand goods during Covid-19 restrictions, Oxford, UK 2020 (Photos: author's own)

As retailing has resumed normal operations, online sales are still some 7% above early 2020 levels, but overall online sales have dipped due to cost-of-living pressures (ONS 2022). This links to the second aspect of unsettled times, the cost-of-living crisis, which in the UK reflects the combined economic impacts of the pandemic, Brexit and energy inflation, largely as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Economic recession is well established as a driver for increased private second-hand sales and consumption, and a reduced quantity and quality of goods being donated to charity retailers (Horne and Maddrell 2002). Although the mechanisms for those sales have switched in the last two decades from car boot and garage sales to online platforms such as Vinted and Gumtree, this presents a further reduction in saleable goods for charity retailers in coming months and possibly years, given the apparently intractable and unpredictable war in Ukraine.

The impacts of austerity are not evenly felt and include emotional-affective as well as practical impacts on households struggling to pay bills. Previous work has shown some of the poorest socio-economic groups in the UK as resistant to second-hand consumption, because new goods (e.g. clothing and household items) are necessary to express self-worth and identity (Horne and Maddrell 2002). More recent work has evidenced the ways in which the necessity of using foodbanks, including by those in work, can induce feelings of shame (Strong 2021). Strong argues that 'shame is a central framework for understanding the



contemporary politics of austerity both in the places it creates and through the feelings, behaviours, and values it encourages' (2021, p. 73). Given that second-hand retailers, including charity shops, are one such set of spaces, there is collective work to be done in relation to the ongoing reframing of the consumption of well-chosen second-hand goods as good value, thrifty and canny purchases which embody economic intelligence, rather than an embarrassing lack of choice. Increased purchase of second-hand *luxury* items was reported in 2020 (Davalos 2020) and this 'bucking of the trend' suggests that greater use of social media, including recruiting more Influencers, to promote second-hand consumption *per se* could be an important tool in this work (although see Goodman [2018] on the dangers of using privileged celebrities to promote sustainable consumption). The discursive framing of second-hand consumption as environmentally responsible, will likewise assist in this endeavour.

The Covid-19 pandemic is far from 'over' and other pandemics may occur in the future, to say nothing of the geopolitical relations centred on Ukraine and Russia, and the international economic effects of this conflict, but the climate crisis and its wider effects are also being felt now, with immediate and longer-term impacts predicted at local-national-global levels. While some charity retailers have encouraged overconsumption in the past (see Figure 2 from the USA), the UK's Charity Retail Association has long adopted the UK government mantra of 'reduce-reuse-recycle', which both supports and elevates their mission for second-hand retailing.



**FIGURE 2** Goodwill thrift store advertisement campaign, Los Angeles, USA, 2013 (Photo: author's own)

More recently the CRA added 'donate' and 'remake' to this mantra, the latter tapping into increasingly popular cultures of crafting, and argued that the principle of reuse (second-cycle consumption) is central to the circular economy and UK waste prevention policy (CRA 2021b). Sector analysts suggest that the pre-pandemic growth in charity shop sales in 2019



can be attributed in part to environmental and ethical concerns (Sabanoglu 2021). A recent study of online purchases by young people in Germany during the pandemic were largely hedonic (Koch et al. 2020), which suggests at best an expression of comfort shopping in unsettled times, or, more seriously, a disjoint between crises, environmental concerns and actions. Increasing understanding of the value of, and an appetite for, second-hand consumption of good quality items – whether clothes, books, furniture, art, household items – must be in the interests of sustainable consumption. While second-hand consumption is not a panacea for the environmental crises the planet faces, it can be a valuable element of a wider package of measures required to address those crises. Additionally, greater social acceptance of buying and using second cycle items may also reduce the emotional-affective stress experienced by those who have no economic choice.

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Avril Maddrell is professor of Social and Cultural Geography at the University of Reading, and has long-standing interests in second-hand consumption, including the co-authorship of *Charity Shops: Retailing, Consumption and Society*.

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